So c i o-l i n g u iSt i c He t e r o g e n e i t y
i n tHe Wr i t i n gS o f Se l e c t e d
Ma l a ySi a n in d i a n au tHo rS
WHo Wr i t e i n en g l iS H

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to present the linguistic heterogeneity of the Malaysian Indian community that is often thought to be homogenously “Indian” through a comparison of the socio-linguistic signifiers in four English-language Malaysian novels. The variety of real-life speech patterns and code variations in K. S. Maniam’s *The Return*, Rani Manicka’s *The Rice Mother*, Preeta Samarasan’s *Evening Is the Whole Day*, and Sunil Nair’s *When All the Lights Are Stripped Away* reveal the linguistic heterogeneity of the Malaysian Indian creative imagination. Nuanced differences in speech patterns and codes from novel to novel counterbalance stereotypical representations of the Malaysian Indian community.

KEYWORDS: South Asian diaspora; Malaysian literature; Malaysian Indian writings; speech patterns; code variation

For a long time, critics of Malaysian Indian literature have focused on the writings of K. S. Maniam when it comes to the experiences of the Malaysian
Indian community.\(^1\) The focal point has always been the Tamil experience and the working class community. One consequence is the emergence of the mistaken notion of Indian homogeneity.\(^2\) The experiences depicted in Maniam's texts, however, do not define the Malaysian Indian community. As a corrective, this paper aims to reveal the heterogeneity of that community, specifically its linguistic heterogeneity, through an analysis of selected novels. Literary texts, after all, reflect the social dynamics of communities.

The novels are K. S. Maniam’s *The Return* (1981), Rani Manicka’s *The Rice Mother* (2002), Preeta Samarasan’s *Evening Is the Whole Day* (2008), and Sunil Nair’s *When All the Lights Are Stripped Away* (2012).\(^3\) We choose these novels to analyze because, first, they give a cross-section of Indian society in Malaysia. While most of the Indians in Malaysia can be traced to South India, they belong to various ethno-linguistic communities and they have come to occupy different positions in society. Apart from the laboring class of migrants, there was also a large scale migration of English-educated Indians who played the mediatory role between the laboring class and the comprador European class of planters.\(^4\)

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\(^{4}\)The dominant producers of fiction in English among the Indians in Malaysia are descended from South India. The Tamil, Telugus, Malayalees, and Sri Lankan Tamils were brought to India in the early twentieth century by the British. Majority of the Tamils and Telugus worked as laborers in the rubber plantations, while most of the Malayalees were employed as junior officers in the Railways (technical and clerical staff). The Sri Lankan Tamils
That diversity is reflected in the authors’ backgrounds and in the social worlds that they depict. Maniam, a Tamil by ethnicity, is an established Malaysian writer who has written numerous stories since 1976. *The Return*, his first novel, revolves around the experiences of the narrator and main protagonist, Ravi, from his humble beginnings in a rural working class environment and his rise up the social ladder through an education in English, and the attendant communal and personal conflicts that beset him. The other three writers are relatively new voices, whose novels are being published in the new millennium. Manicka is a Sri Lankan Tamil. *The Rice Mother*, her first novel, tells the story of four generations of a middle class Sri Lankan Tamil family’s trials through World War II, the Japanese occupation, and post-independence Malaysia. It is the matriarch of the family, Lakshmi, who keeps the family together during their hardship. Preeta Samarasan, a Tamil by ethnicity, recounts the story of the Rajashekarans, a wealthy middle-class Tamil family in Ipoh in the 1980s, in *Evening Is the Whole Day*. The story is narrated from the point of view of the youngest child of the family. Sunil Nair, a Malayalee by ethnicity, is the newest in the literary scene. *When All the Lights Are Stripped Away*, his debut novel, revolves around Anil’s wealthy upper middle-class Malayalee family. Set in Muar, Johor, in the late 1990s, the novel deals with the challenges the protagonist faces in his young life and the people he meets along the way. The story also has a political sub-plot as the father aspires for his son to become the Prime Minister of Malaysia.

Second, all the novels also exhibit nativization of the English language. They exemplify the speech patterns used in a multi-lingual society. The differences in the class affiliations of the characters in each novel reveal many insights into the dynamics of linguistic heterogeneity, as their diction is influenced by their socio-economic background and the local languages spoken in Malaysia.

The paper posits that each writer has a different imagining of the nation and it is therefore incorrect to homogenize the experiences of the Indian
community in Malaysia. Apart from that, since these writers write of the Malaysian experience, and given the fact that Malaysia is a multicultural country, the elements that make their way into the texts would also reflect the varied sights and sounds of the nation, and not merely an essentially “Indian” experience.

