

**Migration, Ethnicity and Identity
in Malay/sian Society**

Shamini Mahadevan

PhD

University of York

English and Related Literature

March 2026

ABSTRACT

This PhD entitled “Migration, Ethnicity and Identity in Malay/sian Society” consists of a creative component as well as a critical component, both of which explore migration, ethnicity and identity in postcolonial literature. The creative component, entitled “I Go and Come”, is a memoir of my parents narrated in a series of episodic flashbacks beginning with the impending death of my father. Mahadevan Vellupillai was the eldest son of Hindu Tamil immigrants from Jaffna, Sri Lanka, who came to Malaya (then a British colony) at the turn of the twentieth century. My mother, Lizy Cherian, was also the daughter of immigrants; her Malayalee Christian parents arrived from Kerala in India around the same time. While the memoir uses both my parents as a focal point, the story is juxtaposed against the events surrounding a massive stroke suffered by my mother during the writing of the memoir. The creative work reflects themes of cultural displacement, intergenerational trauma and the search for a cohesive account of the past using a fragmented, non-linear structure that mimics the way social and cultural narratives shape, and reshape, memory.

The accompanying critical component, “Writing the Diaspora: Migration, Ethnicity and Identity in Malaysian Fiction” uses a dual – gender and postcolonial – lens to explore Malaysian diasporic fiction. The thesis analyses how colonial/postcolonial experiences intersect with gender-based oppression to shape the lived reality of Malaysian minority communities. It also focuses on unique aspects of Malaysian history and politics that affect manifestations of patriarchal power. The novels that form the basis of the critical component are *Evening is the Whole Day* by Preeta Samarasan and Rani Manicka’s *The Rice Mother*. Both novels, and my critical component, focus on the minority Tamil community in Malaysia.

In summary, by pairing creative practice with critical analysis, this PhD is not just an auto/biographical exercise, but instead uses the scaffolding of diasporic fiction to create a site of dialogue between personal narrative and sociopolitical context in postcolonial communities.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	2
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	5
AUTHOR'S DECLARATION	6
CRITICAL COMPONENT	7
WRITING THE DIASPORA:	8
The Authors and their Works.....	9
A Summary of the Novels.....	11
From Malaya to Malaysia: Strangers and Citizens	15
The Novels and their Writers: Allegory and Reality	18
The Structure of the Thesis	28
PART ONE: THE PATRIARCHS.....	31
CHAPTER 1: BOYS WILL BE BOYS.....	32
Traditional Hegemonic Masculinity	32
Identifying the Patriarchs in The Rice Mother and Evening is the Whole Day	35
Tamils in Malaya	36
One Man in his Time Plays Many Parts: The Status of Tamil Men within the Home	39
The Sun never Sets on Empire: Power through Proximity to the British	42
The Colonial Masters Are Cleaning My Shoes Now: Education as a Source of Power	45
Divided by a Common Language: The Language of Shakespeare versus "Manglish"	48
Clothes maketh the Man: Dressing for Success.....	51
Cows for a Wife: Marriage as a Means of Cementing Status.....	52
The Man who Would be King: Male Influence beyond the Home.....	57
A Better Place: The House as Metaphor.....	59
Conclusion	61
CHAPTER 2: NOT QUITE WHITE.....	63
Mind Your Language: English Speakers versus the Rest.....	63
History is Written by Victors: The Implications of the Second World War	65
White Rajahs: The Displacement of English-speaking Postcolonial Elites in Malaysia.....	67
Not Black and White: Racism against Tamils	71
Conclusion	72
PART TWO: THE MATRIARCHS.....	74
CHAPTER 3: WHITHER WOMEN?	75
Identifying the Matriarchs in The Rice Mother and Evening is the Whole Day	76
A Single Man in Possession of a Good Fortune, must be in Want of a Wife: Marriage as Prison	77
The Male Gaze: Men protecting Women (from Other Men).....	82

Tilting at Windmills: Women Fight Back	87
The Empty Vessel: Language as Rebellion	90
Clothes Maketh the (Wo)man: The Sari as a Symbol.....	92
When in Disgrace with Fortune and Men's Eyes: Women in the Shadows	92
If You Prick Us, Do We Not Bleed?: Racism in Malaya/Malaysia.....	97
Conclusion	101
CHAPTER 4: WOMEN VS WOMEN.....	103
Hell hath No Fury: Women in the Home	105
Thy Mother's Glass: Mothers as Instruments of the Patriarchy	110
Beware the Ides of March: Supernatural Validation.....	114
Mine Eyes Smell Onions: The Kitchen as a War Zone	117
Uneasy Lies the Head: Women Competing for Power.....	119
For Mine Own Good: Power through Proximity to the Patriarch.....	121
Et tu, Brute?: Women who Betray Women	123
The Whirligig of Time: Women seeking Vengeance	126
CONCLUSION: MALAYSIA BOLEH	130
From the Critical to the Creative: Bridging the Divide	134
WORKS CITED.....	139
CREATIVE COMPONENT	147
I GO AND COME.....	148
CHAPTER 1	149
CHAPTER 2	162
CHAPTER 3	180
CHAPTER 4.....	188
CHAPTER 5.....	203
CHAPTER 6.....	224
CHAPTER 8.....	252
CHAPTER 9.....	264
CHAPTER 10.....	275
CHAPTER 11	287
CHAPTER 12	300
CHAPTER 13	319
EPILOGUE	341

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I must acknowledge my parents, the subjects of my creative submission. At first, my broader intention was to set the record straight – to ensure, perhaps, that my father was not swiftly rehabilitated through the machinations of the Ceylonese Tamils. I also did not want my mother painted the victim; she is too complex, too combative a person for labels that undermine her agency. This was especially so after she could not speak for herself. I wanted to showcase Pappa's unique approach to life and Mummy's resilience. And tell all those stories I've been shaping and honing, telling and retelling, practice makes perfect, practise makes perfect sense. After my mother had the stroke (at the end of the first year of my PhD), this project evolved further into a narrative of her story as well as that of my father.

In this somewhat challenging context, my PhD thesis could not have been written without the indefatigable support of my supervisor, Dr Claire Chambers. She has nurtured the product and supported the writer in more ways that can be enumerated. Suffice to say, in her absence, there would be no submission. Her enthusiasm for my work coupled with keen insight and laser focus on weaknesses, inconsistencies, ill-conceived arguments, poor writing and incoherent thinking have honed this work into its current form. But more than that, she has been a friend without compromising her role as mentor and supervisor, a tough ask of anyone. My Thesis Advisory Panel member, Dr Maya Caspari, has provided fresh viewpoints and gently but persistently guided the direction of this work towards a clearer and sharper outcome. It has been a privilege to have these two wonderful women guide my way. I am so grateful.

I must also thank my daughter, who was my argumentative sounding board and proofreader throughout, and my brother, who could not get past the halfway point of the memoir because it was too sad. My son was too busy at medical school to read my draft but, as a Tamil parent, that warms my heart.

All shortcomings in the work, needless to say, are my own.

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for a degree or other qualification at this University or elsewhere.

All sources are acknowledged as references.

CRITICAL COMPONENT

**WRITING THE DIASPORA:
MIGRATION, ETHNICITY AND IDENTITY
IN MALAYSIAN FICTION**

INTRODUCTION: WRITING THE DIASPORA

This critical component uses a dual – gender and postcolonial – lens to engage with Malaysian diasporic fiction. I have chosen to examine novels that have unique synergies with my creative submission, the memoir of my parents, “I Go and Come”. Consequently, I have selected fictional narratives by ethnically Indian, or Ceylonese, Malaysian Tamil women writers set against a similar historical background and immigrant experience to that of my family. The two novels that form the basis of this critical component are *Evening is the Whole Day* by Preeta Samarasan and *The Rice Mother* by Rani Manicka. Specifically, I address the research question: How do Rani Manicka's *The Rice Mother* and Preeta Samarasan's *Evening Is the Whole Day* present migration and ethnicity as forces shaping Tamil identity within postcolonial Malaysian society? The thesis addresses the question through an analysis of the way colonial/postcolonial experiences intersect with gender-based oppression to shape the lived reality of minority communities, such as the Tamils, in Malaya/Malaysia¹. Patriarchal traditions imported from the Tamil homelands, the straitjacket of ethnicity and economic disparities faced by the Tamil diaspora are investigated and contextualised to present a distinct and original perspective on Malaysian diasporic writing. Further, I reveal how the intersectionality of these elements creates a uniquely discriminatory environment for Tamil women.

The Authors and their Works

Preeta Samarasan, who has been likened to Arundhati Roy and Zadie Smith, is a Malaysian of Indian Tamil origin, while Rani Manicka is from Malaysia's Ceylonese Tamil community. Their respective grandparents moved, in the early part of the twentieth century to Malaya, which was then a British colony; the British arrived in Penang in 1786 and consolidated power over Malaya through direct rule over the Straits Settlements (Penang, Singapore and Malacca) as well as indirect

¹ “Malaya/Malaysia” is used to indicate the span of history ranging from the British colonial era to the decades after Independence as portrayed in the two novels that form the subject matter of this thesis.

rule, as resident advisors to the state Sultans, over the rest of the Peninsula. As such, both women are third-generation Malaysians.

Evening is the Whole Day was first published in 2008 by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt in the United States and HarperCollins internationally. It received stellar reviews and was a Commonwealth Writers' Prize finalist for best first book (Southeast Asia and South Pacific region) and longlisted for the Orange Prize for Fiction, both in 2009. It has been translated into more than ten languages. In 2022, Samarasan published her second book, *Tale of a Dreamer's Son*, to mixed reviews. Samarasan was born in Malaysia in 1976. She eventually went to high school and university in the United States and now lives in France.

The Rice Mother was published in 2004 in the United States by Penguin Books and by Hodder UK for international markets. It won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 2003 and has been translated into over twenty languages. Manicka has written a number of other books including *Touching Earth* and *The Japanese Lover* which have not received the same widespread recognition. Manicka was born in Malaysia in 1964 and grew up in that country. She studied economics at the University of Malaya and now lives in the United Kingdom.

While both books analysed in this thesis were not published recently, the dearth of internationally recognised literature about the Tamil diaspora in Malaysia means they remain the seminal works on that subject and intensely relevant to a discussion about migration, ethnicity and identity in Malaysian postcolonial society.

The two writers are part of a Tamil community in Malaysia which consists in large part, but not entirely (see below) of the descendants of labourers brought to work on the rubber plantations to feed the voracious appetite of newly industrial Britain and its global Empire. *The Rice Mother* takes place largely prior to Malayan independence from the British (that occurred on 31 August 1957), while *Evening is the Whole Day* is set in the two decades afterwards (from the 1960s to the 1980s). Both works reflect the uneasy assimilation of immigrant communities into colonial Malaya and then the new nation. The spectrum of Malayan/Malaysian history depicted in the

books allows for a systematic and sustained exploration of the role of patriarchs and matriarchs within the Tamil community. The colonial-to-postcolonial arc of Tamil migrants depicted in the two novels creates a distinct frame of reference to explore the themes of this thesis including the portrayal of traditional hegemonic masculinity and the role of women in perpetuating patriarchal structures in the Tamil community.

The subject matter of the novels cannot be properly understood, nor the themes investigated, without context. Accordingly, I begin this introductory chapter with a summary of both novels followed by a short history of the Malayan independence movement to situate the experiences of the characters in *Evening is the Whole Day* and *The Rice Mother* against the evolving national backdrop. I will also consider the attributes of both writers, Preeta Samarasan and Rani Manicka, in the context of postcolonial or diasporic writing. Finally, this introduction will summarise the structure and content of the main body of the thesis to signpost the primary arguments made in later chapters.

A Summary of the Novels

The Rice Mother begins with the story of Lakshmi, a young girl from Jaffna in Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) who, aged fourteen, is married to a stranger, Ayah. Ayah deceives Lakshmi's mother about his wealth and social status in Malaya to trick her into agreeing to a marriage between Ayah and Lakshmi. The married couple move to a small town on the east coast of the Malayan Peninsula, Kuantan, where Ayah is employed as a clerk on a British rubber plantation. Together, they have six children – three boys and three girls. The story is told from various viewpoints, including those of Lakshmi, Ayah, their children and later descendants. Manicka thus presents different perspectives on the same key incidents in a novel that depicts the cultural traditions of, and the impact of historical events on, its Ceylonese Tamil main characters.

The Rice Mother is, superficially at least, a soap opera, described in a contemporaneous *Guardian* review by Natasha Walter as a novel whose “sentimentality seems to stand in the way of any strenuous engagement with the realities of the past”. A sprawling saga that races through key

events in Malayan/Malaysian history, it is at its most powerful when speaking of Lakshmi's experiences as a new immigrant in Malaya and her family's suffering during the Japanese Occupation (1941 to 1945). Lakshmi's struggles to survive and the family's trauma during the Second World War are conveyed with clarity in the novel. Ayah, Lakshmi's husband, is brutalised by the Japanese and their oldest daughter, Mohini, presented as a voiceless, two-dimensional symbol of innocence and purity, is raped and murdered. Their narratives are a powerful witness to generational trauma and the way it affects survivors such as Mohini's parents and her twin, Lakshmanan.

The complicity of women in the oppression of women is also depicted clearly by Manicka; Lakshmi seeks to marry Mohini at a young age because she is attracting unsavoury male attention and requires the protection of marriage. Lakshmi also reveals the hiding place of a neighbour's daughter to the Japanese to protect her own, a sacrifice that fails to save her daughter. The difficult relationships between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law are captured in the tension between Lakshmi and Lakshmanan's wife, Rani, and their battle for influence over the child of Lakshmanan and Rani, Dimple. The lack of female solidarity is a recurring theme in the novel.

The plight of the subaltern, regardless of race, is revealed in all its stark horror in the fate of the servant girl, Mui Tsai, who works for a wealthy Chinese entrepreneur who is also Lakshmi's landlord. The later narratives of the younger generations, the children and grandchildren of Lakshmi, fail to replicate the power of Lakshmi and Ayah's story. In large part, this is because the younger generation seem untethered from their Malaysian context. The stories of love and violence, the extremes of behaviour, the cruelty meted out by men to women, appear in isolation. To some extent, this is intentional; Lakshmi's great-granddaughter, Nisha, is cut off from her past by a father who lies to her about her antecedents. Her journey of discovery about her past is, in essence, the story of *The Rice Mother*. An opportunity is missed by Manicka to capture the experiences and trauma of the latter-day characters in a way that speaks beyond the melodrama of the moment and places events in a Malaysian frame of reference.

Preeta Samarasan's novel, *Evening Is the Whole Day*, is set in Malaysia over a period from the late 1960s to the early 1980s. The work is narrated by the youngest child of the family, the isolated and observant Aasha. It explores themes of family, identity, cultural displacement and the legacies of colonialism. The work also sheds light on race, class and gender dynamics in postcolonial Malaysia. Samarasan's focus is the plight of the Rajasekharan family as they struggle to navigate, firstly, the postcolonial settlement upon the departure of the British upon Independence in 1957, and subsequently, the post-riot (1969) settlement between the races, which leaves Tamils with almost no levers of political power.

Samarasan is scathing about the performative mimicry of Rajasekharan, the patriarch – desperately trying to ape the white man in dress and speech – in his efforts to create an identity that distances him from the racial animus towards Tamils in Malaysia. Some of her most acerbic writing is directed at the Tamil community's failure to show the same political savvy and hardball tactics that have allowed the other races to progress politically and economically in Malaysia. In Rajasekharan's naïve pursuit, by campaigning during elections for an inclusive Malaysian paradigm of a non-race-based political settlement for the country, Samarasan's own disappointment, that such a vision for Malaysia has insufficient traction, is visible.

Rajasekharan uses his male privilege to exploit and constrain the women in his life. His chosen wife, Vasanthi, does not meet with the approval of his mother, Paati, because she is not wealthy, fair-skinned or educated enough to be a suitable consort for Rajasekharan. The petty rivalry between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law affects the wellbeing of the children of the family, especially the oldest daughter Uma, who is a pawn in their wars. Any sympathy for the patriarch is lost when Rajasekharan abuses his power to drunkenly grope his daughter, Uma. This independent and ambitious young woman withdraws, a wounded creature, when she realises that home is not a safe space for her. Uma's despair is exacerbated when her much-loved grandmother, Paati, ignores her abuse at her father's hands to protect the male scion. In Uma's flight from the country at the first possible opportunity, Samarasan acknowledges the well-documented brain

drain from the country as second- and third-generation immigrants look for greener pastures where ethnicity does not determine outcomes.

Later, Paati finds herself at the receiving end of mistreatment from her daughter-in-law and Chellam, the maid, as she ages and becomes infirm, unable to assert her authority anymore. She is the victim of verbal assaults and physical violence, her son indifferent or purposefully ignorant of her suffering. Samarasan implicitly, but vigorously, criticises the way Tamil women uphold male supremacy in the household in exchange for delegated power and influence as well as creature comforts. She paints Patti's sticky end as a cautionary tale for women who go down this path; a reliance on men almost always ends in disappointment.

Samarasan's novel is also a powerful indictment of the class barriers that operate within the Tamil community as the educated and wealthy Tamil elite distance themselves from, and exploit, estate Indians such as Chellam the servant. It is ironic, she suggests, for a community which is so aggrieved, as a powerless minority, at being excluded from equal opportunities to be more than content to do the same unto others. *Evening is the Whole Day* makes many valid political points and holds a mirror to Malaysia and Malaysians that reveals hard truths about ethnicity and identity in the country.

Overall, the two novels are at their most effective and joyous when Manicka or Samarasan write the personal in a way that allows Malaysians, even if it is only the English-speaking, literature-reading, elite, to feel represented or seen. Here, the power of postcolonial literature comes to the fore; it gives voice to themes that may be universal – love, struggle, ambition, despair – but allows Malaysian readers to immerse themselves in work without having to extrapolate meaning from a Western or white-centric context. Given the commercial and literary success of the novels discussed in this thesis, the authors may also have opened the eyes of the instruments of Western hegemony to the humanity of denizens of the former colonies.

The two novels have most certainly highlighted the lived experiences of the Tamil diaspora in Malaya/Malaysia as a marginalised and oppressed minority in the multi-ethnic country. In order

to fully understand the novels, it is important to have a clear picture of the journey of Tamils from India/Ceylon to Malaya, to contextualise the antecedents of the Tamil diaspora in the country.

From Malaya to Malaysia: Strangers and Citizens

The origin story of Malaysia encompasses British colonialism, war and mass migration (including of the forebears of the two writers discussed in this thesis). The British arrived in Penang in 1786 and subsequently took over governance of the Peninsula in stages. The Straits Settlements (Singapore, Malacca and Penang) were ruled directly by the British while the other Malay states were governed indirectly through resident advisors to the Malay sultans. As part of the economic imperatives associated with British control of the tin and rubber industries, there was significant migration from China and India/Ceylon to Malaya to work in those sectors of the economy in the early 20th century. British control was interrupted by the Second World War and the Japanese Occupation; the Japanese invaded Malaya in December 1941 and surrendered after the American attacks on Nagasaki and Hiroshima in August 1945. A Communist insurgency led by the Malayan People's anti-Japanese Army (formed originally to fight the Japanese) raged from 1948 to 1960 while political union with Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak (to form Malaysia in 1963) was followed by partition from Singapore in 1965. Racial and religious fractures in the new nation led to communal tensions and inter-ethnic violence in May 1969. Many of these historical events are the settings for *Evening is the Whole Day* and *The Rice Mother*.

In negotiations for independence with the British in 1956, delegates of the coalition of ethno-nationalist parties (United Malay National Organisation, Malayan Chinese Association and the Malayan Indian Congress) represented the major ethnic groups in Malaya – Malays, Chinese and Indians. It was agreed between all parties that the Chinese and Indian descendants of immigrants had a stake in the new nation and were entitled to citizenship. In the global context of that period in history, marked by segregation in the United States, the Cold War, as well as uprisings against European colonial powers, this was, *prima facie*, a remarkably inclusive settlement between

native and immigrant populations. However, Malay² nationalists argued that it was necessary that this right to citizenship be subject to provisions protecting the primacy of Malay institutions, Malay culture and Malay economic interests. In particular, it was argued that the status and position of Malay royalty ought to be preserved as part of the cultural heritage of Malays. Nine of the states to be incorporated into independent Malaya were hereditary Sultanates. The British had ruled through the Sultans, appointing residents to advise the Sultans on commercial and political matters but leaving matters pertaining to customary rights and religion in their domain. Thus, the powers of the Sultans had been preserved to some extent by the British. It was further suggested that the religion (Islam) of ethnic Malays needed to be acknowledged and protected. Finally, it was argued on behalf of the Malay population that their economic rights and interests should be protected and enhanced through various affirmative action concepts to be enshrined in the nation's founding document.

A rationale for these race-specific provisions was that Malay identity risked being displaced by the customs and traditions of the newcomers. Chinese migrants to Malaya, primarily from southern China, spoke numerous dialects, including Teochew, Hokkien and Cantonese. They professed various religions including Taoism, Buddhism and various folk religions. Indian and Ceylonese migrants were largely Hindu and spoke Tamil but there were also Kerala Malayalees who were Christian and a contingent of Sikh immigrants from the Punjab. Various other ethnic Indian communities arrived in smaller numbers. Furthermore, Christian missionaries successfully converted some immigrants to Christianity – Catholics, Methodists and many other sects besides – adding another religious dimension. In addition, Chinese immigrants from an earlier era (during the Portuguese and Dutch settlements in Malacca in the 16th and 17th centuries respectively), converted to Islam while maintaining Chinese customs and traditions, a complex cultural hybrid known as the Peranakan, or Baba and Nyonya, community. The Malay majority feared a dilution

² The Malay community is self-described as *bumiputera* (sons of the soil) or indigenous; the various actual indigenous tribes in Malaysia remain the country's most marginalised community.

of their ethnic and religious identity through the conferring of citizenship on immigrants with such diverse backgrounds.

Another reason for the proposals by Malay negotiators to promote Malay economic advancement was that ethnic Malays, as a result of British colonial policy, had been marginalised from financial opportunities available to immigrant populations. Imported labour worked in the more dynamic sectors of the Malayan economy, namely in the rubber and tin industries. Malays, on the other hand, were largely left to their traditional small-scale farming and fishing activities as well as, to a certain extent, incorporated into the British civil service. Thus, an argument in favour of special rights for Malays was their relative economic stagnation. As J. M. Fernando argues, these were “constitutional compromises that sought to accommodate competing demands from different ethnic groups for political power and limited economic resources” (536). The Constitution was negotiated to reflect these conflicting interests in an effort to achieve what Jaclyn Neo describes as an “inter-communal consensus on the character of the national polity and the respective rights, privileges and obligations of the various ethnic communities” (96).

Various provisions that addressed Malay concerns were finally agreed and incorporated into the Constitution pursuant to these negotiations between the British and the representatives of the major Malayan ethnicities. Article 153 tasks the Agung (King), selected on rotation from one of Malaysia’s nine Sultans, with responsibility “for safeguarding the special position of the Malays”. Specific ways to achieve the maintenance and enhancement of Malay status included establishing quotas for Malay participation the civil service, permits for any trade or business regulated under federal law, public scholarships and educational opportunities. Further, Islam was designated as the official religion of the nation, although freedom of worship for non-Muslims is constitutionally guaranteed under Article 3 of the Federal Constitution, and Malay was designated the national language and required to be used for official purposes. Neo points out that these constitutional provisions have resulted in an ethnocentric implementation of affirmative action policies, operating to the disadvantage of other needy segments of the population (110). Arguably,

Malay ethnocentric policies are particularly detrimental to minority Tamil communities. In any event, the complex Constitutional settlement, negotiated between representatives of the various ethnicities and the British, embedded inter-ethnic fault lines within the founding document of the nation.

Independence from British colonialism was finally achieved on 31 August 1957 following the aforementioned Constitutional settlement and was greeted by the first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, with shouts of “Merdeka! Merdeka! Merdeka!”, the Malay word for “freedom”. It was followed by the Islamic call to prayer, a singing of the national anthem, a flag raising and 101 cannon shots. This hodge podge of events was a fitting beginning to a smorgasbord country.

Initially, the new nation of Malaya consisted geographically of the Malayan Peninsula. The states of Sabah and Sarawak on the island of Borneo, as well as Singapore, joined to form Malaysia in 1963. Singapore broke away to become an independent country in 1965. These permutations led to distinct variations in the ethnic composition of the country through the inclusion of the indigenous non-Muslim populations of Malaysian Borneo and the inclusion, and then exclusion, of the predominantly Chinese population of Singapore. Further, many families were separated by national borders when Singapore and Malaysia parted ways in 1965, leading to close ties between the citizenry of both countries against a backdrop of national tension and competition. These ethnic, religious and national fissures, the consequence of colonial and postcolonial policy as well as the unintended consequences thereof, form both the subject and context of Manicka and Samarasan’s work.

The Novels and their Writers: Allegory and Reality

Both novels are expansive literary works that cover a significant chunk of twentieth-century Malayan/Malaysian history. Both works arguably fall within the latter part of the stages of evolution of the literature of postcolonial societies: namely, the “development of independent literatures” or the “emergence of modern postcolonial literatures” (Ashcroft et al., *The Empire*

Writes Back, 6). Each novel seeks to elucidate the Malayan/Malaysian experience for their countrymen as well as a global audience.

An extensive analysis of the four levels of allegorical interpretation posited by Fredric Jameson in his *Allegory and Ideology* is beyond the scope of this essay. However, both novels have been read and critiqued as national allegories and thus serve as a “diagnostic instrument” of the Malaysian condition (Jameson, *Allegory and Ideology* 190). The consequence of his analytical approach is to create a “kind of inseparability between the texts under investigation and the history from which they are woven” (Millay 180). For instance, writing about Samarasan, but with a description that applies to some extent to Manicka, Ann Ang insists that *Evening is the Whole Day* attempts “to capture the troubled history of postcolonial Malaysia’s divisive and pervasive discourse concerning race, by establishing an allegorical connection between the public sphere of the nation and the origins of a middle-class Malaysian Indian family” (621). For postcolonial writers, each story “of the private individual” also inevitably and “necessarily project[s] a political dimension in the form of national allegory” (Jameson, *Third-World Literature* 69). While accepting the idea that there is often an inherent allegorical component to writing from the periphery of former Empire, this thesis agrees with Aijaz Ahmad that it is unwarranted to extrapolate from this a so-called category of third world literature predicated on the experience of colonialism or imperialism (3–25). Further, my acknowledgement of the allegorical nature of the two novels is a more diffuse and abstract conception: fiction centred on a particular experience of history of a postcolonial society is inevitably seen as representative of those with similar history (while elucidating a paradigm for the rest of the nation). This is, of course, partly the consequence of limited numbers of texts narrating these stories and may be understood as a representational burden rather than a formalised mode of allegory.

For Malaysians, the allegorical train has very few compartments so readers have little choice but to jump onboard to try and understand national narratives and extricate any available tools for identity formation. However, an allegorical interpretation is especially challenging in the

Malaysian context where the question of what constitutes national culture requires a hitherto absent internal cohesion and inclusivity. Sharmani Gabriel explains that a singular Malaysian identity is “at odds with the incommensurable practices, imaginings, representations, affiliations, and desires of the nation’s cultural communities” (*Translating Bangsa Malaysia* 350). Nevertheless, it is the lot of any writer of historical literature in Malaysia to be denied the space to write purely private stories. Instead, authors are expected to reconcile a particular experiential point of view – in these novels, the Tamil experience in Malaya/Malaysia – with the complex multi-ethnic dynamics of the nation-state. If the writers are to find favour with the populace, they must combine these paradigms in a narrative that promotes a cohesive Malaysian identity. At national and communal levels, Malaysians seek representation in fiction set in the country. They also demand a roadmap towards a national reconciliation of the “incommensurable” strands. In other words, Malaysian novelists are both expected and assumed to create narratives that have a dual purpose, writing the personal and the public. The latter is usually understood to be a parable of some emblematic truth about the Malaysian experience.

Samarasan and Manicka both write in English. The alternative, to write in their mother tongue of Tamil, or the national language of Malay, founders on the rocks of practicality and cultural reality. Firstly, this choice to write in English is a consequence of an effective colonial-era educational framework. Mission schools successfully rendered the colonial tongue the *lingua franca* of inter-ethnic dialogue prior to and for decades after Independence. Both Samarasan and Manicka, like many Malaysian third-generation immigrants, are English speakers. This third generation also tends to be able to speak their mother tongues. However, the ability to read and write is often circumscribed given the limited exposure to formal education in those languages. Thus, for writers like Manicka and Samarasan, Tamil is an unlikely vehicle for literary communication. Further, Manicka’s and Samarasan’s generation was in school after the 1969 race riots in Malaysia. The post-riot settlement introduced Malay as the medium of instruction within the Malaysian school system to create a national identity that represented a clean break from the

colonial past. Once this new education policy was adopted, English was taught only as an additional language while mother tongues became a third choice of communication.

For this post-1969 generation of non-Malays, the adoption of the Malay language in schools was sometimes perceived as a second colonisation, this time by the ethnic Malay majority (Clutterbuck 289–302). The *diktat* to adopt Malay as the national language was not always well received, especially by those who were fluent in English or the other ethnic languages. Both authors may have struggled to accept the new post-riot accommodation. Further, Malay literature taught in school was outside the (translated) Western canon and so failed to supplant the historical focus on English literature. Arguably, both Manicka and Samarasan are the female counterparts to Salman Rushdie's "translated men" who are "borne across the world" (*Shame* 17) and whose identity formation and national experience are shaped by their diasporic experiences. Here, "translated" is intended to convey the notion of hybridity, where a diasporic people combine the cultural heritage of their former homelands with the culture of their new environment to become a blend of both. The Malaysian journey "evokes tangled human experiences, a transgressive crossing of what are seen to be separate and disjunctive cultural and national entities" (Gabriel, *Translating Bangsa Malaysia* 352). In the Malaysian context, authors like Samarasan and Manicka write in English in the liminal space at the interface between distinct cultures, ethnicities and languages.

In any event, English was likely the only language, aside from limited works-in-translation opportunities, that was palatable to a publishing industry still dominated by Western houses. To put it another way, "the Anglo-American publishing industry functions as a conduit for the circulation of literary works from authors on the cultural periphery" (Ang 626). Each author from this periphery is, in effect, a "diasporic individual entering the hegemony of the dominant culture" (Gabriel, *Translating Bangsa Malaysia* 353). Western publishing houses function as gatekeepers in a way that is very similar to the previous system of colonial patronage; indeed, it is a system of postcolonial patronage. As Samarasan puts it, these publishers "have white sensibilities and

aesthetics” (Borneo Expat Writer) which affect their ability to engage with or understand postcolonial literature. The likelihood of publication is limited unless writers take active steps to create a narrative that is palatable to a Western audience. Thus, writers such as Manicka and Samarasan are also forced to resort to what Graham Huggan terms “the postcolonial exotic”, in which the otherness of postcolonial writers and writing is commercially exploited as a cultural commodity within a global marketplace (*The Postcolonial Exotic* 1). The commodification of exoticism leads to the perpetuation of stereotypes as well as a failure to achieve cultural decolonisation despite a long period of political independence from the British. Another element, described as “performative mimicry” (Balme 182), underscores the impact of a system of gatekeepers on postcolonial discourse. Mimicry here is not used in Homi Bhabha’s sense of a subversive mimicry that projects a distorted image of the coloniser (126). Instead, it is an imaginative replication to match what is expected (by Western publishers and their catchment readers) of postcolonial societies and their inhabitants. Examples abound in both books of exoticisation and performative mimicry, where various aspects of local culture or individuals are portrayed in a manner that appears exaggerated or simplistic. This includes, for instance, the strategic exoticisation of female Asian characters such as Manicka’s portrayal of Lakshmi’s granddaughter, Dimple. Her husband, Luke, asserts that her “innocence is what first attracted his attention” (419). Further, Luke does not “like showy girls” and believes that Dimple “should wear white all the time” (421). The myth of Oriental femininity, coupled with a Western patriarchal preference for virginal maidens, subsumes Dimple’s character. Lakshmi’s daughter, Mohini, is presented as the archetype of Asian submissiveness, deprived of a chapter in her own voice in the polyphonic novel and the subject of extreme male violence.

