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K.S. Maniam's *Between Lives***

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Abstract

The article attempts throw light on the maddeningly destructive policies of development that Malaysia embraced in the early years of its Independence, through an incisive study of K.S.Maniam's novel *Between Lives*. The novel pits the resolve of a lonely woman against all kinds of forces that attempt to evict her. There are many strands of arguments: the female as the last bastion against the patriarchal agenda of development, the younger generation a suffering from a disconnect with land and values, the generational conflict, urbanization and its peril, life under the colonial master, Nature versus City, to mention but a few. This paper focuses on three issues, namely, the question of ethicality, that of the precarious survival of a fast depleting eco system, and the role of woman in bringing a semblance of order as well as protecting the last outpost of Nature, from the crass, profit motivated state and corporate agenda of development. In the process the rural, peasant, agrarian Malaya begins to disappear into the capital flow of a corporate ideology driven Malaysia. The article attempts to provide an insight into the richly evocative use of imagery and symbolism. The fascinating use of memory as fantasy and the drabness of the real is touched upon. The poetic language of Maniam is seen to provide the right tenor for the serious discourse on all the three themes broached in the article.

Key Words: Development, Ecoliterature, Feminism, Nature, Postcolonial, Resistance

Between Lives is a novel about an old woman's struggle to conserve nature and her custom in a fast changing, urbanizing Malaysia. It is a novel which brings together a young NGO volunteer who is given the task of bringing the woman around to vacate her land in order that a construction project can get underway. The novel unlike many of its genre in the West makes the female and not the male the centre of resistance against the corporate, the State and the global project of "Development". It is interesting that Maniam has shifted the focus in this novel from diaspora, from subaltern to ecocriticism. Sellamma becomes the location and the site of ecological concerns in the fast changing scenario of a trendy and globalizing economy of corporate Malaysia. This insight was made possible after reading Ursula K. Heise's "Ecocriticism and the Transnational Turn in American Studies" ("Ecocriticism" 381-404.) The novel questions in significant ways the place of the peasantry in modern Malaysia.

The novel opens with a seemingly descriptive sentence but extremely suggestive and therefore metaphoric, "THE OLD WOMAN lives, or should I say, hovers about the land, valuable land, according to some quarters, stretching from the laterite trail to the river and on to

the fringes of the jungle” (Maniam 1). Malaysia, even today has retained to an extent the same character, though fast changing. The opening lines set the tone of the novel, indicating the crux of the problem. It is one woman against the ostensible project of “Development.” Sellamma has to be moved into welfare home in order that the “project condominium and theme park” can proceed unhindered. However, this woman “hovers”, or rather appears to guard this last bit of pristine land against avarice and destruction. She is Malaysian ecology’s last hope. It can also perhaps be argued that Sellamma represents the emic or esoteric understanding of an individual about her lived world and its relevance, while the etic view of a socially sanctioned and state supported view of what the world should be like is dangerously moving in to subsume the individual (Spiers 715). Sellamma represents the archetypal resistance to the invasiveness of capital economy into the rural and peasant world. Sellamma passively resists. Hers is a non-violent defiance of the State approved, intellectually sanctioned exploitative agenda of development.

The young volunteer Sumitra from the Social Reconstruction Department (Maniam 15) is enthusiastic about her task of displacing Sellamma , the old woman as she sees herself participating in what her youthful exuberance would like to recognize as “change”, to be part of the wind of change that is at last unsettling old habits of thought and behaviour” (Maniam 2). She is under no illusion why she was chosen for this task, as she is one of those rare individuals who have a smattering of Tamil in them, the language of the woman to be displaced. This bit of information at once introduces another complexity into the novel. The woman is not a “bhumiputra”, and therefore has no natural right in Malaysia to her land. She is a minority, as she is a Malay of Indian Tamil roots. The State has already ignored the right of the minority to preserve and learn its mother tongue, “the school system hasn’t paid much attention to Tamil, and children tend to speak Malay or English to their grandparents” (Maniam 2). The volunteer’s arrival does not surprise the old woman. She has been expecting someone from the Department to accost her. “They won’t leave me alone” (Maniam 3).