**PATTERNS OF LANGUAGE USE**

A multi-lingual environment is established early on in each of the novels to inform readers that the setting is a multi-ethnic society. In Maniam’s *The Return*, the conversation between Ravi, the protagonist, and his hospital barrack friends is a mixture of English and mother tongue. Ravi speaks grammatically correct English; his friends, in contrast, resort to direct translation from the Tamil language. Menon, the Chief Dresser in the hospital, curses in Tamil and his English is influenced by his mother tongue. In *The Rice Mother*, Lakshmi asks her husband to help her learn the Malay language. In *Evening Is the Whole Day*, Malay is the shared language between Rajasekharan, an Oxford-educated lawyer, and his mistress, an uneducated *char kuayteow* seller. English is the language of communication among the different races in Malaysia in Sunil Nair’s *When All the Lights Are Stripped Away*.

That the characters use varieties of English, including non-standard English or move from one language to another (English, Tamil, or Malay) reflects the linguistic heterogeneity of the Malaysian Indian creative imagination. The ensuing discussion is a detailed analysis of the socio-linguistic signifiers, namely, variety of real-life speech patterns and code variation.

**Varieties of Speech Patterns**

In a majority of speech communities, there are two or more varieties of the same language, each with a distinct range of social function, used by some speakers. This situation is known as diglossia. Ferguson describes two varieties of language where the standard language, known as H (“high”) variety, and regional dialect, called L (“low”) variety, are used within the community.5 The vital features of diglossia include the following: (1) H and L vary in terms of vocabulary, grammar structure, functions, prestige, standardization, and acquisition; (2) H is used in government functions,

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education, official transactions, the mass media, and grammar books, while L is used in everyday conversations; (3) in terms of prestige, H is regarded as superior to L and is learnt formally in school, while L is acquired at home, similar to one’s mother tongue.

Malaysia is a multi-lingual society, and within each language there are H and L varieties. The situation is conditioned by factors such as class differences and historical accidents. Bahasa Melayu (Malay) is the only official language of Malaysia. It is used as the medium of instruction in national schools and at official functions. Although Tamil and Mandarin languages are the mediums of instruction in vernacular primary schools and function as the H variety in those contexts, these languages lose their status as H in secondary schools, where they are relegated to only an optional subject learnt outside school hours. As for English, it is taught as a compulsory subject in secondary schools. Although English is the first language for some people, it is “not a native language for most people in this country [and] it is not used everywhere.”

As it is in other multi-lingual societies, English in Malaysia continually undergoes a process of nativization, so categories finer than “high” and “low” may be obtained. Loga Baskaran has categorized the linguistic nativization in Malaysia under three sociolects: acrolect (official, standard use), mesolect (unofficial, informal use), and basilect (broken English, substandard use). The acrolect variety models itself after the Standard British English, and it is the variety taught and learnt in the Malaysian schools. The mesolect variety is used among Malaysians for intra-national communication between the various ethnicities in Malaysia. The basilect variety is used by low proficiency speakers with limited vocabulary.

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8Irene Wong, *Simplified Features in the Structure of Colloquial Malaysian English* (Singapore: University Press for SEAMO Regional Language Centre, 1983); Saran Kaur Gill, *International Communication: English Language Challenges for Malaysia* (Serdang: Universiti Putra Malaysia,
This categorization is in accordance with the evolutionary model by Schneider, which gives an account of the five phases of the development of the New Englishes that puts Malaysia at phase 3 (Nativization) of the cycle. Phase 3 of Schneider’s model explains the process of nativization where the English language becomes an essential part of the local linguistic repertoire due to an increase in the number of proficient bilingual speakers of English from an indigenous population. Thus, in a multilingual society such as Malaysia, nativization at the vocabulary and syntax levels through local languages such as Malay, Chinese, and Tamil can be found in the written or spoken forms of the English language. In this paper, we use the categorization given by Baskaran to discuss the linguistic heterogeneity of Malaysian Indians as exemplified in the analysis of the four novels.

**The Return**

Given that the novel is set in a working class community, the basilect form is used in many of the dialogues. It is manifested in various ways.

One is by direct translations from mother tongue:

“My many spirits roam it,” she told me. “When I die I’ll never stop haunting the place.”

The speaker is Periathai, who started off as a tinker when she first arrived from India. She later becomes a communal medicine woman and subsequently peddles farming produce as well as traditional Indian savories amid her Indian community in the rural town of Bedong. “My many spirits roam it” is a direct translation from the colloquial Tamil, Periathai’s mother tongue. The direct translation brings out Periathai’s background and character.

Similarly, the English spoken by the boys in the hospital barrack is a direct translation from Tamil. An example is their exchange while they are playing hide and seek:

“Long time you no catch us,” one of them said.

“Long time no play,” I said, reluctantly.

“Why you pull me away?” I asked in panic.

