



Diasporic Dwellings: The Family House and its Role in the Creative Imaginary of Selected Malaysian Indian Writers

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ABSTRACT

Coming from a community born primarily out of the indenture experience, the creative writings that have emerged from the communal compound of the Malaysian Indian diaspora almost inevitably touch on the poetics of loss of homeland and the struggle to reinvent identity in a new land. While there are the inescapable signifiers of trauma in the disillusionment of finding what was hoped to be a promised land, they are set to the rhythms of the new land. While the object of mourning may be unreachable, its semblances are seen in the new land and efforts are made to reinvent the object of loss, leading to a form of substitution. Allegiance to a land of memories becomes located more in its rituals and its religion and the attendant myths and metaphors, a spiritual homeland more than the imagined nation that could have been. Hence, historical remembrance is no more the core theme of Malaysian Indian diasporic experience as there are other various forms of representations of the Malaysian Indian diasporic consciousness. In the context of creative writings, it is also a fertile ground for the articulation of the creative imaginary. However, the terrain is multi-faceted and the following discussion will reveal a small section of the variations in the articulation and perception of the concept of the house, and its varying features as it dwells in the pages of three Malaysian Indian novelists, K. S. Maniam, Rani Manicka and Preeta Samarasan.

Keywords: Diasporic memory, K. S. Maniam, Malaysian Indian writings, Preeta Samarasan, Rani Manicka

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INTRODUCTION

Most creative works that emerge from diasporic communities often tap into the narratives of communal beginnings. The collective memory of the story of Indian

migration to Malaysia reaches back to its beginnings in the large-scale migration of mainly South Indians to British Malaya during the end of the 19th century. Manpower was needed to work in palm oil and rubber plantations to supplement local labour. Indentured labourers from India were brought in to satisfy the demand for workers in the plantations in Malaya. These Indian labourers, regarded as 'sojourners', would in all probability have come with the expectation of remaining in Malaya for a short period of time to accumulate enough money and return to their homeland in India or Sri Lanka. However the promise of monetary returns was quite often a distant and remote reality, for migration came with much liability. One had to repay the debt of his passage through a period of bonded labour. Furthermore, there was also the financial burden of living expenses, which often tightened the noose of debt around the labourer. The consequences of these often resulted in an extension of the indenture contract and with it the diminishing horizon of a return to the homeland. Apart from the labouring class of migrants who were mainly from the rural areas of South India, there was also a large scale migration of English-educated Indians who played the mediatory role between the labouring class and the comprador European class of planters. Here too one would find the differing circles of subalternity, with the middle-class Indians playing subaltern roles when they are within the circle of their superiors, the British planters and other colonialist officials, and assuming the role

of dominator when encountering the Indian labourers. Such differences of roles and stature would have thus led to heterogeneity in experience, a fact that is reflected in the writings that would follow from their progeny generations in the future. Class, gender, ethnic group and other differences led to different experiences, inherited and articulated with different nuances.

The Malaysian Indian community today is testimony of the heterogeneity of its historical beginnings. Though in majority most have ancestral roots in South India, delve deeper and one will see the divisions of regional alliances such as Tamils, Malayalees, Telugus, Sri Lankan Tamils, Punjabis, Gujaratis and Sindhis. Out of these heterogeneous Indian ethnic groups, the Tamils, natives of Tamil Nadu region of India, form the majority; followed by the Telugus, natives of Andhra Pradesh; and Malayalees, natives of the Malabar Coast area comprising present-day Kerala state (Sandhu, 1993; Arasaratnam, 1993). In 1931, the Tamils "formed nearly 87 percent of the South Indian and more than 82 percent of the total population of Malaya [...] Of the other South Indians, only the Telugus and Malayalis have been present in significant numbers" (Sandhu, 1993, p. 160-161). The majority of Tamils and Telugus were brought in through the indenture and *Kangany* system to work as labourers in the rubber plantations in the early 19th century while a majority of the Malayalees were employed as junior officers, mostly made up of technical and clerical staff in the Railways, Public Works Department