Maniam interestingly slivers off the State’s fundamental duty of ensuring dignified life towards its citizens and transfers that duty to an NGO, the Social Reconstruction Department. Social engineering is a project that also involves the State in an affirmative action. However, the State may err in its zeal of empowering traditionally marginalized groups. Lee Hock Guan comments, “affirmative action in Malaysia is a constitutionally sanctioned and exclusively ethnic-based policy where only the Malays and other native groups are entitled to receive preferential treatment” (211). It is no wonder then that the victim here, in this instance, is ethnically preordained to be an Indian. However, Sumitra, who has the responsibility of convincing Sellamma to sell her property as well as relocating her begins as a collaborator in this project, but later gets converted to the cause of the victim. It is a known fact that in modern Malaysia, the displaced plantation workers had to perforce migrate to the urban centres in search of a livelihood and suffer a consequential poverty. Guan in the same article points this out:

Large numbers of Indians working in the plantation sector are condemned to a life of poverty precisely because socioeconomic conditions in the sector neither help to promote education nor enable the acquisition of critical skills. Moreover, since 1990, the rapid economic growth resulted in many plantations making way for industrial and residential

development, which in turn caused the plantation Indian labour force to be displaced and forced to migrate to the urban areas. (221)

In other words, Sellamma would end up in dire straits if she acquiesced to the project of “Development.” Her resistance is a resistance not only of the ethnically marginalised but also the resistance of a way of life to yield to the project of “Development” through exclusion. The transformation of Sumitra therefore is the suggested possibility of revisiting the policy of preferential affirmative action, where development addresses all sections of the society equally.

The skimpily dressed old woman is contrasted with the volunteer’s own grandmother, who is always dressed in her finery “She wears a lace-frilled, long-sleeved kebaya, and a starched, floral sarong, as if she has come into her matriarchal glory” (Maniam 4). But the old woman, whose breasts are not as yet dry, symbolically indicating the rejuvenatory character of the land, has no need to swath her body in yards of clothes. She is an ineluctable part of her land, “they[she and her dog] seem joined, twin-like, to the land and to themselves, in some timeless way” (Maniam 4). Thus Sellamma represents the very living spirit of the land. She is not one of those women who are daunted by their environment. The dog, Nanda, in the novel is a character by its own right, symbolizing consciousness. The volunteer is led through a verdant path, overgrown and mossy, full of untouched fruits, ripening and rotting, through a grotto, to the bank of the river. The journey is both initiatory as well as a rite of passage. She is impressed by the sheer beauty of the locale and fully realizes the commercial possibility of developing it as a tourist attraction. The simple pleasurable act of dipping her naked feet into the cold waters of the river, somehow seems to make the volunteer complicit in the rebellion of the old woman. The boulder, Sellamma’s preferred seat, the dog by her feet, the bending river, all come together to describe a picture perfect scene from some Florentine master. Sellamma’s father likens the Sun to a human being who plays with his wrap-around, his *thundu*, to create the dawn, the hot afternoon, the evening and the night (Maniam 6). Maniam now turns away from realism and with a master stroke takes the narration to another level of creativity, that of magic realism. The stick of Sellamma turns into a cobra, which instead of hurting Sellamma, turns back into the palm of Sellamma before it reverts into the ordinary stick that she each dawn carries with her and her dog to the River to launder the family’s clothes (Maniam 6-7). The stick here grows into that intimation of nature in all its primordialness, the cobra representing within its image both the essential savagery and yet the splendour of what William Blake would have called “terrible beauty”. There is a great communion between the apparition and her, “As she looked into those eyes, she felt a stillness flow into her – a stillness that didn’t know time, or the strange, or the familiar – a stillness that didn’t know fear from courage, the outside from the inside” (Maniam 7). Maniam’s language is highly evocative and suggestive whenever it operates at the level of Sellamma’s communion with nature. The vision of Sellamma is a transmogrifying vision, the stick growing into the cobra whose stillness accentuates the verdurant in Nature before its hood merging with her palm and then again turning back into the ordinary, familiar stick. This intimation of nature seems to suggest that Sellamma has been selected to be its protector in future, while, claiming her as part of its vast scheme. She is the chosen one. In India there are many a myth where the open hooded serpent is associated with the extraordinary birth or achievement of an individual appearing at the turning point of the existence of the individual in question, “When she moved her head again, ever so slightly, she saw her hand turn into a golden

hood, and the hood turn into a girl's river-dipped and cold-shrivelled palm. Then the stick was in her hand, and the tender morning all around her" (Maniam 7). Instead of the snake what she sees is a shining path disappearing into the bush. That is her new task. Sellamma turns from an ordinary girl washing the clothes of her family into a protective principle of Nature, a Devi in disguise, a Sakthi, a figure imbued with divine intimations. Yet, Maniam refuses to accord Sellamma that final status of divinity and thus is successful in keeping the novel within the operative limits of realism, and her character within the zone of probability. Sharmani in her essay argues the case of Maniam as the most sensitive of Malaysian writers writing in English:

Growing up in a Hindu Tamil working-class background and raised for most of his youth in the hospital compound of a rubber estate, Maniam knows first-hand the various forms of exclusion experienced by Malaysia's Indian ethnic community, which borne across, in the words of Edward Said, from 'tradition, family and geography', has experienced discontinuity, not only in a geographical but also a temporal sense. (239)

To the question if she had envisioned the cobra again in recent times, Sellamma makes a cryptic remark, "The times are not auspicious enough" (Maniam 7). The decadence of the present is very much a concern in the novel, as it was for all Modernists. A benevolent Sellamma, is at peace with her world. She very much resembles Nature feeding a little life with her munificence.