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10Maniam, 8.
“You not man to play some other place?” Ganesh said.\textsuperscript{11}

One of them calls Ravi names: “He white monkey! No know what we think!”\textsuperscript{12}

The phrase, “No know what we think!” is a direct translation from the Tamil language to mean “Don’t you know what we think of you?” An exclamation point is used instead of a question mark to indicate their contempt for Ravi.

Apart from the direct translation of mother tongue phrases, which often results in ungrammatical English, the use of slang words is another manifestation of the basilect form. This occurs in the narration as well as in the dialogue. Referring to a North Indian, Maniam uses the word “Bayi.”\textsuperscript{13}

This term (usually spelled as “Bhai”) is commonly used by the older generation of Malaysians to refer to the Punjabi policemen employed under the British system in Malaya.\textsuperscript{14}

Compared to the many instances of the use of the basilect form in \textit{The Return}, there is very limited use of the acrolect form. The only instance of this is in Ravi’s conversation with Miss Crawfurd, an English teacher. Their conversation takes on the acrolect form as both are highly educated and at that time Ravi was doing his teaching practice and she was his supervisor.

It may be asked why many of the characters in the novel speak the basilect form even though they are attending an English medium school. Ravi’s reminiscences help account for the situation:

I remember my anxiety to speak English again, to revive Miss Nancy’s world, during that bleak holiday period. The language we spoke in the long verandah of the houses was a defiant version of English, mingled with and sounding very Tamil. The minute we broke into “pure” English we were scolded.\textsuperscript{15}

The practice of not using Standard English comes from a sense of social solidarity and respect for the majority. In the hospital barrack, importance is given to the Tamil language as most of the residents there are of the working class society. Children from this society are not only reproached by the middle-class society but also by their own community when they speak Standard

\textsuperscript{11}Ibid., 42.
\textsuperscript{12}Ibid., 43.
\textsuperscript{13}Ibid., 81.
\textsuperscript{14}See Sandhu, \textit{Indians in Malaya}, 302–3, who states “with the advent of the British, the role of the Indians as catalysts took on a new direction and emphasis. A new genre of Indian immigrant—Ramasamy the labourer, Tulsi Ram the convict, Bhai Singh the policeman, Maniam the technical assistant and Pillai, the clerk—arrived in the country.”
\textsuperscript{15}Maniam, 75.
English. The perception is that the acrolect form is “spoken by teachers in schools,” and it “reigned supreme among the more skilled, educated personnel of this estate hospital. They [educated hospital staff] lived, quite removed from us, on raised terrace houses.”

***The Rice Mother***

Compared to Maniam, whose colorful characters are brought to life through the speech patterns they use, Rani Manicka uniformly uses the acrolect form for the dialogues in her novel. However, readers are still able to detect linguistic variety. In the scene where Lakshmi asks her husband to teach her Malay, readers presume that the conversation is taking place in Tamil because Lakshmi is uneducated. The setting of the novel, the 1930s, should alert readers to the fact that Malay was still not the official language of Malaya (known as Malaysia after independence) but was widely used, hence, Lakshmi’s eagerness to learn it. Furthermore, in describing Rani, Lakshman’s wife, Manicka reminds her readers in her narration that Rani “sat chatting in English with Ayah in the living room.” The fact that she had to state that they were speaking in English is to make readers aware that this is a Tamil-speaking family.

***Evening Is the Whole Day***

There is more variety in *Evening Is the Whole Day*, as the novel paints a broader canvass than either Maniam or Manicka’s novels. All three varieties of the sociolect are used, and they are reflective of the status of the speakers. The basilect is used by Rukumani, also called Kooky Rooky, who comes from the working class and is uneducated. The verb “to be” is eliminated in these examples: “Where your Amma?” and “‘Akka,’ Kooky Rooky says, still standing in the doorway, ‘he gone away. He not coming back.’”

The other working class characters employ reduplication, a consequence of direct translation from Tamil or Malay. Vasanthi uses it the most. She says, for example, “Tsk, don’t simply-simply make everything into a joke.” Her phrase “simply-simply” is a direct translation from the Tamil reduplication “chumma-chumma.” Samarasan uses this technique to bring out Vasanthi’s character as someone who uses the English language to project her status as the

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16Ibid., 76.
17Manicka, 268.
18Samarasan, 84 and 85.
19Ibid., 81 (my italics).
wife of a respected lawyer in the community. However, her English is that of the basilect variety, as her parents are from the working class community.