Samarasan also resorts to language that suggests a white lens or Western attitudes in her writing. As an example, her description of Gandhi, as “a little brown man in a loincloth and granny glasses” (19) seems to echo the disdain of colonists – Churchill’s “half naked fakir” comes to mind – towards freedom fighters from the colonies. Further, her descriptions of the various ethnicities

in stereotypical terms reinforces imposed identities as understood by the colonial powers such as the “Malay peasant sloshing about halfheartedly for a few hours a morning in the rice paddies of his divinely ordained destiny, content the rest of the day to squat in the shade under his hut-on-stilts” (21). This language plays into the racist trope that Malays are lazy and content to rely on handouts from authority. Thus, authors from the periphery of former Empire are sometimes complicit in this postcolonial exoticism or of complying with perceived expectations of Western readers to pacify gatekeepers who control access to a global readership. Writers, who wish to provide an alternative voice or vision to rectify the ills of Western cultural hegemony with postcolonial reclamation (Huggan, *Re-evaluating* 817), run the risk of reproducing and amplifying the same tropes they set out to avoid. Indeed, as Sarah Brouillette cogently argues, “the postcolonial author has emerged as a profoundly complicit and compromised figure” because of the “politicisation of incorporation into a discredited global sphere” (*Global Literary Marketplace* 5). This conflict between the nature of creativity and the value of creative output requires an acknowledgement of economic rationalities rather than the fiction that the “creative realm [is] a space of pure introspection unbounded by necessity and expedience” (*Creative Economy* 15). In effect, success in the global marketplace is assumed to involve loss of self or agency. Of course, “[r]e-Orientalist discursive practices and rhetorical strategies can be sites of subversion where meanings are in constant flux” (Lau and Mendes 16). However, from the examples above, it seems more likely that Samarasan and Manicka are stressing differences to render exotic (in a palatable form) versions of Malaya/Malaysia. This form of cultural essentialism may be a necessary evil for publication but undermines the narrative of an Oriental self by perpetrating, through re-Orientalism, Western-held stereotypes of the various ethnicities in the country.

Writing in English also begs a question about target readers for the works. To some extent, the novels pander to a Western readership by acknowledging implicitly that there is a Eurocentric centre to which postcolonial novels must pay homage. Writers are expected to explain unfamiliar elements to readers from that centre. As an example, right at the beginning of her novel, Samarasan

refers to Malaysia as a “springless, summerless, autumnless, winterless land” (1). Aside from being a superficial description of the weather patterns of the tropics, this appears to reflect the colonial, and then postcolonial, mindset – there is a geographic standard, or cartographical centre, namely the West, where seasons occur and to which other spaces and places must be compared to be understood.

Despite this, Samarasan, in a published interview, argues that she wrote *Evening is the Whole Day* for Malaysians. She explains that “she fought very hard not to sell out, not to have to change things for a Western audience, not to explain, not to compromise” because in her view every step towards a Western audience is a step away from a Malaysian readership (Borneo Expat Writer). This suggests, that, like many postcolonial writers, decolonising the mind is a work in progress. Writers are so immersed in the postcolonial experience that it can be challenging to extricate oneself from colonial cultural biases, especially when writing in English. Authors like the late Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o expressly chose to avoid the language of colonisers; he wrote only in Gikuyu after being imprisoned by the British in his Kenyan homeland, posing the question, “by our continuing to write in foreign languages, paying homage to them, are we not on the cultural level continuing that neo-colonial slavish and cringing spirit?” (101). However, aside from economic considerations, this option presupposes that a mother tongue is available to the postcolonial writer and that it is a good cultural fit for expression. This is not always true of diasporic writers whose emotional ties, either to the language of the original motherland or that of their new home country, may not be sufficient. As alluded to above, for Malaysian writers, the replacement of English by Malay as the dominant language of national discourse via overt political intervention came with its own neocolonial implications. Malay, by virtue of being the medium of instruction in schools, has, to some extent, displaced English as the *lingua franca* between races in Malaysia. This is a prime example of a colonised community adopting the methods of colonisation and the language of colonial discourse to influence the nature of their postcolonial societies (sometimes at the expense of other similarly colonised communities). Practically speaking, it is by no means certain that

Malaysian writers in English have greater mastery of any other language to communicate or write, and thus the option championed by Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o is not readily available.

Consequently, Samarasan and Manicka are among the many postcolonial authors wrestling with writing in the language of colonisers and in a literary form inherited from said colonisers. Simultaneously, these writers strive to replace the monolithic dominance of the English literary tradition with works that express their widely differing cultural experiences. Ambivalence is visible in their work as they grapple with an attraction to, and admiration for, the English literary canon. This may be an inevitable outcome of the centrality of Western canon to the educational opportunities available in English in postcolonial societies. Samarasan, who has an MFA in creative writing from the University of Michigan, speaks fondly of literary influences that range from Dickens to Woolf. VS Naipaul and Salman Rushdie made it clear to her that literature did not have to be about "white people in England" (T.G. Ean). This is a writing journey shared by many postcolonial writers; first, the admiration of the Western canon and then the sense of joy that those from the so-called cultural periphery are allowed to write and share stories too.

Many postcolonial writers try to appropriate and subvert the literary form of the coloniser and use it as a weapon against colonialism's long tail. However, this is an immensely difficult task while immersed in the coloniser's language, culture, political structures and social conventions. A method adopted by both Samarasan and Manicka is to use words, symbols, references and allusions from the local languages and cultures in Malaysia without translation or explanation of their meaning. This allows readers familiar with the local vernacular to access a deeper level of understanding and immersion than native English speakers, creating a metonymic gap that is a symbol of resistance to the hegemony of the English language. Samarasan, in particular, adopts the speech patterns and syntax of Malaysian English to construct a gap between the cultures of coloniser and colonised. Such language choices remind readers that the writer and her audience do not always have a shared cultural experience despite a shared language.

A nativist approach, harking back to some pre-colonial utopia of local practices and cultural forms, whether in reference to Malaya or India/Ceylon, is not available to either Samarasan or Manicka. Both writers are members of a diasporic community in a national space transformed by the effects of colonialism. The places of which they write bear no economic, cultural or social resemblance either to their countries of origin or to Malaya prior to the British. As a result, there is no idealised pre-colonial condition, no authentic pre-colonial traditions or cultural manifestations, that can form the basis for their postcolonial narrative imaginings. The women are exiles from alternative geographic, cultural or ethnic homelands. Arguably, their origin stories refer to periods and places that have limited contemporary relevance and no discernible future relevance, either to the writers or their Malaysian readership. Therefore, their writing about Malaysia requires that they tell stories about and within an evolving cultural space and perhaps even influence the direction of that evolution. This is a classic example of the observer effect, where there is a disturbance in the observed system by the act of observation. In other words, by writing about Malaysia, these writers may, for better or worse, influence the direction of Malaysia's cultural and political evolution.

In addition, both Samarasan and Manicka are transnational, used here to mean that they have moved away from their Malaysian diasporic roots to reside within the former colonial centres. Samarasan lives in France and Manicka in the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, the subject matter of their seminal works remains Malaysia, a reflection of their formative experiences but also a differentiating factor in terms of publication and readership. One consequence is that their understanding of Malaysia is arguably static and focuses on the victimhood of Malaysian Tamils via a "historically revisionist perspective" (Ang 631). In other words, they write without consideration of constantly evolving cultural realities as well the ongoing interactions across racial, religious and political divides in Malaysia. Samarasan, in an interview, disputes the implicit criticism, arguing instead that she gets "a rich and colourful picture of people's subjective experiences by talking to them" and now has, via social media, "access to much more varied and

diverse perspectives than when I was living in Malaysia” (T.G. Ean). Yet Ang asserts that, by writing a novel whose focal point is race and the disenfranchisement of minorities from economic and cultural spaces, Samarasan ends up reinforcing the homogenised racial identities that she is at such pains to criticise (621–35). There is also the accusation that transnational memory (the memories of someone who is Malaysian but has set down roots elsewhere) is a synthesis of actual memory and invented memories that are drawn from the pages of canonical literary tradition. Such memories are “fleeting images from the repertoire of literary (and historical) archives [that] make their way into the mainframe” (Pillai 48). The upshot of these arguments is that the transnational author is perhaps unable, through physical and emotional distance from the subject matter, to provide an accurate rendering of memory into narrative. An example of this externality is Samarasan’s opening line from *Evening is the Whole Day*. It uses cartographical references that place her outside the physical space that is Malaysia: “There is, stretching as delicate as a bird’s head from the thin neck of the Kra Isthmus, a land that makes up half a country called Malaysia” (1). This marks her out as an outsider or observer, with the implication that she has less at stake in the nation-state. However, Samarasan takes the opposite view, explaining that living overseas makes it simpler to “see and to articulate things” than if she were living in Malaysia. For “her, personally, distance is crucial” (Borneo Expat Writer). Rani Manicka has not publicly spoken about her work in a way that allows her perspectives on these issues to be understood outside the content of her novels, so an interpretation of her approach is only available from her fiction.

To summarise, the two works that form the subject matter of this thesis are, on the one hand, personal stories, and on the other, as explained above, understood to be allegorical. They are written by diasporic authors. As both Manicka and Samarasan are also transnational, they are sometimes accused of a historically specific and static understanding of a complex evolving nation. The novels are written in English, and both works reflect the authors’ immersion in Western canon. The writers use various tools to create a subversive text, for instance, by resorting to a metonymic gap that allows layers of meaning and access; Malaysian readers might derive more

insights than Western readers who are not as familiar with the chosen nomenclature. Despite this, the gatekeeper effect of Western publishing results in various attempts, conscious or unconscious, to create a product palatable to a Western readership. The adoption of language that is expressly exotic in a manner that is stereotypical, simplistic or provides a Western perspective is an egregious example of pandering to Western audiences, especially by Manicka. Against this backdrop, both writers have sought to turn their personal histories and cultures into narratives that capture the zeitgeist of their respective communities and the fledgling nation. Thus, Manicka and Samarasan have written novels that make every effort, with varying degrees of success, to capture the political and cultural maelstrom that is colonial and postcolonial Malaya/Malaysia.

The Structure of the Thesis

After this introductory chapter, the thesis is divided into two parts, “The Patriarchs” (Chapters 1 and 2) and “The Matriarchs” (Chapters 3 and 4) followed by a concluding chapter. In “The Patriarchs”, Chapter 1 provides an explanation of relevant terminology used in this thesis to define the boundaries of analyses. It also contains a brief history of the Tamil diaspora in Malaya and considers the way Manicka and Samarasan leverage this history in their novels. The chapter then investigates the portrayal of key male characters in both *The Rice Mother* and *Evening is the Whole Day*. The descriptions of the men within the family and community reveal the patriarchal nature of Tamil society. I scrutinise the unique elements of Malayan/Malaysian Tamil society that reinforce male power hierarchies. In summary, patriarchal power was, and to some extent still is, primarily derived from cultural traditions of the homeland, whether India or Ceylon, steadfastly maintained by the Tamil community in Malaya/Malaysia. Other elements that enhance male power in colonial and postcolonial society include proximity to the British (physical or cultural), and the ability to speak English. While educational opportunities are portrayed as a primary source of advancement in Tamil communities, the nature of that education is critical to outcomes. Reliance on mission schools and English universities resulted in the creation of a postcolonial elite. Other performative elements revolve around food and clothing. Patriarchs adopt English habits to the

point of caricature to seize the mantle, a literal mantle when it comes to dress, of the former colonial masters.

Chapter 2 explains the challenges to patriarchal power faced by the male characters in both novels despite their privileged status within the Tamil home and community. Tamil menfolk are unable to translate domestic influence into wider prominence or prestige in Malayan/Malaysian society. The insignificance of Tamils, a minority ethnic group associated with the low status of plantation labour, proves impossible for the characters to surmount. Disruptive events, whether the Japanese Occupation during the Second World War (in *The Rice Mother*) or the race riots that broke out in Malaysia in 1969 (in *Evening is the Whole Day*) affect the standing and wellbeing of the Tamil community. Other ethnic groups, with more extensive political and economic levers, are better served by the post-war or post-riot racial settlement. The men in the novels react badly to displacement and disempowerment, responding to emasculating events in ways that prove detrimental to female characters.

In the “The Matriarchs”, Chapter 3 analyses the way the patriarchy, as it manifests in the Tamil family unit, constrains women to distinct gender roles. On the domestic front, patriarchal paradigms, derived from former homelands (India or Ceylon) are perpetuated within Tamil households; women are second-class citizens in the home, expected to be subservient to the men of the family. The subordinate position of women within the family is described unflinchingly in both *The Rice Mother* and *Evening is the Whole Day*. Nevertheless, both writers paint their primary female characters as strong-willed and determined, doing their best to achieve desirable outcomes for their families in desperately challenging times. Both works also explore the experiences of Tamil women wrestling with the desire for autonomy and independence in communities that demand servility towards men and obeisance to patriarchal traditions. The female characters, like their menfolk, are also marginalised by virtue of ethnicity from the Malayan/Malaysian mainstream. Next, the intersectionality of oppressive aspects of society as it applies to Tamil women is examined. The class divides within the Tamil community are thrown into stark relief as

subaltern women, ripe for exploitation and abuse, have distinctly poorer outcomes than other female characters. Nevertheless, women from the higher echelons of society, while protected to some extent from men outside the family, are prey to those within.

Chapter 4 argues that Tamil women strike patriarchal bargains to protect their own position and status within the family at the expense of other women in the family circle. The lack of solidarity against male oppression invites further abusive behaviour by men. Here, complicit women defend and cover up for their menfolk, doing lasting damage to those in their care. The reasons and excuses for such behaviour, ranging from tradition to convenience and more besides, are explicitly and implicitly portrayed in both *The Rice Mother* and *Evening is the Whole Day*.

To conclude, in summary this thesis considers the dynamics associated with expressions of male power and impediments thereto, as well as attempts by women to dispute male privilege while sometimes succumbing to the temptations of compromise in the form of patriarchal bargains with their menfolk. Tamils find themselves using their history and traditions as both a sword and shield when wrestling with the colonial, and postcolonial, implications of their brave new world.

PART ONE: THE PATRIARCHS

CHAPTER 1: BOYS WILL BE BOYS

Both *The Rice Mother* and *Evening is the Whole Day* reveal patriarchal power hierarchies in the Tamil family and community. The cultural infrastructure supporting such birthright dominion is predicated upon traditions and history that originate from the Tamil heritage of the male protagonists. Tamil men also seek to reinforce their patriarchal dominance by relying on additional levers of power and influence available to them in colonial and postcolonial society. Both works describe how the Malayan/Malaysian dynamic enhances male privilege in some contexts while undermining it in others. This chapter will use a bifocal – gender and postcolonial – lens to identify how traditional hegemonic masculinity (explained below), as well as other sources of male power, underpin the patriarchal status of men in the Tamil community in Malaya/Malaysia. While patriarchal elements in many postcolonial societies are well-documented in academia, I argue that the Malayan/Malaysian context requires an expansion of this scholarship because of its unique and under-appreciated historical and cultural features.

Traditional Hegemonic Masculinity

In this thesis, the term masculinity is used to describe “behaviours and characteristics for boys and men” which are empowered “by the belief that masculinity is natural and inherent to all males” (Everitt-Penhale and Ratele 7). In other words, masculinity is perceived as inherent in nature and therefore immutable. In David Gilmore’s *Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity*, he asserts that, “To be a man in most societies ... one must impregnate women, protect dependants from danger and provision kith and kin” (223). In contrast, gender norms conceptualise women as domestic – their realm is the home and the kitchen and their role is as nurturers and caregivers.

Literary and cinematic spaces have played a role in ensuring traditional gender roles appear innate and incontrovertible. In the context of Indian culture, which continues to influence the Tamil diaspora, gender norms that paint women as subservient to men have been propagated by the Bollywood hegemony (Khan and Taylor 3641). The social requirement to conform to the so-

called essential natures of women or men is concisely described by Candace West and Don Zimmerman as “doing gender” (112–22). To the extent that West and Zimmerman refer to the performative or role-playing aspects of gendered behaviour, this is borne out by the characters in both novels. As Judith Butler puts it in *Gender Trouble*, “a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal[s] over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (45) and, further, that “stylised repetition of acts” (191) reinforce gender roles within family and society. The Tamil community, as described in the works and explained further below, implicitly accepts the premise that masculinity is natural and innate to all men. In other words, Tamil males are portrayed as belonging at the apogee of social power structures because of this perceived inherent masculinity.

Tradition, on the other hand, is used to legitimise practices or belief systems which are shaped by social and cultural factors (Everitt-Penhale and Ratele 9–10). John Lavers describes tradition as “something that has been, and undoubtedly will be – accepted without question” (94). Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, in their seminal work, *The Invention of Tradition*, remind us that the object and characteristic of invented traditions is invariance. While this does not “preclude innovation and change up to a point”, the necessity that any proposed change “must appear compatible or even identical with precedent imposes substantial limitations on it” (2). In his review of the same book, Lavers reminds readers that tradition is possible because of “the universal propensity for self-delusion” (95) as society accepts assertions of antiquity in relation to cultural practices. This propensity for self-delusion allows dominant forces within society to utilise the conscious imposition of invented or modified traditions to achieve specific outcomes related to the preservation and perpetuation of power structures (Singh 241–52). Thus, in both novels, traditional cultural practices place men on a social pedestal and reinforce patriarchal ideologies and structures. As an example, in *Evening is the Whole Day*, Rajasekharan inherits the bulk of his father’s estate because he must provide for his sisters (27). This testamentary disposition is not challenged by the womenfolk. In *The Rice Mother*, Lakshmi is tricked into marriage but still treats the bonds of

matrimony as sacrosanct and does not seek to return to Ceylon or her mother. The patriarchy is also imbued with the legitimacy of history – namely the traditional practices of former homelands. This in turn provides power structures with “the sanction of precedent, social continuity and natural law as expressed in history” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 2). For instance, the practice of arranged marriages and the payment of dowries is considered the norm by families in both novels – Rajasekharan humorously insists he will pay a dowry to wed the neighbour’s daughter who has caught in his eye, Vasanthi (65), while Lakshmi reminds her husband, Ayah, that he must save for his daughters’ dowries (88) – but these practices originated in Ceylon/India.

As pointed out by R.W. Connell and James Messerschmidt, the concept of hegemonic masculinity has attracted serious criticism and many formulations are limited and limiting, as when it deemphasises issues of power and domination or is framed within a heteronormative conception of gender (829–59). This thesis uses “hegemonic” to capture the widespread ideological acceptance of a system of gender power imbalances that legitimises the subordination of women to men. This hegemonic quality of traditional masculinity is achieved through persuading large swaths of society that power in the hands of men within a patriarchal system is both natural, a consequence of perceived inherent masculinity (that have a multiplicity of context-specific, cultural manifestations), and appropriate, because of historic and cultural elements presented as traditional values to preserve existing power dynamics.

The term “patriarchy” and derivatives thereof are used in this thesis as defined by Sylvia Walby, namely, “a system of social structures, and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women” (214). In this thesis, the patriarchy refers primarily to the systematic, structural oppression of women by men as it manifests within Malaya/Malaysia generally and the Tamil community more specifically. Walby identifies six structures: “a patriarchal mode of production in which women's labour is expropriated by their husbands; patriarchal relations within waged labour; the patriarchal state; male violence; patriarchal relations in sexuality; and patriarchal culture”, all of which affect Tamil women portrayed in the novels (220). However, this critical component does

not seek to categorise patriarchal interventions in the lives of women but instead considers the patriarchy more holistically as it negatively affects the lived experiences of women in the novels; the historical roots of the oppression of women within Tamil communities is outside the scope of work. To summarise, the hegemonic nature of patriarchal social structures within the Ceylonese/Indian communities in Malaya/Malaysia, which infuses the narratives of both *The Rice Mother* and *Evening is the Whole Day*, is rooted in a cultural acceptance that the natural position of Tamil men is at the pinnacle of power. This male pre-eminence is reinforced by sanctioned traditions that further underpin patriarchal infrastructure in Tamil communities.

Identifying the Patriarchs in The Rice Mother and Evening is the Whole Day

In *Evening is the Whole Day*, Rajasekharan, an educated and erudite third-generation immigrant, is at the apex of privilege within his family and the community. At home, he is surrounded by women: his mother (Paati), his wife (Vasanthi), two daughters (Uma and Aasha) and the maidservant (Chellam) – with only one son (Suresh) to break the gender monotony. The men in *The Rice Mother* such as Ayah and his son, Lakshmanan, despite being portrayed as weak, feckless, lazy, alcoholic and/or sadistic, also enjoy patriarchal power and status. This masculine hegemony is depicted by both Samarasan and Manicka as permitting physical, emotional and psychological violence by Tamil men towards women. Thus, despite having female protagonists or strong female characters, both writers reflect the patriarchal nature of society prevalent in the historical era of which they write. Their characters operate within a framework where traditional hegemonic masculinity is the dominant social construct. The shortcomings of the men and the strengths of the women remind readers that men exercise power over women irrespective of the talent or character of the men who wield power or the talent or character of the women who are subject to the exercise of that power. To put it another way, the portrayal of patriarchs in both works reflects the widespread community acceptance that the superior stature of Tamil men is natural and inviolable.

Tamils in Malaya

It is necessary, in order to analyse the portrayal of Tamil patriarchs in both works, to trace the fictional roots of the protagonists; their journey reflects the historical realities of the Tamil diaspora in Malaya. This frame of reference is crucial to understanding the social dynamics within the Tamil community as revealed in both novels under consideration. Tamil immigrants to Malaya were largely Tamil speaking, uneducated and brought in from India as indentured labour to work on the rubber plantations. However, there were also educated, English-speaking Tamils from Indian and Ceylon who made the journey to British Malaya to work in positions of responsibility including in the British civil service, especially the colonial railways and medical system. While the descendants of the former, mired in the estates, did not have access to sufficient education or opportunities to improve their economic conditions, descendants of the latter leveraged their better circumstances and access to mission schools in the towns to transform their fortunes. This dichotomy between Tamil haves and have-nots in the present era, based largely on the roles of their antecedents, is a profound faultline within the Tamil community (discussed further below in the context of the servant, Chellam).

Evening Is the Whole Day is set in Malaysia, after Independence (1957), over a period from the late 1960s to the early 1980s and follows the misadventures of the Ipoh-based Rajasekharan family. To explain and contextualise the family's presence in Malaysia, Samarasan informs readers that, in 1899, Rajasekharan's grandfather "shuffled off the boat with the rest of the vast herd in Penang" (17). The "vast herd" are the aforementioned Tamils who arrived to form the bulk of the workforce in Malayan rubber plantations. These workers arrived first as indentured labourers and then gained some limited measure of independence under the *kangany*³ system of recruitment. Samarasan's reference to a "herd" clearly hints at the way Tamils were shifted across the British

³ Under this system, Tamil foremen (the *kangany*) working on a plantation were sent back to their villages in India by British planters, charged with recruiting more workers for the estates. Malayan authorities hoped that the *kangany* would be able to exercise paternal authority and discipline over the labour force as they were usually from the same village (Amrith 246–248).

Empire as a matter of colonial convenience with little say in the process. There is some irony in Samarasan's phraseology as cows are considered sacred beasts to Hindus (the religion of the vast majority of Tamils who came to Malaya). The British, Samarasan implies, do not have the same respect for their human cattle as the Tamils do for cows. The destination of many Tamils in Malaya is Penang. Like Singapore to the south, Penang was a British-controlled port that served as the docking point for the numerous ships that plied the route between the South Indian ports of Nagapatinam and Madras, and Malaya. Migrant workers travelled as deck passengers with no reserved space for sitting or sleeping. They were allowed a small box, sleeping bag and one reasonably sized basket for their luggage (Mani 89). Rajasekharan, the main protagonist in *Evening is the Whole Day*, is a third-generation descendant of Tamil migrants. His wealth and social position are a far cry from that of his ancestors who have parlayed their meagre possessions from that original journey into wealth and status.

Sunil Amrith, in his comprehensive exploration of the history of Tamil migration to Malaya before 1940, notes that even prior to the mass influx at the turn of the 20th century, "there was already a significant South Indian presence in the port cities of Singapore and Penang, a result of steady migration that had taken place under the auspices of Indian shipping networks" (234). Samarasan leverages this history to inform readers that Rajasekharan's grandfather worked as a coolie on the Penang docks, "wanting nothing more than to be able to pay his passage back home someday" (17). In this manner, Samarasan avoids the complexity of extricating her character's predecessors from the rubber estates. The descendants of Tamil plantation workers remain mired in poverty (Maartandan et al. 187–207) and are unlikely to have achieved the Rajasekharan family's success. Samarasan instead presents a Malayan history that begins with the aforementioned "coolie on the docks" which, while still a menial position, allows for more credible economic progress over generations. The coolie's son, Rajasekharan's father, "studied hard enough to get himself a clerk's position" (17) – the same job, incidentally, held by Ayah in *The Rice Mother*. This is a reminder of the limited work opportunities for Tamil migrants in British Malaya. Career progress

in the British colony was confined to industries for which the migrants were specifically imported. In the case of the Tamils, this was largely as labour on the rubber plantations where there was no scope for upward mobility. By contrast, Tamils who were English speaking, educated and who had access, in population centres, to a higher quality English-medium, mission school education for their children, were able to escape the generational poverty trap.

Despite Rajasekharan's grandfather's early determination to earn his keep and then his passage back to India, along the way "India ceased to be home" (17). However, if India ceased to be home, Malaya was not yet ready to accept this imported workforce as having any permanent right of abode, let alone rights of belonging. Eventually, as described in the Introduction, the Constitutional settlement offered citizenship. However, Amrith points out that the history of Tamils, whether from India or Ceylon, "in Malaya after 1945 is the history of a long, and still incomplete, struggle for equal citizenship" (260). The key word here is "equal" as structural inequality rooted in history coupled with ethnocentric poverty alleviation policies in Malaysia, that prioritise Malay poverty, entrenched Tamil marginalisation.

The geographical and cultural isolation of Tamils trapped on the plantations played a role in perpetuating patriarchal norms. It left the Tamil diaspora in Malaya, and later Malaysia, isolated from wider modernising social influences so that traditional perceptions of masculinity remained dominant. Samarasan narrates this Tamil struggle for acceptance, this "still incomplete" (Amrith 260) journey to equality, as a core theme of *Evening is the Whole Day*. Samarasan's protagonist, from a generation that participated in the pursuit of independence from the British, seeks to find a political role for himself and his community. Rajasekharan wishes to participate actively in post-Independence nation building and he does this by joining a political party and actively campaigning for an inclusive vision of Malaysia that is not constrained by inter-ethnic divisions. At the apex of the family power structure, he believes in his own omnipotence and therefore his natural right to project that superior status into the wider political and social sphere.

While Samarasan explains the family history and background prior to Independence in a few short paragraphs, this period – from the turn of the twentieth century to Independence – forms the predominant time horizon of Manicka’s novel. There is no conscious moment depicted in *The Rice Mother* where Sri Lanka’s status as a former homeland is accepted. Thus, in contrast to the Rajasekharans, at no point do Manicka’s first-generation Tamil migrants seek to shape national, as opposed to personal, narratives. Lakshmi and her husband, Ayah, fresh off the boat, are politically illiterate, educationally constrained and economically challenged. Theirs is not Amrith’s “struggle for equal citizenship” (260) but a battle for survival in an inhospitable new country. Thus, the two books span a critical period of Tamil history in Malaya/Malaysia, from migrants, imported by Empire as labour, to citizens, seeking belonging in a new nation.

The rest of this chapter will focus on the portrayal of male characters in each novel and the way they manifest patriarchal traits within their respective economic, social and cultural frames of reference.

One Man in his Time Plays Many Parts: The Status of Tamil Men within the Home

In *Evening is the Whole Day*, Rajasekharan is depicted as the dominant male in a culturally conservative Malaysian Indian family. His superior position is legitimised by the Tamil community, including its womenfolk, especially his mother and wife, as being consistent with tradition, including cultural practices imported from India and sanctified through continuous application in Malaysia. As discussed earlier, traditions effectively legitimise and perpetuate patriarchal power structures. As a consequence of his educational and economic advantages, stemming from his elevated status within a patriarchal system, Rajasekharan is the sole breadwinner of the family, a political activist and a highly regarded lawyer. He is perceived, not least by himself, as being cultivated, humorous and dominant. In his dealings with women of the family, he demonstrates a performative machismo and embraces his role as the figure of authority, tasked with protecting supposedly weaker or more vulnerable individuals.

Examples abound within the novel of Samarasan both implicitly and expressly reinforcing the status of Rajasekharan as a patriarchal figure, with the concomitant power and influence of that position. As *Evening is the Whole Day* is largely narrated by his youngest daughter, Aasha, Rajasekharan is referred to throughout as “Appa”, which means “father” in Tamil⁴. Thus, Rajasekharan’s status as a figure of authority – the father as well as father figure – is reinforced by the pervasive terminology deployed by Samarasan. In economic terms, Rajasekharan inherits the bulk of his father’s estate “as part of the understanding that he would see his sisters well settled” (27). In other words, his responsibility as patriarch extends to marrying his sisters to suitable men and paying the appropriate dowry to achieve this end. While arranged marriages and the payment of dowries originated in India/Ceylon, the practice has been perpetuated by Tamil immigrants in their new Malaysian home and remains widespread. Further, while the Rajasekharan family is not overtly religious, they are Hindu. The cultural expressions of the Hindu religion further reinforce the status of men and undermine the position of women. An example is when Chellam the servant is humiliated by a Hindu soothsayer in front of a large crowd of neighbours. He “grunts and gyrates and thrusts his pelvis at Chellam like a backup dancer in a Tamil film” (215) and accuses her of being a prostitute and pregnant. He is seen as entitled to treat her in this oppressive and dismissive way since he is a Hindu soothsayer and has authority over her, a woman and a servant.

Thus, Rajasekharan’s domestic cultural and religious reference points and his relationships with female family members remain heavily influenced by his ancestral homeland. This is because “connections endured, in the imagination, and in the persistence of cultural and familial connections with India” (Amrith 260). This division of wealth, where he inherits the main portion, is uncontested by Rajasekharan’s sisters, indicating their recognition and acceptance of his superior status. Samarasan thus reveals how repetitive cultural and religious practices produce a belief system in which the patriarchal power dynamic is accepted, even by women, without query.

⁴ Tamil is the main language of the Indian diaspora in Malaysia that hailed largely from South India as well as that of the Ceylonese Tamils from Jaffna in Sri Lanka.

Paraphrasing Gilmore's criteria cited in the introductory chapter above, Tamil masculinity may be understood as a series of qualified obligations. These include to "impregnate women" – but only within a suitable, arranged marriage; to "protect women from danger" – but only from the danger of social exclusion; and to "make provision for kith and kin" – not only financially, but also by elevating their social status through the use of dowries to purchase suitable husbands. In other words, there are a multiplicity of traditional masculinities which are context specific. Rajasekharan's is of the wealthy, conservative, ethnically Indian, Tamil-speaking variety as evolved in the Malaysian context.

The key male figure in *The Rice Mother* is Lakshmi's husband, Ayah, who exploits, and benefits from, the desperation of impoverished women to be married into financial security. Ayah uses deception to convince Lakshmi's mother that he is a wealthy man in Malaya. He flashes a borrowed gold watch (18) and thus wins himself a bride. These women's naïve inclination to believe false promises, a willing suspension of disbelief, is in part because men have the power to elevate female status through marriage. Further, the women's lack of scepticism is arguably a function of a lifetime of indoctrination about the natural superiority of menfolk. Ayah's cunning traps his young wife in a new land, Malaya, where she knows no one and does not speak any of the other common languages: English, Malay or Chinese. In other words, despite not having Rajasekharan's talent, education or wealth, Ayah is still able to marry a woman of his own choosing and remove her from any protective family structures. This is a result of the Tamil cultural requirement that women be wed because social acceptance hinges on an appropriate marriage. In this context, a suitable groom is one selected by a bride's parents as demonstrated when Lakshmi's mother is cast off and ostracised by her family after she elopes with a servant's son (5). Religious practices that marginalise women are revealed to play a part in maintaining patriarchal power as well. As an example, Lakshmi is aged fourteen "when the first drop of menstrual blood proclaimed [her] suddenly and distressingly a grown woman" and she is "shut up in a small room with the windows nailed shut" (8) to preserve her virginity. The physical isolation of daughters in this

manner disempowers them in their own homes in preparation for marriage and subordination to the family of the chosen husband. As Manicka makes clear, the best outcome for Tamil women within patriarchal boundaries is to seek to better their economic situation by using their available assets, virginity, dowry or beauty, to barter for a wealthy (or wealthier) husband.