The house where Sellamma lives is the only one that stands in an otherwise dilapidated surrounding, metaphorically likening the situation to an exploitative Malaysia irrevocably despoiling its environment. Sellamma appears to resist a process of change that would historicise her. She alone appears to be that vast principle of resistance against a logocentric change ushered in on the scaly back of modernism. It is as if Nature is in the process of claiming what is its right. Sellamma's house is the only one that is whole while all others are in ruin. Sumitra returns to Sellamma's house. It is uncanny how Sellamma can almost hear Sumitra's thoughts and responds to them almost simultaneously. That Nanda is not around guarding the old woman against the intrusion of Sumitra means that she is accepted as a part of Sellamma's world, and not perceived to be a threat. Nanda has in the past attained notoriety as a fierce dog that would attack anyone who dared approach the woman as is evident on p. 12 of the novel. As Sumitra walks into Sellamma's house on invitation to share some coffee, she has a distinct impression of survival and preservation: "I don't see much of the ruin I saw in the other houses, only a painstaking effort at preservation. The objects pushed up against the side wall and covered with grimy, faded cloth, suggest tentacles and scary shapes" (Maniam 12-13). This reflexivity of Sumitra indicates her unreadiness for the great task of ecological preservation, as yet. One is reminded of Coleridge's mariner at this point. Again, the scepticism of Sumitra may perhaps be also a result of her presumed "superiority". This hegemonic assumption gets entirely reversed in the course of the novel. The urban arrogance in confronting non-urban realities is not very unlike the patriarchal supposition that Nature is subject to exploitation. At this point Sellamma and Sumitra form part of the classic binary, female/ male; Nature/ Culture. Ironically, Sumitra represents the patriarchal attempt at dominating both Nature and woman. Sellamma's resistance and eventual success in transforming Sumitra's ethics can be read as a part of what Warren and Cheney might call "quilt-in-the-making" (180).

On this visit, Sumitra, instead of attempting to influence Sellamma to come round to see the world in a new light, is slowly being dragged into the private and esoteric world of the old woman. Growing aware of such possibility, even as she mulls over her success in counselling Christina who had broken down because of her estrangement with her boyfriend, Sumitra hastily slips away from Sellamma's presence. But her escape does not come soon enough. Already the critical words are uttered, "I know you too well" (Maniam 14). This act of recognition and owning of familiarity on the part of Sellamma lets loose a dynamics of change that will overpower Sumitra. Instead of representing the patriarchal domination of both the world of nature and the female world, Sumitra begins to grow complicit in the act of establishing the ethical universe of responsible and egalitarian coexistence.

Back in her office, Sumitra sees that the file on the old woman contains the legend "Obstructive Occupation of Land" (Maniam 15). She has inherited Sellamma via the Land office and the Social Welfare Department. Sumitra sits mulling over the scant details that the file offers about Sellamma. The biographical account is also an act of historicising Sellamma's existence. Memory here is used as a tool to drag the past into the present, in order to reframe Sellamma inside the present. But then there are many inexplicable facets of this individual that refuse to get patterned or framed into the normative framing of the present. However, what is apparent throughout is that Sellamma is never coerced. She has always chosen to be where she wants to. In fact, we learn that she had moved away briefly from the land locking up the house after her brother and parents' mysterious disappearances. Yet she returns to work on the land that her father had abandoned. One is tempted to ask the question if this is an act of expiation or merely fulfilling an obligation to a greater duty. No doubt, this return of Sellamma can also be perceived as an ecofeminist act:

Ecofeminists acknowledge up front their basic feminist value commitments: the twin dominations of women and nature exist, are wrong, and ought to be eliminated. Ecofeminists see these twin dominations as social problems rooted in very concrete, historical, socioeconomic conditions, as well as in oppressive, patriarchal conceptual frameworks that maintain and sanction these conditions. (Warren and Cheney 186)

Sumitra, attempts to record Sellamma's conversation, when the other quizzes Sumitra why she wishes to use a machine when she can actively remember things. However, Sumitra is able to make Sellamma recede into her past and encourages her schizoid speech of talking to her elder sister, Anjali. But then, soon Sellamma sadly tells Sumitra that Anjali is unwilling to speak any longer, which forces Sumitra to switch off her recorder and leave. The conversation at the start between Sumitra and Sellamma is both intimate and playful. When Sumitra would record her voice, Sellamma asks, "Is your memory becoming a sieve?" And when Sumitra avers and says she wants to record her memories, the latter says, "I don't have to remember.....They are here all the time" (Maniam 22). Sellamma is an embodiment of culture in process. Memory studies are divided between prioritizing collective memory and individual memory. However, Maniam's novel does not seem to place much store by collective memory. Sellamma thus represents the only point of bearing which will offer any direction to society at large in the wasteland of memory. Anna Green quoting Nancy Wood in her erudite article says, "collective representations of the past represent the conscious purpose of social groups" (Green 37). The indictment on Malaysian society is not easy to miss. The social groups seem to have failed in

Malaysia in any act of conscious purpose. Sellamma is the high node of minority culture that is the repository of any change and perpetuation of value. Thus the novel attempts to move beyond the theoretical premises of social historians in prioritising the collective recollection over the “passive”, “unconscious” individual memory.