Many of the other characters also use reduplication, reflective of their working class background. These include Vasanthi’s neighbor (“‘Look look look,’ says Mrs. Balakrishnan farther down the street,”), the garbage collector (“The family personally told me it was for you, special-special only”), Vasanthi’s father (“Suddenly-suddenly this manicure is oh-so-urgent, yes?”), a Malay man (“You asking-asking your poor mommy so many questions”), Vasanthi’s sister, Valli (“Running in like a madman and simply-simply talking like this”), and Rajasekharan’s mother, Paati (“What are you simply-simply pulling my hair for?”). All the characters mentioned above, with the exception of the Malay man, use direct translation from the Tamil language: “look look look” is “pare, pare, pare,” “special-special” is “cirrapu-cirrapu,” “suddenly-suddenly” is “thidhirne-thidhirne,” and “simply-simply” is “chumma-chumma.” The reduplication of “asking-asking” is a direct translation from the Malay word “tanya-tanya.”

Another form of reduplication is found in the novel. Unlike reduplication of words which has examples of the basilect variety, phonological reduplication, or the doubling of a word by changing the initial syllable of that word, belongs to the linguistic repertoire of the characters from the middle-class community and is used in the acrolect variety. Rajasekharan uses this doubling for its rhythmic sound effect: “not on our omelets-bomelets my boy.” In the examples discussed, one’s social status in the society differentiates between the use of reduplication of words and phonological reduplication.

There are other manifestations of the basilect form in the novel. These convey meanings specific to the cultural milieu that would otherwise be missed. Vasanthi uses repetition of the Wh-question form “what”: “What, he thinks we’re bringing two three suitcases just to ta-pau our lunch or what?” “What” is used to express sarcasm and not to start a question. The reduplication of the word by Vasanthi’s father (“Whatatta-whatatta treat that will be for us all”) and Vasanthi (“Whatatta-whatta grand place this Station Hotel used to be back in the British days, you know or not?”) is a direct translation of “enna-enna” from the Tamil language and is an expression of exaggeration.

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20Ibid., 12, 34, 49, 116, 123, and 256.
21Ibid., 76 (my italics).
22Ibid., 113.
23Ibid., 49–50 and 114.
Slang words are used by both the working class and middle class characters: “hi-funda,” a term used by the young generation to refer to a level of sophistication that is displayed by someone; “ta-pau,” meaning “take away,” a Cantonese word that is widely used by all the ethnicities in Singapore and Malaysia; “gomen,” meaning “government,” a clipped form common among speakers of Tamil, in which there is no /v/ sound; and “Japanese slippers,” referring to flip-flops. Meanwhile, the mesolect variety is used among Ipoh’s tea-party circle ladies, whose husbands are affluent members of the society such as lawyers and doctors. Here is an example:

“Had to drop my Rajesh off for his maths tuition class,” Mrs. Dwivedi pants. . . .
“Sooo long he was taking to get ready, what to do, these children nowadays?
Even for tuition class must get all suited and booted. Going to study or to meet
girls, I wonder.”
“Yes,” Datin Latifah offers, “our Hisham also giving us endless headache.
Have to cancel our annual Paris trip next year, I think—exam year for him,
you know?”

The grammatical reductions are not due to the speakers’ lack of knowledge of the English language. As this is an informal gathering, the reductions are acceptable.

Apart from that, words coined from trade names are another form of the mesolect variety used in the novel: “their eyelids dark with kajal, their toenails bright with Cutex” and “the top of Appa’s Brylcreemed head.”25 “Cutex” is used instead of “nail polish,” and “Brylcreem,” a brand of hair gel, is used as an adjective to describe Rajasekharan’s hair.

The only evidence of the acrolect form used in conversation is Rajasekharan’s remark to himself after he finds out that Chellam, the domestic helper, has posters of Tamil film actors on her room wall: “I fear our bonny young village lass is waiting for Rajinikanth to sweep her away on his white stallion.”26 His linguistic repertoire is a reflection of his Oxford-educated social background.

**When All the Lights Are Stripped Away**
In this novel, the use of the various sociolects reflects the characters’ social or educational background and the immediate context of the conversation. There are many instances of the acrolect form of English because many of

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24Ibid., 189.
25Ibid., 3 and 52.
26Ibid., 250.
the conversations are between highly educated speakers: Dr. Razak and Datuk Onn, who are political leaders, Mr. Ramalingam, a teacher, Dr. Hoo, a medical doctor, and Santhia, a newspaper editor. Early on, the conversation between Anil and his father establishes their educated status:

“Who am I?” Acha asks. Anil waits to see if this is a trick or rhetorical question. Acha says nothing, so he replies with a frown, “You are my father.”

“What else?”

“You worked your way up from a boy growing up in a family on a rubber estate to a successful lawyer and businessman. And you were Amma’s husband.”

“You are not wrong. But I am more.”

As for the mesolect variety, Nair has Tiok Lam (a Chinese) use this form in questioning Anil (an Indian) about his personal life: “Yes, yes, lah, we know that, but how come a young man like you is away from home and not at university?” Tiok Lam, although a trainee engineer, uses the mesolect form of the English language because the setting is at a hawker stall. Accordingly, the use of the particle “lah,” which functions here as a mark of informal style, the omission of the emphatic auxiliary “do” before the word “know,” and the deletion of the indefinite article “a” before “university” are all indications of the mesolect variety, which is acceptable in an informal gathering and is the choice for intra-national communication among the different ethnicities in Malaysia.