Overall, merely by being the man of the house, male characters are depicted in both novels as being suffused with power over their womenfolk. However, the roots of male supremacy run deep. There are many other political and cultural elements within Malayan/Malaysian society that reinforce masculine hegemony. The privileged position of men, including Tamil men, in society, is derived from a mosaic of attributes both adopted and conferred as revealed in both *Evening is the Whole Day* and *The Rice Mother*. Some elements that underpin male omnipotence are widespread across the former British colonies and in postcolonial societies and others are unique to the Malayan/Malaysian happenstance. Each facet of male power beyond the traditional patriarchal inheritance of men serves to reinforce masculine privilege at the expense of women. Further, each component, as described further below, reinforces the structural integrity of the patriarchy so that the overall edifice becomes even more difficult to dismantle.

The Sun never Sets on Empire: Power through Proximity to the British

Power and status were derived, during both the colonial and postcolonial era, from proximity to the British. Pre-Independence, this proximity to the British was usually through employment. Because of their patriarchal status, Tamil men were the primary breadwinners of the family. This created opportunities for men to reinforce their cultural hegemony over women through employment and the concomitant proximity to British colonial power centres. Ayah in *The Rice Mother* works on a British plantation for British managers (and his son, Lakshmanan, runs errands for British soldiers). However, despite having been shuffled across the chessboard of Empire to where his labour is required, Ayah has almost nothing to do with the British. He is too far down the pecking order to have much interaction with the colonial masters. As a first-generation

immigrant, he is focused on economic survival. Community involvement is with locals and neighbours, whether Indians, Chinese or Malays – and not British overlords. Thus, individuals like Ayah have limited opportunity to milk proximity to the British as a source of power; the closest Ayah comes to benefiting is being given some old pieces of furniture (30) upon the departure of a British manager while the soldiers' reward for Lakshmanan (his son) is a bar of chocolate.

Post-Independence, proximity to the British was achieved through the adoption of English culture, such as Rajasekharan's embrace of quintessentially English habits, whether of dress, language or mannerisms. This is not entirely surprising in a nation where the country's first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, on Independence Day, stated in his speech marking the occasion:

Thus, today a new chapter opens in our relationship with Britain, our colonial status has given place to full equality but we are confident that, fortified by old associations, and linked by old memories, our ties with Britain will grow ever stronger and more durable. Britain will ever find in us her best friend (Arkib Negara).

This framing of the relationship "largely preserved British administrative thinking as well as the political and economic apparatus that had been set into place by the colonial power" (Jeyathurai 305). Further, this promise that Britain would find in Malaysia "her best friend" was borne out by post-independent economic data where the returns on investment (ROI) in British Malaya from 1889 to 1969 "might have been the highest in the world" (Rönnbäck et al. 149) and, more importantly, was "at its highest at the end of the period" (Rönnbäck et al. 150). In other words, Britain's return on investment from its Malayan/Malaysian interests was highest in the first decade after Independence. So much for dispensing with the colonial yoke.

In *Evening is the Whole Day*, set in post-Independence Malaysia, Rajasekharan, the patriarch, identifies with the former colonial power and consequently adopts or mimics Englishness. While it was the British that colonised Malaya and many colonial stewards were Scottish, it is English culture (or that which is perceived to be English) that is the subject of imitation by former colonial subjects. This Englishness was understood to be that variation propounded by the white

upper/middle classes; postcolonial Malaysians did not adopt Cockney rhyming slang. While the reasons for the ascendancy of English culture are beyond the scope of this work, there are a number of possibilities that include the dominance of Englishness in British cultural discourse at the time, the centrality of colonial power to Westminster, mission school focus on English literature, the English legal background of many colonial and postcolonial elites and/or education in English institutions of higher learning such as Oxford and Cambridge. Samarasan, in describing Rajasekharan's adoption of the habits of the colonial classes expressly refers to his appropriation of English, as opposed to British, mannerisms, dress and other outward expressions of colonial culture. This is her acknowledgement that, while it may have been the British Empire, it was an English colonising mission. Alternatively, it might be that Samarasan has internalised the notion that it is Englishness that defines postcolonial elitism rather than a wider lens that encompasses the other home countries.

Rajasekharan adopts these performative elements of Englishness to seek legitimacy "through inherited imperial mechanisms of power" (Nah 512). Homi Bhabha suggests that "mimicry is at once resemblance and menace" (127). He argues that, obliged to adopt the dress and habits of the white man to make themselves palatable to those with power in society, the oppressed channel subtle resistance. However, Rajasekharan plays his imitation game with a straight bat. As demonstrated in the next chapter, Samarasan's protagonist, despite the outward trappings of Englishness, is unable either to inherit colonial power or ignore the rest of the influences upon his status because at the end of the day, he is "[a]lmost the same but not white" (Bhabha 130). Despite seeking to be "English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect", as Macaulay (49) argued, in his Minute on Education in 1835, was a useful goal to create an elite class of locals to function as intermediaries between colonial representatives and the Indian masses, men like Rajasekharan hastened the demise of "Englishness" as a source of status and influence in postcolonial societies. His mimicry is patently absurd to postcolonial subjects who have not

adopted the same fetish. Consequently, this imitation game allowed other factions, such as the Malays in Malaysia, to reject English cultural appropriation and reap the political benefits.

Nevertheless, Rajasekharan milks his performative adoption of Englishness to maximise his influence within the Tamil community, while Ayah and his son, Lakshmnan, still have more access than their womenfolk to British favour. In this way, traditional hegemonic masculinity provides opportunities for men to reinforce their influence through association with the colonial powers, an option denied to women. As discussed in the next section, education is another means for patriarchs to reinforce their dominance over women.

The Colonial Masters Are Cleaning My Shoes Now: Education as a Source of Power

Whereas, in *The Rice Mother*, Ayah is sufficiently educated to work as a clerk in the rubber plantations, implying some degree of English literacy and numeracy, Lakshmi is illiterate. The historical dichotomy between educational opportunities for men and women in Tamil society is covered in Chapter 3 of this thesis. Suffice to say here, men were usually provided, not least because of their anticipated role as breadwinners, with greater access to schooling. Like many of the next generation, the firstborn twins (Mohini and Lakshmnan) of Lakshmi and Ayah start school at six where, “in the morning they went to mainstream school where they learned English, and in the afternoon to vernacular school where they were taught to read and write Tamil” (88). In the colonial period, the school system in Malaya was organised by ethnicity and associated languages – Malay schools, Chinese schools and Tamil schools – while English-medium schools emerged in urban areas (Pandian 402). Attending school in English and then again in the relevant mother tongue was common amongst early immigrants. This unique practice in Malaya/Malaysia, of offering schooling by origin, segregated children by language and geographical origins. Even in the present day, Chinese and Tamil schools are widespread and a source of considerable controversy in the context of forging a national identity that transcends racial barriers. In the colonial era, families did not know if they were temporary economic migrants to Malaya or

permanent immigrants to a new land; they were thus determined to hedge their bets by being educated bilingually. This racial segregation through language-specific schools, especially in the estates, is another contributory factor to the isolation of Tamils and the perpetuation of traditional patriarchal norms imported from the homelands. In *The Rice Mother*, Lakshmi mentions that the British taught her son “to speak the kind of English we were never taught at school” (109). In this way, Manicka hints at the social advantages to be derived by immigrants who learn to speak like the colonial masters.

Manicka also acknowledges that education is the key method used in the Ceylonese community to escape the poverty trap as well as assimilate into the middle classes where ethnicity is less determinative of outcomes. She does this tangentially by describing how a Grade Two for his senior exams leaves Lakshmanan, Lakshmi’s oldest son, employable only as a “Labour Officer in a Government Office” (287). By contrast, a classmate of Lakshmanan, who gets a Grade One, studies at Sandhurst Military College in England. This young man sends home a photo of himself having his shoes shined with the caption, “Look how far I’ve come. The colonial masters are cleaning my shoes now” (287). There is a cultural overtone here that represents the metonymic gap – footwear is considered unclean and Tamil families remove their shoes before entering the home. As a corollary to that, touching the feet of elders is a traditional gesture of respect or humility amongst Tamils. Thus, for the young man having his shoes cleaned, the elevation of status is much greater in his eyes than might be perceived by the shoe cleaner or a Western reader of Manicka’s work. In any event, the differing professional opportunities between Lakshmanan and his schoolmate are the consequence of different educational outcomes for the young men.

This approach, of enhancing one’s status through education in English, comes to fruition in Samarasan’s character, Rajasekharan. He has the benefit of the complete mission school proselytising experience. In *Evening is the Whole Day*, Rajasekharan’s superior education reinforces his authority; he is one of the “scrubbed little weasels, schooled at the Malay College ... or the Penang Free School and shipped off to Oxford and Cambridge” (21). This is the description of

men like Rajasekharan by the Scot, Mr McDougall (who is part of the colonial service in Malaya; Rajasekharan purchases their family home from him), who flees to Britain “when he smelled trouble coming, seeing [these English-educated Native lawyers] return in their robes and powdered wigs” (21). Here, Samarasan recognises and acknowledges the double-edged sword that was the colonial/mission education system, intended to train the “weasels” to work for the British but eventually sowing the seeds for these self-same newly educated elites to seek freedom from colonial shackles. The word “weasel”, with its implication of deceit or treachery, foreshadows the so-called betrayal of the British by these elites when they use their educational advancement to push for independence. Thus, as a Cambridge-educated lawyer, Samarasan’s Rajasekharan seeks to inherit the mantle of authority from the recently departed British overlords, a not uncommon approach of the *comprador* class in postcolonial societies. The *comprador* class is understood in this context as “those local bourgeoisie who owe their privileged position to foreign monopolies” and in the postcolonial context has “evolved... to include the intelligentsia... whose independence may be compromised by a reliance on and identification with colonial power” (Ashcroft et al., *The Key Concepts* 62). Many of the first generation of nationalist anti-colonial activists in Malaya were mission school educated. Tunku Abdul Rahman, first Prime Minister of independent Malaysia, was of both royal stock (Tunku is a royal prefix) and was educated in the first mission school in Malaya, the Penang Free School⁵, referred to so scathingly by McDougall above. Tunku subsequently went to Cambridge and was admitted as a barrister to the English Bar. In other words, Malaysia’s first Prime Minister was the archetypal postcolonial aristocrat. However, this also meant that the new elite, owing their privileged position to the colonial system, fought for independence in a manner that perpetuated the same political and social hierarchies. The postcolonial establishment merely displaced, or sought to displace, the British with themselves. Alex Sutton describes this as a “curious mix of continuity and discontinuity based upon the formal

⁵ The school was established in 1816 by the Reverend R. S. Hutchings, a pioneering missionary (Mission Schools in Malaysia 1).

end of empire and the existence of sympathetic elites in post-colonial states” (471). Thus, both novels demonstrate how patriarchal traditions provide Tamil men with superior educational opportunities which in turn reinforces their masculine authority over female counterparts. As considered next, English language skills provide another means for men to reinforce their status in society at the expense of those others, including women, who speak either native languages or pidgin English.

Divided by a Common Language: The Language of Shakespeare versus “Manglish”

In Malaya/Malaysia, a proverbial Tower of Babel because of its multiracial composition, language reinforces social hierarchies. Pre-Independence, the ability to speak English was determinative of stature in the architecture of Empire; it allowed individuals to find jobs within the civil service or in higher positions in economic activities managed by the British. Thus, Ayah finds work as a clerk on a plantation while Tamil-speaking migrants are effectively forced labour. After Independence in 1957, fluent English was evidence of postcolonial status. Rajasekharan speaks flawless, often idiomatic, English – “bloody fool” (24) is the way he describes his ballroom dancing brother known disdainfully in the family as Uncle Ballroom – and occasionally reverts to Latin. Latin is another relic of the mission school education system which adopted mottos such as the Penang Free School’s *Fortis Atque Fidelis*, or “strong and faithful”, as well as the ubiquitous presence of Latin in the study of law (including the all-important right of *habeas corpus* and writ of *certiorari*, much used in Malaysia to fend off state authoritarianism). In the period after Independence in 1957 but prior to the race riots of 1969, English was the national *lingua franca*, medium of education and language of politics and commerce. A quote from appellate court judge, Tan Sri Eusoffe Abdoolcader, demonstrates the extraordinary impact of the colonial language:

I am not concerned with the political undertones or overtones or whatever that may affect the questions raised in this action, and in this trial am moved by no considerations other than that of determining the issues involved purely and strictly

within the confines of the Federal Constitution and the law, abjuring any concomitant political or emotional offshoots springing like Athena from the head of Zeus in its wake. The Attorney General, meaning well no doubt, presents a vision of doom when he speaks of the grim consequences that might ensue if grave circumspection is not exercised in weighing the respective interests involved, but my short answer to this is, as I said in court in anticipating Mr Beloff for the plaintiff, *fiat justitia, ruat coelum* - let justice be done, though the heavens should fall. I said in *Mak Sik Kwong v Minister of Home Affairs Malaysia* (1975) 2 MLJ 168 (at page 171) and I say again, the courts constitute the channel through which His Majesty's justice is dispensed to his people and are accordingly the bastion of their rights and the courts must therefore necessarily be the ultimate bulwark against the excesses of the executive, though I should add that unconstitutionality and illegality of administrative action and not the unwisdom of legislation or executive discretion is the exclusive and narrow concern of judicial review and control of administrative acts (Court of Appeal, Malaysia).

The combination of English legal principles, Latin, Greek myth and English language skills caused Judge Abdoolcader to be labelled the Legal Lion of the Commonwealth. The postcolonial elite excelled at rewarding each other with laudatory titles and labels to reinforce their hegemony. His positionality captures the silk-stocking status of those who could wield the English language (and law) with such fluency. Similarly, as the male scion of a wealthy family, Rajasekharan's access to a first-class education in English provides him with significant status and power – he is a successful lawyer – in Malaysian society and reinforces his domination over his housebound Tamil family.

Unlike Rajasekharan, many women in *Evening is the Whole Day* speak using that unique Malaysian syntax, sometimes known colloquially as Manglish (as pidgin Singapore English is known as Singlish) – more detail of this is provided in Chapter 3 – that is the consequence of directly translating the various mother tongues into English. Samarasan is able to depict her female characters as symbolising resistance to the hegemony of the English language by using a local

pidgin because the educated patriarchy has abandoned the use of mother tongues in favour of the colonial language. By contrast, in *The Rice Mother*, Manicka presents her characters' speech in simple but correct English. The actual conversations between Lakshmi and her family are, or should be understood by readers to be, in Tamil; her dialogue with the neighbours, and other non-Ceylonese, are in Malay. Her female characters do not speak enough English for it to be a tool either for advancement or for resistance and that is a function of their economic status as first-generation migrants in Malaya.

Another way of understanding this absorption of other languages – as seen in the conversational style of the characters in Samarasan's *Evening is the Whole Day*, whether through the use of their grammatical structure, syntax or words – is to recognise the “intrinsic multilingualism of language” (Allan 40). This allows for a “solidarity beyond the straitjacket of fixed identities, languages, or situations” (Allan 46) and might even be a precursor to Sharmani Gabriel's notion that “the concept of a Malaysian race is an ideologically necessary tool to frustrate attempts to consolidate hegemony by the state” (*Translating Bangsa Malaysia* 370). However, Samarasan alerts readers that Rajasekharan does not see language as an instrument of solidarity with the working classes but instead as an instrument of dominance. As such, his use of the English language is devoid of nuance and remains confined by the aforementioned “straitjacket” (Allan 46). It is through the female characters' Manglish that Samarasan reminds readers that it is possible to use a colonial language in a way that does not necessarily imprison the formerly colonised in the coloniser's paradigm. Despite this possibility, members of the first-generation Western-educated, post-Independence elite, such as Rajasekharan are quite content in their gilded cage. Neither author has a character who protests, as Aimé Césaire's Caliban does, “You didn't teach me a thing! Except to jabber in your own language so that I could understand your orders”. Instead, the English language is an avatar of power that further distinguishes the patriarch from both their womenfolk and the less educated men “jabbering” in their native languages or a postcolonial patois. To reinforce his status, it makes far more sense for Rajasekharan to adopt speech patterns

that owe their etymology to the English upper classes than the linguistic hybridity of his wife or mother.

Clothes maketh the Man: Dressing for Success

Already the dominant figure in the home as a consequence of traditional gender roles in the Tamil community, a patriarch's determination to wield influence in the wider community requires a more calibrated approach. Tamil members of the postcolonial elite sought to dress to project power; they abandoned traditional clothing outside the home. Rajasekharan's mimicry of the typical English gentleman, as understood in the colonies, is developed by Samarasan to the point of caricature. Rajasekharan has "three matching leather suitcases, a black briefcase and a small trunk" (51). He stands at the gate "under his enormous black umbrella" (5). These affectations appear rooted in, or are reinforced by, fictional representations of Englishness. Aside from courtroom trappings, he also wears "courthouse shirts, Arrow brand" (6). Here, Samarasan reveals the irony of Rajasekharan's choices – "Arrow brand" shirts were one of the few formal shirt brands available in that period in Malaysia but were cheap, of thin cotton, and not particularly well cut or sewn. However, there is no ambivalence in his attitude, no mockery in his mimicry; Rajasekharan is portrayed as genuinely believing himself to be adopting a superior culture, that of his former colonial masters.

It is interesting to note too, the performative elements of the postcolonial legal system, the "robes and powdered wigs" (21), which are adopted by the local elite, a literal attempt to clothe themselves in trappings associated with power. To this day, Malaysian lawyers wear the gown, wing collar and bib to court, even though the country has dispensed with the horsehair wig as well as appeals to the Privy Council. Even intrinsically absurd elements such as the robes and collars, given the tropical climate, achieve their purpose of imbuing the avatars of British tradition with status. As Shashi Tharoor puts it in his book, *An Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India*, "every Indian schoolchild must lament the influence of the British dress code on Indians – especially the tie as a permanent noose around the necks of millions of schoolchildren". However, Tamil men

such as Rajasekharan adopted the formal dress of former rulers to portray themselves as the natural heirs of colonial power in the newly independent former colonies.

A generation earlier, in *The Rice Mother*, Ayah changes “from his sarong into a pair of trousers” (252) when he goes to work and also when he sets out to loot Japanese warehouses when Japan surrenders at the end of the war. This links his wearing of trousers to official duties such as his work as a clerk on an estate (this also distinguishes him from the Tamil tappers who wore sarongs, the women – sarees, when collecting rubber). There is no express attempt by Ayah to aspire to Britishness, the wearing of trousers is part of the uniform of the job. Again, the contrast between Manicka’s colonial impoverished and Samarasan’s postcolonial elite shows the trajectory of economic advancement for some Tamil migrants. However, it is critical to note that the transformation from powerless to empowered is available primarily to the menfolk in the Tamil community as observed over the novels’ historical span: from landing on Malayan shores in *The Rice Mother* through to *Evening Is the Whole Day*’s post-Independence temporal setting.

Cows for a Wife: Marriage as a Means of Cementing Status

In *Evening is the Whole Day*, Rajasekharan does his best to reinforce his traditional dominance by all means available including in his selection of a wife. He intends his choice of spouse to reinforce his status in the family and community. At the very least, he does not want a wife to undermine his position. To this end, he has no wish to “settle down and procreate” with any of the “worldly women with whom he dallied” as “these women were his equals and they knew it” (44). It is noteworthy that Rajasekharan’s concern is that “they” (the women) know they are his equals; he is not threatened by their comparable status so much as their being aware of it. The power dynamic between the lawyer and these women is affected by their access to knowledge. Only if the women understand their equal status in the social hierarchy, whether as a consequence of wealth, education or ethnicity, does the discourse between the parties change in a manner that impinges Rajasekharan’s authority. Samarasan’s use of “dallied” indicates that he knows full well that these

women will not do for a wife. As a side note, a Tamil woman who “dallied”, or is even suspected of dallying, as Chellam the servant is accused by the Hindu soothsayer, would be humiliated, ostracised and unmarriageable. In behaving in this manner, Rajasekharan is flexing patriarchal muscle. An alliterative phrase “worldly women” is contrasted with what Rajasekharan wants – a wife who is “admiring, respectful, adoring” (45). Samarasan omits conjunctions, using an asyndeton as a literary device to speed up the pace of the sentence and provide readers with the sense of urgency with which the scion wants a spouse with these characteristics. By contrast, the types of women who might challenge him are more diverse in the Malaysian context; the women who “look him in the eye” (44) are Chinese and/or educated. Even an uneducated Chinese woman, by virtue of being from the larger, wealthier minority race in Malaysia, challenges his domestic hegemony. In other words, a Tamil patriarch might be less powerful in the home if his wife is Chinese (because, in Malaysia, her ethnicity trumps his masculinity) than if his wife is Tamil.

In his choice of bride, Samarasan reveals Rajasekharan’s insecurities. He has a very real fear of being displaced in the social hierarchy by a woman who has an independent source of power. Unable to admit self-doubt, patriarchal figures are required to believe the fiction of their superiority, he interprets his choice of wife as being a function of his “rarefied appetites” in that he likes “obscure Continental writers, game and dark women” (52). These pretensions are intended to reassure himself of his privilege, his Anglicised nature and his lack of Tamil cultural constraints. For instance, a dark-skinned woman, as explained further below, would usually be anathema to a Tamil man. Despite this, Rajasekharan’s attention is drawn to Vasanthi, the eldest daughter of a poor neighbour who is “excruciatingly gauche”. She is a “thin, dark girl, several inches taller than he, too awkward to meet his eyes as she mumbled her pleased to meet you” (52). She has “unfashionable oiled braids” and “probably unshaven legs beneath her drab ankle-length skirt” and “got Cs in all her papers” for her Senior Cambridge Certificate “except geography, which she failed” (52). Within the Tamil community, Vasanthi would be unmarriageable, having none of the desired attributes of beauty, wealth or education but instead the twin failures of being dark and

tall, let alone gauche. The oily hair and hairy legs described by Samarasan are an “estate” Indian stereotype (Jeyathurai 303–323). Samarasan details similar traits, hairy armpits and the pervasive smell of coconut oil, to explain the disdain of the Rajasekharan family for Chellam, their Tamil servant girl from the rubber plantations (252). Here, by drawing parallels between Vasanthi and Chellam, Samarasan capably demonstrates that Vasanthi is from a lower socio-economic class than the Rajasekharans, even if not quite a “rubber estate girl” (Jeyathurai 312) like Chellam. In any event, she is someone who would usually be treated as unworthy of marriage to the likes of Rajasekharan.

Vasanthi’s lack of confidence and social graces is revealed in the way she rushes her speech until words merge into one, “pleasedtomeetyou” (52). Her father – it is not just Tamil men outside the family who disdain women like Vasanthi – highlights her lack of academic ability evidenced in her results by describing her as a “numbskull” (49). This dismissive terminology is a reminder that, in the absence of beauty, education is seen as the means to escape low social status within the Tamil community; her lack of any attributes perceived as attractive is extremely disappointing to the family.

Her father is also scathing about her chances of achieving progress through marriage, “Fifty sixty cows also won’t convince anyone” to marry Vasanthi (49). The treatment of daughters as property to be passed from father to husband in the most advantageous fashion is implicit in the father’s wish that Vasanthi be taken “off his hands” (49) by a husband. The reference to livestock is meant to be particularly insulting. Dowries are paid in money or property in the modern era so the suggestion that he should start “buying cows” (49) is to imply she is low-class or from a backward village where cattle might still constitute a dowry. And yet, she catches the eye of Rajasekharan.

Rajasekharan’s pleasure in the relationship with Vasanthi derives from his superior wealth and worldliness and his ability to impress her family with gestures redolent of his class and education. For example, he announces his intention of bringing dinner home for her family – “mee

goreng and char kuay teow” (common Chinese street food dishes) – which he packs from the stalls in “two enormous eversilver dishes” (57). With a single act, Rajasekharan is able to show off his worldliness (Chinese food), egalitarianism (stall food), generosity (packing dinner) and wealth (the eversilver dishes). He is also besotted with Vasanthi’s inexperience and naivety which he sees as “missionary school daintiness” (60). Here again, his admiration of and aspiration to, all things English, causes him to confuse the consequences of Vasanthi’s repressive environment with her character. He believes that she has the benefits (and constraints) of a mission school education which would have hammered home the virtues of virtue by measuring skirt lengths, the diameters of earrings and teaching sewing and home economics. She also gives him opportunities to be paternalistically protective as when he punishes her brothers by “cuffing them one after the other” (56) and forces them to apologise for being rude to their sister. Thus, in Vasanthi, Rajasekharan has found someone who will reinforce his hegemonic masculine paradigm.

Samarasan cleverly reveals to readers the extent of Rajasekharan’s aspiration to replace the colonialists. He sees himself as being on a civilising crusade to educate and improve Vasanthi and rescue her from the periphery of Tamil polite society. He is convinced of his own power to “exalt and educate” (93). This is the same moral justification for colonial rule: to bring enlightenment to those perceived to be on the fringes of civilisation. An example, pertinent to Malaysia, is the description of the Brooke regime in the Borneo state of Sarawak⁶ which Bromley Philip states “painted a positive picture of the coloniser, a ‘paternal’ white Rajah, bringing much needed peace to an otherwise chaotic land of savage head-hunters” (125). This account from the Western perspective seeks to justify Empire as the introduction of civilisation to the colonies. The implication “is that colonised people have been compelled to define what it means to be human because there is a deep understanding of what it means to be considered not fully human, that is, to be savage” (Philip 125). This has led to “the construction of colonial relations around the binary of the coloniser and the colonised” (Philip 125). Rajasekharan embraces this colonial mindset and

⁶ Sarawak, along with Sabah, are the two states in Borneo that elected to become part of Malaysia in 1963.

seeks to place himself in the position of coloniser in his interactions and expectations of Vasanthi. After all, for Rajasekharan to truly mimic his former colonial masters, it is necessary to have a subservient native people. Vasanthi is Rajasekharan's very own "savage" and he feels a moral duty to embark on a civilising mission. Of course, he soon finds that there is "nothing behind her innocence after all, no raw proletarian wisdom for him to draw out and sculpt" (97). As Rajasekharan discovers, it is impossible to recreate the so-called civilising mission of Empire vis-à-vis other former subjects when residing in the same postcolonial space. Samarasan uses this failed effort of Rajasekharan, to improve Vasanthi, as a metaphor for the overall hypocrisy of the civilising narrative underpinning colonial rule. In his choice of bride, however, Rajasekharan's main priority is to shore up his patriarchal status by selecting a wife who will not, whether through ethnicity or education, challenge his primacy in the home.

Ayah's stature, as a man working abroad in Malaya, together with his deception about his wealth (14), allows him to marry Lakshmi. Lakshmi's mother was previously cast out from the family home because her runaway marriage to a servant (5) undermines her father's status in the household – including his right to choose a husband for his daughter. She must therefore be severely punished and excluded from the home as a means for him to regain the authority that he has lost in the eyes of the family and community because of her rebellion. To put it another way, a suitable marriage to a suitable boy, brokered by the family and community, and with an eye on the economic and social progress of the family through a careful bartering of beauty, education and wealth, is an intrinsic part of maintaining the patriarchal infrastructure of the Tamil home. Any deviation from this model undermines the concentration of power in male hands. The men in both novels are very aware of this dynamic and seek to ensure their continued domination through desirable marriages.

Dominion in the home is not a sufficient power base for Tamil men to achieve ascendancy in society. The ability to grasp political power in Malaya/Malaysia is determined, *inter alia*, by ethnicity, education and economic status. Patriarchal traditions that elevate Tamil men domestically are straws in the wind. The only politics of first-generation immigrants like Lakshmi and Ayah in *The Rice Mother* are the politics of survival. Insufficient wages mean they are always at the mercy of moneylenders, as when Lakshmi discovers her husband's wage is owed to moneylenders who arrive to collect their due each payday until "at one point there is a queue [of moneylenders] outside the door" and she is left "clutching fifty ringgit" (38) for the whole month. The word "clutching" reveals how difficult it is to retain enough money to survive. Juxtaposed against the woefully inadequate "fifty ringgit", the struggle to make ends meet is clear. In this context, the idea of having sufficient political power to change their lot in life is not even a pipe dream for these fresh-off-the-boat immigrants to Malaya.

Ayah's lack of status is even more evident during the war years. He can hardly believe that he has been selected by the Japanese for interrogation and torture because he has "no political affiliations or ambitions of any sort" (129) and thinks himself safe because of his insignificance. The brutality he suffers is representative of his powerlessness; his outcomes are determined by the whims of those in political or military command and stand in contrast to his primacy in the home. His lack of influence also means he is unable to protect his kin. The family strive to ensure their survival during the war years, including hiding their beautiful daughter, Mohini, from the Japanese in a space under the floorboards. Despite these efforts, she is discovered in the waning days of the Japanese Occupation and brutally raped and murdered (221). As the fate of Ayah and Mohini indicates, first-generation immigrants are the victims of the exercise of power by others, whether economic (the moneylenders), political (British) or military (Japanese). None of the attributes that render them privileged in the Tamil community, such as Ayah's position as the head of the family in a patriarchal system, or Mohini's beauty, hold any protective value in wider society.

In *Evening is the Whole Day*, Rajasekharan aspires to a future for Malaysia where politics is not based on ethnicity and representation is not limited to ethnic-specific parties; the governing paradigm of that post-Independence era consists of the same race-based political parties that negotiated independence from the British (described in the Introduction). As highlighted earlier, Malaysia's racially complex society was formed as a consequence of colonial policies that imported labour from India and China to work in the Malayan rubber plantations and tin mines. Thus, the country's racial composition consists of Malays, who form the majority (and refer to themselves as *bumiputera* or "sons of the soil"), a significant Chinese minority which controls large sectors of the economy and an almost invisible Indian community⁷. Further, the racial categories used by the British in their economic management in pre-Independence Malaya were fraught with lazy stereotypes. Daniel Goh summarises well, "In Malaya, the British saw the Chinese as economically useful but perfidious orientals to be kept out of the colonial body politic while the Malays were lazy but picturesque medievals to be advanced in civilization by political and agricultural training and the Tamils from South India to be cared for as docile savages working European-owned plantations" (235). Thus, the development of a Malaysian identity in a postcolonial nation state "relies heavily on the ability of the state to incorporate the nation's internal diversities" (Gabriel, *Translating Bangsa Malaysia* 349). However, the distinction between *bumiputera*, "the true originals, the legitimate inhabitants, and non-*bumiputera*, those who arrived after remains the most significant fissure on the national landscape" (Gabriel, *Translating Bangsa Malaysia* 354). This is because the Malaysian state practices the "hegemonic politics of inclusion and exclusion, belonging and non-belonging" (Gabriel, *Translating Bangsa Malaysia* 355). Rajasekharan desires all Malaysians, perhaps as a matter of principle but certainly as a matter of convenience, given the likely marginalisation of minority Indians like himself in a race-based system of government, to have equal access to political power. Rajasekharan's political activism is necessary to sustain his desire for prominence,

⁷ This categorisation includes marginalised indigenous subjects with hardly any political power or status since their indigeneity has been co-opted by the Malay majority. Malays displaced the indigenous population at sufficient historical distance to insist on special rights as the "indigenous" people of Malaya vis a vis those who arrived later as a result of colonial policies (Nah).

because Indians are by far the smallest diasporic community in Malaysia. As such, any race-based political accommodation will, by definition, relegate him to the periphery of political power. Only a “*bangsa* Malaysia” or a “Malaysian race” that abandons its multi-ethnic identity drivers (Harper 238–55) will give Tamil men like Rajasekharan the opportunity for power and influence that he sees as his birthright as a wealthy, Anglicised, educated, Malaysian Indian man who is convinced that his status in the home should be reflected in wider society. However, as further explained in Chapter 2, Rajasekharan’s ambitions prove ephemeral.