On the surface, we are a witness to Sellamma’s schizoid speech, wherein she descends to imitation and double enactments. However, ritualistically, in the world of magic, both hysteria and schizophrenia have a different role, that of not affecting but effecting a presence in a world of absences and recovering from the past what is lost or absent in the present. Sellamma’s schizoid speech effects temporarily such a reclaiming. Sumitra uses the recording room and the tape on which she has recorded Sellamma’s speech to learn to imitate Anjali’s voice. She now arms herself with a strategy of humouring Sellamma’s belief that she can speak to her sister directly, in order to bring her round. However, this only gets her deeper into Sellamma’s world.

Sumitra’s interlude marked by the retelling of her father’s Sunday parties also marks for us the gradual improvement in the family’s fortunes and the father’s growth in the community as an important man. He as a wage earner has as a right once a month shindig at home, later he brings home his cronies unannounced which act is silently resented but with his growing influence and affluence, the occasional parties at home are no more a bugbear. Sumitra is not very happy doing her job, as she confesses, “I am also a little saddened by what I’m going to do to the old woman. No, not the loosening of her hold on the land, but the tearing of the veil from her eyes.” (Maniam 31). Maniam employs irony competently here. What Sumitra does not realize at this moment of her arrogated superiority is that it is her cataract of ignorance filming her eyes that is being removed. Sellamma is a very unassuming Ophthalmologist of a different kind! In her zeal to reform she is already confused we see. She thinks that displacing the old woman is somewhat akin to her own moving away from their rented accommodation to their own Bungalow, an act that would remove her illusions at the same time also her familiar surroundings. But even as that thought occurs, she realizes that is precisely not what the change would mean. It is of far more consequence, “No, no, I’m not getting it right. What I mean is, I’ll be taking her away from the one reality that keeps her desperately alive” (Maniam 31). Sumitra would think that she should be happy to be relocated to an old age pension. She blindly believes that memories can turn into obsessions and thus be burdensome in one’s old age and thus it better be avoided by relocating to a new environment to contend with new realities. She sees herself as a deliverer.

Without her being aware, Sumitra has grown familiar with the terrain of the old woman. The conversation takes place at two different levels of reality, each outside the other, yet not completely disjunctive, but rather in a palimpsest. If Sumitra would feign talk about her realities and her presents and her intents, wherein Sellamma would be a conscript at best and a victim at the worst, the old woman talks of a reality that is immanent and not of exteriority, wherein Sumitra would be acting an integral part in the reconstruction and replay of that reality, by and by. The one significant character that is needed is patience. Instead of Sumitra analysing Sellamma, we see Sellamma doctoring to the spirit of Sumitra when she observes, “Still young.... And restless” (Maniam 34). Sellamma tells Sumitra that she needs to return time and again before she can attempt to understand the scheme of things. That consternates Sumitra as

well as mystifies her. She may chose to visit randomly, at all hours of the day, but Sellamma does not pay attention. It is as if Sumitra has already grown into a part of the vast design of Sellamma's universe. At this point, Sumitra uses the word "patience" quite critically. For her, patience is a trait with which to bring round the recalcitrant subject. But for Sellamma "patience" has a meditative quality. If for the one it is a word of opportunism, for the other, it is a word of virtue (Maniam 36). On one of Sumitra's visits, Sellamma decides that Sumitra is ready. She now is capable of a deeper ingress into the esoteric but sympathetic universe of Sellamma. She will be the third now, "'Come Nanda', she says. 'We must show our visitor what keeps us here'" (Maniam 36). These words are enough indication that Sellamma is not oblivious of Sumitra's real intent or her agenda. Yet, Sellamma has let her into her scheme of things because she has been chosen. If Sellamma represents the female under the sign of exploitation, Nanda represents the non-human being that necessarily is exploited by the human world. Yet, using not only her refusal to be translocated but also her individual memory, Sellamma has been successful in constructing an esoteric world of ethicality and conservation where Nanda and she both have found refuge against a world of male Narcissism. She refuses to be the specular other of such a universe.