The basilect variety is found in the speech of the front desk helper at the hotel where Anil is staying:

“Oh, you back. Think no come back. Win money in Genting?” he had said with his toothless grin when he saw Anil walk in earlier that night.

Similarly, Ah Nam, a cook, speaks in the basilect form: “You not the police, why you ask so many questions? He speak when he wants.”

**Code Variation in a Multi-Lingual Community**

Code-switching and code-mixing are usual in multi-lingual societies. Code-switching occurs when speakers insert a word or phrase from one language into a sentence in another language or move back and forth

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27 Nair, 22.
28 Ibid., 87.
29 Ibid., 83.
30 Ibid., 87.
between the different languages. The words or phrases in one language grammatically fit in the sentence in another language. Thus, code-switching reflects the grammars of both languages working simultaneously. According to Romaine:

Many linguists have stressed the point that switching is a communicative option available to a bilingual member of a speech community on much the same basis as switching between styles or dialects is an option for the monolingual speaker. Switching in both cases serves an expressive function and has meaning.31

Code-switching takes place in specific social situations, enriching the repertoire of the speakers. Platt states that “code selection would naturally depend on the extent to which the speaker wishes to accommodate the addressee.”32 Apart from that, code-switching functions as “a signal of group membership and shared ethnicity with an addressee.”33 In other words, speakers consciously code-switch as it is motivated by the solidarity of their relationships. Moreover, according to Talib, the “use of code-switching in a literary work may depend on the author’s need to reflect the accuracy of language use by characters.”34 The strategy of code-switching achieves the “dual result of abrogating the Standard English and appropriating English as a culturally significant discourse.”35

There is a common misconception that bilingual speakers speak ungrammatical English when they code-switch. In fact, inserted phrases that are in a second language are always in keeping with the syntactic rules of the language with which the sentence began. In code-switching, “speakers have a genuine choice of which words or phrases they will use in which language,”36 as they are competent speakers of both languages.

Bokamba does not distinguish between code-switching and code-mixing as he uses both terms interchangeably.37 Talib, on the other hand, argues that

31Romaine, 59.
36Holmes, 42.
“code-mixing involves the use of a scattering of words in a different language or dialect, whereas code-switching involves something more substantial: a whole clause or a sizeable phrase from other [sic] language or dialect is imported.”

Code-switching should not be confused with code-mixing. Further, code-mixing has minor or major lexicalization of local language vocabulary and may impede the grammatical structure of the language. Therefore, code-mixing falls under the mesolect or basilect varieties, depending on the extent of lexicalization and proficiency of the speakers. For example, the particle “lah,” which has become a common feature in Malaysian English, would fall under code-mixing rather than code-switching. Although it does not impede the grammatical structure of the sentence, it functions as a suffix and not as a whole clause. Besides, the particle “lah” can be placed at different parts of the sentence depending on its intended function. Richards and Tay, in the first reference to the use of the particle “lah,” state that it is an indicator to express solidarity and support, while Kwan-Terry identifies two types of “lah”: the stressed and the unstressed. Low and Deterding explain Kwan-Terry’s distinctions further:

The stressed version is associated with a persuasive, conciliatory or explanatory attitude, while the unstressed version is often used to suggest impatience or annoyance. She also links the occurrence of the stressed lab with the emotive sentence-final particles found in Chinese and suggests that the appearance of the lab particle in SgE is the result of transfer from Chinese.

Although Kwan-Terry states that the particle “lah” is a characteristic of the Chinese language, Jassem argues that the particle “lah,” considered the most characteristic feature of Malaysian English, is actually a Malay expression.
Similarly, Goddard also asserts that the particle “lah” is a salient feature of colloquial Malay. Whether code-switching or code-mixing, characters in the novel employ code variations for various purposes.

**The Return**

Maniam, aware that he is writing for a multi-ethnic society, uses glossing throughout his novel. Any Tamil or Malay words used in the text are immediately explained in footnotes. In one instance, however, Maniam leaves words untranslated and unglossed, a strategy of code-switching called transplantation: “Look at the avarakai panthal!” Still, readers are able to guess that *avarakai* refers to legumes and *panthal* denotes a wooden framework because Maniam describes that Ravi is brought to a vegetable plot where he sees legumes growing from a wooden framework.

**The Rice Mother**

Similarly, Rani Manicka uses glossing. However, her use of glossing is more subtle than Maniam’s because it is worked into the text and not tacked on in the form of footnotes. Her translation of the Malay words used is meant for her international readers:

> “And one more thing. Will you teach me to speak Malay?”
> 
> “Boleh.” He smiled at me.
> 
> I knew that word. It meant “can do”. I smiled back.
> 
> “Terima Kasih.” Thank you, in Malay.

