ISSUES AND CHALLENGES FACED BY THE MALAYSIAN INDIAN DIASPORIC COMMUNITY IN THE RETURN AND EVENING IS THE WHOLE DAY

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Introduction

Though much contested nowadays, the word “diaspora” remains a useful term on which to anchor discussions on current issues and challenges faced by today’s societies. In much contemporary cultural and literary theory, diaspora has become “an exemplary condition of late modernity” (Mishra 1995, 147), signalling the liberating aspects of interrelationships and a resistance to monologic thought. It has been, and still is, a dominant trend in world history. Today the expansion of diasporic communities is a social transformation of global significance. It could be said that the diasporic experience provides the new postcolonial subject. However, diasporas are complex sites and are not-unproblematic. By their very nature, diasporic groups challenge notions of nationhood, racial purity and unity. In a multicultural site like Malaysia where various races co-exist, issues of differences still persist and shape not only the perceptions of the community but also governmental policies as well.

This paper looks at K.S. Maniam’s The Return and Preeta Samarasan’s Evening is the Whole Day. These texts which have garnered international recognition, capture the sensibilities and struggles of the Indian diasporic community in Malaysia as it tries to locate itself within surroundings which are rich in diversity. Both narratives evoke the numerous complexities that reside in a nation of varying ethnic races and call for the need to confront the conflicts so that understanding can prevail.

Indian Diaspora in Malaysia

In The Encyclopedia of the Indian Diaspora, Vijay Mishra, an important theorist in diasporic studies, puts forward the idea that the Indian diaspora can be seen as “two relatively autonomous diasporas” defined as “old” and “new”. Though each conveys a different experience, the old has now become a part of the new (120). However Mishra insists that the distinction of old and new must be held so that the “economic strength and global presence of the new diaspora, now commonly situated in the West”, does not obliterate the stories of the diasporic Indians who underwent the dramatic and shaping experience of indenture (120). I have found it useful to locate my analysis of The Return and Evening is the Whole Day within Mishra’s discussion because his ideas illuminate some of my own thoughts on both texts.