Sellamma's attitude towards her reminds Sumitra of her father who had grown stern with her when she had had played truant once as a child. She conducts Sumitra on a visit through the ruins, at the end of which, she seems to notice a change coming over her guest, "'Something is coming into the visitor's eyes, Nanda,' she says. 'If you have been away for long from a place, you take time to know it again'" (Maniam 42). Sumitra is thus torn away from her reality into the vortex of the embalming reality of Sellamma, and through her, her entire family.

When Sumitra would use the voice of Sellamma's sister, the latter admonishes her. Sellamma has no use for pretensions. She has already involved Sumitra in her lost universe. Soon Sumitra is led towards the waterfall. Walking is also an exercise in memory for Sellamma. They cross over to the *Dusun*, the orchard. Sumitra misinterprets the emotion of Sellamma as one of restfulness associated with owning a land of plenitude. She believes now that all she has to do is alienate her from that restfulness or reveal to her an alternative restfulness to dislodge her from her land. She is taken to the Rama- Sita grove, which means little to Sumitra. However, Sellamma does not lose faith in her. She asserts that Sumitra, when the time is ready, will visit the grove on her own.

The old woman is not her only client. Sumitra has been particularly successful with young subjects. Hisham is her case on hand. He appears to suffer from manic depressive tendencies, alternating between suave, intelligent, humorous conversation and sullen silences. Soon, Hisham's mother Puan Jamal is beguiled into thinking that he has improved in his mental health and tells Sumitra that she can be off the case till such time when she needs to be consulted again. In the meantime, at home too there is a problem grandmother, who with her affectations makes her mother's life that much more miserable. The little expedition to the mall to buy a pair of ear rings ends up in Sumitra deliberately making her grandmother walk all the way down to the car in the basement parking lot, during the course of which her makeup and careful coiffure comes undone.

Her visit to Sellamma now is a relief for the woman because she apparently had thought she would not. Sellamma leads her to the Rama Sita grove. Sellamma, now hands her the shovel to dig the furrowed earth with. It is as if she were waiting for her sister to return so that they could once more pick up from where they had left off. She demonstrates to Sumitra how to handle the *changkul* or the shovel, taking a jibe at her city bred ways that have distanced her from her earth bound task: “Appa always said be part of the handle, and you’ll be part of the earth” (Maniam 62). Sumitra soon gets into the rhythm of hoeing the furrowed earth and as they work in tandem she grows more and more aware of the earthiness of it and its rhythm, not without some misgiving though. Yet, she emerges a happier person for her effort, “the shining sweat of our labour feeling like a second skin on our bodies!” (Maniam 63). Sellamma appreciatively observes, “Your earth hands are coming back” (Maniam 63). It is as if Sumitra is on a programme of recovery and not Sellamma. The old woman leads Sumitra to the river for a bath. On the bank she pauses and utters what could be the most significant speech in the entire novel, which holds the key to understanding the novel:

‘After I returned from visiting you, I didn’t know what to do.’ She says. ‘Then I remembered what you used to do. I’ve been doing it all these years. Doing it whenever I felt your absence, doing it whenever I felt the others’ absence. Doing it and waiting for you to come, all these years. Now you are here, you must enter it and bring me out. You must enter it to bring yourself out.’ (Maniam 64)

In this amazingly lucid entreaty, Sellamma lays bare what binds her to the place and the ultimate vocation of not just her but as also of Sumitra. It lays bare the task of returning to one’s roots as the apotheosis of one’s existence. Nothing else appears of any significance than that.

What follows is a ritualistic bath. At first reluctant she is encouraged by Sellamma to divest her clothes and to wear the *serung* and enter the river, which she does at last. Reminiscent of a ritualistic ablutionary dip in the temple ponds, Sellamma pours water from her cupped palms over the head of Sumitra and the latter imitates the act. Thus the two seem to undergo a purificatory ritual, which is reminiscent for Sellamma of what she and her sister used to do long ago. In Sumitra she sees an unaging principle of her sister. Even as they sit on the boulder emerging from the river allowing their bodies to dry without using the towel, Sumitra enters a trance like state along with Sellamma and experiences a deep communion. However, she guiltily attempts to resist, even as the “visitation” vanishes and she seems to emerge from a spell.

The second stage of the familiarization process begins in this chapter. The bath in the river is described by Sumitra as baptismal. The task now is to drag back to life what “was not living properly” (Maniam 68) as Sellamma tells Sumitra. The house is opened now, aired and rearranged. Sellamma now freely starts using Anjali’s name to address Sumitra. She is shown the photo albums, and Sumitra explores the family history of Sellamma and in the process we are introduced to Sellamma’s family and its story proper.

