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THE IMPACT OF JAPANESE OCCUPATION IN THE WRITINGS OF MALAYSIAN INDIAN WRITERS

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Abstract

The Japanese occupation in Malaya from 1942 -1945 during the World War Two has scarred the lives of many people. The victims and their descendents were haunted by the memories of the Japanese atrocities for decades. These untold cruelties committed by the Japanese army towards the Malayan people is often used as the theme by Malaysian Indian writers in their works. The struggle of the Indians during this period is narrated in most of the novels that has WW2 as a setting either it is written in English or Tamil language. The aim of this study is to show why Malaysian Indian writers often use the theme of war in their novels. This study will analyse two novels; Rani Manicka's, *The Rice Mother* (2002) which is written in English and *Siam Marana Rayil* (1993) by R. Shanmugam which is in Tamil. Both writers have used war as their setting and harp on the same issue which depicts the hardships faced by the people during the Japanese occupation. Their works will be analysed to highlight the sufferings encountered by the Malayan people especially the Indians during that period. It will also reveal the motive of these writers in using this theme in their works. Finally, this study will also show how these writings can be regarded as historical records for the Indians in Malaysia.

Keywords: Japanese occupation, World War Two, Malaysian Indian writers, history, atrocities.

Introduction

The Japanese Occupation in Malaya lasted for three years which is from 1942-1945. The harsh rule over Malaya and many other regions ended with the detonation of atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 by the Americans. Having no answer to the devastation caused by this monstrous weapon, the Japanese laid down their arms after the signing of *Instrument of Surrender* on board the American battleship, Missouri, in Tokyo Bay on 2nd September 1945. Thus, the war ended and the Japanese left. But the three years of cruel rule over Malaya became a nightmarish experience which refused to leave those people who were directly affected. Instead, it lingered in the minds of the Malayan people for decades. In the beginning, the Japanese came under the pretext of liberating Malaysians from the British encapsulating the slogan "Asia for Asians". But soon the people of Malaya came to realise that the Japanese too are nothing but another coloniser whose interest on this country was solely propelled by its natural wealth and strategic military location. These Japanese soldiers were very

well-trained to wage war in the tropical terrain and only used bicycles to travel through the jungles towards the south of Malaya in a very short period of time. The Japanese Occupation and the hardship encountered by the Malayan people has often been used as the theme by many of the Malaysian Indian writers. This paper will analyse the works of two Malaysian Indian writers. The first novel to be studied is Rani Manicka's debut novel titled *The Rice Mother* (2002). Rani Manicka was born and educated in Malaysia. In *The Rice Mother*, Manicka narrates the life of a fourteen year old bride named Lakshmi who came to Malaya after marrying a thirty seven year old widower who already had two children. The story chronicles three generations of family who failed to recover from the trauma caused by the Japanese army towards their family members. The second novel is by R. Shanmugam, titled *Siam Marana Rayil* which is written in Tamil. R. Shanmugam is also another Malaysian writer of Indian origin. This novel is about a young boy named Mayakrishnan who runs away from home in the pursuit of looking for his father who was taken away by the Japanese to work in the Death

Railway project. Maya's mother is employed by the Japanese to clean the long weeds in the scorching heat every day. She befriends a man named Muttiah and decides to marry him in order to save her family. She explains to Maya that the chance of returning for the men taken to build the railways is almost zero. Therefore, she needs to marry Muttiah in order to look after her three children. Maya gets angry over his mother's decision and flees home looking for his father. His journey by train to Siam and all the stories on the atrocities committed by the Japanese army is narrated through him in this novel. This study intends to show the sufferings encountered by the Malayan people during the Japanese occupation by analysing the selected characters and their experiences in the novels by Manicka and Shanmugam. This paper will also reveal the motive of these writers in using the Japanese atrocities as the theme in their works. The discussion will show why the Malaysian writers harp on the same issue. Finally, this study will show how these writings can be regarded as historical records for the Indians in Malaysia.

Hardships Endured by the People

The three years of Japanese rule over Malaya was like walking on smouldering fire for the Malaysians. People suffered from food shortage and were forced to live on boiled tapioca. Poverty was also widespread due to the scorched-earth policy carried out by retreating British forces causing production languish, rampant unemployment and ultimately leading to the near standstill in international trading. Socially, the locals were not allowed to move about freely when the Japanese introduced the peace-loving certificate. The Japanese language and culture were also taught in schools. Moreover, people suffered from malnutrition and diseases such as Beri-Beri as the locals did not have access to medications. Besides that, there was racial disparity and the races were treated differently by the Japanese. The Chinese received the worst treatment as they were considered their traditional enemies. The Chinese women were made prostitutes and comfort women for the Japanese soldiers and they were often brutally raped and murdered in front of their own families. Although the Indians were supported for their campaigns

for India to break free from the British rule, sometimes their women were also raped and killed. Beautiful Malay ladies were not spared too. In *The Rice Mother*, Manicka through the character of Lakshmi, shows the cruelty of the Japanese army. Lakshmi's husband, Ayah is caught by the Japanese and beaten up because they wanted some information about a Communist. Ayah barely escaped death. Besides the cruelty and torture, looting was also rampant. All the big and wealthy homes were taken over by the Japanese. Lakshmi who took her family to hide in Seremban came back to Kuantan and saw nothing was left in the house except for the "big iron bed and a heavy bench in the kitchen" (Manicka 2002:173). All the big European houses were also looted. The neighbourhood had changed drastically. "Girls turned into boys overnight and girls of certain age vanished into thin air" (Manicka 2002:174). Parents had to hide their young daughters from being taken away to be made into comfort women for the Japanese soldiers. Lakshmi also hid her beautiful daughter, Mohini below the floors of her house. Unfortunately, the Japanese broke into her house one day and Mohini was not fast enough to enter the trap door. Instead, her twin brother Lakshman fell into the hole and that became the last day for Mohini in her parents' house. The Japanese took her away to be made into a comfort woman. Life was never same for this family. Lakshman blamed himself for not being quick enough to save his twin sister. This episode destroyed the happiness of this family and the impact lasted forever in the lives of all the characters. Another pathetic character highlighted by Manicka is Mui Tsai. She is Lakshmi's friend and neighbour who is the servant of Old Soong. The Japanese who ransacked Old Soong's house raped Mui Tsai. "They (the Japanese) threw poor, unloved Mui Tsai on the kitchen table, queued up in an unexpectedly orderly fashion and used her until they were all satiated (Manicka, 2002: 202)". After being abused horribly by all those around her and the Japanese soldiers, she finally hanged herself.