A Better Place: The House as Metaphor

The Rajasekharan family home is the Big House on Kingfisher Lane in Ipoh. It is bought by Rajasekharan’s grandfather from the Scotsman, McDougall, who flees the country upon Malayan Independence. The transformation of the house reflects the evolution of the family from migrants to citizens with a stake in the nation (Shangeetha et al. 903–16). There might also be an element of *schadenfreude* in Samarasan portraying Rajasekharan as seeking to capture superior status through mimicry of the English by purchasing the home of a fleeing Scotsman. Rajasekharan’s renovations to the Big House capture all the contradictions and cultural influences that weigh down on him and the fledgling nation. There is an English kitchen with “a gleaming Aga range” and “an Indian kitchen with its squealing tap and its gaping drains ready to receive the fish guts, vegetable peelings and leftover curries” (25). The English kitchen, however, is never used. Samarasan implies there is no substance in the adoption of Englishness, it is only for show; she hints perhaps that Rajasekharan’s adoption of the dress and speech of a typical Englishman is similarly decorative or performative. Alternatively, and more credibly given Rajasekharan’s character, Samarasan is suggesting that his Englishness is of no benefit to him or his country. Samarasan’s lexical choices – the Indian kitchen appendages do not work (the “squealing tap”), are unhygienic (“gaping drains”), frugal (“leftover curries”) and crude (“fish guts”) – reveal Rajasekharan’s self-hatred of his roots and his insecurity at being a Tamil in independent Malaysia.

The new wings of the family home are “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” (26). This hodgepodge of influences is a mirror of those that affect Rajasekharan. Samarasan indicates that synergies are absent from this configuration by informing readers that “unnecessary corridors met each other at oblique angles” and “additions, partitions and covered porches seemed to rise out of nowhere” (26). In other words, Rajasekharan’s attempts to both mimic the English and accept the influences of post-Independence Malaysia and his own Indian Tamil heritage, leave him a conflicted creature, unable to harness this hybridity effectively. A further ironic element is discernable in the use of the kitchen, a traditional space for women in Tamil culture, to manifest his identification with both the former colonial power and his heritage. This can be interpreted as evidence of his emasculation by the existing power dynamics in Malaysian society, he is only able to express authority in a woman’s space.

By contrast, in *The Rice Mother*, Manicka uses the home to reveal Ayah’s poverty. Lakshmi’s new home is one of four houses that are “poor and wooden” and “on low stilts” (29). The design, wooden and on low stilts, of Ayah’s Malayan house is consistent with local and practical Malay architectural styles. Status remains associated with English-style houses such as that of Lakshmi’s mango trader uncle which is built in “the English Regency style of John Nash” (91). Again, progress is defined as sufficient wealth to allow for overt Anglicisation. Despite this, there are relatively modern elements in Lakshmi’s Kuantan home compared to her village hut in Jaffna. She is surprised that the bathroom is connected to the house (31) as compared to the outhouse in Ceylon. Lakshmi cries out with aspirational pleasure to see a bench carved from hardwood and is amazed by a “huge, iron four poster bed painted silver”, “a bed fit for a king” (30). Both these pieces of furniture are hand-me-downs to her husband, Ayah, from an Englishman returning home (33), a rare benefit of his proximity to the British.

Unlike Rajasekharan’s Blue House, where no mention of an altar is made, in Ayah’s home a “shelf has been turned into a prayer altar with framed pictures of Hindu deities” (31). The simple

faith of first-generation immigrants is demonstrated when Lakshmi “automatically” presses her “hands together in a gesture of respect and prayer” (31) when she spots the altar in her new home. This is in stark contrast to the performative religious ostentatiousness of later generations as manifest in Samarasan’s work. In the home of Rajasekharan’s neighbour, a “garden temple, a gleaming blue-tiled, no-expenses-spared theater” has been built where the “altar shimmers gold as daylight in the dark of night” (200) and behind which “five different camphor flames crackle and hiss” (211). Rajasekharan is depicted by Samarasan as further along the evolutionary progression towards modern man; he mocks this display and encourages his daughter’s disdain of manifest religiosity. For Rajasekharan, who aspires always to adopt English cultural norms as a source of postcolonial power, it makes perfect sense to mock his Hindu heritage as a means of demonstrating his status as a postcolonial elite.

Conclusion

This chapter focuses on the various sources of male privilege including the traditional primacy of the man in Tamil culture. I argue that Tamil men use their traditional masculine hegemony to access additional power and influence in the home, community and society. Superior proximity to the influential centre, access to education, suitable marriages and generational wealth, inform the extent of power wielded by male figures. In *Evening is the Whole Day*, Samarasan depicts Rajasekharan as deriving his social status from numerous sources: patriarchal norms within Indian culture, being mission-educated into a postcolonial elite, his wealth and the manifestations of that wealth, his superior English language skills and his mimicry of the habits and dress of the archetypal English gentleman. All these advantages are juxtaposed against the supposed shortcomings of other, especially female, characters.

Manicka’s men, whether husbands, sons or fathers, are almost caricatures – liars and cheats who manipulate women for their own ends. Manicka’s portrayal of men outside the immediate family circle, namely their Chinese neighbours or the Japanese occupiers, is even more critical.

These men have no saving graces and their interactions with women are cruel and exploitative; both Mohini, the daughter, and the neighbour Chinese servant, Mui Tsai, are the victims of extraordinary violence. In other words, the men in *The Rice Mother* retain their superior status over their womenfolk despite their character shortcomings. They are rarely punished for their transgressions; it is their implicit right, as male patriarchs, to oppress women.

However, in a body blow to their self-esteem, despite overall dominance on the domestic front, Tamil men are sometimes, albeit rarely, thwarted at home and largely unable to influence events beyond the home. In addition to the occasionally rebellious behaviour of the women in their lives, the patriarchs in the two novels face significant challenges to their traditional male authority, in particular when they seek to expand their status beyond the family and the Tamil community and into the wider ambit of Malayan/Malaysian society. Both Manicka and Samarasan describe the threats posed to male power in the Tamil-speaking communities in Malaya/Malaysia. These challenges come in many shapes and forms, but all serve to undermine the status of Tamil men although not necessarily in a manner that enhances progress towards gender equality. Instead, as the influence held by male figures within the Tamil community fragments under the weight of explicit and implicit tests to their authority, they take out their frustrations on women. The challenges to the patriarchal power of Tamil men are discussed next.

CHAPTER 2: NOT QUITE WHITE

In the previous chapter, the myriad ways that patriarchal authority is embedded within the Tamil household, as described in *The Rice Mother* and *Evening is the Whole Day*, were revealed. However, both Manicka and Samarasan identify numerous challenges faced by Tamil patriarchs that undermine their status within the home and in the wider community. The response of male protagonists to these threats forms key plot points in the two novels. As their attempts to exercise authority outside the home are thwarted, the blowback undermines the status of these men in the domestic sphere as well. However, the impairment of male influence does not enhance progress towards gender equality. On the contrary, expressions of male power over women become arbitrary and cruel as the men lash out in anger and disappointment. This chapter asserts that impediments to patriarchal hegemony, whether unique to Malayan/Malaysia society or shared across former colonies, undermines the status of men like Rajasekharan, in *Evening is the Whole Day*, and Ayah and sons, in *The Rice Mother*, to the detriment of the women in their lives.

Mind Your Language: English Speakers versus the Rest

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the better the spoken English (that of newscasters or fictional detectives), ideally with a smattering of superfluous Latin, the higher the likely status of the individual in colonial and postcolonial societies such as Malaya/Malaysia. However, in *Evening is the Whole Day*, this path to influence, this attempt to inherit the mantle of the British upon their departure, is undermined by political developments in the country. In particular, the formation of a parallel Malay elite that is not reliant on the language of their former colonial masters for advancement undermines the value of English. Rajasekharan, so convinced that his adoption of English habits and the English language will propel him to great heights, brings up his children without a working knowledge of Malay, still clinging to the notion that the colonial language will remain the *lingua franca* of the nation. An event in the novel foreshadows the family's loss of standing despite adopting English as a means to maintain it. A daughter, Aasha, of the

Rajasekharan family is mocked on a train to Kuala Lumpur for not speaking Malay. The gentleman calls her “*thanggach*” (116), which means “little sister” in Tamil, in a way that is patronising and belittling. The cloak of Englishness and education that Rajasekharan has flung over himself and his children to distance them from their Indian roots is stripped away in a moment by a Malay stranger using discriminatory language. Samarasan demonstrates that “to be Anglicised, is emphatically not to be English” (Bhabha 87); Rajasekharan is unable to save his daughter from mockery about their Indian origins, let alone inherit colonial power.

After the race riots of 1969, the newly created and hastily implemented national education policy shifted the medium of instruction in Malaysian schools from English to Malay, now officially the national language. All other mother tongues, and certainly the colonial tongue, are relegated to the margins, for use only in personal (and commercial) spaces. Thus, as Timothy Daniels explains, although “a white supremacy racial model was perpetuated, the postcolonial racial formation entailed the political ascendancy of Malays and emergence of a Malay supremacy racial schema in the dominant vision of the nation” (257). Rajasekharan’s superior English language skills are no longer a means of political advancement. Instead, it is fluency in Malay that determines progress. Samarasan’s patriarch comes to realise, much as Frantz Fanon argues in *Black Skin, White Mask*, that the adoption of a “white mask” cannot conceal his racialised identity, resulting in psychic trauma. Thus, inadvertently but almost inevitably, Rajasekharan, by seeking to ape his former colonial masters, sets the scene for his own discrimination and exclusion in the developing power paradigm of independent Malaysia⁸. There is a satirical twist in comparing the two novels by Samarasan and Manicka – in the latter’s novel, but not the former, Malay is recognised as the predominant language of communication amongst races because that was always the case for those of lower economic status. However, speaking Malay during the colonial era, when English held sway, is of no benefit to the characters in *The Rice Mother*. In Malaya/Malaysia,

⁸ Racial categories are a central facet of Malaysian public life with preferential treatment, conceived as affirmative action policies for the majority Malay race to redistribute economic wealth, leading to a hierarchy of power based on race.

the fluid nature of power means that timing is critical as certain skills have value only in limited temporal windows of opportunity. Rajasekharan mistimed the moment and lost his opportunity to leverage his English language skills into political influence.

History is Written by Victors: The Implications of the Second World War

As mentioned in the previous chapter, power and status were also derived, during the colonial era, from proximity to the British. Despite this, although *The Rice Mother* is set in large part in pre-Independence Malaya, the British do not feature much in the daily lives of the characters. Ayah is a clerk in a British-run rubber plantation. However, his only personal interaction with the British seems to be when a departing manager leaves him some old pieces of furniture (27). The manager of his estate would have been British, given that the rubber plantations were under the purview of managers brought over from Britain for that purpose. However, these men did not typically socialise with their employees. The minimal personal contact between coloniser and colonised is ironic given that the presence of immigrants in Malaya was a consequence of the machinations of Empire. In any event, Ayah, despite working for the British, fails to benefit in any material way from such proximity or expand his power beyond that inherent in the Tamil patriarchy.

Manicka reminds readers that, while women are subordinate to men within Tamil culture, both sexes are seen as inferior to their colonial masters. On ships arriving in Penang, “first to disembark were the Europeans ... segregated in first class” (23). By contrast, as described in Chapter 1, migrant labourers reach Malayan shores as deck passengers. This physical separation reflects the social stratification of colonial society between the British and the locals. In *The Rice Mother*, any encounter with the British usually has an avuncular tone, revealing that many first-generation Malayan immigrants saw the British as a benevolent authority. For instance, a narrator remembers a “happy time” when the son of the family “used to come home with chocolates ... from the British Army camps” (108). Manicka describes how the British “tousled [Lakshman’s] hair affectionately” (109), revealing the implicitly servile nature of interactions. The colonisers are

depicted as people “who lived in superior houses with servants and drivers to serve them, eating only choice food made up of hunks of red meat bought from Cold Storage”⁹ (172). The significant lifestyle distinctions between migrants like Lakshmi, who live in poor accommodation, do not have servants and for whom eating red meat (beef) is prohibited by their Hindu religion, is presented in stark contrast to the privileged British.

On 7 December 1941 (a day that lives on in infamy for other peoples and other reasons than Pearl Harbour), the Japanese invade Malaya and “the big, burly British soldiers” that the inhabitants of Malaya “imagined invincible” flee towards Singapore (96). The alliterative description of the British and use of plosives reinforces the perception of invincibility and renders their hurried departure in the face of the invading Japanese even more shocking. Indeed, Manicka writes that many locals stood in the marketplace as the bombs exploded “on their upturned faces”, all the while “believing the planes to be the mighty British come to save them” (96). The “upturned faces” here carries a connotation of naivety and alludes to the way a child might look up to their parents. This faith in the omnipotence of the British cost many locals their lives. Despite this, the willingness to see the British as a benevolent force persisted even after the war, as demonstrated by the acceptance of their return without demur by Lakshmi and her ilk. This is partly a consequence of the contrast between the British and the Japanese occupiers of Malaya and Singapore during the Second World War. While, as explained earlier, locals like Lakshmi and family had very little interaction with the British, their encounters with the Japanese are frequent. When exposed to the crude habits of the invading Japanese soldiers, Lakshmi laments: “How could these men have vanquished the British?” When the British flee before the advancing Japanese, British residences are looted and the Sunday market is “crammed full of goods” including “bottles of jam, marmalades and pickles” (172–73). In this manner, readers realise that the locals have quickly lost their respect/fear for the British as they are willing to traffic in their stolen goods. In this case, the

⁹ The Cold Storage is a chain of upmarket supermarkets that was established in 1903 in Singapore and provided, in its early years, ice and frozen meat, to the British in Singapore and Malaya.

transgression of authority comes with a piquant taste. Manicka refers to “pickles” thrice in the novel, twice to the Indian form (249) of the product and once to its English version (174). This distinction between the two forms of pickles implies perhaps that she does not accept the “chutnification of history” (Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children* 642) to render it more palatable. In any event, it is a witticism which reveals that two peoples can indeed be separated by a common language.

The Second World War triggered independence movements throughout the colonies, and post-war Britain was susceptible to those stresses. As Alexandra Carter explains, the British were aware that their status as colonial power had been decisively undermined by the ignominious failure to defend their assets from the Japanese. As a result, the British were obliged to consider complete internal autonomy in their colonies including Malaya. In other words, they would remain in power until local populations were equipped to take responsibility for their own governance (19–35). This paternalistic justification for continued Empire did at least recognise the right to future self-determination. Thus, to some extent, while the Second World War did not undermine the British immediately or sufficiently to avoid the postcolonial impact of Empire, it did expedite the British departure. In Malaysia, as mentioned previously, Independence was achieved in 1957. Suffice to say that the loss of authority by the British was not a sufficient predicate for the male protagonists in either *The Rice Mother* or *Evening is the Whole Day* to seize power. As discussed in the next section, Rajasekharan’s attempts to inherit the mantle of colonial authority of the departing British is stymied by his impotence in the face of Malay privilege.

White Rajahs: The Displacement of English-speaking Postcolonial Elites in Malaysia

As noted in the previous chapter, although Rajasekharan argues in favour of a Malaysian Malaysia, his tools are the bequests of Empire such as parliamentary democracy and the English legal system. He advocates for a new vision for the country by campaigning for racially inclusive political parties in national elections. However, colonial institutions maintain the “racial norms and hierarchies

associated with the old, hegemonising idea of race and nation that pre-empts non-Malays from claiming true belonging in the nation” (Gabriel, *Translating Bangsa Malaysia* 371). Instead, Alice Nah¹⁰ points out that Malay nationalists and anti-colonialists used mechanisms and tools of constraint inherited from the British to suppress dissent (520). An example of this inherited mechanism of control is the Sedition Act (1948) which was amended after the 1969 riots to criminalise discussions over sensitive issues such as “any matter, right, status, position, privilege ... including those concerning Malay identity and special rights”. Consequently, Rajasekharan’s attempts to negate the colonial legacy of socially constructed, race-based categories for understanding society are destined to fail because these patterns are adopted and perpetuated by Malay nationalists as a means of seizing and consolidating power.

In the context of Hobsbawm’s invented traditions referred to in the previous chapter, political domination achieves legitimacy via a substantive, albeit exaggerated and idealised, representation of traditions in national culture (Babadzan 131). In Malaysia, cultural symbols with links to periods of Malay ascendancy, such as during the precolonial Malay Sultanate, were invented or repurposed by Malay elites to provide legitimacy to their appropriation of power. Critics such as Hari Singh argue that political parties co-opted Malay myth and tradition to achieve an acceptable narrative justifying prolonged dominance. Singh contends that elite members of the ruling Malay party, United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) consciously constructed a national ideology that foregrounds Malay culture in a relatively subtle but intentional underpinning of Malay political supremacy (241–54). However, to use Malay traditions as the blueprint for Malaysian postcolonial society requires acceptance by non-Malays of cultural domination as the price of a peaceful, non-violent inter-ethnic co-existence, albeit as second-class citizens. Thus, creating a myth of nationhood based on a homogeneous conception of Malay identity marginalises the diverse communities within the country in the interests of consolidating power. English

¹⁰ Nah makes the various arguments in the context of Malay versus indigenous rights in postcolonial Malaysia but the underlying factual context is relevant to the condition of Indians as well.

traditions, adopted by the likes of Rajasekharan as mean to power, are supplanted by Malay traditions, optimised as building blocks of political ascendancy. Those who protested this new paradigm found themselves marginalised to the periphery of power, or, if they protested this demotion, stripped off it in entirety. A real-life example of such a downfall is Judge Eusoffe Abdoolcader, quoted in the previous chapter, who, along with five other Supreme Court justices, was suspended in a battle between the judiciary and a Malay nationalist government reluctant to permit impediments to their increasing authoritarian power. This marked the moment in Malaysian history when an independent judiciary was lost for a generation (although shoots blossom in the present era, led by the first female, recently retired, Chief Justice, Tun Tengku Maimun Tuan Mat; she wrote the crucial decision of the apex court that consigned a former Prime Minister to prison for corruption).

The electoral successes of the opposition parties who champion a Malaysian identity, as advocated by Rajasekharan in *Evening is the Whole Day*, lead to the (real-life) nationwide race riots of 1969 and the creation of a formal, entrenched, race-based approach to nationhood. Unfortunately for the Tamils, they inherit the worst of both worlds where “Malay primacy is the cornerstone of the postcolonial racial worldview; however, white supremacy is still expressed in skin colour prejudice and in biophysical evaluations of groups in the racial hierarchy” (Daniels 279). The death of his political ambitions leaves Rajasekharan “barricaded in his study with two bottles of whiskey” (126). He takes out his frustrations at his political impotence on his family. The British legacy of a multiracial society has left the majority Malay population determined to propagate a national system of entrenched privilege to level up economic disparities between them and later immigrants, the Chinese and Indians. These other races, also citizens, are relegated to the periphery of political discourse, as they were under colonial rule. Thus, Samarasan uses the riots of May 1969, which loom large in the cultural heritage of Malaysians, to explain the shrinking political space for Malaysian Tamil men like Rajasekharan. It turns out that Vasanthi was right years before when, referring to the majority Malays, she says to Rajasekharan: “after all it’s their

country, what, so why shouldn't they be the masters?" (99). The years of being bullied and dismissed by first her father and then her husband have left their mark; her expectation is that someone, from her own or some other race, will be her "master". After her life experiences, she cannot imagine an egalitarian society. She rejects Rajasekharan's premise that "it's our country just as much as the bloody Malays" (99), dismissing this as one of his "grand ideas" (99). By mocking his "grand ideas", she reveals that she thinks her husband is aspiring above his place in the hierarchy; he is not important enough to have important ideas, another blow to Rajasekharan's status, this time from within the family.

Samarasan describes the post-riot accommodation as a "little redistribution of wealth, ala sikit-sikit aje ... you Chinese are so rich you won't even notice the difference, and the Indians, never mind the Indians" (134). In this way, Rajasekharan is casually removed from the post-riots discourse on nationhood because "never mind the Indians". Indians, lacking numbers or economic might, are marginalised to the point of irrelevance. The Chinese, on the other hand, are persuaded that "sikit-sikit aje" (in Malay, just a little bit) of redistribution will protect their economic position and this is worth the political sacrifice. Thus, in Malaysia, a postcolonial elite of one race is displaced by another race using the weapons inherited, and tactics learnt, from the British. The denigration of Tamils is a product of both the "legacy of white supremacy and newly emergent postcolonial Malay supremacy" (Daniels 279). The "stupid doonggu Indians" are "left empty handed to slog in the factories and ditches and rubber estates" (211). Samarasan conveys Rajasekharan's despair by using another syntactical habit of Malaysians, to repeat a word for emphasis using two different languages. "[D]oonggu" here literally means "stupid" in Malay so in effect he is calling Indians "stupid stupid"; the use of Malay implies that Indians are being made to look stupid by the Malay majority. The polysyndeton "factories and ditches and rubber estates" reveals that all available employment options for Indians are equally limited – and equally awful. Rajasekharan's strategy, of seeking to inherit power from the departing British as a mimic man while using his status as a postcolonial elite to widen access to power for minority Indians, comes

to nought. The Malay majority show themselves to be adroit at manipulating social and racial stratification for gain. By rejecting British influence (an apogee is reached when former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed launched a “Buy British Last” campaign in 1981), Malay nationalism becomes mainstream and eventually achieves political dominance. Unfortunately for his desire for primacy, Rajasekharan’s adoption of English speech, dress and habits turn out to be insufficient to cement influence as the new Malay elite circumvent this self-appointed, postcolonial *comprador* class to seize political power. In the context of Malaysia, these former subjects of Empire beat their own path to power – a rejection of an English postcolonial identity and its replacement with a Malay nationalist vision of society. In this development, men like Rajasekharan find that their elite status within the Tamil community is not a transferable asset.

Not Black and White: Racism against Tamils

The colour bar affects Tamil women more than men as discussed in the next chapter. However, the men too founder upon the inter-ethnic, and intra-ethnic, colour hierarchy in Malaya/Malaysia. Lakshmi described Ayah on their wedding day as so “dark his skin shone like black oil in the night” (16). When she turns to her mother for solace, the new bride realises that “his wealth had blinded her to everything else” (16). This is a reminder of the commercial nature of arranged marriages in the community. Wealth makes palatable what would otherwise be unmarriageable. Manicka later reminds readers that racism in Malaysia is a two-way street. Lakshmi concludes early on that “the Chinese race was barbarous” (27) after she comes across the traditional practice of foot binding. Japanese excesses during the war lead her to describe East Asians as a “foul and ugly race” (204). When Lakshmanan, Lakshmi’s son, goes off the rails and develops a gambling habit, it is because “his greedy heart led him to a crowd of wealthy Chinese boys” (287). Later, when Lakshmi’s granddaughter marries someone conceived by a young Chinese girl raped by Japanese soldiers and left for dead (435), she knows that racial sneers by the Ceylonese women are only “thwarted by his enormous wealth” (423). Samarasan also uses the Rajasekharan family home to signify

postcolonial Malaysia's ethnic challenges. The miscegenation of the nation, so feared by the Malay elite as a threat to their political power and so feared by the Indian community as a threat to their cultural homogeneity, is reflected in the Blue House where "green mosquito netting thumbed its nose at Battenburg lace curtains" (26). Further, "sweat and steam and coal smoke from the hot Indian kitchen" invades "the immaculate English kitchen and smeared its shiny surfaces" (26). Rajasekharan's self-hatred is apparent as Indian elements ruin his white mask, his "immaculate" and "shiny" Englishness. Despite his fervent mimicry, Samarasan implies again that Rajasekharan's Indian cultural heritage prevents him from being sufficiently English.

The same frowned-upon miscegenation is eventually reflected in Rajasekharan's personal life. The scion of the Indian community, a patriarch tasked with responsibility for his Tamil family, has an affair with a Chinese woman who washes dishes in a restaurant for a living. She is described by Chellam as not "white-white" like "some Chinese" (266). In other words, this is both racial and social miscegenation. This working woman does not even have that saving grace of an appropriate skin colour; darker skin implies low status even for a Chinese woman. The illicit couple go on to have three mixed-race children to whom Rajasekharan speaks in Malay having previously insisted that he has "no use for their bloody Bumiputera tongue" (267). The postcolonial coup de grace is then administered by Samarasan like a blunt instrument to the back of the head, "we Indians should rue the day the British left this country" (267). This signals Rajasekharan's recognition that, without the British, he is a political orphan in an independent Malaysia. Patriarchal power is limited to his domestic arrangements. The advantages of education and adopted Englishness founder on the rock of Rajasekharan's ethnicity. In Malaysia, the race card trumps other attributes and Tamils are dealing from the bottom of the deck.

Conclusion

The patriarchal infrastructure that underpins the cultural and economic power of Tamil men is insufficient for them to project influence beyond the family. In *Evening is the Whole Day*,

Rajasekharan is undermined by the racial dynamics in Malaysia where his Indian heritage, which allows him dominion within the family and Tamil community, is a millstone vis-à-vis the rest of society. His mimicry of the English fails to fix shortcomings associated with being a minority Indian as the Malay majority co-opts the postcolonial system to impose their own racial hegemony. Indian cultural traditions or adopted English cultural traditions are insufficient to overcome the oppressive nature of multi-racial Malaysia towards minority citizens, in particular, ethnic Tamils. Confronted with his political impotence, the armour of patriarchal authority insufficient to protect him, Rajasekharan fails to fulfil his role as father, husband or employer. The men in *The Rice Mother* are also unable to parlay traditional masculine hegemony into influence outside the family and pay an appalling price for powerlessness during the Japanese Occupation; Ayah is tortured and his daughter, the beautiful Mohini, is raped and murdered. Ayah has failed the first test of Tamil manhood, to keep his family safe.

The next two chapters of this thesis will explore the way women within the Tamil communities in Malaya/Malaysia navigate the patriarchy. Women's rights are exercised within confined social spaces; female characters strive for better lives within the same paradigm. Thus, the next chapters will also argue that Manicka's and Samarasan's women succeed mostly in perpetuating patriarchal structures within the family, Tamil community and wider society.

PART TWO: THE MATRIARCHS

CHAPTER 3: WHITHER WOMEN?

The first half of the thesis focuses on the depiction of traditional hegemonic masculinity in *The Rice Mother* and *Evening is the Whole Day* and the challenges faced by Tamil men in maintaining and expanding their influence beyond the domestic sphere. The chapters place particular emphasis on the way patriarchal structures are maintained for the benefit of male characters. I also discuss threats to their authority, within the Tamil family and community as well as wider society. To take one example, the previous chapter demonstrates how Rajasekharan's privilege as a male scion of a wealthy Tamil family is undermined by his status as a second-class citizen – a minority Indian – in postcolonial Malaysia.

This chapter, and the next (Chapters 3 and 4), the second half of this critical component, will focus on the women portrayed in the two works. The traditions and norms that constrain female characters are patriarchal in nature. The extent of patriarchal hegemony in Tamil society in Malaya/Malaysia is revealed in the way women behave or are treated within the family and community. However, Tamil women, from Lakshmi to Paati, are also ethnic minorities in the worlds described in both novels, while individual women, such as the servant, Chellam, struggle economically and are ripe for further exploitation. In other words, Tamil women exist at the intersection of these patriarchal, colonial, ethnic and economic oppressions. This thesis uses the framing by Kimberlé Crenshaw, that intersectionality is inextricably linked to an analysis of power and discrimination and that individuals may find themselves at the intersection of multiple structures of oppression. The concept of intersectionality is a means to understand how power oppresses in diffuse and differentiated ways and that single-axis frameworks undermine efforts to dismantle oppressive systems (785–810). Further, overlapping discriminations such as experience by Tamil women should not be seen as additive but understood to generate qualitatively distinct forms of oppression. The expansion of scholarship in this critical component is to extend this conceptual framework of intersectionality to the overlapping discriminations in the Malaysian context primarily as applicable to Tamil women.

However, existing at the intersection of multiple oppressive factors is not limited to Tamil women. In *The Rice Mother*, Mui Tsai is exploited by her employer, Old Soong, his wives and the Japanese occupiers during the Second World War. In other words, during the era of Empire, women were subject to the domination of colonial powers as well as a multiplicity of coercive structures within the patriarchy. This oppressive experience is referred to as double colonisation in Anna Rutherford and Kirsten Holst Petersen's *A Double Colonization: Colonial and Post-Colonial Women's Writing*. However, after Independence, there was no significant respite from, or alleviation of, the power imbalances as a Malaysian postcolonial elite inherited the colonial mantle and perpetuated existing gender regimes. This patriarchal infrastructure, within Tamil families and communities, but also in wider society, continued to coerce and constrain women. This chapter will, firstly, examine the portrayal of women in both works and consider how women are socially, financially and culturally corralled within a patriarchal system. Next, it will explore the extent to which female characters strive for better lives, whether within the same paradigm or otherwise, and the extent to which women fight back against male tyranny to carve out their own autonomous space and freedoms. Finally, this chapter will argue that the impact of the patriarchy, already present in the Tamil community, is exacerbated by intersectionality with other oppressive structures in the lives of the female protagonists.

Identifying the Matriarchs in The Rice Mother and Evening is the Whole Day

In *The Rice Mother*, Lakshmi, a young girl from Sri Lanka, marries a stranger and moves to Malaya, then a British colony. Although the story is recounted by generations of family, Lakshmi remains the pivotal figure. Her viewpoint dominates the narrative and her influence, benign or malign, informs the perspectives of other characters, even after her death. Overall, Manicka's key female characters appear to be strong, determined women bent on making the best life possible for themselves and their offspring despite the physical, emotional and psychological violence meted out by the men in their lives.

In *Evening is the Whole Day*, Rajasekharan, a successful lawyer and man-about-town, is surrounded by women – wife, mother, daughters – all of whom are subjects of his male authority. The women in Samarasan’s novel are mostly cowed creatures fighting only for the attentions of the patriarch. The capacity of Samarasan’s men to turn small domesticities into evidence of their superiority is unparalleled. An example comes when Paati, Rajasekharan’s mother, is peeling onions and weeping; her husband spots her tears but assumes she is crying because of the onions and chides her for not wearing her spectacles for the task. He admonishes her, “how you women let vanity rule your lives” (23), firm in the belief that her not wearing spectacles to do housework is a function of her conceitedness. The reference to “women” indicates that this belief about the superficial, vain nature of women is held not just about his own wife, but about women in general. The aggressive “you” works to belittle the entire gender as being inferior to men. The dismissal of women as being obsessed with minor matters and not competent to formulate worthwhile opinions on issues outside the domestic realm is an excellent example of patriarchal forces in action. It is possible for men to interpret the smallest actions in a way that reinforces stereotypical gender roles. However, a close reading of both novels reveals that a *prima facie* binary conclusion, that women are either forlorn victims or fighters against the *status quo*, ignores the complexity of power dynamics within Tamil families.

A Single Man in Possession of a Good Fortune, must be in Want of a Wife: Marriage as Prison

In *The Rice Mother*, the subordinate position of Tamil women, regardless of wealth and status, is illuminated at the beginning of the book. Lakshmi’s mother goes from being the daughter of a wealthy man to the wife of an impoverished man without any interval of personal independence. Manicka does not give the mother a name, thus emphasising that she is a cypher who does not have an independent identity apart from her role as daughter, wife and mother. When, by eloping and marrying the resentful son of a servant, her mother fails to meet her father’s expectations, Lakshmi explains that he “forbade my mother even the merest sight of any member of her family”

(5). As Lakshmi's mother has no right to make decisions independent of her father's wishes, she is cast off. This reveals the extent of control exercised by menfolk over the women of the family as well as the punishment meted out for non-compliance with paternal demands. Transgressions from male domination are unacceptable; punishment is swift and absolute. Such unwillingness to brook any contrarian behaviour both punishes the rebel and serves as a warning to other women to toe the line or face life-changing consequences.