Sellamma wants a puja to be performed and she asks Sumitra to get the paraphernalia, including the needles for the gramophone. The ritual once more transports Sumitra into the world of Sellamma as it had done at the river. Sellamma becomes Sellam for Sumitra as she slips into the

role of Anjali -akka – though cautiously. Thus Sumitra enters a deeper circle of relationship with Sellamma, instead of extricating her from her memories, “ ‘You have really come back Anjali-Akka,’ she says. ‘Now we can look for the others’” (Maniam 82).

Anjali had not found it easy to part from her sister Sellamma soon after her wedding. It had taken a few days and a lot of convincing Sellamma to let her go. Finally Anjali had promised to return one day to Sellamma (Maniam 87).

The family of Sellamma is offered an escape from the rubber plantation where her father was a tapper, by the white man who was their boss. He was impressed by the learning that was in Sellamma’s father Arokian, whom even the labour supervisor sirs. Sellamma the child was upset even then to leave all that was familiar to her behind. However, it was Anjali who helps her lose her fear and distrust of the unfamiliar. The act of building their own house on the new land dispels all her reservations.

Arokian convinces his white boss to let him have more land to start a new plantation, to build houses for labour. However, the rest of the plantation workers are antagonistic to the idea of displacement from their present environs as well as almost viscerally antagonistic that the white man dispenses with a land that is not his own so whimsically. Maniam seems to indicate the anti-colonial emotions already palpable among the common populace in Malaya. However, Arokian takes the business of owning land seriously and not only does he start cultivation he also builds a shrine with his own hands and offers the gods his puja. He stocks the land with cattle and fowl. The presence of Pak Mat in all this endeavour apparently suggests the future of Malaya conceived as a joint endeavour between the various races.(Maniam 107) The children were taught to respect and respond to the land via an appreciation of the Ramayana. It is no wonder then that there is a Rama Sita grove – perhaps reminiscent of Chitrakuta where Rama and Sita were happiest. The jungle provided the means with which he could grow healthy crops. Pak Mat helped him identify the roots, the creepers, the leaves and the gum, and in the preparation of the substance with which they coated the saplings before planting. Thus the Malay and the Indian come together in the new land to cultivate and enrich the land,

“‘You’ve more than got the touch, Arokian, ’ Pak Mat said., watching him.

‘You’ve taught me well,’ her father said, and they looked at each other with the glow of some secret knowledge.” (Maniam 109)

But even as the plantation takes root, the eldest of his daughters has an affair and the father meets the boy and marries her off.

That is when Anjali ritualistically anoints Sellamma with a concoction made from forest herbs and pours a libation of water over her head and says that they will always be part of the river. On On p.112 Sellamma emulates her sister, but then prays for their togetherness and that their permanent stay there.

Anjali names the vegetable patch Rama Sita grove after her parents, likening them to the epic characters. While Arokian worked his land hard, his companions who too had been

beneficiaries of the munificence of the British had not emulated him. Most were happy working for the Chinese or the Malay employers at their restaurants, shops or orchards. The white man arrives with the title deeds and presents them to Arokian and others. He is full of praise for what Arokian has done with his lands unlike the rest.

Now a prosperous Arokian gets his eldest son married off to an English speaking bride. He has been also teaching a smattering of it to his two sisters, who were taking Malay classes. Anjali teaches Sellam to follow her dreams by taking her beyond the waterfall, through the forest where no one has walked as we witness on p. 125.

The girls are found by a search party asleep. They have found their dream beyond all walks of people. In her dream, the tiger and the snake are envisioned by Sellamma. In other words she becomes part of the primordial nature. The high priestess of this rite of passage is Anjali. Rightly so! Only a woman can initiate a woman into the knowledge of ecological balance and wellbeing. They have stayed overnight in the forest. If the brother finds them truant and the mother finds Anjali too self-willed, the father understands their free spirit and their spirit of enquiry. As a contrast to Anjali and Sellamma we have Christina and Sumitra clubbing.

Their placid life in the new plantation is disturbed by the Japanese invasion. When one of the settlers talks about returning to motherland, Arokian admonishes them. And Pak Mat gently reminds them, "This is where you live now" (Maniam 142). For Sumitra, Sellamma's memories of the Japanese incursion are an act of historicising what is almost forgotten. The Japanese camp nearby and forcibly muster men for the railway they were building into India.

Pak Mat comes to the rescue of Arokian and his people. He asks him to provide vegetables to the Japanese so he is not conscripted to build the railways as most Tamils are. The Japanese conscript the men to work at their camp. The cleaner ones are taken to work in the Japanese camp kitchen while the others are left to work on the land with Arokian (Maniam 147). The girls hide whenever the Japanese soldiers, nick-named Ravanas by their father, appeared. They grew maize and vegetables for the Japanese. Arokian would listen to the radio surreptitiously, and the girls would warn the father by tuning the gramophone loud whenever they heard the Japanese coming. Soon, their life of anxiety is at an end when the allies bomb Japan. There is a greater intimacy achieved between Sellamma and Sumitra as she narrates the tale of the Japanese occupation.