and Post and Telegraph Department in the first quarter of the 20th century (Ramasamy, 1993; Puthucheary, 1993; Sandhu, 1969). A significant minority of the Malayalees also worked on the rubber plantations, occupying relatively more skilled labouring positions (Ampalavanar, 1981; Sandhu, 1969). The Sri Lankan Tamils were mostly employed in the area of subordinate managerial, clerical and technical posts in the estates especially during the period of 1880-1920 (Sandhu, 1993). As for the North Indians, the majority were the Punjabis. "In 1947 they numbered 30,592 or more than 72% of the total North Indian population in Malaya" (Sandhu, 1993, p. 161). The Punjabis were initially employed in services such as the police and military forces. As for the Gujaratis, natives of Gujarat, and Sindhis, natives of the Province of Sind, which is now part of Pakistan, they were part of the trading and money-lending groups in Malaya. Overall, it was estimated that between 1834 and 1937 about 30 million Indians migrated to different parts of the world, and about 24 million returned home during the same period (Jain, 1990, p.10). In the time span of over a century, around 6 million Indians remained in the colonial countries such as Malaya and Burma, making them their homes. The Indians in Malaya became Malayan citizens "following the liberalization of the country's citizenship laws in 1952 and 1957 which allowed non-Malays to become citizens of Malaya provided they fulfilled certain requirements" (Sandhu, 1969, p. 301). Citizenship saw the etchings of a new identity, one that

amalgamated Indian origins and new roots through its transplantation in the new land, Malaysia. The journey to nationhood would travel multiple routes, through the many and varied vehicles of individual identity. Nowhere is this more evidently and significantly expressed than in literary works. The ensuing section provides a glimpse into the role of the family house in the creative imaginary of three Malaysian Indian writers: K. S. Maniam, Rani Manicka and Preeta Samarasan.

FEATURES OF THE FAMILY HOUSE

Most discussions of the trope of the house in diasporic texts centre on its reflection of the politics of belonging. In the South Asian Diaspora, V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas* is often seen as the quintessential text that puts forth the journey towards home and belonging in the host land. As Vijay Mishra succinctly puts it, while for the people of Biswas' generation, first-generation migrants to new lands, the house became a signifier that suggested "an ownership through naming and transforming the landscape", for the new diaspora, the diasporas of metropolitan spaces, home takes on a different meaning as it becomes a status symbol, of a marker of how far one has come in materialistic terms (2008, pp. 202-203). We wish to add another dimension to this argument by investigating the transformation of the family house amongst the different generations of the South Asian diaspora in Malaysia and how this acts as a reflection of the changing features of the diasporic imaginary. We wish to reveal too

how as generations unfurl deeper into the depths of the land that has become home, the physical features become indicators of the extent to which the diaspora has developed into a heterogeneous community. In the context of the corpus of texts selected for this paper, the image of the family house in the selected novels by K. S. Maniam, Rani Manicka and Preeta Samarasan would give readers an idea to the heterogeneity of the writers' diasporic experience as the design and structure of the houses depicted in these stories are influenced by the culture that they are from, together with the culture that they are surrounded by. For example, in building a family house, first-generation diasporic Indians would be strongly inclined to build their homes with distinguishing features of traditional Indian houses. One such distinguishing architectural feature of Southern Indian houses is the veranda or *thinnai* (an open-walled, roofed porch). It is the front portion in one's house which functions as a temporary shelter before entering a house. The veranda acts as a space between the exterior and interior part of a house. Pillai (2007, p.98) states that the *thinnai* is significant because it "becomes the portal of folk memory, the space where the younger generation of the diasporic community is drawn into, and subsequently transformed by, the memories of the older generation". For the Indian community in Malaysia, the veranda is looked upon as one that bridges the older generation to the younger generation of Indians. Furthermore, as the Malays are the predominant ethnic group in Malaysia, the architecture of the

houses built or lived in by the characters in the novels discussed may also be influenced by that of the traditional Malay house. According to Lim (n. d., p. 16), a traditional Malay house is made of timber: "with a post and lintel structure raised on stilts, with wooden, bamboo, or thatched walls and a thatched roof, the house is designed to suit the tropical climate". Apart from that, since Malaysia was once colonised by the British, the influence of the English-style architecture may also contribute to the design of the houses found in these stories.