To the extent that Lakshmi's grandmother might have thought it an excessive sanction, her influence over her husband is notable only in its absence. Only after the father was "grey ash in the wind" did [Lakshmi's mother] return to her family home, but by then her mother was a widow grey with loss" (5). The repetition of "grey" to refer to each parent reveals the hierarchy of privilege within patriarchal society. The man only loses his power to control events when he dies while the woman's suffering, and lack of influence to change outcomes, characterises her whether dead or alive. In other words, men lose influence over the family upon death, at which point the male firstborn will inherit authority, while a woman is disempowered throughout. The suffering of women is captured by the widow being grey "with loss"; the imprint of her torment is writ on her person.

The impoverished husband of Lakshmi's mother, who marries her to spite his rich employers, soon seeks entertainment elsewhere. After "each absence he returns and presents his young wife with jar upon jar of all manner of white lies pickled in various brands of alcohol" (5). The metaphorical references to "jars" and "pickles" remind readers of the limited scope for a woman to seek financial independence; selling jars of pickled homegrown produce was the pinnacle of entrepreneurship available to Ceylonese Tamil women of that era. In other words, Manicka packages his disdain for his wife in a form she is equipped to recognise while belittling her opportunities to seek economic freedom and therefore freedom from him. The exploitative nature of the patriarchy is further revealed when the new husband "sold some of her jewellery" (5) to buy a hut in his village. As Amali Philips points out in her study of Tamil tea plantation

workers, “women have no way of preventing their husbands spiriting away their money and pawning their jewellery for drinking and gambling” (25). Her possessions are his to do with as he chooses and, put simply, Lakshmi’s mother’s options are the frying pan or the fire. The persistence of patriarchal norms in Sri Lankan society remain even in the present era when women from poor families become migrant domestic workers and bear responsibility as the main breadwinner. A study by V. Samarasinghe concludes that women who are earners, and thus assume the typically masculine role of breadwinner, remain the caregivers to children, albeit from a distance (109). On a day-to-day basis, their maternal role is filled by female relatives while they earn the family’s keep overseas; men continue to maintain their role as supervisors of domestic arrangements. The absence of the wife does not engender a more hands-on approach to child-rearing by the husband as this would be perceived in the community as undermining his masculine authority. Further, men require women who are the breadwinners to explicitly acknowledge their continued subservience within the relationship, especially through religious and cultural rituals such as women eating temple food only after the men are done. Thus, women consciously uphold the expectations and demands of patriarchal society despite being breadwinners (Samarasinghe 94–113). It is no surprise, in these circumstances, that Lakshmi’s mother, from an earlier generation with no means of independent support, was entirely at the mercy of the men of the family, whether her father or her husband.

Women are acutely aware of the patriarchal tyranny they endure. Lakshmi’s mother, when her daughter is born, “cried to see that [Lakshmi] was only a girl” (6). This is a recognition of the lifetime of suffering that is the likely lot of a female child. Describing Tamil women in the colonial Ceylonese tea plantations, Philips explains that women were seen as “docile, dependent, ignorant, inept and sexually weak, emotional and irrational, lacking in leadership skills, and incapable of taking the initiative” (21). Women such as Lakshmi and her mother are deemed to have no need for education since their worth is determined by beauty and measured in dowries. Their role within the culture and community is as wife, mother and homemaker.

Later, Lakshmi is married to Ayah, an older man; she meets him for the first time at the wedding ceremony. The marriage is arranged because, as explained previously, he misleads Lakshmi's mother as to his wealth. She is easily persuadable because she is desperate to save Lakshmi from the drudgery of an impoverished existence. Further, marriage is, "in Tamil culture, the most celebrated rite of passage for a woman, and fulfils the purpose of her being" (Philips 22). As such, her mother is determined to elevate Lakshmi's status through marriage. Her new husband tells Lakshmi to call him "Ayah" (20), a clever irony since the word refers to a nursemaid or nanny in the British colonies but in Malaya, "ayah" means father in Malay, the mother tongue of the local population. Manicka's choice of words foreshadows the battle between Lakshmi and her husband for control in their relationship. Is he the dominant father figure or is he subordinate to the wife in the same way as a caregiver of children? This patriarchal nomenclature is also prevalent, as mentioned above, in *Evening is the Whole Day* where Rajasekharan is referred to throughout as "Appa" or father (in Tamil). When they arrive at her new home in Kuantan, Lakshmi realises that she and her mother have been duped because her "husband was not rich, he was poor", the "shining gold watch" (30) he used as evidence of wealth having been borrowed for the occasion. Lakshmi is now trapped in marriage with a stranger in a strange land. She has no money of her own, is unable to speak "a word of English or the local language" and has no idea how to return to Ceylon (30). While young men were the first to seek opportunities in the colonies, having established themselves, they often sent home for a wife. Once a suitable girl was identified, she was sent to join him after marriage and thus deprived of the physical proximity and protection of her family. In other words, colonialism allowed young women to be transported to faraway lands without the protection of family and made them even more susceptible to power abuses by men.

In *Evening is the Whole Day*, Vasanthi, the neighbour's daughter, is depicted as completely browbeaten even prior to her marriage to Rajasekharan. Her treatment by her father is designed to keep her in her place. When she is cleaning the shutters in their home – she is effectively a domestic servant as well as nanny to her younger (male) siblings – he says to her: "if you have no

brains can't you at least make your hands useful?" When she does badly for her school leaving exams, he mocks her mercilessly, suggesting that she should start making career plans to become "UN Secretary-General or chief of the London *Times*". The sarcasm is particularly cruel in a patriarchal and postcolonial context as neither of those jobs, however talented Vasanthi might have been, would have been available to either a Tamil or a woman. As far as marriage is concerned, Vasanthi's father is sceptical of her chances, exclaiming at one point, "better I start buying cows for your dowry now itself" (49). As mentioned in the previous chapter, the reference to cows is meant to belittle Vasanthi. The expression "now itself" augurs early preparation but her father has no real intention of doing his best to find a husband for Vasanthi. A daughter who is a domestic drudge is more valuable than one for whom he has to pay over the odds to get off his hands. Overall, Vasanthi bears the weight of the patriarchy with no desirable personal attributes to lighten the burden.

However, Vasanthi is not a butterfly-in-waiting; she is conventional in the extreme. For instance, after watching a movie she remarks to Rajasekharan, "not nice lah to see men dressed as women" (97), demonstrating her limited capacity for diverse thought and foreshadowing abuse of those in a position of weakness. Once she marries Rajasekharan, Vasanthi is referred to as "Amma" or "mother" in Tamil. She is now defined by her role in the family, a fate similar to that of Paati, Rajasekharan's mother, grandmother to his children. "Paati" means "grandmother" in Tamil and the nomenclature is symptomatic of the way the patriarchy rips away identity and defines women by their domestic roles. As such roles are associated with gender, this terminology institutionalises patriarchal hierarchies within the home.

When the marriage to Rajasekharan proves unsatisfactory, Vasanthi concludes that "all she can do ... is to complete her transformation into a rich man's wife" (100). Vasanthi's only interest is to learn from her husband's posh friends "all those women's rules and rituals. The preferred makeup brands, the favoured hairdressers, the fashionable saree colours" (98). The alliterative "rules and rituals" sounds attractive, a cosy space for women to thrive, but illustrates how women

are circumscribed by their upbringing and brainwashed into believing in their own purported limitations. The idea of creating an independent identity apart from her position as Rajasekharan's wife does not even cross Vasanthi's mind. Her father has already undermined her self-image and self-belief and the Rajasekharans complete the process. Her status depends on being the wife of a "rich man", her satisfaction is revelling in that wealth before others. To conclude, marriage is both socially and culturally necessary, and a patriarchal prison, for women.

The Male Gaze: Men protecting Women (from Other Men)

Ironically, the reward for subjugation – the protection of women by their patriarchs – refers to the protection of women from other men. One of the worst outcomes in Manicka's *The Rice Mother* is suffered by Lakshmi's daughter, Mohini. She is doted upon by her family. She is named for a "celestial temptress of ancient legends" because she is so "incredibly beautiful" (66). However, Mohini's beauty causes "envy [to] drop sharp roots" (66) into the hearts of strangers. Lakshmi believes she must "marry her off quickly" (91) because even aged ten she was "attracting too many adult-sized looks" (90). In Indian/Ceylonese culture, families paint a black dot on their babies' foreheads to mar their perfect beauty and protect the child from envious glances. The online magazine *Hinduism Today* confirms a "black bindi is often worn before marriage to ward off the evil eye". An old woman tells Lakshmi that Mohini's ill health is the result of envy's "evil eye" (95) which must be warded off with a black *pottu* (bindi). Here, a different patriarchal trope plays out, namely that women who are beautiful are asking for trouble; men cannot be expected to withstand such temptation as is posed by female beauty. Tracey Nicholls describes this aspect of culture pithily as a "pressure to take responsibility for men's sexual desire, to manage it, and to conform to it [which] is something that typically exists as a background feature of women's lives in male-dominated societies" (28). Due to her beauty, Mohini is depicted as someone in dire need of marriage and thus a male protector; the irony that she needs this protection from other men is lost on the community.

Rape was a common weapon of war in Malaya during the Second World War. A detailed analysis of rape in war is beyond the scope of this critical component save to note that, as Shannon Heit points out, “it is important to recognise that patriarchal and subjective attitudes exhibited towards women in peacetime make a logical, though horrifying, progression towards how women are treated during war” (363). Thus, during the Japanese Occupation, Mohini becomes “a prisoner in her own home” (115) to keep her safe because, as Mohini’s headmaster warns Lakshmi, the Japanese “did after all rape their way through half of China” (115). This matter-of-fact alert reveals the lack of surprise by men about the behaviour of other men. All Lakshmi’s efforts to hide her daughter are to no avail and Mohini is captured, brutalised and murdered by the Japanese. The family, especially Lakshmi, Ayah and Mohini’s twin, Lakshmanan, “changed into unrecognisable people” (239). It is both tragic and ironic that, when the patriarchy reaches its logical conclusion, as in times of war, men who are tasked with protecting their women are also devastated when they are unable to do so. In a patriarchy, all women may be subservient but the power structure also creates a hierarchy amongst men based on other features such as ethnicity.

Gwendolyn Bellinger points out that “*The Rice Mother* is haunted. It is haunted by the dead, by painful pieces of Malaysian history, by traumas and atrocities that are passed from one generation to the next. It is not just one character who is haunted; rather, generation after generation experience ghostly pieces of the past” (952). The haunting is presented by Manicka in the form of the murdered Mohini, a lingering spectre after her death. She appears in the memories, dreams and hallucinations of surviving members of the family and later generations. Through her presence, individuals process and remember their trauma. Through the novel, Manicka bears witness to historical atrocities that have been ignored, forgotten or erased, to varying extents, from Malaysian memory and history. Further, the reactions of family members to the appearance of Mohini’s ghost are a means of processing survivor’s guilt, coping with the trauma of loss and accepting the need to grieve. For the reader, this “haunted vision provides a pivotal story for the post-generation to reimagine and remember the atrocities of the Occupation” (Bellinger 956).

There is also an element of Hindu mythology in the haunting by Mohini. Lakshmi's granddaughter, Dimple, is born with a close resemblance to her deceased aunt. Dimple's father, Lakshman, rushes to Lakshmi and says, "Mohini has come back to us. She has come back as your granddaughter" (222). Here, Manicka taps the Hindu concept of reincarnation to facilitate the processing of personal anguish. It is also an illustration of how different cultures have unique methods of processing intergenerational trauma. A "haunting", such as that by Mohini, begs the question of how such intergenerational memory interacts with the oppressive patriarchal structures endured by women. While this question is not explicitly considered in *The Rice Mother*, it is possible to extrapolate some possible effects. The impact on the menfolk is devastating because they have failed in their critical responsibility to "protect dependants from danger" (Gilmore 223); they have thus failed the primary test of manhood. Consequently, Ayah is a broken man who "for many years ... sat hunched in his chair staring at nothing" (250). Mohini's brother, Lakshman marries a woman, Rani, who complains about the way "the entire family keeps that dead girl's image glowing in their lives" (322). In this way, Mohini's beauty, character and early death is used as a standard to judge other women who marry into the family (and find them wanting), likely exacerbating their oppression. Rani uses the family's love for her daughter (as the reincarnation or, at least, spitting image of Mohini) to punish them by not allowing Ayah and Lakshmi access to the child (340). Thus, Mohini is used as a weapon in the internecine battles between women, more of which is discussed in the next chapter.

It is also worth noting that Mohini is the only family member not to have a chapter of the novel presented in her voice or from her perspective. Manicka has drawn her as a cipher, an embodiment of beauty, youth and innocence. This is a capitulation to the notion that women must pass a purity test to be considered a victim; otherwise, there is the pervasive cultural suggestion that the woman is responsible for her own suffering. This approach, that panders to the patriarchal duality of innocence versus impurity, undermines the real suffering experienced by victims. Such victims include the "comfort women" of Malaya who were often treated as outcasts after the war

instead of being recognised as casualties of unspeakable cruelty during the Japanese Occupation. Overall, the portrayal of women by Manicka in *The Rice Mother* is quite binary. Lakshmi is presented as a woman of great personal strength but other female characters are drawn in crudely stereotypical and oppositional terms to “male self-definition” (Connors 144). These walk-on women, ranging from the virginal Mohini to the conniving and slutty Rani, are portrayed as gendered beings through a patriarchal lens. It is difficult to discern from the text if Manicka does this because these other women serve plot points and are therefore drawn in broad strokes or whether this is a form of Huggan’s postcolonial exotic to ensure commercial appeal in the global marketplace (*The Postcolonial Exotic* 1). This appeal to readers by exoticising characters requires, whether consciously done or not, that Asian women are written as subservient and feminine and, as described above in the Introduction, this arguable renders postcolonial authors complicit in the global creative economy and not isolated, creative beings sharing their interiorities.

Later in *Evening is the Whole Day*, in a drunken moment, Rajasekharan molests his oldest daughter, Uma. She retreats into a shell, desperate to flee the family home where she no longer feels safe but is unable or unwilling to speak up. This incident reveals the extent to which men may oppress women in a traditional Tamil household and the lack of viable protest mechanisms within. (The next chapter will consider why Uma does not have anyone to turn to for succour at this moment.) The distribution of financial power within marriage enhances patriarchal power structures, theoretically to create a powerful male figure to protect women of the family. When Paati’s husband “keeled over in his vegetable garden” (26), she “ordered her daughters to summon their oldest brother” (26). The oldest brother is, of course, Rajasekharan. In family matters, only the firstborn son has the authority to deal with the death of the patriarch; the Tamil approach is very much: the king is dead, long live the king. The culture demands that the son inherits the obligation to protect his womenfolk, ironic given that it is Rajasekharan who poses a threat to his daughter.

When Paati first moves to the Blue House, the family have “selected an auspicious moving day from their Tamil calendar” (23). In this way, Samarasan informs readers the Tamil community incorporates tradition and superstition into daily life. Later, Paati’s funeral is referred to as a “grand pantomime of last rites” (78), a reminder of the performative element of Tamil traditions. In this way, Tamil society prepares women for their reproductive roles as wives and mothers through an elaborate system of life-cycle rituals (Philips 24). When Paati is married at eighteen, Samarasan describes the future, present and past versions of the bride competing for supremacy, discerning a “brave battle in the bride’s kajal-ed eyes” (40). Kajal or kohl is a powder customarily applied to line the eyes and make them appear larger, a desired element of a culturally feminine appearance. According to Samarasan, the present version of Paati is a “good young Indian wife adept at fading, in public, into the background behind her men” (40). At her wedding, Paati’s hands are described as “red with henna”, the ceremony is held in front of “thousands of guests invited for the month-long celebration” under “five canopies erected on her father’s land” (40). The extent to which the marriage ceremony is designed to buttress status and preserve traditional roles is revealed by its ostentatiousness. It is no wonder that the young Paati is sufficiently overwhelmed to fall in line.

In sum, both authors reveal the coercive patriarchal structure of Tamil communities that leave women lacking independent power. Overall, Samarasan and Manicka remind audiences that the fate of women within patriarchal societies is dependent on the status of their menfolk in the patriarchal pecking order. Thus, it is better to be Rajasekharan’s wife or mother in *Evening is the Whole Day* than Ayah’s wife in *The Rice Mother*. Both Uma and Mohini have some cachet as daughters of their respective houses, although the former is admired for her intellect and the latter for her beauty. In other words, in the decades between the events depicted in both books; some progress towards valuing women for their abilities, and not looks, may be discerned. However, any protection offered by the family patriarchs is susceptible to compromise when the menfolk are the predators (as with Uma and her father) or the men lack authority in relation to other men (as with Mohini and the Japanese soldiers).

Tilting at Windmills: Women Fight Back

The women in *Evening is the Whole Day* and *The Rice Mother* are not without a desire for autonomy and progress towards independence from male domination. However, Partha Chatterjee argues, in the context of India, that modernising influences, derived from the import of Western practices and the penetration of Western ideas (which were consistent with the colonising mission's conviction of its cultural superiority), retrogressed during the period of Indian nationalism where there was an instinctual inclination to defend traditional values and conservative practices (116). While it is arguable that there is an element of this reversal of modernising trends consistent with developments in Western feminist thought, it is difficult to find any convincing evidence in the Malaysian context. It is possible to point out that patriarchal systems evolved to respond to changing circumstances; as an example, women's education became the norm over the period of history covered by the two works. However, hegemonic forms of masculine dominance remained the prevalent social structure. Further, the absorption of any efforts towards emancipation were largely limited to the middle classes as can be seen in the different ambitions of Uma and Chellamservant below.

In *Evening is the Whole Day*, the younger generation of women, led by Uma, show some resolve to escape the tyranny of the home. From an early age, Uma explains that she does not want to play "masak masak and beauty saloon" (masak masak means cooking); she demands to know why she has "to play these silly games just because we're girls" (107). Interestingly, third-generation Tamil women in Malaysia are expected to perform as well as boys academically. Writing about the Malaysian Iyers, a small community of Tamil Brahmins, Lokasundari Vijaya Sankar demonstrates that, despite the great emphasis on education (for men and women), "women adhered to Iyer customs and traditions by playing a role that was supplementary to that of men, thereby keeping to their patriarchal traditions" (17). Thus, for girls like Uma, the expectation remains that they

should prepare to be mistresses of the domestic realm and gatekeepers of traditional practices despite being expected to have educational success and a career outside the home.

Chellam, the maid, also shows a desire to improve her lot beyond the role of servant. She is desperate to “save up for spectacles” (212) convinced that if she can see better, her situation and opportunities will improve. The limits on the imagination of women in a patriarchal society are revealed when Chellam muses, “Don’t servant girls get married sometimes?” Her expectations remain grounded in her economic circumstances, “There must be some man, poor or ugly or previously married” (213) who would settle for a wife like her. Despite being a few rungs removed from rubber estate girl, Vasanthi’s ambitions are similarly limited. She sees her life as, “Waiting and scrubbing. Polishing and dreaming” (50). Waiting/dreaming here is clearly for marriage, since potential employers “took one look at [Vasanthi’s] trembling hands, heard a single stuttering answer to the simplest question” (50) and reject her even for the most basic of job roles. Thus, like Chellam, the scope of her ambition is curtailed both by her upbringing and her own expectations of what is possible.

In *The Rice Mother*, Lakshmi is portrayed as a resilient and resourceful woman. She refuses to be cowed despite having been tricked into marrying a poor man in Malaya. On their wedding day, Lakshmi sets eyes on Ayah for the first time and is irritated by his “expression of proud possession” (17). She locks “him into a childish game of who could outstare whom” and Ayah “dropped his eyes” because she “had defeated the ugly beast” (17). Her description of him in animalistic terms shows both her disgust and her sense of superiority in taming said creature in an elemental battle. She is the stronger character despite his exploitation of patriarchal marriage conventions to trick her into marrying him. After the initial shock, Lakshmi sets about making the best of the situation by taking control of matters usually within the male domain. As an example, she takes over the family finances once it seems that her husband is incapable of financial discipline. After his wages are seized by moneylenders, she resolves to tighten their belts, taking various cost saving measures including eschewing “meat until our bills were settled” (45).

Unfortunately, her husband has no self-control and “[t]hat evening returned with cash he had borrowed from the moneylender” (45) once again. After an incident with moneylenders, Lakshmi writes to an uncle who is a mango dealer in Seremban for help. The reliance on family and community is common among the Tamil community who often worked, within the *kangany* system, to bring kinfolk to Malaya from their own families and villages (Stenson 24). In other words, Lakshmi’s survival depends on her extended family and is the consequence of having the good fortune to have a trader uncle, one who is not trapped on the plantations and has wealth to spare.

Lakshmi continues to be resourceful to survive; she plants a vegetable garden, her chicken coop is a success and she even begins to save “a modest amount inside a small tin” that she “hid in the rice sack” (46). The battle for survival is implicit in the definition of successes: a “vegetable garden” and “chicken coop” (46). Savings are hidden at home, from the rest of the family, the Japanese, and moneylenders. The money cannot be deposited in banks because first-generation female immigrants like Lakshmi would not have been allowed to open a bank account. Later, during the Japanese Occupation, when Ayah loses his job and their ration cards, Lakshmi tells herself, “I will survive this too” (204) and she sells some hoarded jewellery to buy cows (205). The cashflow generated from the cows allows them to have “tapioca most of the week” (205), a wartime food staple. Again, it is the woman who is portrayed as having the resilience and determination to “survive”. When Ayah is beaten almost to death by the Japanese, Lakshmi, striving to tend to his wounds, is described as “coldly professional” (142) in the manner she takes care of Ayah. A woman who is a departure from the feminine ideal of wife or mother is both “cold” and “professional”; she is within the masculine realm of expected behaviour. Thus, despite being tricked into marriage and trafficked to a strange land, Lakshmi has the wherewithal to take the steps necessary for her family’s survival. In this way, Manicka demonstrates that the oppressive circumstances endured by women at the hands of the Tamil patriarchy are a function of tradition and culture and not individual competence or strength of character.

Lakshmi's daughter-in-law, Rani, is also a woman of strong character who entices Lakshman into marriage despite the family's disapproval. She writes him love letters in secret and promises him a generous dowry; his gambling habit makes this an enticement he struggles to refuse. She seeks to marry Lakshman despite the "ill omen" (304) of the oil lamps at the prayer altar being extinguished which leads to them being "advised not to proceed further with the match" (304). Rituals are an integral part of the control of Tamil women within the patriarchy, and the daughter-in-law's willingness to break taboos speaks to her independent attitude. However, her independence is asserted only to the extent of getting her own way in marriage.

The women featured in both novels are constrained by their gender and the accompanying propaganda about their worth to society. While there might be some rebellion or resistance to their lot in life, success is defined within patriarchal parameters, such as seeking a better husband. Further, a better husband is characterised almost entirely in terms of wealth and worldly success. Save for Uma's departure to the United States, the women portrayed in both novels are unable to imagine a paradigm where they are not firmly under the patriarchal thumb.

The Empty Vessel: Language as Rebellion

Women were not, and are not to some extent, provided with the same opportunities as men for education in South and Southeast Asia and this limits their opportunity to escape domestic tyranny. For instance, in *The Rice Mother*, Manicka points out that that "unlike boys, girls didn't have to go to school" (8). Indeed, at the turn of the previous century, compulsory education for girls in Ceylon was limited to town areas for ages six to ten years old (Little 141). Male primacy is thus entrenched as men are able to leverage education into privilege. In the case of Samarasan's Rajasekharan, a mission school education allows him to mimic Englishness and take his place, at least for a while, as a postcolonial elite (analysed at length in Chapters 1 and 2).

However, in *Evening is the Whole Day*, Samarasan's portrayal of the Manglish spoken by women indicates that less-educated women have thrown off colonial-era language shackles more

comprehensively than educated men like Rajasekharan. As mentioned briefly earlier, many women speak using the unique Malaysian syntax, known colloquially as Manglish that is the consequence of directly translating the various mother tongues into English. For instance, “What for all this drama now? Now only they’ll sit and cry” (13), says Mrs Balakrishnan, a neighbour, with a form of sentence construction that follows the grammatical rules of Tamil rather than English. Also, many female characters speak with the linguistic habit of repeating a word twice, or lexical cloning, as in “new-new” (6) or “white-white” (266). This stems from the way the Malay language uses repetition to indicate the plural, co-opted and used for other purposes, such as emphasis, in Manglish. By appropriating English and using it in a form that abrogates the notion of a correct or formal standard of English, women create resistance against the hegemony of the English language. It is also a way of expressing solidarity and camaraderie to indicate a Malaysian identity (Ng and Diskin-Holdaway 563). However, the “internal variation within Malaysian English [which] reflects the multi-ethnic and multilingual makeup of the population” means that “perceptual differences are often sufficient to mark out the ethnic background of the speaker” (Ng and Diskin-Holdaway 575). In other words, the speech patterns of these women characters may indicate resistance to the long shadow of colonialism but also mark them out as Indian within the Malaysian context. Thus, Manglish is a double-edged sword.

In *The Rice Mother*, few of the first generation of immigrants speaks English and none of the women. Lakshmi’s first encounter in Malaya is with Bilal, the driver, who is Malay. She points out that “he spoke no Tamil” and “could pluck no Malay from my tongue” (25). Later, Lakshmi asks Ayah to teach her Malay (46) so she can communicate with the neighbours. As a practical matter, the communal language of the lower classes was Malay, not English. In a humorous contrast to Rajasekharan’s use of the expression “bloody fool” (24) to show off his Anglicised nomenclature in *Evening is the Whole Day*, Lakshmi’s son tries to teach Lakshmi the same expression, having learnt it from the British. She repeats it as “bloody pool” three times as he tries to correct her pronunciation (109). Lakshmi is thus portrayed as being a long way from either any language-

driven social advancement or from using language as a form of subtle pushback against language-centred elitism.

Clothes Maketh the (Wo)man: The Sari as a Symbol

Earlier in this thesis, the adoption by Tamil men of Western dress and its significance in terms of the power dynamics within Malayan/Malaysian society was addressed. Women, trapped in the home, have far less opportunity or need to joust for power by adopting the clothing of colonists. Lakshmi, a first-generation immigrant, wears only the “eloquent sari” (Jones 52–63). To be respectful, she dons a “clean cotton sari” (40) to go to the temple. Earlier, her mother breastfed her, while wearing “a rough cotton sari” (8), denoting poverty. Lakshmi is married in “six yards of [her] beautiful red and gold sari” (15), marking the occasion with celebratory colours, and later, she expresses her “terrible mood” by changing into “a dull grey sari with hardly any patterns on it” (306). Lakshmi feels profound disgust with her daughter-in-law when “expensive saris” are left “hanging on the washing line outside for a good few days” (333) until “all the areas exposed to the direct afternoon sun had begun to fade” and the “deep red sari was ruined forever” (334). This is because, in Lakshmi’s eyes, “saris are precious heirlooms that are handed down from mother to daughter” (333). Manicka effectively uses the sari to represent the cultural heritage of her female protagonists. Further, women trapped in oppressive family structures also use saris as a means of non-verbal communication to convey their feelings and attitudes. In this way, traditional garb is both a symbol of female disempowerment but also a means of silent protest against the patriarchy.

When in Disgrace with Fortune and Men’s Eyes: Women in the Shadows

The concept of patriarchal systems is not always sufficient to account for “gendered experiences that intersected with other structural oppressions” (Hill and Allen 166). The women depicted in the novels suffer more from the tyranny of men when there is this intersectionality – the overlap between the patriarchy and its “shifting interactions” (Hill and Allen 168) with racism and

capitalism. As Johanna Bond explains, “aspects of identity, such as race and gender, are mutually constitutive and intersect to create unique experiences of discrimination and subordination” (2). In a changing world, including from colonial to postcolonial, intersectionality recognises the evolving contours and durable impacts of overlapping oppressive features suffered by marginalised communities. Tamil women are ethnic minorities in the worlds described in both novels, while individual women also struggle economically and are thus susceptible to further exploitation. At the very bottom of the pecking order, are subalterns like Chellamservant and Mui Tsai who are understood by the social elite to have “something barbaric or pathological about them” (Gramsci 4). Subaltern is used in this thesis to describe individuals who are socially, politically, and geographically outside the hegemonic power structure (Gramsci 1-14) – people whose position denies them a voice or agency within the dominant systems of representation. The subaltern is at the very bottom of overlapping hierarchies; they have no political voice and minimal ability to resist exploitation.

An interesting archive of the experiences of the female Tamil subaltern class are recorded songs that describe the plantation or estate life of Tamil labour in Malaya and further “offer a rich social context of Tamil society, the role of women, the perception of women’s labour, and also migration to Malaya” (Saxena and Saigaran 268–69). The songs range from optimism, “see the ship sail to Malaya” to an account of their treatment, “white man inhumanly confined us in a cage”, their destitution, “sixty cents per day, for a day’s labour” to resilience, “we are here to survive – Tamils forever” (Saxena and Saigaran 270–74). The violence against women perpetrated in the isolated plantation communities is also recorded: “He chased me and pulled my saree, He clutched my hand and pulled my wrist” (Saxena and Saigaran 279). The mere existence of these songs, similar in vein to the songs of African slaves in the United States, arguably constitutes performative subversion. However, the experiences of the marginalised Tamil estate class are often ignored in a monolithic approach to racial categorisation in both politics and fiction in the country.

Samarasan addresses the plight of the subaltern class in *Evening is the Whole Day* by exposing economic divides within the Tamil community. She draws fault lines between the Rajasekharan family and the maid, Chellam, to demonstrate that not all Tamil women are created equal. There are significant rifts within the community that are a consequence of colonial history. Descendants of Tamils brought to Malaya as plantation labour, indentured or otherwise, often remain trapped in poverty. Dashini Jeyathurai explains that this is because “Malaysia’s mode of decolonisation kept the economic apparatus of the British plantation industry intact and this included preserving the labouring underclass of Indians in a cycle of impoverishment” (305). The structure of the rubber plantations is similar to that of the tea plantations in Ceylon during the British era where Tamil workers from South India were also brought to work. Writing about the tea plantations, Amali Philips describes a situation that could equally apply to the Malayan rubber estates: “The isolation of the plantations from the rest of [...] society has contributed to the consolidation of traditional caste divisions, and gender relations, including marital relations, among the plantation Tamils” (21). This isolation contributes to the lack of rights of rubber estate girls such as the servant, Chellam.

By contrast, Tamils brought in to fill other roles such as clerks or in port services, those like Rajasekharan’s forebears, were marked by their “ostentatious displays of empire loyalism” (Stenson 26). Those who arrived for work outside the rubber estates (implied in the description of Rajasekharan’s grandfather having found work at the port in Penang) or were mission school-educated and therefore literate in English, were able to provide the next generation, including Rajasekharan, with educational opportunities denied to those of lower socio-economic status. Risking the accusation that “the ventriloquism of the speaking subaltern is the left intellectual’s stock in trade” (Spivak 27), Samarasan seeks to elucidate the experiences of a servant, Chellam. Chellam is subject to the hegemony of the ruling classes, represented in her case by her employers, the Rajasekharan family. In this manner, Samarasan tries to avoid the trap of Malaysian writers in English who do not always recognise heterogeneity within races but treat the consequences of

ethnicity as a monolithic experience. Overlooking lower economic classes in the postcolonial narrative leads to them being silenced again, this time by their own compatriots (Chandran and Seng 180–90). Unsurprisingly, Samarasan’s Chellam suffers the worst outcomes in *Evening is the Whole Day*. As an economically, educationally and racially marginalised individual, she has no inherent authority or ability to resist elite domination. Bullied by higher-status women and the privileged Rajasekharan children, she has no tradeable value to offer society in exchange for kindness or compassion. In this, her experience as a “rubber estate girl” (Jeyathurai 312) parallels those of women from her social background – impoverished, uneducated and Tamil-speaking – in both the pre- and post-Independence eras.