Using the first person point of view, Manicka is able to give readers the meaning of the Malay words as a natural part of the scene. In another instance, Jeyan, Lakshmi’s son, was called names. Manicka not only gives the literal translation but the figurative as well:

> In the playing fields children I had never seen before chanted out, “Kayubalak, Kayubalak, Timber, Timber,” when they saw me. “Thick as a piece of wood.”

In the example above, the ethnicity of an individual is portrayed through the use of words from the local languages.

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45Maniam, 119.

46Manicka, 38.

47Ibid., 125.
Evening Is the Whole Day

In contrast to Maniam, Samarasan does not give glosses and contextual clues when her characters code-switch. For example, the use of code-mixing here might pose problems to readers who do not understand Tamil: “Tata was pleased with himself for one-upping a vellakaran.”48 Some readers may be unaware that the term “one-upping a vellakaran” refers to Tata’s (Rajasekharan’s father) victory over a white man. Samarasan’s choice to use transplantation could be reflective of her transnational status as she is writing for an international audience where readers have come to accept the use of foreign words in novels written in English, an acknowledgement of the culturally diversified society all over the world, and not for Malaysians where the majority are from the Malay ethnicity. Another example of the use of transplantation occurs when Vasanthi’s father used the word syabas, which means “congratulations”: “For an idiot you haven’t done too bad for yourself. Syabas!”49 Apart from those examples, there are numerous code-switches between Valli and her husband. In one instance, Vasanthi used the Malay word “pondan,” a derogatory term for a man who acts in a feminine manner, to reprimand her son.

One interpretation for Samarasan’s choice not to translate terms is that it creates authenticity in the dialogue. Ashcroft et al. explain that the “technique of selective lexical fidelity which leaves some words untranslated in the text is a more widely used device for conveying the sense of cultural distinctiveness.”50 Samarasan’s use of transplantation is a strategy that informs her readers that this is a community which is culturally diversified. Besides, transplantation also affects the readers differently as they are left with the curiosity of wanting to find out what the foreign words used imply, therefore, creating an eagerness to continue reading the novel.

Apart from these one-word code-switches, Samarasan also uses phrases and even sentences in Malay and Tamil when code-switching without giving an English translation: “Dares to wear the shirt I gave her after all the havoc she’s caused. Vekkumillai these people. No bloody shame.”51 The words “vekkumillai” refer to “having no shame.” Although the phrase “No bloody shame” is given after the code-switching sentence, readers may still not be able to relate the connection between them.

48Samarasan, 23.
49Ibid., 66.
50Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, 64.
51Samarasan, 6.
Appa’s English is like Vellamma, the washerwoman’s English, as he code-switches in the Tamil language and uses the mesolect form to establish solidarity:

“Chari, paruvalai,” Appa said, “next time all that will have changed. You vote for my party, new gomen will come, new gomen will change your IC for you. Then next election you can vote.”

“Aaaaaman,” Vellamma said to Letchumi as Appa went outside. . . .

“Lawyer-saar dreaming big-big dreams.”

Furthermore, no explanation is given for the Malay phrases used in the examples below:

“Aiyo-yothanggachi, your own Na-tio-nal Language also taktahuke?”

Talking about poverty without talking about race, manaboleh, in this country? Not possible. A little redistribution of wealth, alasikit-sikitaje, and a few small guarantees . . . .

In the first example, a Malay man is speaking to Uma. He may have code-mixed because he has a poor command of the English language. In the second example, Malay phrases are used to give the narration a less serious tone as Samarasan is referring to the New Economy Policy that resulted from the May 13 riot.

Chellam’s speech exhibits code-switching. Chellam, a domestic helper, speaks only Tamil:

“Intha veedu vanthu maaraddikirain” Chellam is saying now. . . . Here in this house I’m . . . I’m . . . Asha doesn’t know what those last words mean.

Samarasan does not set the sentence in italics nor give the meaning of the words in English, but Asha provides the readers with a partial translation. Although the rest of the meaning is not given, leaving readers to wonder what Chellam could have said, the readers’ understanding of the novel is not jeopardized. Here again, code-switching adds to the authenticity of the novel.

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52Ibid., 119.
53Ibid., 116 and 134.
54May 13 is a very sensitive issue in Malaysia. There is much criticism against the New Economy Policy implemented from 1971–91, therefore, Samarasan has to be cautious in her narration resulting in the superficial treatment of this issue and a less serious tone.
55Ibid., 143.
A few pages later, Chellam seems to speak in the acrolect form of English
when she is talking to Paati. The sudden switch in her speech can be explained.
Samarasam does not indicate this, but the readers are given a clue to this when
Paati questions Chellam through a combination of Tamil and English. Paati’s
use of code-switching indicates that Chellam is speaking in Tamil:

But then Chellam puts down the bucket and slings a good-morning towel over
her shoulder. “Stay here,” she says. “Hold on to the edge of the water tank and
wait. I have to go and clean up your mess properly.”