Quite interestingly, even like Arokian, Sumitra's father has made it good in life. Despite Sumitra's slow progress with Sellamma, her boss has a good word for her and her work with her father whom he meets at the Golf Club. Her brothers visit her with their families, and Maniam shows how full of pretentious cordiality such visits can be.

With the Japanese gone, the girls are back to the vegetable garden harvesting a variety of them. Once more Arokian's garden flourishes. However, life did not go on in its sedentary fashion. Soon there were confrontations between the members of the family. The eldest son wants the land to be sold and move to the city. Arokian would not hear of it. The brothers want

the land to be divided so that each one can sell his share or keep as it pleases him. Anjali threatens the brother:

“No dividing!” Anjali said, getting up. “No selling.”

“What will you do?” the married brother said, stepping upto her.

“You force Appa to do anything, you’ll know!”

“You’ll bite off my head?”

“I hold the changkul better than you now!” (Maniam 181)

Notwithstanding the visceral reaction of Anjali, the passive resistance of Arokian, the disapproval of Sellamma, the two brothers leave one fine day. They foresee the Malay upsurge, and want to be away before that happens: “Not like before, Appa”, the younger brother said. “The Japankarans were here only for a few years. The others will always be here” (Maniam 181-182). The younger generation of Indian immigrant community already shows the signs of insecurity of a minority community, on the eve of Malay nationalism. Soon, the younger brother too gets married. Arokian refuses to go while the mother and Anjali attend the wedding. This is the time that communists begin to gather force and spread out. In the meanwhile, both Sellamma and Anjali delve deeper and deeper into a communion with their vegetable patch. The brinjals for instance seem to them the breasts of Mother Goddess.

Arokian’s faith in Mat is touching. But the wise Pak Mat knows the world around them is not made for easy friendships. Arokian finds that there is no more the easy relationship between him and the Malays. Chinnathambi’s sketches and his figurines too seem to elicit animosity among both Chinese and Malay populations. The divide is real. What the two elder brothers foresaw seems to happen. Chinnathambi attains notoriety among the Chinese as insane. Anjali cannot anymore confide in Sellamma because Sellamma pretends to be as yet innocent. Anjali is married off by the intervention of the brothers. But then the close bond of Sellamma refuses to let go of Anjali. Arokian would not be drawn into the politics of the communities. He angrily dismisses the “Sangam” when they want him to represent them. Chinnathambi disappears, saying one day he would be understood by another generation.

Sumitra decides to enter her role as Anjali completely in order to draw Sellamma out. But, ironically she is getting subverted all the time. Sellamma uses her little game of intimacy to wean Sumitra away from her clubs, her modern notion of development into the rich, verdurant world of Nature.

Sellam is not the one who cries “Wait for me!” anymore. It is Sumitra as Anjali. In this act of backtracking, Sellamma turns into the natural leader. When Sumitra anxiously searches for Sellamma as she scrambles over the rocks, Sellam replies, “I am everywhere.... You’ve to find me, Anjali Akka” (Maniam 198). Sellamma is no more in search of the darkness but of silence, which hides within it the essential darkness.

The little expedition ends up on top of a watchtower overlooking an obvious quarry, a hole in the ground, a sign of man's avarice. When Sumitra warns of the imminent failure of Sellamma's tenacious attachment to land, the latter replies, "They have to care, if they have to go on living Appa" (Maniam 201). In Sellamma's speech, both Sumitra and Anjali have fulfilled their usefulness. She is now trying to fill her parent's heart with courage under the terrible and continuous onslaught on all that is dear to them. Her advice to Anjali is an advice to all future generations: "You must look behind the silence Anjali- Akka," Sellamma says after a while. "I see them all the time. When I don't see them anymore I'll go to my rest" (Maniam 201) .

Thus Sellamma humbly rests her case. Sumitra, is now listening to the silence and finds that she is enveloped by the silence. She wants to search this pregnant silence with her tiny torch, and then she grows aware of the jungle sounds all around her. It is in this resounding of the darkness in the heart of silence that Sumitra tries to refamiliarize herself - the Anjaliness of Sumitra, the other face. Like on the first occasion, on this too a search party comes looking for Sumitra (Anjali) and Sellamma. Only the envisioning this time is on the part of Anjali (Sumitra) while Sellamma is already the enlightened. Sumitra's father makes his first incursion into the world of Sellamma with the search party. It is also his first exposure to Nature , while his rather elaborate dressing up for the search reveals his lack of knowledge and his amateurish attitude to Nature

It is now the turn of Sumitra's mother to visit Sellamma's place of an evening. The mother advises Sumitra not to be possessed by a man she does not want. Sumitra wants to be away from the demand that she accept some man for a husband. Sellamma's home becomes her refuge now! If the real Anjali got possessed, the reincarnation returns to avoid being possessed.