K. S. Maniam is one of Malaysia's most prolific writers and his stories centre around the history and problems of the Indian community in Malaysia. Maniam's *The Return* (1981) is hailed as one of the seminal creative works in English to have emerged out of the Malaysian Indian community. It revolves around the experiences of the narrator and protagonist, Ravi, from his humble beginnings in a rural working class environment and his subsequent social mobility through an education in English and the attendant communal and personal conflicts that beset him. Rani Manicka, on the other hand, is a promising and upcoming novelist who published her first novel, *The Rice Mother* in 2002. *The Rice Mother* has been translated into 17 languages and has gained international acclaim. The novel tells the story of four generations of a middle class Sri Lankan Tamil family's struggle in surviving through World War II, the Japanese occupation and post-war prosperity. It is the matriarch of the family, Lakshmi, who keeps the family together

during their hardship. Preeta Samarasan, who published *Evening Is the Whole Day* in 2008, is being hailed as one of the newest voices to emerge from the Malaysian Indian community. Her novel centres on the Rajashekarans, a wealthy middle class Tamil family in Ipoh in the 1980s, and is narrated from the point of view of the youngest child of the family.

As in many communities, class affiliations are always a significant factor that influences the dynamics of inter-communal experience. The differences in the class affiliations of the communities in each novel reveal many insights into the images of their house as these dwellings are very much influenced by their socioeconomic background. Furthermore, Maniam lives in Malaysia and Manicka has migrated to England while Samarasan resides in France, and it is the transnational status of Manicka and Samarasan that make up the different resonances from Maniam's homebound imaginary. Thus, the discussion of the three novels that follow will bear witness to the playing out of these very dynamics.

ROLE OF THE FAMILY HOUSE

One of the most significant creative enunciations of the intricacies of the early Indian immigrant experience of Malaya can be found in the works of K. S. Maniam. Maniam's works offer important insights into the ways in which he reconstructs the narrative of the pioneer Indian immigrants of Malaya. The Indian community started their lives in the indentured barracks or coolie lines and this community gradually

began to carve their own spaces which are very much evident in Maniam's *The Return*. In *The Return*, we are introduced to a descriptive image of a family house in the first few pages. Periathai, the matriarch of the family, builds a house for her family with evidence of strong Indian elements:

It had a large, cool hall, a small room and an old-fashioned, Indian cooking place. We, her grandchildren, enjoyed more the colourful entrance to this house. A double-pillared affair; it had strange stories carved on its timber faces...The walls, thinnai and even the kolam-covered yard appear insignificant. Some of the Ramayana episodes stood out with palpable poignancy: Rama challenged, bow and arrow at the ready, yet his brows lined with anxiety for the missing Sita. The sculptured, fold-like flames envelope Ravana's palace and threaten to engulf Sita's tender, shapely limbs and breasts. One pillar carried the creation of the Ganges, the cascading water stilled, another the typical, rustic look of the Indian village. (p. 4)

The pillars are described in great detail and it is clearly seen that Periathai still clings on to her Indian roots and traditions very strongly. The pillars are engraved with important events/scenes in India such as scenes from the Ramayana, the epic tale of good versus evil; the holy river, Ganges;

and even a depiction of a rural Indian village. While on one level the house may seem like an encapsulation of an India left behind, it will serve one well to note that the Ramayana has been hailed as one of the signifiers of the diasporic experience. Rama and Sita's exile in the forest is akin to the diaporic exodus. Thus we have the arrival of Periathai in the forest of Bidor. On the other hand, the image of the river can be seen as a metaphorical cleansing of the sins or of Rama reaching the river to be absolved of sin, "Rama, the mighty armed, reached the river Ganga, which is devoid of sins and which dispels all sins..." (Valmiki Ramayana, n. d.). In many senses the carvings on the pillars symbolise the attempt to immortalise the memory of the distant home, in concrete form within the new home. It also acts as a site that locates ancestral heritage for the future generation, inscriptions of ancestral legends and lived locations, a manifestation of the "fossilised motherland" that Vijay Mishra (1992) has spoken about. Although the concept behind Periathai's house is leaning towards India, it should be noted that Periathai, in her deathbed confession, gives her word to Ravi that she will never leave the land that she had grown to love and fought for till her last breath to have the land deed legalised under her name. Although the land may not be hers legally, her spirit will still belong to the land. Periathai, an immigrant, had made a home in Malaysia and from her dying words, the readers know that her allegiance lies with Malaysia, and not India.