Shanmugam in *Siam Marana Rayil* illustrates the cruelty of the Japanese soldiers through the lens of Mayakrishnan. After somehow making his way to Burma, Maya witnesses how the Chinese women were brought in as comfort women by the Japanese to satisfy the lust

of the Japanese soldiers monitoring the workers building the Death Railway in Kanchanaburi in January 1943. Shanmugam also shows how the system of *Ration Cards* were introduced by the Japanese government. The people were supplied with inedible rice which was mixed with calcium carbonate. The rice will still smell of calcium carbonate no matter how many times it is washed. It was the Japanese way of poisoning the people of Malaya (Shanmugam 1993:2). Through Maya, the readers are informed about the process of recruiting workers to build the railway tracks. The journey starts from Singapore with workers and halts in Kuala Lumpur where more people are gathered by force. The journey continues till north of Malaya and ends in Padang Serai station which was under the Siamese government at that time (Shanmugam 1993: 23). During the Japanese occupation, heads were often struck on bamboo poles and exhibited to the public as warning. This was done by the specially trained Manchurian soldiers who were brought in by the Japanese to kill their fellow Chinese. These young Manchurians were abducted from their homes when Japan invaded China. These boys were trained like slaves to kill their own kind (Shanmugam 1993:49).

Motive of the Writers

According to Mani in her article titled "Caryl Phillips's Novels: A Reminder of a Forgotten Issue", literary works are not "merely an art work that was created to entertain but it is the voice of the author that articulates his social and political visions" (Mani 2013:188). So, whenever a single theme dominates a writer's work, it means it is written with a motive of revealing something to the readers. Karl Marx wrote "the tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living." By reading these novels, one can recall the cruelty of the Japanese and the sufferings endured by their victims. These writers use the Japanese occupation as a theme in their work as a chance and opportunity to reveal the atrocities committed by them. These memories have lingered and have been talked about for generations by the families of the victims. These writers act as a voice to these victims. Manicka depicts the loss of a mother and her hatred towards the Japanese soldiers through Lakshmi:

They were arrogant, uncouth, cruel and unforgivable, as long as I live I shall hate them with a mother's wrath. I spit their ugly faces. My hate is such that I will never forget, even in my next life. I will remember what they have done to my family and I will curse them again and again so that they will one day taste the bitterness of my pain (Manicka 2002: 203-204).

The excerpt above shows the hatred harboured by a mother towards the Japanese army. Lakshmi represents the anguish of all the women who lost their children to the cruel Japanese army. Many mothers and families were haunted by these types of atrocities. Maya who runs away from home hears about the atrocities of the Japanese from his fellow travellers. A man named Velu who was travelling with him tells him about the mass graves near the Death Railways project site. According to him, people were just thrown into the big uncovered holes along the railway tracks when they died due to the harsh labour. Corpses were just left to decompose in those mass graves (Shanmugam 1993:113).

Historical Records for the Indians in Malaysia

Both novels involve the elements of the past and the present. As T.S. Elliot stated in his essay titled "Tradition and the Individual Talent", "no poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone" (Elliot 1963: 23). Elliot sees writing as an organic process and emphasizes the interaction between the past and the present. As mentioned by Elliot, these two writers have penned their novels to record the history of their people during the Japanese occupation. These novels are the unheard voices of the many helpless Indians who suffered during Japanese occupation. Homi Bhabha, in his essay "Of Mimicry and Man: the Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse", claims that the subalterns' voices can be recovered in the narratives by symptomatic readings (Bhabha, 1994:8). Therefore, the works of these two writers can be considered as the unheard recordings of history. Like Manicka, Shanmugam too wants to remind the descendents of the Indians who sacrificed their lives in the Death Railway project. They want the later generations to know how their people suffered in the hands of the Japanese army when they were conscripted

to build the "Death Railway" over a stretch of 412 kilometres from Kanchanaburi in Thailand to Thanbyuzayat in Burma (McCormack 1993: 1). About 60 000 prisoners and 300 000 Asian labourers were put on hard labour from November 1942 and October 1943. Workers were brought in from Malaya, Singapore, Sumatera, Indonesia, Burma, Japan and as far as Manchuria to toil and build the railway track. In the preface of the novel *Siam Marana Rayil*, Shanmugam states that this novel is written to record the experiences of the Indians during the Japanese period and as a remembrance to those souls that perished in vain.

Conclusion

Rani Manicka and R. Shanmugam are the voices of the people who suffered in silence during the Japanese occupation. It is obvious that these authors do not want their sufferings to go unheard. They feel that it is their social responsibility to record these events in their works for the younger generations in their country to get a first hand glimpse of their history. The works of these writers carry lots of unrecorded information about their race and their struggle in the new land during the Japanese occupation. The characters represent the Indians who became victims to the atrocities of the Japanese in Malaya. By enacting them in the novels,

these writers believe that the incidences will become part of the Malaysian history.

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