Sumitra's mother is introduced to Sellamma. The first question that person asks is if mother has returned (Maniam 246). Next she wants to know about "Appa". The mother has no answer to Sellam's question. However, there is a sympathetic relationship that at once gets established between the two: " Don't you remember me , Amma?" " Yes., I remember you, Sellam" (Maniam 246). When Sumitra objects to her presence there, she recounts her story, the story of Gowri the little girl. It is the story of a sensitive girl, intelligent who had a difficult childhood and of a run away from home and the return of the prodigal. Gowri is in a way much better position to relate to Sellamma than Sumitra.

The father comes in search, even as Gowri settles down with Sellamma. Sellamma asks, " Why did you let Amma come alone, Appa?" (Maniam 284). He is very disturbed at what he sees as a charade being played by his wife and daughter. He leaves in a huff, but Gowri assures Sellam that he will soon return. The father now is also caught in the scheme of Sellamma, and her vicarious family is now complete, with Anjali, Amma and Appa returning to the abandoned farm: " I am the returned Anjali ,but also the Sumitra who had strayed to the game machines, now showing my father he is the one who has strayed" (Maniam 285). He, when put to it, shows how well he can wield the hoe. His skill surprises Sumitra. The tale now reflexes with Sumitra saying that her father was always reticent about his past and his other children. When he tells Sellamma that he has returned to take her away to a better place, Sellamma avers. She tells him there is no better place than home. He asks what he needs to do then. Sellamma reveals the secret

then: “You must bring back into life what was not living properly”. (Maniam 289) She seems to have taken on the mantle of Pak Mat.

When Sumitra realizes that of an evening, a couple of days later, Sellamma has not reverted to her memories, she asks her mother if she would from then on stop using her memory to which her mother makes a very significant reply, “ I don’t know Sumitra,..... . But we’ve to see she doesn’t lose her dignity” (Maniam 289). The father returns the next day and tells Sellamma, as a part of his ruse, that he was going to make everybody happy soon. He then goes off to return with the retinue of his other children in a couple of days. His elaborate plan fails. The mother insists that they all dress in the clothes of Sellamma’s family.

The mother oversees Sellam perform the puja and then she has Sellam and Anjali serve the lunch. The mother wants Sellamma to take the initiative. Sellamma reminds father of his long uttered imperative, “ Our life cannot be traded for anything” (Maniam 298). The father reiterates, which makes Sellamma break into tears. Then as the rest of the family leave, Sellamma, Anjali and Amma begin to work on the land. The father has failed to bring his wife away with him. She insists that he bring her mother-in-law. When she arrives, Sellamma addresses her as Elder-Akka and she and the mother forcibly give her a bath with the well water, after divesting her of all her jewellery . It is a part of the act of forgetting her life of forgetfulness and remembering her life of memory. After forcing the woman through the ritual she is allowed to leave. Yet, the mother does not return. The mother now gets a few labourers to work on the land and have the reservoir opened: “ We’ll get the land to look as it did before Sellam” (Maniam 305)

Sellam has other plans. She wants to bequeath the land to Anjali so that the land grabbers cannot get their hands on it (Maniam 307). But she wants the mother and daughter to treasure hunt for them. Finally Sumitra finds it hidden behind the portrait of Sellamma and Anjali. When Sellamma says she has to write the will, Sumitra admonishes her and asks her to go back to sleep, assuring her that she will take care of everything. Sumitra, writes down her name in the transfer form meticulously, and asks Sellamma to sign it. Sumitra goes off to seek the help of Nathan to formalize the will. But Nathan hasn’t got the contacts at the Government office. So Sumitra has to seek the help of Aishah.

Sellamma knew her time had neared when on the last of her peregrinations beyond the waterfall she saw the golden cobra, the very one that had in the first instant through the intervention of Anjali had taught her the worth of belonging to the land. Sellam dies peacefully now that her task on this earth is over.

Sumitra stays on. The developer’s representative who goes to see Nathan and the deed leaves. Sumitra gets Periasamy to come and help her with the land. However, holding on to her claim is not easy. The developer and his henchman try to faze her with strong arm tactics. At this juncture, the father steps in. He not only codons off the area, he also puts up notices of warning along the perimeter.

The builders run an advertisement against Sumitra as antidevelopment. In response, Sumitra enrolls Mei and Aishah to help her. The father gives her a computer and they create a montage with Chinnathambi's artwork and photographs and run it as a contrast to show the serious ecological threat that meaningless and avaricious rapine of land is sold down the throat of the public in the garb of development. They hope that it would bring enough public opinion against the assault on Sellamma's land.

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