. . . Paati hasn’t heard her. . . . “Eh, Enna?” Then two notches: “Engga
porei?” Where’re you off to?56

Similarly, during the May 13 riot, the dialogue between Ratnam and a
Malay man, although written in English, takes place in the basilect form of
Malay. As indicated by Samarasam, Ratnam speaks market Malay.57 Readers
should be able to understand, even when it is not specifically stated, that
an Indian speaking to a Malay during a riot would definitely not use the
English language as it would only aggravate the situation further. Therefore,
the passage is a vernacular translation of a conversation in the basilect form
Malaysia, tak tahu cakap Bahasa Melayu).58 Although Samarasam gives the
translation a few lines further, readers would not be able to comprehend
the statement as no direct reference is given to the translation. Samarasam also
uses glossing but in a very limited way. An example would be when she uses
the English and Malay words side by side, “Old devil. Syaitan.”59

Samarasam is distinctive from Maniam and Manicka in her inclusion of
the particle “lah.” As discussed earlier, the use of “lah” is a familiar feature
in Malaysian English, influenced by the Chinese and Malay languages.
According to Tongue,60 the particle “lah” has many functions, some of which
are to intensify speech, to signal intimacy, or to mark informality, persuasion,
and rejection. In Evening Is the Whole Day, the particle “lah” is inserted
in many of the characters’ conversations. Thus, here we have examples of
different characters using the particle “lah” for different functions. Vasanthi

54Ibid., 145.
55Ibid., 132.
56Ibid.
57Ibid., 56.
60Ray K. Tongue, The English of Singapore and Malaysia (Singapore: Eastern University
Press, 1974), 114.
uses it as an intensifying particle (“Now even we would lose to them in taste and class, lah!” she grumbled), Valli uses it to signal intimacy between herself and her sister (“Sorry lah Akka,” Valli said, pouting playfully), while Mr. Dwevedi, their neighbor, uses it as an informal marker style (“. . . can make all sorts of demands. TV lah, day off lah, air con lah”).

**When All the Lights Are Stripped Away**

One feature of code-mixing that is found in Nair’s novel is the insertion of the particle “lah” by one of the characters in the novel (“go home to Canton or Tamil Nadu lah.” . . . “Yes, yes, lah, we know that”). Apart from these examples, there are limited uses of code switches in Nair’s novel as his novel focuses on the upper middle class society. An example of code-switching is when Nair refers to the multi-ethnic races in Malaysia as in the example given below:

Then Kuppusamy, or Sammy Coop as they call him, will say, “You bloody Malays, you idiot bumiputeras. You’re all the same. With all the privileges and still you complain and act like lazy cows, chewing grass all day.” Or Rahim, “Hey, cina babi and keling biawak, if you don’t like it here, go home to Canton or Tamil Nadu lah.”

This is a conversation that takes place among friends of different ethnicities in a hawker stall. The characters use the Malay word “bumiputeras” and the derogatory terms “cina babi” and “keling biawak” to refer to the Malays, Chinese, and Indians in Malaysia. The special term “bumiputeras” refers to “sons of the soil” and it is a term coined by the first prime minister of Malaysia, Tunku Abdul Rahman, to recognize the special privileges accorded to the Malay and the indigenous ethnic groups in Malaysia. On the other hand, the word “keling” is often associated with the Indian coolies in Malaysia while “cina” refers to Chinese and “babi” refers to pigs. In Malaysia, the Malays

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61Samarasan, 34, 118–9, and 315.
62Nair, 85–6 and 87.
63Ibid., 85–6.
64Susan Philip (“Sunil Nair, *When All the Lights Are Stripped Away*, *Asiatic* 6, no. 2 [2012]: 189–91) touches on the concept of racial harmony found in Nair’s work. She argues that Nair does not really address the issues of “race and belonging within this nation” as his description of the use of derogatory terms among Anil’s multi-ethnic group of friends “makes the racial insults sound like part of an accepted script or game everyone knows and doesn’t take too seriously” (189–90). However, as the issue of race is a sensitive subject in Malaysia, this may explain the reason for Nair’s superficial treatment of the concept of racial harmony found in the text.
are forbidden from eating pork whereas it is one of the favorites among the Chinese, hence the association to the word “cina babi.”

SUMMARY

The premise of our argument is that most studies and discussions of the literary texts emerging from a single diasporic location are more focused on identifying strands that consolidate a particular set of attitudes and perspectives that distinguishes the singularity of that location rather than focusing on the diversities that the location displays. To correct that, we have discussed the works of four Malaysian Indian writers as representations of a multilingual environment.