Unlike the strong Indian elements found in Periathai's house, the space the young Ravi builds for himself as a child growing up in a hospital barrack leans towards a desire for assimilation into the dominant culture in the local landscape at the time, that of the English. The hospital barrack, a colonial imposition, has limited space, and this space is used for multi-purpose functions such as hall-cum-dining room during the day and bedroom during the night. Its limited space is a metaphor for the early experience of the Indian immigrants who travelled within the cramped spaces of the vessels that transported them from India to Malaya which resulted in what Vijay Mishra terms as 'trauma in the homeland' (2005). As a young boy, Ravi had to draw a line with a chalk in a corner of the front room and imagine it as his walls, and the space within this line, a room that he can call his and retreat to when he wants some privacy. The space created by Ravi reflects how the third generation, then young, appropriates 'a room of his own within that house' thus creating another perception of his own identity although the space that he creates is born within the colonial space. To further distance himself from his Indian identity, Ravi has pictures of the English countryside and snow-capped mountains pasted on the walls in his 'room' which points to the fact that his concept of belonging is moving towards the ideal of belonging, possession and home, in this case, Britain. Even in this limited space, Ravi cherishes his privacy and believes that to get out of his poor

lifestyle, he has to study hard as through education, he would be able to upgrade his standard of living.

Compared to Periathai and his father, Kannan, Ravi does not see the importance of owning land in Malaysia. Ravi's disdain of his father's effort to build a house clearly comes across when he returns from England to find his family has moved to a hut at the edge of a jungle. Readers are again reminded and given the picture of a jungle which goes back to the reference to Rama's exile in the forest. However, his father's hut is liberation from the hospital barrack as it is his own space. It also shows an engagement with the land as Kannan's hut is built using materials from the land. Kannan has toiled day and night to build a house for his family. Kannan does not want to die like his mother, a displaced person. Furthermore, Kannan also tries to convince Ravi of the importance of owning land in the country they migrated to but Ravi shows no interest in his father's efforts. Apart from that, Kannan grows his own vegetables and from its description, the land is rich and its soil fertile. By fencing the land, Kannan would also be able to claim the space as his private property. Owning a piece of land becomes important to the older generation of immigrants but not to the younger as Ravi only sees the importance of being educated to come out of the cycle of poverty within which his family is trapped. For Ravi, there seems to be no urgency for planting a stake in the land to call it his home. Thus, within one family, there seems to be different renditions of the concept of house: for Periathai, the concept of house

is ingrained in ties to India but her sense of allegiance is to Malaysia, whereas Kannan's concept of house is a sense of belonging in his new home, Malaysia, and Ravi's concept of home seems to be a leaning towards Britain.

In *The Rice Mother*, readers are given a description of the family house through the eyes of 14-year-old Lakshmi. Married off to a man 23 years older than her and brought to a new country, Malaya, Lakshmi was led to believe that her husband was a rich man and that she would live a comfortable life. In reality, she was brought to a small wooden house that did not even belong to her husband. Manicka describes the house as wooden and raised on low stilts, typical features of a traditional Malay house (Lim, n. d.). Unlike Periathai's house that has strong Indian features, the description of Lakshmi's house reflects a localised image. Similar to Maniam, Manicka also gives importance to religion as there are descriptions of a prayer altar with pictures of Hindu deities and dead flowers surrounding them, an indication of prayer rituals. Thus, while the exterior of the house is local, the interior reflects ancestral heritage. Furthermore, the interior shows the house to be modern. Facilities such as shelf and a bathroom are a luxury that Periathai in *The Return* could not afford. Lakshmi has clean running water from a tap in her bathroom as compared to Periathai who only has a 'communal bathshed' (Maniam, 1981, p. 5). Lakshmi's bathroom is located inside the house whereas Periathai's bathshed is not only outside, but anyone in the surrounding

area could have access to it. Apart from that, Lakshmi has a shelf that she can use as an altar whereas Periathai has to make do with an 'earthen dais' (Maniam, 1981, p. 5) to conduct her prayers. Lakshmi's house not only reflects modernity in its facilities, it also shows the social class she belongs to. Lakshmi's husband, Ayah, is a clerk, whereas Periathai is an independent worker and her son, Kannan, works as a dhobi for the hospital. Ayah's position would place him in the same social class as Menon in *The Return*, the middle-class group, hence the recourse to modern facilities. As soon as Lakshmi arrives in her new home, she begins to cleanse the house of any dirt or memories of the past. The house, described as her "new toy", indicates that she would etch new memories.