The character is disparagingly described throughout with the portmanteau coinage “Chellamservant”; her name cannot be separated from her role. Samarasan also reveals the way Suresh, the son of the family, uses vocabulary that is designed to dehumanise the subject such as referring to Chellam’s “coconut hair oil and her hairy armpits” (252). Dashini Jeyathurai explains that “Suresh’s attitude is distinctive because it reflects how privileged Indians in the novel imbibe the very vocabulary and outlook of colonial masters” (314). Moreover, this was done because of the desire of other Malaysian Indians for distance from the denizens of the plantation economic space (312). As an example, Rajasekharan wears expensive cotton, in contrast to Chellam’s “brown nylon shirt” (6) and “shiny polyester skirt” (4). Synthetic materials, such as nylon and polyester, are perceived by higher class Tamils as symbolic of the poor taste of lower-class Indians as opposed to an economic necessity. Chellam’s father is reflected in the glass door of the family home when he visits Rajasekharan to obtain his daughter’s wages; this mirror image serves to emphasise the difference in their respective status while reflecting their Tamil origins. In his “dirty white singlet spattered with rain” (8), Chellam’s father stands in contrast to the immaculate lawyer. The dirty, white singlet is juxtaposed against the white “courthouse shirts” (6) and the rain reminds the reader that the superior Rajasekharan is equipped with that “enormous black umbrella” (5), like the quintessential English gentlemen of literature.

Unfortunately, “the debris of the British plantation economy litters the Malaysian body politic and the estate-girl remains one of the most powerful figurations of that debris” (Jeyathurai 318). Chellam is also stripped off all forms of male protection, whether from her father or employer. Rajasekharan, as the man of the household, does not stand up for Chellam’s economic rights; he pays her wages directly to her alcoholic father. Her dream of saving enough money to buy a pair of spectacles (213), to be able to read and improve herself, are doomed to failure. In other words, Rajasekharan not only does not protect a weaker female, but he also stands in the way of her trying to escape her lot in life. Chellam is thus statistically destined for an ignominious end – repatriated to the estate, suspected of being pregnant, she commits suicide – from the moment she was born a woman with that heritage. The fate of Chellam is a reminder that, even within female Tamil communities in Malaysia, there remains a hierarchy of oppression. A woman who lacks education, is from a lower socio-economic class such as the plantation community, is tarred by her skin colour and does not have beauty (and thus something to barter in exchange for male protection) is at the very bottom of the pile.

While the *The Rice Mother’s* focus is on Lakshmi’s Ceylonese Tamil family, Manicka reminds readers that women of other races suffered from the same oppressive patriarchy; Mui Tsai, Lakshmi’s Chinese neighbour and friend, is a victim. Mui Tsai looks youthful because she sports “two long black plaits ending in childish pink bows” and has a “pair of jet black eyes [that] sparkled in her round face” (41). She is described as a “pitiful domestic slave” (42), whose stepmother sold her into slavery in China at the age of thirteen. After her sale to a merchant in China, Mui Tsai is trafficked to Malaya where she is purchased as a gift for Soong’s “new, third, wife” (50). Old Soong is a wealthy but grotesque man who owns many properties in the neighbourhood and has numerous wives. In his “grand house” (51), Mui Tsai is regularly raped by Soong. The wealth disparity between the parties and the lack of paternal care is at the root of Mui Tsai’s exploitation. The children she bears are taken away and given to his official wives, who are infertile. After the loss of her fifth child, Mui Tsai “shuffled around like a bitter ghost” (122). In the end, she was “a

small animal, her foot trapped in a mangle” (80). Note the language Manicka uses to describe Mui Tsai, “ghost” and “animal”. This reflects the way she is both treated as less than human and degraded and devastated by the treatment meted out to her. However, her suffering remains invisible; she is a “ghost”.

During the war, the Japanese use Mui Tsai as “their comfort woman”. This practice was widespread and there are survivor testimonies of women who were repeatedly raped by Japanese soldiers and then ostracised by their families and communities after the war for having consorted with the Japanese (Michiko 581–89). Eventually, Mui Tsai disappears and when Lakshmi asks after her, Old Soong’s cook answers the query “by making a circling motion with her index finger against her temple” (261), a crude gesture symbolising insanity. In Mui Tsai’s fate, Manicka reminds readers that any woman, of any race, is subject to male power. Such women may be stripped off everything, from their children to their sanity, if they are from a lower socio-economic class and lack male protection of their own.

Overall, Manicka and Samarasan paint different female victims, victimised for very different reasons and at the hands of different men from different races. However, what the women, Mohini and Uma, as daughters of the patriarchs, as well as Chellam and Mui Tsai, subalterns, have in common is that they are abused by men within a system that offers women neither sufficient rights nor protection. The extent of the abuse of women is determined by the extent of the intersection between gender-based oppression and other excuses for male tyranny.

If You Prick Us, Do We Not Bleed?: Racism in Malaya/Malaysia

Tamil women are at the mercy of both intra-ethnic and inter-ethnic racism. The former relies on skin colour to distinguish between women who are marriageable and those who are not. In relation to the other races, one Tamil is very much like another and at the receiving end of structural and casual racism in Malaya/Malaysia. Hence, there is a common expression in Malaysia that “if you see a snake and a Tamil, you better shoot the Tamil first” (Daniels 269). Sundara

Sivachandralingam Raja and Raymond Shivalinggam insist that the marginalisation of south Indian labourers was the inevitable consequence of the British colonial administration's race-based policies that favoured Malays and Chinese (115). The British policy choice to implement indirect rule through Malay royalty required pro-Malay strategies. The negative perception of Tamil economic capability compared to the Chinese immigrants with the former seen to be "very passive and lack entrepreneurial ability" (Raja and Shivalinggam 116) was another reason for Tamil segregation. However, Tamil subservience was also inevitable since "the promotion of docility among labourers was essential for the functioning of the colonial-capitalistic economy" (Raja and Shivalinggam 119). By contrast, "the Chinese had a long history of worker solidarity and were in a much more stable position to bargain for higher wages. The Malays were already accorded political protection under their independent rulers in the British administration" (Raja and Shivalinggam 119). Thus, descendants of the Tamils are portrayed in the novels as inheriting the disempowerment of their estate predecessors. If their antecedents are not from the plantation, they are subject to racial bias anyway based on the presumption that they are of the same stock. This racism is one of the root causes of non-plantation Indians seeking to distinguish themselves from the estate class, including by discriminating amongst themselves based on skin colour.

In *The Rice Mother*, Manicka's Tamil girls are subject to race-based discrimination. The only school friend of Lakshmi's daughter, Lalita, is an Indian girl called Nalini. This is because the Chinese girls avoid the two of them, believing that they are "dark because [they] were filthy" (256). The Chinese mothers insist that their daughters be allowed to "sit apart from the Indian girls" because "Indian girls have lice in their hair" (256). These are all common racist tropes about Indians in Malaya/Malaysia. While Nisha, Lakshmi's great-grand-daughter acknowledges that "the blood of many races" (501) mingles within her, this does not lead to any insights about race relations in Malaysia. Manicka uses common racial stereotypes as useful plot points, as when Lakshmi recoils at the Chinese custom of binding women's feet (26) or her daughters are ostracised by their classmates on racial grounds because they are "dark" and "filthy" (255). However, she

does not address the complexity of racial politics in Malaya/Malaysia by delving into the political and historical framework for the inter-communal tensions in society.

Samarasan paints a clearer picture of discrimination towards Indians but also reminds readers that skin colour plays a significant role in intra-Indian power dynamics. Paati, Rajasekharan's mother, describes his would-be wife, Vasanthi, as "shapeless as a coconut tree and so black" (54). Paati's crude yet emphatic description of Vasanthi as "so black" reveals the intra-Indian colour prejudice of the day and underlines the community's investment in being physically distinct – by skin tone – from those still confined to the labour lines. She is not just black but "so black", an extreme from which there can be no social redemption amongst the Tamils. The reference to the "coconut tree" is an allusion to village ancestry, also an insult.

Commentators have also attributed the obsession with skin colour within the Tamil community in Malaysia to the obsession with skin colour in India. In India, "desires for fair skin ... are interrelated with local and global discourses on beauty and with religious and caste identities, as well as with colonial and global capitalist (colour) hierarchies" (Kullrich 246). This colour bias is also a function of the professional classes trying to distinguish themselves by using a "beauty ideal that is associated with an (upper) middle-class, urban, cosmopolitan lifestyle" (Kullrich 248) instead of, in Malaysia, the outdoor, sunburnt plantation labour lines. This also explains the narrative arc of the sun-darkened subaltern, Chellam (discussed in greater detail above). S. Y. Koh and I. L. Sin note that hierarchies of differentiation based on race exist in Malaysia even when describing the varied experiences of expatriates from all over the world involved in the diverse educational landscape in Malaysia (664). Thus, a colour bar is also a class barrier. Rajasekharan may think he is strengthening his patriarchal position by marrying Vasanthi (see Chapter 2), but his mother makes it clear that he is achieving the opposite outcome because marrying someone "so black" will undermine the family's status.

In *The Rice Mother*, the obsession with skin colour and the perceived advantages associated with fairer skin amongst the Tamils is prevalent throughout the text. Lakshmi is described as "no

Indian beauty but in a land of coffee-coloured people” she was a “cup of milky tea. A prized, precious colour” (10). Later, she sees Ayah for the first time when he is a bridegroom waiting on the dais and she realises he “is so dark his skin shone like black oil in the night” (16). Ayah would have been unmarriageable to Lakshmi except for his wealth as manifested in the “gold watch” (18) he shows off to the family. He comes with the reputation of being “so rich he does not require a dowry” (13), which is useful given that Lakshmi’s mother is impoverished and cannot pay a dowry. Lakshmi’s socially advantageous skin colour and their poverty mean the family is tricked by a show of wealth to marry a man who would otherwise struggle to find a desirable wife in the colour-conscious society of the Ceylonese Tamils.

Later, Lakshmi goes to great lengths to protect her eldest daughter’s “milky white skin” (67). Her son, Mohini’s twin, is of the same shade of “milky tea” as his mother (69) while Lalita “was the colour and texture of bitter chocolate” (88) and Jeyan had a “dark, still body” (87). Mohini holds the boy “in her fair arms” and tells “him his skin was as beautiful as the blue skin of baby Krishna” (87). This incident is written to demonstrate Mohini’s generosity of spirit rather than the acceptability of Jeyan’s colour. In other words, the colour hierarchy is perpetuated within families and through the generations.

However, in the fate of Mohini, Manicka reminds readers that there is such a thing, in patriarchal societies, as being too fair and beautiful. *The Rice Mother* makes clear, in the rape and murder of Mohini as well as the exploitation of the Chinese servant girl, Mui Tsai, that whatever the shade of skin colour a woman might have and whatever advantages or disadvantages may accrue to her as a consequence of her place on the colour spectrum, a woman’s fate is still in the hands of the men who wield power in society. The intersectionality between the racial discrimination of Tamils in Malaya and the patriarchal attributes of Tamil society leaves Tamil women at a particular disadvantage.

Conclusion

The Tamil women depicted in both works are subject to constraints, a consequence of patriarchal structures, in every aspect of their lives. Their lack of freedom to marry is a primary instrument of control. A lack of access to education and employment opportunities leaves women confined to domestic spheres without the financial independence to stand up to exercises of male power. Economic pressures reinforce the need to marry, and marry well, and this leaves Tamil women vulnerable to exploitation. In the colonial era, this manifests as a real likelihood that these women will be whisked away to distant lands, far from any family or community support structures. This double colonisation, domination by colonial powers as well as the coercive structures of the patriarchy, was not alleviated in any meaningful way by Malayan Independence. Rajasekharan represents a new postcolonial Tamil elite that maintains the patriarchal hegemony and reinforces male advantages – education, wealth, language, dress – over their female counterparts.

Despite this, women of strong character, like Lakshmi in *The Rice Mother*, or Paati in *Evening is the Whole Day*, work hard to carve out some autonomy and/or authority to improve their outcomes. Their efforts are often stymied. Failure occurs for two reasons, pushback by men who belittle and undermine women and, perhaps more importantly, a lack of imagination on the part of women. Women like Lakshmi successfully develop influence over their husbands and therefore have some control over events. However, they use this hard-earned power to work within patriarchal systems to achieve better outcomes. Thus, Lakshmi endeavours to achieve arranged marriages for her daughters with wealthier, more successful men. The irony of having to find a husband for her beautiful daughter, Mohini, to ward off the male gaze is lost upon Lakshmi. In *Evening is the Whole Day*, fourth-generation offspring, like Uma, are not deprived of education but every opportunity is taken by her elders to remind her that she is still responsible for achieving a good marriage and being subservient and dutiful to men.

Finally, intersectionality with other oppressive social, political and economic elements operate to further undermine the ability of women to change this paradigm. The subaltern class,

represented by the servant, Chellam in *Evening is the Whole Day*, and Mui Tsai, in *The Rice Mother*, demonstrate that poverty leads to especially horrific outcomes. Tamils, whose roots were not plantation labour, victimise their poorer kin based on skin colour. These “city” Tamils assert cultural superiority because of their status as postcolonial facsimiles of the English. The replacement of one postcolonial elite (English-educated) for another (Malay) in post-Independence Malaysia leaves Tamils even more segregated from mainstream discourse. The women bear the brunt of this displacement as disappointed men take out their frustrations on their dependants. Even potential strengths, the use of a version of English that has been adapted to form a unique pidgin which acts as a rejection of colonial value systems, is loaded with risk. The syntax of Manglish reveals ethnicity and exposes vulnerable Tamils to further bigotry. Overall, the lot of Tamil women in Malaya/Malaysia, as portrayed in the two works, reflects the historical realities of an ethnic minority caught in the crosshairs of traditional masculine hegemony as it intersects with colonial, economic, political and race-based social marginalisation.

However, as argued in the next chapter, Tamil women also play a part in reinforcing the architecture of the patriarchy to the individual advantage of some women but the overwhelming disservice of women collectively.

CHAPTER 4: WOMEN VS WOMEN

The Rice Mother and *Evening is the Whole Day* depict complex relationships between women protagonists. The dynamics between women are portrayed primarily within the family, including the extended family. To a lesser degree, they encompass interactions by women with women outside the home. As explained in the previous chapter, female characters in both works are constrained by the patriarchy, their lives controlled by men. Aside from instances of overt control, women are undermined in myriad subtle ways to the point where their sense of self, and self-belief, is profoundly diminished. Therefore, any pushback against men is rare. Moreover, acts of rebellion tend to occur within the paradigm of the patriarchy. As an example, a woman might protest marriage to an individual man but not the institution of marriage itself. This is despite marriage being a primary means of coercive control as each woman is given away by a father to a husband. However, in both novels, it is not merely the men who maintain and sustain the patriarchal edifice for their own benefit. Women within the Tamil community act as instruments of control over other women.

It would be much harder for men to preserve the patriarchy without the complicity of women. This chapter will identify a range of female behaviour that is contrary to the wellbeing of other women in a whole series of different contexts. Almost every interaction between women in the novels manifests as a site for internecine battles: between mothers and daughters and mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, between mistresses and servants and between sisters. It seems that women versus women is a constant; the battleground is the home, weapons range from words to violence and the spoils of victory are power and proximity to the patriarch. There are good reasons for this sorry state of affairs which are discussed below. However, it is important to recognise that the disputes have life-changing consequences for the women involved who are bullied and mistreated by both men (as patriarchs) and women (who have any seniority or authority) over them.

Lize-Marie Steenkamp points out that, “patriarchal behaviour is not exclusively observed in those of male gender or sex but, in particular contexts, especially small spaces, can also be

perpetrated by women” (609). Deniz Kandiyoti warns that it is of critical importance not to consider the patriarchy as a monolithic concept that explains male dominance. Instead, she argues for recognition that “patriarchal bargains exert a powerful influence on the shaping of women’s gendered subjectivity” (274–75). Kandiyoti identifies the reasons underpinning the support of patriarchal structures by women despite the resulting consistent devaluation of the labour of women (280). Women actively “adopt interpersonal strategies that maximise their security” because even though “these individual power tactics do little to alter the structurally unfavourable terms of the overall patriarchal script, women become experts in maximising their own life chances” (280). Women thus strike a bargain with the patriarchy in their own self-interest which undermines the interests of women more broadly. Importantly, the nature of the bargain struck by women with the patriarchy “influence[s] both the potential for and specific forms of women’s active or passive resistance in the face of oppression” (Kandiyoti 275). Thus, the women in *Evening is the Whole Day* and *The Rice Mother* exist and function within a complex, shifting system that has at its core the perpetuation and protection of male power within the Tamil community. Their resistance and renegotiation of their positions vary based on individual context but are often desperate attempts to maintain their own wellbeing even if at the expense of other women. Individual women strike patriarchal bargains that maximise their own security in a manner that perpetuates gender-based discrimination in the society. In other words, within the Tamil community described in the two novels, women are more than complicit; they are active agents of the patriarchy. Women work in tandem with men, at their instruction or for their benefit, to circumscribe and limit the independence or autonomy of other women. This chapter will argue that Tamil women in *The Rice Mother* and *Evening is the Whole Day* eschew collective bargaining to better their situation. Instead, the women bind themselves and their daughters to male control over their lives. In the absence of equal bargaining status, the implicit contract – preservation of status at the expense of other women – has an expiry date. The women who strike patriarchal bargains find they have paid a high price for a privilege that is amortised over their lifetimes. Kandiyoti’s explanation of the patriarchal bargain within a classic patriarchal model identifies clear

benefits to individual women which explains why women might be active agents who negotiate to trade autonomy for passivity and delegated control in domestic situations in exchange for security and other material and psychic advantages. For this chapter, I have expanded the notion of this bilateral contract to encompass examples of overall complicity by women in domestic arrangements that result in the oppression of other women. As the extended family dynamic becomes more complex and the role of women within the patriarchy more nuanced, it is important to recognise that the patriarchal bargain ranges from complicity in oppressive female domestic arrangements to control over other women as active agents of the patriarchy and on behalf of men.

Hell hath No Fury: Women in the Home

The role of women in policing other women is critical to the persistence of the patriarchy. Expressions of docility and subservience, understood culturally and socially to be appropriate feminine behaviour, manifest within the domestic spaces of the home. Home here “is often experienced in down-to-earth fashion at the explicitly spatial level of physical environment and quotidian dwelling” (Maxey, *Home and Nation* 31). However, as discussed earlier, the home, such as the Blue House on Kingfisher Lane, is a metaphor for successful integration and postcolonial expression. Samarasan uses the family house as a metaphor for the contradictions and cultural influences that weigh down both her characters and the fledgling nation. The home is both a physical and ideological space whose boundaries are defined, amongst other things, by gender roles mapped by traditional patriarchal forces. The women in *The Rice Mother* and *Evening is the Whole Day* are expected to be the embodiments of cultural tradition within the home.

Home is also a source of contradiction as women of the diaspora navigate a desire and an expectation that they preserve traditional domestic roles derived from the homelands of India or Ceylon while assimilating sufficiently to achieve a sense of belonging in their new world. Having children is one way of navigating an evolving identity; it allows the role of mother to be a source of fresh identity and redirects the sense of loss, of both mother and motherland, suffered by the

diaspora. An example when Lakshmi misses her mother is when she promises herself that she will “not forget a single thing about my mother. The smell of her, the taste of the food that came off her work-worn fingers straight into my mouth, her beautiful, sad eyes and all the precious stories that she stored inside the golden box inside her head” (20). However, when Lakshmi’s twins are born, she feels that she is “walking into a secret garden and discovering hundreds and hundreds of beautiful new flowers, the colours, the incredible new scents, and the wonderful shapes” (66). Further, children expose parents to their new and real world such as Uma being in the school play or Lakshmi’s children experiencing racism. Mothers of the diaspora, in other words, are “cultural negotiators” who painstakingly attempt to sustain prior and current homes, “one in the imagination and one in reality” (Karmakar 126). In other words, children are a bridge to the new world.

An important element of domestic cultural expression is through food which “signals the link, for Indian women, between food and maternal discourse, inherited gender roles, and the ancestral home” (Maxey, *Mangoes and Coconuts* 165). Angela Meah identifies the domestic kitchen “as a space associated with routine and ritual, one which both inscribes and reinforces particular gendered roles” (675). Unfortunately, the tropes of food and eating are an aspect of the prevalence of exoticisation in diasporic writing, where food “offers itself up for voyeuristic consumption” (Rahman 484). While, in both novels, there is an “orientalist approach to South Asian culture and identity as expressed through depictions of Indian cuisine” (Rahman 485), the reality is that food plays a critical and central cultural role in Tamil households. A seminal example of the importance of the “language of food” in Tamil communities is seen in the testimonials by rural Tamil women in Sri Lanka caught up in the civil war who use “culinary ingenuity as the language of self-expression to tell their stories of suffering and survival” (Mehta 146). Narratives concerning food and domestic spaces play an important role in both novels under consideration. While accusations of exoticism are credible, the analysis below demonstrates that most of the culinary content is merited and its symbolism apt in the circumstances.

The language of food is an effective shorthand and a viable point of entry into an understanding of South Asian diasporic activity (Mannur 19). For example, food traditions are a subtle affirmation that a household has traditional values, and its daughters are therefore marriageable, such as when the aroma of the “famous black curry” pervades the house when Lakshmi’s family is visited by marriage brokers (15). Food also displays cultural heritage and pride in ancestral roots and is a method of affirming identity in a multicultural, multi-ethnic society such as Malaya/Malaysia. Food reflects socio-economic status, as when Lakshmi makes the cheapest of meals, a “simple curry of lentils and cooked ... rice” (32). Cuisine also demonstrates integration into the wider cultural mix in Malaya/Malaysia; for her birthday dinner, Lakshmi is treated by Ayah to “chilli crabs, afterwards the mutton cooked in goats’ milk, the creamy laksa noodles, the spicy seafood char kuey teow, the squid sambal pungent with the smell of belacan, the pomfret in ginger paste, the sugar-cane sticks wrapped in prawn paste” (154). These are largely Malay and Chinese dishes – the meal marks a conscious departure from Tamil food orthodoxy and implicitly recognises the diverse influences of a multi-ethnic society. It also celebrates the immersion and acceptance of the family into Malaya’s multi-cultural environment, which given the larger racial dynamics at play, is a milestone towards the much sought-after “*Bangsa Malaysia*” or “Malaysian race” (Gabriel, *Meaning of Race* 782–809). Food has always been a symbol of racial integration in Malaya/Malaysia although culinary integration may be considered superficial in the context of the myriad flashpoints that affect racial dynamics in Malaysia.

Cooking has a therapeutic impact on women and is described as “a necessary component in their psychological survival” (Maxey, *Mangoes and Coconuts* 165). Lakshmi describes her step-by-step method of preparing a vegetarian dish: “she cooked aubergines in a little water that had turmeric and salt” with “onions and tomatoes [she] chopped and mixed with fresh yoghurt” (43). This description is almost a mantra, a means for Lakshmi to find release from the stresses of her domestic environment. Food is also used as a means of conveying affection or respect such as when Rajasekharan, in *Evening is the Whole Day*, orders a “kampung chicken” and not the usual “supermarket rubbish” (230) when entertaining his brother. Kampung chicken means village

chicken and is a precursor to the concept of free-range poultry. Alternatively, food is a form of wordless communication such as Rajasekharan's sense that if he keeps his brother, Uncle Ballroom, (Rajasekharan's younger brother nicknamed such because he was briefly a ballroom dancer) "happy with tiger prawns for his nasi lemak and senangin fish curry for his roti canai, they will reach a tacit agreement to avoid certain uncomfortable topics of conversation" (234). These expensive choices of food effectively amount to a bribe. The family cook is horrified and thinks of the culinary extravagance that "too much money can drive you mad, *I tell you*" (234; emphasis in original). Food is also weaponised as a tool of oppression as when a neighbour tells Rajasekharan that "dhal curry twice a day" is enough for Chellam, the servant, as there is "no need for her to be feasting on chicken mutton crabs" (315). The unpunctuated asyndeton, "chicken mutton crabs", cleverly conveys a lack of hesitation at ostracising maids from life's finer things.

Food dishes also represent comfort in Tamil societies as when Paati says she will ask the maid "to make laddoos for tea" (109) for Uma, her granddaughter, when she is upset. Of course, to serve Western dishes to guests is an implied sign of status for postcolonial elites. Thus, Rajasekharan's wife, Vasanthi, browses a cookery book to select "guaranteed-to-impress recipes" (139) and contemplates serving "salmon mousse or jellied prawns? Lobster Newburg or crab canapes? Bombe Alaska or lemon souffle?" (139) at one of her tea parties to garner the respect and envy of her peers. Nevertheless, cultural pride also requires diasporic communities to disdain colonial foods as bland and inferior and so Samarasan reports that Malaysians are inclined to trust their first Prime Minister despite his Anglicised ways because "good Malay blood ... could not be diluted by any amount of bad English food" (20). This smugness at the perceived superiority of Asian food is widespread and may almost be seen as a successful extrication of a people from the colonial, or postcolonial yoke, at least in relation to cuisine.

In middle class Tamil households, menial tasks and cultural drudgery are delegated to maids. The Rajasekharans employ Lourdesmary the cook, and "neither Paati nor [Vasanthi] had any need to set foot in the kitchen" (100). Household women are still expected to remain at home and supervise the activities of the domestic drudges. In this sense, freedom from physical labour

in the home does not mean any greater latitude for personal independence. Indeed, not having to do the housework or the cooking deprives women in *Evening is the Whole Day* of the associated psychological benefits (as derived by Lakshmi from her cooking routines in *The Rice Mother*), leaving them with more time for domestic power struggles.

Overall, the cultural expectation is that the home is the domain of women. This is an expression of masculine power at work since it delegates the household, and especially the children, to the management of women while men play the role of breadwinners and have the associated freedom of movement and association. The bargain here is arguably to agree to an existence within physical and cultural boundaries, and to restrict younger women to that space, in return for status and creature comforts. This is ironic because home, whether understood as a physical location or a space where “cultures, identities, heredity and environment are negotiated” (Maxey, *Home and Nation* 31), is also the space where women have maximum autonomy from their menfolk. Men struggle to exercise power given their physical absence and their traditionally limited knowledge (to show that they are above such feminine concerns) of the domestic sphere. Nevertheless, for the women in both novels, the home is arguably not a safe space but a prison. As Lize-Marie Steenkamp explains, the home, which “comprises walls, rooms, hallways, furniture, and bodies, is the materialisation of power made structural” (609). The power she refers to here is that of the patriarchy to enforce physical and social boundaries for womenfolk. Nonetheless, given their access to a relatively private realm from which to plot their resistance, it is enormously significant to the persistence of patriarchal power that women often use this separate enclave to oppress each other on behalf of men. As a consequence, “domestic places emerge not as inherently resistant to patriarchy, but as conducive to the production of patriarchal women” (Steenkamp 609). The control exercised by women over other women has various motives, some superficially kindly, others cruel, but all resulting in the continued usurpation of the freedoms of women, by women.

Women might believe or convince themselves that they are acting in the best interests of other women – for instance, by agreeing to an arranged marriage for a daughter to a man of greater status or wealth. Women seek to improve outcomes by conforming to male demands. Given that these women have only experienced the patriarchal cage, they have limited knowledge or imagination to conceive of an alternative. An object lesson is Lakshmi's mother in *The Rice Mother*. As noted earlier, Lakshmi's mother was deceived into thinking she was giving her daughter an escape route from poverty by marrying her to a man of "better caste" who "lives in that rich land called Malaya ... where there is money to be found in the streets" and she would "live like a queen" (13). Note both the aspirational language and the fixation on wealth, "rich"/ "money", and status, "better caste"/ "queen". Lakshmi's mother is determined to better her daughter's outcomes using the same organisational principles as were taught to her – arranging a marriage that provides the opportunity to improve Lakshmi's position. The consequences of her own rebellious marriage, ostracisation and poverty, have driven home to Lakshmi's mother the importance of conformity with the demands of the institution. The other lesson, that her father or husband should not have been able to render her destitute and alone just because she made her own choice, is ignored.

It must be noted that there has been some pushback to the notion that arranged marriages inherently deprive women of agency and choice. Raksha Pande argues that women who opt for arranged marriages are not just passively following familial *diktat* but are "capable of steering their way around cultural expectations to achieve what they want from the marriage" (174). By contrast, Naema Tahir, while sympathetic to the idea that arranged marriages should not be viewed only through the lens of the so-called love marriage and judged by those standards, insists an "arranged marriage is always haunted by force" (5). This is corroborated by the punishment meted out to women like Lakshmi's mother who do not conform to patriarchal demands. In *The Rice Mother*, Lakshmi marries Ayah, a man she sees for the first time on her wedding day; this marriage demonstrably falls further along the spectrum to forced nuptials rather than an arranged one. Lakshmi cannot be argued, notwithstanding Pande's perspective, to have been navigating her way

through the thicket of expectations to a desirable outcome. She is justly portrayed by Manicka as a victim of the oppressive nature of marriage in the Tamil community.

In *Evening is the Whole Day*, Paati, Rajasekharan's mother, does her best to dissuade him from his interest in the neighbour's daughter, Vasanthi. She is against the match because Vasanthi is a "clerk's daughter" and not a "girl of his own standing" (53). Here, Samarasan, via Paati, warns of the dangers of diverting from the traditional path of an arranged marriage to pursue a love marriage where the prior sanction of family and community has not been obtained. This sort of independent marriage usually involves some element of impropriety whether of ethnicity, appearance, education, family reputation or economics. Otherwise, a potential spouse would likely be incorporated into traditional marital arrangements and a dowry agreed, perhaps at a discount, to acknowledge that personal choice played a part. Soothsayers would be consulted and the marriage treated for all intents and purposes as having been arranged. For Paati, Vasanthi, with her educational shortcomings and physical unattractiveness, falls well short of the ideal bride (despite being Tamil) for her precious firstborn. In the absence of a spectacular dowry, it is also impossible for Vasanthi to better herself through an arranged marriage. Paati's husband's hard work was so that "his sons should have the pick of the country's marriageable Indian maidens" (53). For Rajasekharan to go his own way and wed someone perceived as inferior is to undo the work of generations. It is interesting to note that Lakshmi's mother, in *The Rice Mother*, is acting in what she perceives to be the best interests of her daughter while Paati, in *Evening is the Whole Day*, is thinking about her son. However, both subscribe to the same aspirational notions about improving the family's fortunes through marriage, an idea which is central to the cultural fabric of the Tamil community. Whether these mothers lock their offspring into the same patterns of cultural behaviour from a position of good faith or not, the end result strips autonomy from potential brides and, to a lesser but real extent, from their male counterparts. The plight of brides is exacerbated because marriage is culturally understood as a transfer: the bride ceases to fully "belong" to her natal family and is absorbed into her husband's. She is expected to reorient her primary loyalty toward her husband's parents and siblings rather than her own family. This is part

of why sons are traditionally valued — they stay and extend the family line, while daughters are, in a sense, raised for someone else's household. Further, because she is the newcomer in a home where everyone else has pre-existing bonds, the bride typically enters with the least power in the household hierarchy. Her own mother and father are no longer positioned to intervene in her daily life. This isolation is a large part of what makes her vulnerable to mistreatment. Thus, whatever the motivations, mothers are adhering to a pattern where they bind their daughters to a perpetuation of male control over their lives.

The idea of arranged marriages is hierarchical as it operates on the basis that individuals of marriageable age, such as Lakshmi and Rajasekharan, do not have the wisdom to make good choices that benefit the individual as well as the family while maintaining or enhancing status within the community (Tahir 1–20). Thus, both Paati and Lakshmi's mother are comfortable with the notion that their opinions about suitable spouses should be determinative for their children. In any event, a so-called love marriage — one that is not arranged by kin — is not a surefire path to happiness as Rajasekharan's experience with Vasanthi demonstrates. A love marriage is challenging for a Tamil bride who is still expected to conform to cultural expectations based on gender, regardless of her route of entry into the family. Further, a wife without a dowry arrives in her new home at a manifest disadvantage. She has not paid the price for a good groom (Diamond-Smith et al. 3) and earned her husband's family's goodwill and gratitude. Priya Banerjee points out that the practice of dowry payments is a causative factor of violence against women where “the dowry or bride price is deemed unsatisfactory by the groom and his family” (34). It is a rare woman who is “herself a dowry” (*King Lear* 1.1.277). Vasanthi, a Tamil woman, marrying into the family without the appropriate bride tithe, is in a weaker position than a wife who joins the household having paid full measure for a modicum of courtesy or kindness from the family.