The patterns of language use represented in the novel are marked by class and context. Characters from the working class use the basilect forms, while characters from the middle and upper classes use the mesolect and acrolect as context demands. The manipulation of codes, including the choice to gloss or not, is similarly reflective of a character’s background and is also a narrative strategy. Code-switching is used generally to effect authenticity. It also signals the interaction of multiple ethnicities and the subsequent need for a nuanced reading of linguistic cues. Indeed, far from there being an essential “Indian” experience, what these novels evince is the heterogeneity of Malaysian Indian life.

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APPENDIX: SYNOPSES OF THE NOVELS

**The Return**

K. S. Maniam’s *The Return* is a novel written across three generations of a Tamil immigrant family: Periathai (the matriarch of the family), Kannan (her son), and Ravi (her grandson). It tells of the experiences and struggles faced by the working class of a Malaysian community steeped in Indian tradition and culture. Set in the 1940s to the 1960s in Kedah, Malaysia, it centers on Ravi, who leaves his small hometown in Bedong to further his studies in England, and the conflicts he faces upon his return to Malaysia. A recurring conflict is the humiliating treatment the working class community receives from the middle class of Malaysian Indian society. Emphasis is placed on the value of owning land and on the importance of education as a way out of the working class existence. Periathai and Kannan seek to plant their roots firmly in Malaya with a great sense of urgency—an urgency that is not shared by Ravi. After Kannan’s death, Ravi acknowledges the sacrifices made by the previous generation. The novel ends with a poem steeped in regret and with the affirmation of a denied heritage.

**The Rice Mother**

Rani Manicka’s *The Rice Mother* tells the story of a working class Ceylonese family across four generations. It depicts the struggles they faced during the Japanese occupation in Malaya and the difficulties they experienced in post-independence Malaysia. It is the matriarch of the family, Lakshmi, who keeps the family together during their hardship. Lakshmi married a widower at the age of fourteen and migrated from Sri Lanka to Malaya. Although she is the main narrator, the story is also told from the points of view of her family members: her husband (Ayah), her sons (Lakshman, Jeyan and Sevenese), her daughters (Anna and Lalita), her daughters-in-law (Rani and Ratha), her
granddaughters (Dimple and Bella), and her great granddaughter (Nisha). With the Japanese occupation as a backdrop, *The Rice Mother* reflects on the challenges of raising six children in such a dangerous and brutal time. The saga also reveals how the family falls apart and the resulting damaged relationships and failed marriages. Although their lives are besieged by tragedy, the story ends on a positive note, choosing to focus on the value that knowing one’s roots adds to one’s identity and self-worth.

**Evening Is the Whole Day**

Preeta Samarasan’s *Evening Is the Whole Day* centers around a wealthy middle class Tamil family, the Rajasekharans, and their domestic helper, Chellam. The Rajasekharans include Paati (Rajasekharan’s mother), Appa (Raju Rajasekharan), Amma (Vasanthi), their daughters (Uma and Aasha), and their son (Suresh). Set in Ipoh, Malaysia, from the 1960s to the 1980s, the story is told through the eyes of their six-year-old child, Aasha. The story begins at the end, with two departures: the eldest child, Uma, for New York and Chellam’s from the Rajasekharans’ home under gloomy circumstances. The novel focuses on the travails of a dysfunctional family in a newly developed independent country faced with its own political and social struggles. The family’s struggles are intertwined with the challenges confronting the new nation. Apart from that, the story focuses on the differential treatment the middle class Indians give to the working class Indians. It also narrates the strained relationship between Paati (whose husband successfully climbed the social ladder, moving from the position of steamship company clerk to shipping company owner) and Amma, her daughter-in-law (whose father was a bookkeeper for a cement factory) owing to their differences in social status.

**When All the Lights Are Stripped Away**

Sunil Nair’s *When All the Lights Are Stripped Away*, set in Muar, Johor, Malaysia, tells the story of Anil’s wealthy upper middle class Malayalee family. Taking place in the late 1990s, the novel deals with the challenges faced by the young protagonist and the relationships he makes along the way. It begins in Kuala Lumpur, when Anil, who had run away after his mother’s death, receives a letter from his dying father requesting him to return home. The story narrates his father’s attempt to mend their relationship and Anil’s understanding of his father’s legacy. The story also contains a political sub-plot. Anil’s father, Sankaran (referred to as Acha), a well-established powerful and influential lawyer, aspires that his son become the first non-Muslim and
non-Malay Prime Minister of Malaysia. The novel ends with Anil inheriting all his father’s wealth, his name, and position. Readers are left wondering whether Anil fulfils his father’s ambitions.

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