Although there seems to be quite a difference between Lakshmi's house and Periathai's house in *The Return*, one similarity that we find is the role of the veranda. In both *The Return* and *The Rice Mother*, the veranda seems to be an important feature. In *The Return*, the *thinnai* (veranda) is the place where Periathai tells stories to the younger generation, reminding them of their ancestral land through these stories (Pillai, 2007). In *The Rice Mother*, a connection between the younger and older generation is established in the veranda. Starting with the story of Ayah, Lakshmi's husband, down to that of Nisha, her great-granddaughter, the veranda is privy to the family's happiness and sadness. The veranda has always been Ayah's refuge and it is here that his daughter-in-law and granddaughter

sit and talk to him on many accounts, such detailed below:

Rani, her daughter-in-law...sat chatting in English with Ayah in the living room or on the veranda. (Manicka, 2002, p. 268)

Often Grandad and I sat quietly on the veranda watching the evening sun turn red in the sky. (Manicka, 2002, p. 311)

It is at the veranda that Lakshmi bids goodbye silently to her second son, Jeyan, when he leaves the house, "Mother sat on the veranda watching him leave with the strangest expression on her face" (Manicka, 2002, p. 282). The veranda is also where Lakshmi waits eagerly for her granddaughter every school holiday: "Breaking free from Auntie Lalita's hold I would run towards the figure on the veranda" (Manicka, 2002, p. 308). Lakshmi's excitement can be clearly seen in the image of her hugging her granddaughter in her arms in the veranda.

It is also at this very same veranda that Lalita embraces Nisha in her arms towards the end of the novel, "I knocked on the door and my Great-Aunt Lalita appeared. She held me in her feeble arms and she looked so old I didn't recognise her at all" (Manicka, 2002, p. 459). Manicka poignantly paints the same picture of a grandmother hugging her granddaughter, only this time it is not Lakshmi embracing Dimple but Lakshmi's daughter, Lalita hugging Nisha, Dimple's daughter. Thus the

veranda plays a significant role in the lives of each generation of Lakshmi's family.

Apart from Lakshmi's house, there is the other family house that belongs to her granddaughter, Dimple. Lara is the name given to the house that Luke, Dimple's husband, builds for her. Significantly, Lara is the family name of a powerful Spanish family that rose to power in the late eleventh century and "(i)t is this romance of treachery, love, and revenge, spanning the gulf between Lara and Cordoba, which accounts for the village's modern name, Lara de los Infantes" (Doubleday, 2001, p. 3). How apt to name the house Lara as it is treachery, love and revenge that destroys the lives of Dimple and Luke. Unlike Lakshmi's small wooden house, Lara has wrought-iron gates and is described as rather large:

It was very large, brand new and set on hilly ground.

...At the touch of a remote control the imposing gates swung open...I had never seen the gates of a residential house operated in such a manner before. We walked along a driveway flanked on either side by conifer trees.

*...At the end of the curved driveway on a large piece of land dotted with big, shady trees, a house white and beautifully decorated with cornices and thick Roman pillars rose grandly from the ground. And at the entrance stood two huge stone lions...a statue under the shade of an *angsana* tree. (p. 330)*

The house is built in accordance to the era of technological development in the West and at a time when Malaysia was starting to enjoy the development as a post-independent country, growing from being an agricultural state to an industrial economy in the late 70s. Thus the readers are able to share Dimple's surprise at having gates being opened using a technological device rather than manually. Apart from highlighting the shift from agriculture to technology, it is also the first indication of Luke's wealth. The image of the driveway being 'flanked on either side by conifer trees' (Manicka, 2002, p. 330) gives the readers a picture of being in a countryside in cold countries rather than in Malaysia as conifer trees are more commonly found in Northern America. However she does mention an *angsana* tree somewhere near the entrance of the house, thus adding a local touch to the house. The readers are brought back to the image of a time in Ancient Rome with her description of "thick Roman pillars" rising "grandly from the ground" (Manicka, 2002, p. 330). The pillars, unlike the pillars described in Maniam's *The Return*, are 'thick', 'Roman' and 'grand' which is almost like a description of the ancient temples built in Rome and not a description of a house. However, the inclusion of the image of two huge lions made of stone standing in front of the entrance adds a touch of Asian culture, in particular, Chinese culture. According to Ma (2011), in the Chinese culture, it is believed that stone lions are a "symbol of grandeur and can often be seen at the entrances to temples, palaces or mansions,

and prominent locations...meant to keep away evil spirits and guard the location”.