The impetus to arrange marriages manifests generationally as, despite her own disappointment, Lakshmi “planned good marriages” for her daughters and set herself the task of “saving money for [her] girls' dowries” (216). The idea that marriage is a transaction that requires a cost-benefit analysis before a proposal is made to a suitable counterpart's family is ubiquitous in

the Tamil community. Despite their own personal experiences of its shortcomings, the women in the novels find it well-nigh impossible to consider alternatives to a dowry system which has been described as a cultural practice that perpetuates the oppression, torture and murder of women (Banerjee 34–40). When Lakshmi is of marriageable age, “suddenly strange middle-aged ladies began to appear” (9). Lakshmi is “dressed to the nines and paraded in front of” the visitors, who had “the shrewd look of buyers in a diamond store” (10). The “diamond store” reference confirms that intermediaries see Lakshmi as an object to be valued and bartered. The appearance of these marriage brokers “suddenly” indicates that their machinations are unavoidable. These women know their market and have an eye on the goods: the young women of marriageable age in the village. The marriage industry is one of the few available to women, all of whom have a vested interest in maintaining a system of arranged marriages and dowry payments. So pervasive is bride barter within the Tamil community that its absence is its own form of oppression. As an example, Chellam laments the girls, “whose fathers are too drunk to arrange their marriages with factory boys or road workers” (213) while Rajasekharan’s Chinese mistress gripes that “[e]verybody knows you’ll never marry me” (281). Marginalised from the mainstream activities of the Tamil community, these women are bereft of the limited protection afforded by arranged marriages.

There is also a constant drumbeat of propaganda that validates the necessity of marriage for the wellbeing and prosperity of women. Cautionary tales are whispered about those who embark on wedded bliss without suitable consideration for their role in cementing wealth and alliances. Both books regularly refer to the unmarried status of individuals: Rajasekharan’s father had “three unmarried daughters” (24) in *Evening is the Whole Day* while, in *The Rice Mother*, prospective in-laws send word they have “a daughter of a marriageable age” (298). Put another way, there are only two states of being for young women, unmarried, and therefore in need of community intervention to procure a husband, or to be married.

The importance of marriage for status is drummed into women from a young age. When Uma is looking at a wedding photo of Paati’s, her eye is caught by a little girl sitting cross-legged on the grass. She speculates that the girl “likely grew up to be a spinster aunt” whose main role, in

the absence of a family of her own, is to send sweetmeats “to her nieces and nephews every Deepavali” (39). In other words, the only option for an unmarried woman is to piggyback on the children of the wider family since she has none of her own. This is consistent with Philips’ research into Tamil society that notes “women are considered to be incomplete as women until they have had children” (24). Further, Uma imagines that the spinster aunt from the photograph likely “died in her bathroom and was not found for a week” (39). Implicit in Uma’s speculation is the firm belief held by young Tamil women, even those who are educated and intelligent and from a younger generation, that unmarried women or women without children are “barren, malevolent, envious and unattractive” (Philips 24) and are fated to vicarious living followed by lonely deaths.

The younger generation is regularly told of the dangers of an independent approach as a warning of what might happen if they do not obediently accept marital arrangements. An illustration of this is, Rajasekharan’s brother, Uncle Ballroom. Having married a dancer, he is described as “tangoing and foxtrotting his way to penury” where the “bloody idiot got outfoxed by his own fox” (24). A woman is described as a “fox”, too cunning for a man unless he has the protection of his family and community. The fate of Lakshmi’s mother whose bridegroom was “lured away by the bright lights in the cities” (5) is another lesson for subsequent generations not to make the mistake of seeking their heart’s desires. The misery of Rajasekharan’s marriage to Vasanthi, without the blessings of family, is a major narrative strand through Samarasan’s novel. Overall, the novels reflect the way the Tamil community, including women with delegated power, strives to convince young women, and to a certain extent young men, that marriage is a community endeavour, neither to be avoided or entered independently as the consequences of such behaviour are a lifetime of suffering for all concerned.

Beware the Ides of March: Supernatural Validation

Male privilege is presented as religiously sanctified to perpetuate patriarchal power, especially in the domain of marriage. The importance of rituals is emphasised when choosing a bride or groom just as it is when completing the nuptials. Customs and conventions lend credence to any choice

of spouse made by the family, providing the imprimatur of a pantheon of Hindu deities. The matter of the marriage is, so to speak, in the hands of the gods. Furthermore, ritual is a useful opt-out to avoid giving offence to the families of potential partners. Thus, in *The Rice Mother*, Lakshmi informs her son's prospective in-laws that she found "the oil lamps on the prayer altar ... extinguished" (303). This is an ill omen and reason enough to call off the match, providing Lakshmi with a means to extricate herself from the proposed marriage while not giving offence to the bride's family. When Lakshmanan defies her wishes and proceeds with the marriage, it ends in misery for all concerned, his wife describing the marriage as a "fine mess" and Lakshmanan as a "useless gambler for a husband" (312). This stands as a warning to others of the inefficacy of rebelling against supernatural imperatives.

Later, Rani, Lakshmanan's wife, suggests that the family had "availed themselves of evil spirits" with a love potion "hid in those [coconut] cookies" (312) to ensure the marriage. She wishes to absolve herself of responsibility even though, knowing his gambling habit, she manipulated her prospective husband with the promise of a cash dowry. When Jayan, another son of Lakshmi, is to be married, a child crashes into the ceremonial preparations and a "large silver platter of kum kum went flying in the air" (344). Kum kum is the red powder used in Hindu worship to ward off negative energy. Lakshmi immediately recognises the accident as a "bad omen" (344) and blames the failure of the marriage on this rather than her poor choice of spouse. One consequence of the rituals associated with choosing brides is that all parties are able to divest themselves of responsibility for bad outcomes by blaming the supernatural. The status quo, of arranged marriages and dowry payments, is maintained by attributing failures to the intervention of the spirits rather than the absurdity of cultural barter practices. The prosaic nature of supernatural interference, a boisterous child knocking over the offering platter, allows mere happenstance to be used by the patriarchy, including the women who perpetrate its control, in service of maintaining traditional practices that limit freedom for women.

Rajasekharan, in *Evening is the Whole Day*, is also unlucky in the marriage stakes. Having ignored his mother's wishes and married Vasanthi, he finds that some "spiteful black magic had

left this soured wife” (97) in place of the girl he courted. It must be unnatural intervention that doomed his marriage rather than his own stubborn resolution to pursue Vasanthi against all advice. Ironically, it is the man, the beneficiary of the patriarchal system designed to provide him a dowry-bearing supplicant as wife, who is complaining because he bucked the system and made his own choice. To maintain the patriarchy, even the men must be reminded that it is best they abide by the strictures of the community and operate only within culturally permitted boundaries. His mother, Paati, does not mince words after the marriage, saying, “Now you and I are stuck with her for good” (99). She includes herself in enumerating the individuals “stuck” with Vasanthi. In Tamil households, women are in forced proximity with each other and a poor choice of spouse rebounds well beyond the parties to the marriage to encompass the wider family. This is another reminder that the rebellion of a scion has negative consequences for the women who are invested in the system as well as the men. Overall, both novels brim with warnings of the bad outcomes that await those who show an independent streak when it comes to marital matters. To be clear, this does not suggest that Samarasan or Manicka share those views; the women use their platform to highlight the pressures that are brought to bear on members of the Tamil community to conform with traditional practices. The constancy of indoctrination serves to eat away at any sense of purpose or independence to which the female characters might otherwise aspire.

Younger generations are much less susceptible to propaganda and thus, in *The Rice Mother*, Dimple, Lakshmi’s granddaughter, marries a half-Japanese man she falls in love with despite the consternation of the family. However, he turns out to be violent and manipulative so this might be seen as yet another example of the folly of striking out on one’s own when seeking a spouse. Uma, in *Evening is the Whole Day*, makes good her escape without succumbing to marriage. She obtains a full scholarship to Columbia University and on her departure Samarasan implies that the family does not expect her to return. Rajasekharan captures the imprisoning nature of Tamil culture and the opportunities and adventures that now lie ahead for Uma, because: “In America, he says, his voice low with wonder [...] anything can happen” (338). The circle is complete and the female child flees to the centre of global power to find freedom (*Evening is the Whole Day*

predates MAGA) from the double oppression of postcolonial and patriarchal Tamil society. However, for women like Vasanthi, this effectively means that “they have paid the heavy price of an earlier patriarchal bargain, but are not able to cash in on its promised benefits” (Kandiyoti 282). Vasanthi has lived under her mother-in-law’s yoke but is unable to control her daughter and probably any future daughter-in-law. As such, Vasanthi is deprived of her just reward for knuckling down and accepting the tyrannical demands of the existing patriarchal infrastructure. In this manner, Samarasan makes the interesting point that women finding their freedom comes at a cost to other women, albeit those who might not engender enormous sympathy given their role in perpetuating male power in the household. It is, however, a reminder that any successful dismantling of traditional male hegemony will have collateral damage in the form of female victims.

Mine Eyes Smell Onions: The Kitchen as a War Zone

Women, limited by cultural demands to a finite physical and emotional space within the home, turn on each other when confronted with the forced proximity of different generations under one roof. In these circumstances, there is no complex root to the animosity between women of a household, it is merely the results of living cheek by jowl with others in a confined space where personalities and habits clash. It must not, of course, be forgotten that this domestic propinquity is a function of the patriarchy and not a free choice by the women. It must also be kept in mind that the prison wardens (senior household women) ensuring this proximity are acting in their own self interests. The extended family unit was originally adopted for reasons that included efficiency and poverty mitigation. In the Tamil community depicted in the novels, the son has responsibility for the women in his life: mother, wife, daughters and sisters, the latter two categories until marriage. The obligation of a Tamil son to house a mother usually reoccurs upon widowhood. The tensions between cohabiting women are rife in both novels and encompass every family dynamic whether of kin by blood or marriage. What stands out, though, for domestic disharmony, is the relationship between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law. Studies in India have identified “the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship [as] being particularly inefficient” (Gupta et al.

1184). Rani, Lakshmi's daughter-in-law, refers to Lakshmi as "the spider" who is "dribbling poison into [Lakshman's] ear" (317). The two women are implacable enemies, which has unhappy consequences for other family members such as Dimple, Lakshmi's granddaughter who is prevented by Rani from visiting her beloved grandmother. In *Evening is the Whole Day*, Paati's viciousness towards her daughter-in-law manifests in pettiness and domestic cruelty. When Vasanthi chooses a saree to wear one afternoon, Paati says offhandedly that she seemed "to like these bright-bright colors" (101) which she, Paati, still thinks of as "rubber estate colors" (101). Suffice to say, this would be construed by Vasanthi as a mortal insult given the status of estate Tamils in society (see above on the lot of the Tamil subaltern, the rubber estate girl in Malaysian society). In other words, Paati reserves "her bile for immutable truths: for [Vasanthi's] origins" (101). The word "bile" reminds us that these attacks are intentional, with the tongue as a weapon, dripping bitterness towards the interloper in a similar manner to Lakshmi's "dribbling poison". Later, while Vasanthi reads a women's magazine, Paati remarks that it is good she "can find reading material for [her] level" (101), reminding her daughter-in-law of her unremarkable intellectual and educational achievements. Knowing full well that her parents are from a lower class, Paati asks "sweetly" and often, "Well, Vasanthi, how are your parents?" (103), thus recalling her origins and the status gap between the women. With few levers of power, words are weaponised by women in the Tamil home.

In the same manner, other female household dynamics are rooted in low-grade, persistent conflict. Uma is dismissive towards her younger, affection-deprived sister, Aasha, who often "sits in Uma's empty room" (15). The sister seeks comfort in her imaginary friendship with the illegitimate offspring of the former Scottish owner of the Blue House who dies in a murder-suicide by the mother. The entire household is unkind to Chellamservant, sometimes with intentional cruelty such as that dealt out by Paati and Vasanthi, sometimes with offhand casual indifference, such as that expressed by the Rajasekharan children as when they mock her hygiene standards, language skills or estate origins. The dynamics of a closed system with no outlet for energy, ambition or diversion leads to tensions and pettiness in the dealings between the women and young

people trapped in that space. The closed system itself is the result of the patriarchal nature of the Tamil family dynamic and the complicity of women in the oppression of other women in exchange for favours.

Uneasy Lies the Head: Women Competing for Power

While some of the unpleasantness in the relationships between women can be explained away as a function of proximity and a lack of external stimuli, power struggles underpin willingness by women to torment other women. Unable to stand up to men, these women punch down. To paraphrase Yang Jisheng writing about Mao's China in his book *Tombstone*, every person – in this context, women – during that era was a slave facing upwards and a tyrant facing down (46). An interesting aspect of the desire for power, albeit peripheral power – primary power is with the patriarch – is the competition for influence over female family members. Thus, in *Evening is the Whole Day*, Paati and Vasanthi compete for the affections of Uma, the oldest daughter, hoping to entice her into their personal orbit and persuade the girl to reject the other. When she is first pregnant with Uma, her eldest, Vasanthi, feels a “stream of hope” that “[a]t least now I won't be alone” and “I'll have one person on my side in this house” (103). Within the family and the marriage, Vasanthi is “alone”. Her marriage is unhappy and she has no female allies, partly because she arrived without a dowry and therefore had nothing to offer in exchange for status in the extended family. The birth of a child represents hope for change.

Uma, however, is precocious and “each week she laughed a little harder” at her father's jokes and “yawned a little more” (106) at the entertainments provided by her mother. While this outcome is partly Vasanthi's own fault, her lack of ability to entertain a bright child is because she was constantly undermined by her own family, especially her father. Besides, Uma does not reach these conclusions or develop these attitudes without help. Paati, her grandmother, is quick to enter the fray, telling Uma that “people who are boring get bored very easily” (108) and that the bad relationship between Uma's parents is “what happens when people marry beneath themselves” (109). Upon inquiry as to the meaning of these remarks, Paati explains to Uma that this is when

“people get married to those who are not as clever as them, not as educated, not as classy, not as wise” (109). Samarasan uses the asyndeton and the repetitive anaphora skilfully here to impress the shortcomings of the mother forcefully upon the child. Implicit is the suggestion that the list of her mother’s failures has no discernible end. The battle for control of the child is ongoing and intense. When Vasanthi wants to take Uma to Kuala Lumpur for a trip, Paati tries to keep the child with her. In this instance, Paati loses the argument and gives in with bad grace. “If such a small thing is sooo important to Vasanthi?” (112) then the child, she concedes, should make the journey. The long vowel sound in “sooo” serves to sarcastically undermine the victor by suggesting the spoils are negligible.

In *The Rice Mother*, a similar dynamic plays out. Rani, Lakshman’s wife, does her best to keep her daughter away from her grandparents. She does this to punish her mother-in-law, Lakshmi, who is entranced by the child – not least because of her resemblance to the dead Mohini – and assert her independence from the matriarch. Eventually, Rani becomes jealous of the daughter, Dimple, who is a favourite of the father. She allows the girl time with Lakshmi just to get her out of the house; she “began to send the poor child back and forth like an incorrectly addressed package” (338). Again, a girl child is treated as an object to obtain leverage, not as an individual with dignity. Rani does not allow Dimple to live with Lakshmi permanently even though she is happy to be rid of the child because it would “be letting [Lakshmi] win” (338). She prefers to torment her mother-in-law and husband with her capriciousness and has no thought for the child with “big, sad eyes” (338). Objectified from childhood and stripped off autonomy, Dimple is ripe for exploitation by a cruel and manipulative husband as she has not been taught self-respect or a belief that she has the right to self-determination. The consequences of the hostility between female members of a household thus have generational impact. However, it is critical to note that it is the older women, mothers and grandmothers, who make the lives of girls unhappy in an effort to gain influence and companionship in the domestic sphere. Men are not directly responsible but are scions of a system that places women in these invidious positions.

The power of women, within families and tight-knit communities such as those portrayed in the two novels, is directly related to their proximity to, and influence over, the primary patriarchal figure. As a woman, to be powerful or influential, requires the implicit backing of the male head of the household. Behind every dominant woman, it seems, there is a male enabler. At the very least, to exercise authority, a woman needs to give other household women the impression that she speaks for the throne. This is illustrative of the “patriarchal bargain” struck by women who are obliged to strategise within set patriarchal parameters of activity (Kandiyoti 274). Paati cloaks herself in her son’s authority to assert herself against his wife. This is consistent with Kandiyoti’s insight that older women of a household are keen to ensure the primary allegiance of a son is to his mother rather than his wife (279). In this way, they maintain and exercise secondary power derived from their adjacency to the patriarch. As a case in point, in the earlier conflict between Paati and Vasanthi about the trip to Kuala Lumpur, Paati appeals to a higher authority, Rajasekharan, for a decision on whether the child is to be allowed on the trip. However, in the manner of men who have no personal stake in the outcome of the dispute, Rajasekharan says, “You women can fight it out” (112). Here, he betrays his mother’s expectations that he will come down on her side but also demonstrates a masculine indifference to the petty concerns of the household women. His use of “women” to describe the two is Samarasan’s hint to readers that “women” are viewed as a subordinate class by Tamil men, indistinguishable from each other. “You” is merely rude and emphasises his male superiority. By belittling Paati, with whom he usually agrees, Rajasekharan also instinctively ensures that his mother does not usurp his power entirely. If the household believes Paati speaks for him, eventually there will be no one to listen when he speaks for himself. Thus, in this situation, he ensures that ultimate authority remains with him by arbitrarily favouring his wife, Vasanthi, with the decision.

Women might believe they are acting in the best interest of their menfolk, whether fathers, husbands or sons when setting boundaries for these potentially usurping women. These women sometimes launch attacks against other women, pre-emptive or otherwise, who may be making a

play, or who they fear might be making a play, for influence over their menfolk. According to Kandiyoti, such women make every effort to ensure that men live up to their obligations (282) because they want to benefit from the patriarchal bargain they have struck and paid for in terms of docility and propriety. Presented with a choice between the wellbeing of either the women or men in their lives, it is not entirely surprising that these women prioritise the men who have been placed in authority over them by the family and community and to whom they owe their livelihoods and status.

In *The Rice Mother*, Lakshmi has a peculiar encounter with the wife of her uncle, the mango seller, who lent her money to rescue the family from moneylenders. Meeting her for the first time, she feels that the aunt “secretly detested” her (92). Eventually, Lakshmi confronts her aunt and asks why she is so hated. The response is that she “borrowed money from my husband and paid no interest” (97). Lakshmi wonders why her very wealthy aunt has her “mind fixed on something as petty as the interest on a loan to a struggling relative so many years before” but realises it is the “obvious and genuine affection” (98) that her uncle has for her and her children that is the issue. The aunt is jealous of her niece and the threat she poses by being a favourite of her uncle. For women in Tamil households, power is perceived as finite, any usurpation by another means less for that person. A similar episode occurs between Lakshmi’s wife, Rani, and sister-in-law, Ratha. Rani is convinced that Ratha is “trying to steal her husband” (354). In fact, Rani has borrowed money from Ratha and does not want to be seen to be in the wrong, or to pay back the loan, so she manufactures a false accusation. Here, a woman launches a pre-emptive strike to retain standing in the family that might be lost if her financial shenanigans come to light. The need to be close to the seat of power, to appear to speak for it, to compel the patriarch to uphold the patriarchal bargain, forces women to treat each other as the enemy within as opposed to fellow inmates in a patriarchal prison.

Proximity to the patriarchal figure is determinative of position in the household hierarchy and women fight tooth and nail to maintain or advance their status. Women angle for authority over other female figures (and younger men) in the family as it extends their sphere of influence. However, women in these confined, prison-like households are ultimately capable of betraying individuals under their protection at the behest, express or implied, of the patriarch. For example, Vasanthi is resentful of her daughter's precocity and her good relationship with her father and Paati. Thus, she works hard to sabotage Uma's successes. When Uma is the star of a school play and receives flowers on stage, Vasanthi accuses her daughter of loose morals, "Like a cheap floor dancer you looked" (182). When Uma looks at pictures later, she is accused of enjoying the memory of when she "took that boy's flowers like a cheap prostitute" (151). The repetition of the word "cheap" is instructive; a girl child who is "cheap" has betrayed the mother's sacrifice and the father's standing in society as she cannot be bartered for higher status. The criticisms of women within the patriarchy follow the same patterns; a woman is a "prostitute" or she flaunts herself in a way that is designed to attract male attention. Similar to the accusations against Chellamservant – she is a whore and likely pregnant out of wedlock – the criticisms of women within patriarchal systems conform to certain stereotypes. Women are either chaste or whores; their stature within the society is defined by their effect on and value to men.

A further illustration of women failing to protect women in their care is the treatment of Uma by Paati in *Evening is the Whole Day*. Uma has always "been Paati's favourite" (32). The bond between grandmother and granddaughter is real and powerful, described by Samarasan as follows: "Paati taught Uma English proverbs and Tamil poems; Uma threaded Paati's needles for her. Paati washed Uma's hair; Uma massaged Paati's pre-arthritis legs. Uma wove soaring fictions for Paati; Paati fed Uma peeled facts" (107). This interesting description of "peeled facts" likely alludes to the common practice in Tamil households of peeling fruits for children to avoid mess and the risk of choking. The idea that the facts must also be sanitised in this way subtly reminds readers of the control exercised by older family members over the young. These sentence fragments demonstrate

a powerful connection in which grandmother and granddaughter are capable of functioning across generational and language divides. The bond is also domestic and plays out within the realm of the home. When her parents' shouting upsets Uma, she sleeps with her grandmother (109); when she is afraid of what will become of her if her parents part ways, her grandmother reassures her, "Nothing will happen to you [...] Paati is here for you" (107). Implicit here is the promise that Paati will shield the child and take her side against her parents if that should become necessary.

However, later, when Uma is molested by her father in a drunken moment, Paati turns a blind eye and "before anyone could speak to her, ask her anything, or force her to see more than she'd already seen, she retreated and shut her door behind her" (303). As Kate Manne succinctly states, "One frightening aspect of such violence is how easily one could miss its incipient possibility, beneath the smooth surface of ordinary social relations" despite masculine violence being "typically faced by women and committed by men due to patriarchal forces that serve and reflect gender roles and relations". Paati chooses to "shut her door behind her" (303), a physical symbol of the barrier she raises between herself and the truth and, as a consequence, a barrier between her and Uma.

As Uma silently accuses her before her death, Paati "purposely went blind and deaf so [she] didn't have to know anything" in order to protect her "precious son" (153). Uma realises that "Paati was her protector no longer; she was just a selfish old lady who would never do anything to endanger the cushy life she led in her rich son's house" (306). Uma has finally recognised that in the patriarchal bargain between father and grandmother, she has no value. Paati pays for her privilege in the coin of her granddaughter. That same day, she asks for her bed to be shifted to the spare room downstairs, ostensibly because her age makes the stairs too difficult. But "Uma knew what Paati really feared; Appa knew it too" (306). By moving downstairs, Paati makes it impossible to be privy to any further inappropriate interactions between father and daughter, preferring to protect her son with her ignorance than her granddaughter with her knowledge. In this manner, she chooses to uphold patriarchal structures even at the cost of the wellbeing of a girl within her care and with whom she has a close and loving relationship (and who trusted her to provide

protection). She is the definition of the patriarchal woman who has struck a bargain – for that “cushy life” (306) – and will pay her dues regardless of the cost to other women. If Paati will not stand up for Uma, Samarasan implies, there is no instance when women will gainsay the men.

Cruelty is also meted out to women who are in a relationship of financial dependence to the family. The overall treatment of Chellam and Mui Tsai has been described above. The pettiness of the women of the family in their dealings with Chellam is particularly enlightening, not just about the overall class divides within Tamil society, but the desire of some women to bully weaker members of the household. In *Evening is the Whole Day*, Chellam earns some extra money from Uncle Ballroom, the brother of Rajasekharan, who feels sorry for her. In no time, Chellam is accused of having an affair with him and likely being pregnant. The attacks are so vicious that a so-called holy man, asked to intervene, sums up the gossip as follows: “Chellam is a whore, a dirty girl, an itchy woman. Chellam might be carrying a bastard child in her belly” (207). The shaming of women again follows well-worn paths; failure is judged against patriarchal standards – a whore not a wife, a bastard child, not an heir, and always the suggestion of being unclean, of failing a purity test. Once again, Samarasan resorts to the asyndeton to suggest that Chellam’s shortcomings extend beyond the list provided.

Likewise, in *The Rice Mother*, it is Old Soong’s first and second wives who are prepared to take Mui Tsai’s children away from her and raise them as their own with no thought for the mother’s trauma. Another example of abuse by those in a protective relationship comes when Lakshmi, in a rage when she thinks her less favoured child, Jeyan, has lied to her about something trivial, instructs her son Lakshmanan to use a cane. He “vengefully struck the skinny back” (277) until Jeyan’s “skin had peeled off in places and strips of raw flesh were visible” (280). This is not sufficient punishment, so she blows some chilli powder into the wounds (279). Narrating the incident, Lakshmi refers to herself throughout as a “monster” (275–79). She knows that her actions are unconscionable but is unable to prevent her own loss of discipline. The control of the matriarch over the household and her profound isolation, trigger violent outbursts; women are portrayed as capable of almost unimaginable cruelty against those in their care.

The Whirligig of Time: Women seeking Vengeance

As the hierarchy amongst household women is not static, changes in status are sometimes coupled with revenge for previous ill-treatment. In this way, both works remind readers that the patriarchal bargain is not negotiated between equals. In the commercial sphere, victims of contractual bullying have some redress; in the domestic sphere, however, the patriarchy has a free rein. Thus, as Paati grows old, the two who have suffered most at her hands, Vasanthi and Chellam, get their revenge. This is a variation of the expectations of women described by Kandiyoti as follows: “deprivation and hardship [a woman] experiences as a young bride is eventually superseded by the control and authority she will have over her own subservient daughters-in-law” (279). Here, the cyclical nature of women’s power is exercised when the senior woman is too old to defend her rights and so the daughter-in-law does not have to wait for her own daughters-in-law but can exact vengeance on the mother-in-law. Vasanthi deals Paati a “wet thump, a flat slap”, “hand on back” (150) when the old woman is having her bath. The whole family is aware of the “scoldings and slappings and knuckleknockings of Paati” (166) and later “mouthslaps and thighpinches and headknocks on Paati” (260). The present continuous tense indicates the frequency of the beatings. The repetitive polysyndeton and portmanteau coinage, as well as the sibilance and rhyming quality of “scoldings” and “slappings” gives the abuse a sing-song repetitive quality which reflects both the frequency of the assaults and the unwillingness of the family to take it seriously. This is despite instances where the bodily harm is difficult to ignore such as when her daughter-in-law “swings around and gives Paati a mouthslap that echoes all through the house” (263). The “mouthslap”, referred to twice in the novel, is an assault loaded with meaning as Paati’s tongue has been her weapon against the women who now assault her. Vasanthi slapping her mother-in-law’s mouth is a symbolic of her ability to finally silence her and punish her for cruel words.

The rest of the family still prefer to “pretend not to see or hear” (166). Ironically, this is the same approach previously taken by Paati to the abuse of Uma. The secrecy maintained within families is an important feature of patriarchal institutions. The proposition implied by the reticence

is that the families that struggle are the exception. Behind closed doors, Tamil families suffer indignities and cruelty while presenting a unified face to the public. This leads each family to believe that they are the exception, the unique household who cannot make the patriarchal rules or cultural values work for them. Once again, a lack of honesty impedes any hope of solidarity between the oppressed. This is also why these novels by Samarasan and Manicka are so important for casting a light on the realities of the Tamil family's lived experience (and why the creative component of this thesis is a memoir).

Chellam too "has pushed and knocked and pinched Paati before, and pulled her hair" (172), the plosives emphasise the physicality of the violence. One day, no different from any other, the youngest daughter counts "three new marks on Paati: two dark pinch-spots on a right arm and a red welt on her left temple" (260) courtesy of Chellam. Pinching is a common form of punishment meted out by older women to children in the Tamil community so Samarasan subtly informs us that the tables have been turned on the matriarch. There is emotional abuse as well since they mock Paati for the failure of Rajasekharan to intervene, insofar as he knows, to prevent her debasement. Vasanthi tells her mother-in-law, "We don't need to hear about your wonderful son, okay?" (150). Uma's last words to her grandmother are also mocking: "Ask your son to bring your water, then, if he's so wonderful" (154). The references to Paati's "son" are a reminder that power is derived from proximity to the patriarchal figure and now, despite the relationship, her son is of no use to her. All she can do is wonder whether he knows "what happens while you're at your office" (149). The repetitive use of a sarcastic "wonderful" to describe Rajasekharan indicate that the women know full well that their patriarch has feet of clay. However, they are still trapped in the home, exercising delegated power over each other, but always as the sidekick of the dominant male. He remains the fountainhead of authority even when they have limited respect for him in his personal capacity. In this way, Samarasan demonstrates the powerful hold of the patriarchy over Tamil families. The physical attacks on Paati are motivated partly by revenge for former treatment and frustration at the burden of caring for a cantankerous elderly person. However, the verbal attacks are an indication that all female denizens of the household recognise

that Paati no longer has a grip on power. Her son is absent, ignorant or indifferent and without him, she, aged and infirm, does not have the weapons to defend herself. The patriarchal bargain, it appears, has an expiration date.

Conclusion

In conclusion, both novels depict women operating within patriarchal boundaries that form the organisational framework of the Tamil household. Occasional acts of rebellion, described in the previous chapter, are few and far between and are usually exercised within the constraints of existing permission structures rather than as acts of defiance against the infrastructure of male power. Further, women in the novels, reflecting the realities of Tamil households in Malaya/Malaysia, are often as committed to upholding the patriarchy as the men. They are willing to police other women's behaviour and limit their freedoms on behalf of men. Motivations for this behaviour range from a genuine belief, a consequence of lifelong indoctrination, that patriarchal power structures are traditional and appropriate, to a patriarchal bargain in which a woman is rewarded with creature comforts as well as dominance within the domestic sphere.

Younger women or those with less power or status, such as a woman who marries into a family without a dowry or one who is of a lower socio-economic status, often suffer from degrading and humiliating treatment. However, as power in the domestic sphere is obtained and wielded with the permission of the patriarch, a breakdown of this relationship may leave the matriarch without armour and subject to vengeful behaviour by those women she previously tormented. Further, the determination of women to maintain their fealty to men in the hopes of appropriate reward leads them to sacrifice those in their care or who are the subject of their affections at the altar of male power. This represents a tragedy for the marginalised individual as well as for the family unit which loses any cohesiveness or structural integrity leading to unhappiness and guilt for all concerned. Thus, the efforts by women to maintain patriarchal strictures and impose them on other women, in the hope, *inter alia*, of personal benefits, results in

only short-term gains. As demonstrated by both authors, patriarchal bargains also undermine any effort to develop solidarity among women to confront monolithic male power.