Although the outer appearance of the house has a combination of local and Western influence, the inner part of the house seems to be devoid of any local touch except for the painting of Dimple, and that too is located on the far wall, attesting to its being somehow less significant:

...The lofty ceiling was painted with cherubs and robed figures from the time of the Renaissance. A curving staircase in the middle led to the first floor. Under our feet was an unbroken expanse of black marble and on the walls hung sumptuous paintings.

...on the far wall, a very large painting of me...

‘Look, this is inspired by Nero’s golden palace. Press this button and the mother-of-pearl squares in the ceiling slide back and look...’

...out sprinkled drops of perfume.
(p. 331)

Manicka’s mention of the Renaissance era brings the readers back to a time of the revival of elements of ancient art with modernity. It gives an image of classical, breathtaking paintings from the 15th to 16th century by famous artists such as Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo and Raphael. Apart from the 15th century Renaissance era, the house also has the characteristics of architecture of nearly 2000 years ago. The construction of the ceiling was a replica

of Nero’s golden house which was built by the infamous Roman emperor in 60 A. D., “There were dining-rooms with fretted ceils of ivory, whose panels could turn and shower down flowers and were fitted with pipes for sprinkling the guests with perfumes” (Suetonius, 1914, p. 137).

Lara has never been a home for Dimple as while it is a luxurious house, it serves merely as a building and not a home or family house for Dimple, and she does not find happiness there. Dimple has lost her Indian identity amidst other cultures, namely, European and Chinese. Although this is a dilemma experienced by some of the younger generations who become lost and confused with their hybrid states, Maniam (1997), in his discussion of the new diasporic man, celebrates hybridity as being an inevitable and inescapable part of most Malaysians. Unlike Periathai in *The Return* and her own grandmother, Lakshmi, Dimple does not have any ancestral heritage in her house that she can hold on to, thus losing her sense of identity. In the description of the house belonging to the younger generation, there is no trace of Indian cultural identity except for the reference to the Taj Mahal. Although the Taj Mahal is located in India, it is of Mughal era, representing Islamic architecture. Thus the role of the family house belonging to the younger generation, with its European and Chinese architectural style rather than Indian, shows a dissociation with the family’s ancestral land.

In *Evening Is the Whole Day*, readers are introduced to the images of different sizes and styles of houses found in one

particular street in Ipoh on the second page of the novel. This description informs us that in Samarasan's novel, the architecture draws on various cultures and their houses. The houses described reflect the races in Malaysia as there is mention of houses built according to Malay and Chinese architecture. The family house, known as the 'Big House', is described using adjectives such as 'black gates', 'robust greenery', 'bright blue bulk' and is said to dominate the street they live on (Samarasan, 2008, p. 2). The description is almost as if the house is intimidating and there is no cosiness or comfort that one often finds when reading descriptions of family houses. The vivid colour of the house, 'bright blue', is a stark contrast to the hospital barrack in *The Return* which is described as "squalid, green, and over-crowded" (Maniam, 1981, p. 50). While Samarasan gives the image of a house that is too big for its household with its vibrant colours, Maniam paints a picture of a dirty, small house.

Apart from that, the capital letters used to refer to the family house in Samarasan's novel indicates that there is no emotional attachment to the house as the term serves only to express the vastness of the building. The journey towards the ownership of the Big House is portrayed as rather effortless too. Unlike in *The Return*, where Maniam highlights the struggles of an immigrant family to own a house despite living in the land for a long time, in *Evening Is the Whole Day*, Samarasan gives readers an account of how a colonial house comes into the possession of an Immigrant coolie's son

within a time-span of only 57 years. Known as Tata, the coolie's son works his way from being a clerk at a steamship company to owning his own shipping company and is even able to send his son to read law in Oxford. Tata needs a house that will show his prosperity in the country he migrated to. He buys a colonial house to lay a stake in his new country, to show a shift of ownership from a white man (coloniser) to an Indian man (the colonised).

It is also interesting to note that there was light in the Rajasekharan's house at the exact moment that there was light in the colonial cricket ground when Tunku Abdul Rahman announced the independence of the country. The immigrant family who were brought in by the colonisers have found a new home in the country they migrated to and just as how Malaya gained its independence from the British, the Rajasekharan family, although they come to Malaya as dockyard coolies, are able to establish their stake in the new land. Thus, Samarasan's family house is used as a metaphor for the advent of freedom from colonial rule, as 31 August, 1957 is the day of Malaya's freedom, Independence Day.

Tata extends the house with English-style renovations by hiring a few architects as he wants only the best for his family house. All the rooms that Tata adds to the house serve to show Tata's wealth and status in society. Samarasan's purposeful mention of a claw-foot bathtub and Aga range kitchen appliances indicates elegance and the expensive taste of the Rajasekharans. Added into this is an orchid conservatory

which is unnecessary as the climate in Malaysia is hot and humid, together with a music room-cum-smoking room where Samarasan points out that no one smoked or played music, thus rendering all those added renovations as unnecessary and a waste of money and time. With all the additions, not even one room is allocated for prayers, unlike in *The Return* and *The Rice Mother* where prayer altars and deities are mentioned. The Big House is almost devoid of Hindu cultural elements and is a modern, Anglo-Saxon construction. However, Tata does try to add a touch of local design into the construction of the house, according to Malay architecture:

Tata had the new wings built in a proud local style: solid wooden slats on a concrete base, patched willy-nilly onto the austere symmetry of the original grey stone structure, so that in less than two years the house metamorphosed into something out of an Enid Blyton bedtime story. Unnecessary corridors met each other at oblique angles. Additions, partitions, and covered porches seemed to rise out of nowhere before the eye. Green mosquito netting thumbed its nose at the Batternburg lace curtains in the next room. Sweat and steam and coal smoke from the hot Indian kitchen invaded the immaculate English kitchen and smeared its shiny surfaces. (Samarasan, 2008, p. 26)

The word 'proud' used to explain the local style indicates that the house is built in a grand manner and apart from the wooden slats, the only other indication that the house has a local feature is the green mosquito netting against the sophistication of the Batternburg lace curtains. The only thing that seems out of place in the entire house would be the green mosquito netting, which is a necessity as there are a lot of mosquitoes in Malaysia. Unlike *The Return*, in which the Indian culture is obvious through the carvings of stories from India and the mention of *thinnai* and *kolam*, *Evening Is the Whole Day* lacks a stamp of Indian identity in its architecture. The only mention of an Indian feature in the image of the house is the Indian kitchen whose smoke has tarnished the beautiful tiles of the English kitchen. However, the Indian kitchen is not even part of the house as it is located outside the house. Furthermore, the mention of Enid Blyton stories is a reference to the Western influence on the young children as compared to the mention of the Ramayana stories in *The Return* which is steeped in Indian tradition and culture.

Apart from the mention of the Indian kitchen, the vivid paint on the exterior of the house is another characteristic of Indian identity:

Tata's last home-improvement venture before he died was to paint the outside of the house an unapologetic peacock blue, as if to stamp upon the building his ownership, his nation's liberty and his own. (Samarasan, 2008, p. 26)

It is interesting to note that Samarasan has chosen peacock blue as the colour of the family house as the peacock is the national bird of India and “symbolizes the qualities like beauty, elegance, pride, delight, spirituality and mysticism” (Khanna, 2007). Furthermore, Samarasan states that the choice of colour is a mark of “his nation’s liberty”. Which nation’s liberty is Samarasan referring to, India or Malaysia, as one of the colours in the flag of Malaysia is dark blue canton and not peacock blue? Painting the house in such bright colour is Tata’s way of planting his stake in the land that he considers his home. There is also a reference to Malaysia’s five-year-economic plan as the house is repainted every five years but with the same colour. The choice of the same paint is a metaphor for the unchanging ethnic stamp.

CONCLUSION

If we were to take a panoptic view of the family houses discussed above, we would see that they are not aligned to a common architectural blueprint. Each narrative presents the construction of the diasporic home according to the materials of family memory, and as these memories travel the generational distance the resultant edifice emerges out of a hybrid compound that reconstructs ancestral architectural designs with other structural designs. In the case of the diasporic Malaysian Indian experience, the two most influential prototypes would be either that of the British colonial prototype or the Malay architectural prototype. The

further afield these memories travel, the fainter the pull of these prototypes, and they become inevitably replaced by the modern globalised architectural designs, ranging from European villas to postmodern constructions of an extremely hybrid ensemble.

In sum, this discussion reveals the plurality that is etched on the grounds of the Malaysian Indian diasporic literary sensibility, and this undoubtedly, will colour to the various articulations of house and dwelling, key indicators of the experience of diaspora. This said, it would be interesting to find out the role of family houses in the writings of Malaysian diasporic Chinese writers such as Tash Aw and Tan Twan Eng. We thus bring this discussion to a close by emphasising that the Malaysian Indian diasporic imaginary is heterogeneous.

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