CONCLUSION: MALAYSIA BOLEH¹¹

In the previous chapters, I analysed the depictions of traditional hegemonic masculinity in Malaysian/Malayan Tamil communities and the role of women in perpetuating patriarchal social and cultural structures. I approached the analysis using both a gendered and postcolonial lens while exploring the intersectionality between elements and other power dynamics that are prevalent in colonial and postcolonial societies and/or unique to the Malayan/Malaysian experience in order to answer the research question: How do migration and ethnicity shape the construction of identity in Malaysian society, as represented in Rani Manicka's *The Rice Mother* and Preeta Samarasan's *Evening Is the Whole Day*? While the first part of the critical segment concentrated on male characters, their sources of power and status as well as threats to male authority, the second part examined the role of women in Tamil families as depicted in both novels and the extent to which women cooperate in their own oppression. In *The Patriarchs*, the two works are analysed to identify the elements of Tamil culture that reinforce patriarchal structures within the home and community. Traditions that reinforce male primacy, imported from their countries of origin, Ceylon and India, are maintained by the Tamil diaspora in Malaysia. Leveraging on this status, the men in the novels are breadwinners, have better access to education and use their status to obtain wives of their choosing. In Samarasan's work, the patriarch adopts English habits and language to fashion himself into a postcolonial elite, intending to use his status to launch a political career. However, attempts by Tamil men to expand their influence into Malaysian society more widely is hampered by their status as ethnic minorities without political or economic clout. Tamils are also associated with the plantations, and assumed to be uneducated, alcoholic and violent by the majority Malay and Chinese populations who manifest this attitude in racist behaviour towards Tamils in society. This leads to colourism, or intra-ethnic discrimination, as middle class Tamils desperately try and distinguish themselves from their estate kin. Finally, the Tamil postcolonial elite that seeks power through the adoption of English customs, dress and language is displaced

¹¹ "Malaysia boleh" is the national chant adopted by Malaysians when cheering sporting events, particularly badminton, and translates literally to "Malaysia can". The phrase captures the national spirit on those occasions when divisions of race and religion are not at the forefront of discourse. It is also sometimes used ironically.

by a Malay majority that uses the mechanics of power inherited from the British to position themselves at the apex of political power in the country. This leaves emasculated Tamil men to take out their frustrations on their wives, mothers and daughters.

In *The Matriarchs*, the oppression faced by Tamil women in patriarchal households is shown to be preserved through arranged marriages and dowry practices. Women in the novels, even when they show strength of character and determination, largely conform to traditional expectations. Their roles in Tamil society are reinforced by religious and cultural practices that are all designed to ensure their continued subjugation to men. Their machinations to better their situations and that of their families are usually effected within patriarchal boundaries. Further, women strike patriarchal bargains to access power through proximity to and influence over the patriarch. Consequently, these women function as instruments of the patriarchy and oppress other women even in domestic domains where men are usually absent, such as the kitchen. Tamil women are also in the crosshairs of other forms of oppression in Malaysia based on their ethnicity, language skills and the postcolonial legacy of economic marginalisation. Subalterns in both works, at the intersection of various types of oppression suffer the worst outcomes of all female characters.

This critical component makes substantive contributions to the general understanding of migration, ethnicity and identity in Malaya/Malaysia. These include the identification of unique oppressive features that affect Tamil women from postcolonial subordination, lack of access to elite status via language skills or education, the patriarchal nature of Tamil society and the continued prevalence of arranged marriages and dowry practices. The subordination of both Tamil men and women in society because of skin colour and its association with plantation backgrounds is revealed in the racism by the other ethnicities towards Tamils as well as the colourism within the Tamil community. The intersectionality of race and poverty with gender and postcoloniality creates a complex and comprehensive infrastructure of oppression that is textually different, more than the sum of its parts, and to which the Tamil woman in Malaysia is a victim.

The failure of a Tamil postcolonial elite to access political and economic influence because they are displaced by the seizure of political power by Malay nationalists using inherited colonial systems, is a unique consequence, identified in this thesis, of Britain's colonial legacy. Colonial pluralism was maintained by a postcolonial elite and now underpins the Malay governing coalition. This legacy includes raced-based administrative, education and employment practices that continue to inflame tensions and undermine race relations in the country (to the detriment of Tamils especially). The ethnic framing embedded into the legal and constitutional framework of the nation institutionalises racial segregation. In effect, Malaya/Malaysia went from a model of white supremacy (as a colony) to a postcolonial elite that affected a white mask to seek power and then a second colonisation by Malay nationalists, most of which has worked and works to the detriment of the Tamil community, especially its women. Individuals operate within hierarchies of privilege that are constant and overlapping but non-linear, sometimes alleviating burdens but more of than not, in the Tamil context, legitimising exclusion and discrimination. The intra-Tamil colour bar ensures a lack of solidarity within the community that further undermines the ability to overcome economic exploitation. Overall, Tamil identity formation as reflected in the two works is a complex dialectic between adherence to patriarchal customs and traditions of the motherlands and the consequence of being a racial minority in Malaysia's multiethnic and stratified society.

Given the overlap between history and the narratives of *The Rice Mother* and *Evening is the Whole Day*, the two novels that form the subject matter of this thesis are, on the one hand, personal stories; on the other, can be read as allegorical. In an interview, Samarasan does not shy away from her role as a writer, not just of the personal but the political. She is quoted as saying that she was engaged in the writing of a political novel, but "I was also aware that to remain true to the country I knew, most of the 'political action' would have to unfold in the claustrophobic atmosphere of a single household" (Ng 126). Samarasan suggests she used the home as a microcosm of society. Her focus is the plight of the Rajasekharan family as they struggle to navigate, firstly, the postcolonial settlement upon the departure of the British, and subsequently, the post-riot settlement between the races, which leaves Tamils with almost no levers of political power.

However, criticism of Samarasan's novel stems, in part, from her transnationalism. Arguably, as commentators highlighted in prior chapters have suggested, her perception of the country is fixed at a point in time and has not evolved with the country. Alternatively, her literary and educational influences affect her objectivity. For instance, the evolving concept of a "*Bangsa Malaysia*" or Malaysian race (Gabriel, *Meaning of Race* 782–809), not so different from Rajasekharan's dream, is a strand in politics that has largely developed after Samarasan's personal experience of the country. Her public protestations on social media about race-based injustices in Malaysian society have made her a somewhat controversial figure and suggest she is now a cynic about the prospects of the nation to find an equitable and just future for all Malaysians. For many, who cling to hope and work for change, this attitude smacks of transnational privilege, and her social media followers have responded to her in both thoughtful and abusive ways. Arguably, her presence on social media, while informative, lacks the nuance of her formal work, and somewhat undermines her reputation as a thoughtful contributor to the dialogue about the country.

Samarasan is also acutely aware of the contradictions and pitfalls of writing in English for a Malaysian audience and does her best to create a layered narrative – a series of nesting dolls – where the greater the familiarity with Malaysian languages, customs, history and idiosyncrasies, the greater the insights into the Malaysian condition that may be derived from the novel. While Manicka also writes in English, her characters are understood to be speaking the various ethnic dialects. Thus, she does not seek to create the metonymic gap so prevalent in Samarasan's work. Manicka's rejection of understatement has the effect of making even the instances of recorded or verified history appear amplified and less credible. Save for the Japanese Occupation, whose horror in the Malaysian context is difficult to exaggerate, Manicka wastes an opportunity to explore the more subtle, but brutal aspects of the Malayan experience under the British. Unlike Samarasan, Manicka does not maintain a presence on social media and thus her current opinions on Malaysia are not available for public dissection. In any event, her sketches of post-Independence Malaysia lack the heft of her historical analysis and in that sense, she is a less controversial figure than Samarasan.

Both Manicka and Samarasan have written first novels that generated enormous pride in the homeland. They stormed the barricades of Western publishing and gave a voice to the voiceless lurking in the far reaches of the Commonwealth, opening the doors for other Malaysian writers to achieve publication and recognition. To do this with insight and scholarship that have the two women spoken about in the same breath as Salman Rushdie and Vikram Seth provides other Malaysian writers the confidence to speak of their own experiences.

In the minute details of the lived experiences of the characters – waiting for the Milo van, parents pulling out the fine strands of a banana for the children, the black-smoke-emitting pink mini-buses hurtling down busy streets, the old man on his bicycle collecting newspapers for recycling – a flood of memories is triggered in Malaysian readers that makes us, finally, feel seen. Although flawed, both novels capture the realities of the past and its impact on the present in a manner that has allowed a dialogue to continue about what it means to be a Malaysian, especially an ethnic minority, in the colourful, troubled land this writer still calls home.

From the Critical to the Creative: Bridging the Divide

The analysis of the two works of fiction, and this critical component, underpins the creative section of this thesis, the memoir of my parents entitled “I Go and Come”. I have approached the overall thesis from two directions, with academic rigour in the critical piece and storytelling engagement in the creative segment. The design of this thesis has sought to use the scaffolding of diasporic fiction to write a work of creative non-fiction that explores similar themes to that in *Evening is the Whole Day* and *The Rice Mother* including the legacy of colonialism, the displacement of the English-speaking postcolonial elite with Malay power, the patriarchal nature of the Tamil family, the economic marginalisation of Indians in the country and the racism towards Tamils and colourism within the Tamil community, that is endemic in Malaysia. In the research and writing of this thesis, there has been a process of osmosis where the two components have influenced and informed the other, I believe to the enhancement of both.

The critical component of the thesis gave me an unparalleled opportunity to understand my own experiences as a Tamil woman in Malaysia. To be specific, I used the academic framework of gender and postcolonial studies to consider and contextualise my personal experiences and family history. This has allowed me to explore the lives of my parents with a broader understanding of the cultural, political and social context of their lived experiences. For instance, the different treatment meted out to my father, as a dark-skinned individual and my mother, as a light-skinned individual, can be better understood in the context of the Tamil history in Malaysia and the determination of the community to avoid association with the plantation past of the bulk of Tamils in the country. This can be juxtaposed against my own experiences of racism and colourism as a dark-skinned woman; the consequences were greater for me than that faced by my father because his gender provided him with some protection in a patriarchal community and society. My mother's fondness for the Western canon, and my father's dismissal of "white man words" (as described in the creative component) strikes at the heart of the choice faced by many within postcolonial societies, whether to adopt or eschew their colonial heritage. My mother taught me a love of Shakespeare, English law and Latin idiom despite my father's rejection of the same content. The dialectic between critical and creative component has driven home the difficulties faced by Malaysian individuals to decolonise the mind and confront history with clear and untainted vision.

My father's status in the Tamil community was undermined, but not destroyed, by his maverick behaviour because, as the oldest male son of respectable parents, he was cloaked in the armour of the patriarchy. My mother, on the other hand, a woman at the intersection of various oppressions, was ex-communicated from her church because women straying from their socially acceptable roles to marry outside the community must be punished, as a warning to other women, to ensure generational conformity with societal norms. Her fate bears some marked similarity to that of Lakshmi's mother and yet she is more Rajasekharan than Vasanthi when it comes to colonial influences. Real life is stranger than fiction.

My grandmother and my father's sisters, all struck patriarchal bargains with their menfolk. They controlled their daughters and daughters-in-law on behalf of men in exchange for influence

and status in the community. These women arranged marriages for daughters and bartered sons for dowries. My father's decision to proceed with a "love" marriage in these circumstances was a betrayal of the expectations, financial and communal, of his family. And yet, my mother suffered much more severe consequences than him. She, the oldest child, with a mother who died young, a father with early dementia and two feckless younger brothers, did not have a patriarch with whom she could come to such an arrangement. My father drove too hard a bargain, demanding that she abandon her own family and adopt Hindu practices; she demurred, costing the family significant isolation and ostracisation from the community. It has been genuinely eye-opening to understand that my family story is not so much a series of unfortunate events but a consequence of a unique historical and cultural context. It has been a revelation to come to terms with the insidious and distorting effects of postcolonial and gender hierarchies on individuals and society. This is not to suggest that my parents were without free will, but their channels for expression of that freedom were constrained by boundary markers, beyond which a high price was paid for independent behaviour.

I chose the medium of the memoir for the creative element of this thesis because it has unique structural advantages. It allows for the use of double memory: the narration of events as they happened and the interpretation of such events with the benefit of hindsight. I was also able to structure the work as a series of flashbacks that mimic the sporadic, episodic, potentially unreliable nature of family memory. The incorporation of post memory was used to consider how events that occurred prior to my life and that of my children were affected by the family trauma of my parents.

A memoir, as a true story, also reveals the price paid for a life lived at the intersection of Malaysia's oppressive capacities. I hope that the revelation of my anxiety disorder, the use of humour as coping mechanism, the suppression of natural emotion in order to be competent in dealing with family emergencies, my workaholic nature that seeks displacement of feelings and the damaged relationships with close family, will reveal the cost and generate empathy and sympathy for Tamil women with similar backgrounds. Further, to the extent that the memoir began as a

story of resilience, the fate of my mother – who suffered a massive stroke and is now in a vegetative state – demonstrates that there is no real recompense for surviving a wretched life at the intersection of onerous oppressive factors.

In writing creative non-fiction, I was also determined to shine a light on cultural practices that oppress women without allowing defenders of patriarchal norms to ignore my work as fictional. Any work of fiction can be dismissed by naysayers, even if fundamentally autobiographical, as exaggerated, or a composite of experiences, to diminish the authenticity and revealing nature of the writer's experiences. The secrecy, and desire to save face, within Tamil families means that unhappy families and, especially unhappy women, feel isolated and alone; there is no room for solidarity and understanding when oppression occurs behind closed doors. My goal is to write the memoir as my testimony, using my status as a Tamil writer and lawyer, to enhance credibility and provide a counter-narrative to the perception that the educational and economic progress of some elements of Tamil society in Malaysia justifies patriarchal practices.

As set out in detail in the critical component, Tamil women suffer a multiplicity of oppressions whether as a consequence of postcolonial elitism, racism, colourism or the overarching imposition of patriarchal constraints through cultural and religious practices. These factors combine to limit educational and economic opportunities and further corral women within a societal prison. It is my intent that the memoir, "I Go and Come", functions in this thesis as a counterpoint to the critical component to underscore the importance of understanding the impact of these myriad oppressive features upon women, especially Tamil women. I believe, we must first reveal, then understand; only after, can we work for change and redress injustices, whether political, economic or social, that affect the most marginalised members of our communities. The juxtaposition of the critical and creative component is designed to contribute to the conversation on how best to extricate society from the oppressive straitjacket that is the confluence of historical factors playing out in the present day.

(Word count of Critical Component: 46385)

WORKS CITED

- "14 Frequently Asked Questions." *Hinduism Today*, 04 Apr. 2020. *Hinduism Today*, <https://www.hinduismtoday.com/hindu-basics/14-faq/>. Accessed 30 Jan. 2026.
- Abdul Rahman, Tunku. "Speech by the Chief Minister at the Proclamation of Independence at Merdeka Stadium, Kuala Lumpur, 31 August 1957." *National Archives of Malaysia*, www.arkib.gov.my.
- Ahmad, Aijaz. "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory.'" *Social Text* [Madison, Wis], vol. 6, no. 2, October 1987, p. 3.
- Allan, Michael. "The Language(s) of Self-Representation: Toward a Postcolonial Theory of Voice." *Critical Times*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2023, pp. 39–57.
- Ang, Ann. "Transnational Re-Memorialization in Preeta Samarasan's *Evening Is the Whole Day*." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 57, no. 5, 2021, pp. 621–35.
- Amrith, Sunil S. "Indians Overseas? Governing Tamil Migration to Malaya, 1870–1941." *Past & Present*, vol. 208, no. 1, 2010, pp. 231–61.
- Ashcroft, Bill, et al. *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2000.
- . *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2002.
- Babadzan, Alain. "Anthropology, Nationalism and 'The Invention of Tradition.'" *Anthropological Forum*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2000, pp. 131–55.
- Balme, Christopher B. *Pacific Performances: Theatricality and Cross-Cultural Encounter in the South Seas*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- Banerjee, Priya R. "Dowry in 21st-Century India: The Sociocultural Face of Exploitation." *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2014, pp. 34–40.
- Bellinger, Gwendolyn. "Immigrant Ghosts and Haunted Heritages in Rani Manicka's *The Rice Mother*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 2024, pp. 952–62.
- Bhabha, Homi. "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse." *October*, vol. 28, 1984, pp. 125–33.
- Bond, Johanna. *Global Intersectionality and Contemporary Human Rights / Johanna Bond*. First edition., Oxford University Press, 2021.

- Brouillette, Sarah, and American Council of Learned Societies. *Literature and the Creative Economy* / Sarah Brouillette. Stanford University Press, 2014.
- Brouillette, Sarah. *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace* / Sarah Brouillette. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2006.
- Carter, A. "The Long Return of the Colonial Power: The British and the Shock of World War II in Malaya [1941-1948]." *Relations Internationales*, no. 134, 2008, pp. 19–35.
- Césaire, Aimé. "A Tempest Act 1 Scene 2." *Genius*, genius.com/Aime-cesaire-a-tempest-act-1-scene-2-annotated. Accessed 2 oct. 2025.
- Chandran, Gheeta and Foong Soon Seng. "Re-Conceptualising Racial Identity of Subaltern Malaysian Chinese Community in Tash Aw's *We, the Survivors* (2019)". *New Literaria*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2020, pp. 180–90.
- Chatterjee, Partha. *The Nation and Its Fragments : Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* / Partha Chatterjee. Princeton University Press, 1993.
- Cho, Sumi, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall. "Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis." *Signs*, vol. 38, no. 4, 2013, pp. 785–810.
- Clutterbuck, Richard. "The 1969 Riots in Kuala Lumpur." *Conflict and Violence in Singapore and Malaysia, 1945–1983*, edited by Richard Clutterbuck, 1st ed., Routledge, 1985, pp. 289–302.
- Connell, R. W., and James W. Messerschmidt. "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept." *Gender & Society* [Thousand Oaks, CA], vol. 19, no. 6, December 2005, pp. 829–59.
- Connors, Clare. *Literary Theory: A Beginner's Guide*. Oneworld, 2010.
- Court of Appeal, Malaysia. *Merdeka University Bhd. v. Government of Malaysia*. 2 MLJ 357, 1981.
- Daniels, Timothy P. "Blackness in Malaysia: Indigenous Kentsu Semang and Tamil Indians." *Sojourn (Singapore)*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2024, pp. 254–84.
- Diamond-Smith, N. G., Dahal, M., Puri, M., & Weiser, S. D. (2020). "Semi-arranged marriages and dowry ambivalence: Tensions in the changing landscape of marriage formation in South Asia." *Culture Health & Sexuality*, vol. 22, no. 9, 2020, pp. 971–86.

- Dirlik, Arif. *The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism*. Westview Press, 1997.
- Ean, T. G. “‘Tale of the Dreamer’s Son’ by Preeta Samarasan Centres on Hidden Hopes and What Children Inherit from Their Parents.” *Options*, 27 Nov 2022.
www.optionstheedge.com/topic/culture/%E2%80%98tale-dreamer%E2%80%99s-son%E2%80%99-preeta-samarasan-centres-hidden-hopes-and-what-children-inherit.
- Evans, S. “Macaulay’s Minute Revisited: Colonial Language Policy in Nineteenth-Century India.” *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, vol. 23, no. 4, 2002, pp. 260–81.
- Everitt-Penhale, Brittany and Kopano Ratele. “Rethinking ‘Traditional Masculinity’ as Constructed, multiple and ≠ Hegemonic Masculinity.” *South African Review of Sociology*, vol.46, no. 2,3 Apr. 2015, pp. 4–22.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann, forewords by Ziauddin Sardar and Homi K. Bhabha, Pluto Press, 2008.
- Fernando, Joseph M. “Special Rights in the Malaysian Constitution and the Framers’ Dilemma, 1956-57.” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, vol. 43, no. 3, 2015, pp. 535–56.
- Gabriel, Sharmani Patricia. “The Meaning of Race in Malaysia: Colonial, post-colonial and possible new conjunctures.” *Ethnicities*, vol. 15, no. 6, 17 Feb. 2015, pp. 782–809.
- . “Translating Bangsa Malaysia.” *Critical Asian Studies*, vol. 43, no. 3, Sept. 2011, pp. 349–72.
- Gilmore, David. *Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity*. Yale University Press, 2018.
- Goh, Daniel P. S. “From Colonial Pluralism to Postcolonial Multiculturalism: Race, State Formation and the Question of Cultural Diversity in Malaysia and Singapore.” *Sociology Compass*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2008, pp. 232–52.
- Gramsci, Antonio. *Notebook 25 (1934): On the Margins of History (The History of Subaltern Social Groups): A Critical Edition of Prison Notebook 25*. Edited by JA Buttigieg and ME Green, Columbia Univ Press, 2021, pp. 1–14.
- Gupta, S., et al. “Intra-household Efficiency in Extended Family Households: Evidence from Rural India.” *The Journal of Development Studies*, vol. 57, no. 7, 2021, pp. 1172–97.

- Harper, T. N. "NEW MALAYS, NEW MALAYSIANS: Nationalism, Society and History." *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 1996, pp. 238–55. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27912155>. Accessed 26 Nov. 2025.
- Heit, S. "Waging Sexual Warfare: Case Studies of Rape Warfare Used by the Japanese Imperial Army during World War II." *Women's Studies International Forum*, vol. 32, no. 5, 2009, pp. 363–70.
- Hill, R. L., and K. Allen. "'Smash the Patriarchy: The Changing Meanings and Work of 'Patriarchy' Online'." *Feminist Theory*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2021, pp. 165–89.
- Hobsbawm, Eric J., and Terence O. Ranger. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge University Press, 2023.
- Hou, Chi-ming. "Review of *The Malayan Tin Industry to 1914 with Special Reference to the States of Perak, Selangor, Negri Sembilan, and Pahang*, by Wong Lin Ken." *Business History Review*, vol. 40, no. 3, 1966, pp. 393–94.
- Huggan, Graham. *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*. Routledge, 2001.
- . "Re-Evaluating the Postcolonial Exotic." *Interventions*, vol. 22, no. 7, 2020, pp. 808–24.
- Jameson, Fredric. *Allegory and Ideology*. Verso Books, 2020.
- . "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism." *Postcolonial Studies*, 2016, pp. 7190.
- Jeyathurai, Darshini. "Labouring Bodies, Labouring Histories: The Malaysian-Indian Estate Girl." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol. 47, no. 3, 2012, pp. 303–23.
- Jones, D. "The Eloquent Sari." *TEXTILE*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2004, pp. 52–63.
- Kandiyoti, D. "Bargaining with Patriarchy." *Gender & Society*, vol. 2, no. 3, 1988, pp. 274–90.
- Karmakar, Indrani (2018) *Maternal Fictions: The Representation of Motherhood in Indian Women's Writing*. PhD thesis, University of York.
- Khan, Subuhi, and Laramie D. Taylor. "Gender Policing in Mainstream Hindi Cinema: A Decade of Central Female Characters in Top-Grossing Bollywood Movies." *International Journal of*

- Communication*, vol. 12, 2018, pp. 3641–3662. *International Journal of Communication*, ISSN 1932-8036, <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/8701>
- Koh, Sin Yee, and I Lin Sin. “Race, Whiteness and Internationality in Transnational Education: Academic and Teacher Expatriates in Malaysia.” *Asian Migration and New Racism*, 21 July 2022, pp. 656–76.
- Kullrich, Nina. “‘In This Country, Beauty Is Defined by Fairness of Skin’: Skin Colour Politics and Social Stratification in India.” *Beauty and the Norm: Debating Standardization in Bodily Appearance*, edited by Claudia Liebelt, Sarah Böllinger, and Ulf Vierke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, pp. 245–82.
- Lau, Lisa, and Ana Cristina Mendes, editors. *Re-Orientalism and South Asian Identity Politics: The Oriental Other within / Edited by Lisa Lau, Ana Cristina Mendes*. Routledge, 2014, <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/9780203814543>.
- Lavers, J. “Review of *The Invention of Tradition*, by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger.” *Africa*, vol. 55, no. 1, 1985, pp. 94–5.
- Laws of Malaysia, Federal Constitution*. www.jac.gov.my/spk/images/stories/10-akta/perlembagaan_persekutuan/federal_constitution.pdf.
- Laws of Malaysia. Sedition Act 1948*. Act 15 (revised 1970). (Section 3(1)(f)).
- Little, Angela W. *Development, Education and Learning in Sri Lanka: An International Research Journey*. UCL Press, 2024.
- Maartandan, S., Normahfuzah Ahmad and Paul GnanaSelvam Pakiranathan. “The Marginalised Tamil Indians and Their Lived Experience in Multicultural Malaysia.” *Kajian Malaysia: Journal of Malaysian Studies*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2024, pp. 187–207.
- Macaulay, Thomas Babington. “Minute on Indian Education.” *Sources of Indian Tradition*, vol. 2, edited by William Theodore de Bary, Columbia University Press, 1958.
- Mani, A. “Going Home to Cry: An Analysis of Labour Migrant Letters.” *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science*, vol. 24, no. 2, 1996, pp. 84–98.
- Manicka, Rani. *The Rice Mother*. Penguin, 2004.

- Manne, Kate. "Conclusion: The Giving She." *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*, Oxford UP, 2017, Oxford Academic. Accessed 3 Feb 2026.
- Mannur, Anita. *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture*. Temple University Press, 2009.
- Maxey, Ruth. "Home and Nation in South Asian Atlantic Literature." *South Asian Atlantic Literature, 1970–2010*, Edinburgh University Press, 2012. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1wf4cbs.5, pp. 28–76.
- . "‘Mangoes and Coconuts and Grandmothers’: Food in Transatlantic South Asian Writing." *South Asian Atlantic Literature, 1970–2010*, Edinburgh University Press, 2012. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1wf4cbs.8, pp. 162–208.
- Meah, A. "Reconceptualizing Power and Gendered Subjectivities in Domestic Cooking Spaces." *Progress in Human Geography*, vol. 38, no. 5, 2014, pp. 671–90.
- Mehta, Binita J. "Gastro-testimonials in *Handmade*: Narrating the War Experiences of Sri Lankan Tamil Women through Food." *Feminist Formations*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2022, pp. 146–74.
- Merican, Din. "Tribute to 'Legal Lion' Sir Eusoffe Abdoolcader." *The Malaysian DJ Blogger*, 12 Aug. 2018, dinmerican.wordpress.com/2018/08/12/tribute-to-legal-lion-sir-eusoffe-abdoolcader/.
- Millay, T. J. "Review of *Allegory and Ideology*, by Fredric Jameson." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 47, no. 1, 2020, p. 180.
- Mission Schools in Malaysia*. www.fcmsm.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Mission-Schools-in-Malaysia-FCMSM-16april2021.pdf. Accessed 5 May 2024.
- Nah, Alice M. "Negotiating Indigenous Identity in Postcolonial Malaysia: Beyond Being 'Not Quite/Not Malay.'" *Social Identities*, vol. 9, no. 4, 2003, pp. 511–34.
- Nakahara, Michiko. "‘Comfort Women’ in Malaysia." *Critical Asian Studies*, vol. 33, no. 4, 2001, pp. 581–89.

- Neo, Jaclyn Ling-Chien. "Malay Nationalism, Islamic Supremacy and the Constitutional Bargain in the Multi-Ethnic Composition of Malaysia." *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2006, pp. 95–118.
- Ng, Jia Chi, and Chloé Diskin-Holdaway. "Attitudes to English in Contemporary Malaysia." *World Englishes*, vol. 42, no. 3, 2021, pp. 562–78.
- Nicholls, T. "A Beautiful Girl Met a Handsome Prince: Toxic Masculinity and Complicit Femininity." *Dismantling Rape Culture*, 1st ed., vol. 1, Routledge, 2021, pp. 27–66.
- Ng, Evelyn Gaik-hoon. "Review of Evening is the Whole Day, by Preeta Samarasan." *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, 2010, pp. 125–32.
- Official Portal of Malaysia National Archives. www.arkib.gov.my/en/web/guest/home.
- Pande, R. "'I Arranged My Own Marriage': Arranged Marriages and Post-Colonial Feminism." *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2015, pp. 172–87.
- Pandian, Ambigapathy. "Literacy in Postcolonial Malaysia." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, vol. 40, no. 5, Feb. 1997, pp. 402–04.
- Philip, Bromeley. "Historical Narratives of the Colonized: The Noble Savage of Sarawak." *The Gaze of the West and Framings of the East*, 2012, pp. 123–38.
- Philips, Amali. "Rethinking Culture and Development: Marriage and Gender among the Tea Plantation Workers in Sri Lanka." *Gender and Development*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2003, pp. 20–29.
- Pillai, Shanthini. "Memory and the Diasporic Creative Imagination: Preeta Samarasan's *Evening Is the Whole Day*." *Kritika Kultura*, pp. 44–56, no. 18, 2012.
- Rahman, M. "Covert Communications: Food in Transition in Ritesh Batra's *The Lunchbox*." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 54, no. 4, 2018, pp. 484–97.
- Raja, Sivachandralingam Sundara, and Shivalinggam Raymond. "The Lost Race in British Malaya: Revisiting the Problems of South Indian Labourers." *Diaspora Studies*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2018, pp. 115–34.

- Rönnbäck, Klas, Broberg, Oskar, Galli, Stefania. "A Colonial Cash Cow: The Return on Investments in British Malaya, 1889–1969." *Cliometrica*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2021, pp. 149–73.
- Rushdie, Salman. *Midnight's Children*. 1980. Avon, 1982.
- . *Shame: A Novel*. Random House Trade Paperback, 2008.
- Rutherford, Anna, and Kirsten Holst Petersen. *A Double Colonization: Colonial and Post-Colonial Women's Writing*. Oxford UP, 1986.
- Samarasan, Preeta. *Evening Is the Whole Day: A Novel*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009.
- Samarasinghe, Vidyamali. "When Migrant Women Return: Gender Role Reconfigurations in Sri Lankan Households." *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2020, pp. 94–113.
- Saxena, Vandana, and Nithiya Guna Saigaran. "Songs of Tamil Plantation Women of Malaya: Contesting Memories and Histories." *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 59, no. 1, 2025, pp. 265–88.
- Shakespeare, William. *King Lear*. Edited by R. A. Foakes, Arden Shakespeare, Bloomsbury, 1997.
- Shangeetha, R. K., and S. Pillai. "Diasporic Dwellings: The Family House and Its Role in the Creative Imaginary of Selected Malaysian Indian Writers." *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities*, vol. 22, no. 3, 2014, pp. 903–16.
- Singh, Hari. "Tradition, Umno and Political Succession in Malaysia." *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 19, no. 2, 1998, pp. 241–54.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*. Edited by Rosalind C. Morris, Columbia University Press, 2010.
- Steenkamp, L.-M. "Building Oppressive Proxies: Sudanese and Egyptian Domestic Place and the Production of Patriarchal Femininity in Leila Aboulela's *Lyrics Alley*." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol. 57, no. 3, 2022, pp. 608–27.
- Stenson, M. *Class, Race and Colonialism in West Malaysia: The Indian Case*. UBC Press, 1980.
- Stockwell, Anthony John. "The Historiography of Malaysia: Recent Writings in English on the History of the Area since 1874." *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1976, pp. 82–110.

- Sutton, Alex. "British Imperialism and the Political Economy of Malayan Independence." *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, vol. 44, no. 3, 2016, pp. 470–91.
- Tahir, N. N. "Understanding Arranged Marriage: An Unbiased Analysis of a Traditional Marital Institution." *International Journal of Law, Policy, and the Family*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2021, pp. 1–20.
- Tharoor, Shashi. *An Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India*. Aleph, 2016.
- Thiong'o, Ngugi wa. "Decolonising the Mind." *Diogenes (English Edition)*, vol. 46, no. 184, 1998, pp. 101–04.
- Vijaya Sankar, L. "Women's Roles and Participation in Rituals in the Maintenance of Cultural Identity: A Study of the Malaysian Iyers." *SEARCH Journal of Media and Communication Research*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2015, pp. 1–21.
- Walby, Sylvia. "THEORISING PATRIARCHY." *Sociology (Oxford)* [LONDON], vol. 23, no. 2, May 1989, pp. 213–34.
- Walter, Natasha. "Sketches of War." *The Guardian*, 12 Oct. 2002, www.theguardian.com/books/2002/oct/12/featuresreviews.guardianreview25.
- West, C., and D. H. Zimmerman. "Accounting for Doing Gender." *Gender & Society*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2009, pp. 112–22.
- Wong, Lin Ken. "The Malayan Tin Industry to 1914: With Special Reference to the States of Perak, Selangor, Negri, Sembilan, and Pahang." Published for the Association for Asian Studies by the University of Arizona Press, 1965.
- Writer, Borneo Expat. "Interview Preeta Samarasan: Robert Raymer chats with French-based Malaysian writer Preeta Samarasan." *Borneo Expat Writer*, borneoexpatwriter.blogspot.com/2018/01/interview-preeta-samarasan-robert.html.
- Yang, J., et al. *Tombstone: The Untold Story of Mao's Great Famine*. Allen Lane, 2012.

