

national literature, a number of Malay short-story writers returned to Islamic ethics to shape their social vision while others experimented with psychological realism. Governmental funds were used to develop Malay literature and culture in the “art for society” mode as the basis of a “national” culture. With more women writers emerging during the 1970s, women’s issues became increasingly popular. During the 1980s, many fiction writers shifted to global issues and the world of urban Malay intellectuals as they continued to develop protagonists with greater psychological depth.

Throughout the 1990s, Malaysian writers in English presented a fragmented view of Malaysian culture, undercutting the government’s advocacy of modernization. Economic transformation has occurred along with more social divisions, changing gender relations, and the rise of a new Muslim fundamentalism. Current themes include upper-class corruption, mendacity, and “transgressive” sexuality. Writers in Bahasa Malaysia continue to develop a more experimental psychological realism that remains socially engaged. The short stories in this section represent the diversity of contemporary fiction on Malaysia by Southeast Asian writers.



K. S. Maniam

“The Kling-Kling Woman”

K. S. Maniam, born in Bedong, Kedah, in 1942, was educated in both Tamil and English. A playwright, novelist, and short-story writer, he has won a number of literary awards. He is currently at work on his third novel, Delayed Passage. In the literary history of modern Malaysia, he represents a group of creative writers in English who emerged out of the 1960s.

In “The Kling-Kling Woman” we are transported into the British colonial past, when immigrant labor from China, India, and other parts of Southeast Asia was imported as “more controllable” than the indigenous Malay. Here the exploitation of manual laborers on the railroad and the sexual objectification of women are portrayed through the experience of an Indian woman worker. Another glimpse into the Malay colonial past, but through a Chinese lens, is found in Suchen Christine Lim’s “Two Brothers” (Malaysia). Recapturing the past through the eyes of indigenous writers is an important theme in modern Southeast Asian fiction.

Modern Malay literature has been criticized for its representation of weak female protagonists. The heroine of Maniam’s story, however, is a powerful woman who paradoxically takes control of her own destiny within the confines of tradition. Female protagonists in modern Southeast Asian fiction are often portrayed as being in a weakened position because of a traditional double standard—for example, in Ma Sandar’s “An Umbrella” (Burma) and in Marianne Villanueva’s “The Mayor of the Roses” (the Philippines).

It was that evening, when sitting on the steps looking out towards the laterite road and then looking at her mother’s face, that she made the pact with herself. She would never be like her mother! She would never wear the *pottu* dot on her forehead. She wouldn’t sit in that dumb way,

“The Kling-Kling Woman,” by K. S. Maniam. Permission to publish granted by the author.

waiting for *her* husband to come back; sit there hoping he would come back to her, and finally praying he would come back to the family. She wouldn't get up in the small hours of the night to let in a drunk, unfamiliar man whom custom had dictated she accept as her husband. She would refuse to pretend she wasn't starving in order to keep her husband's name clean in the eyes of society. She wouldn't wait, like a slave, for any handouts he might make towards the household expenses. Instead, for the rest of her life, she would follow her mother about, working or resting, to taunt her away from subservience.

Sumathi looked at her mother's face as if to store in her mind all that it stood for. She didn't know why, but she saw that it was beginning to resemble her great-grandmother's face she had been shown in a faded sepia photograph. The eyes were beginning to darken and become unfathomable, eyes that had turned away from the light of the world. Her mother had taken the velvet-lined box that she always kept at the family shrine and showed Sumathi, as she would a holy object, the silver anklet with its pair of bells. Then, for the thousandth time, she told Sumathi some of the stories that were lodged deep in her memories about great-grandmother.

Remembering the stories her mother and others had told about her great-grandmother, Sumathi found herself bringing a new, critical awareness to the recollection. The most popular story was called "The Kling-Kling Woman." They had even turned it into a kind of play. When relatives, far and near, met at Sumathi's grandmother's house on the outskirts of the town, about thirty kilometers from Kuala Lumpur, they played this silly game. Some of the older girls put on anklets with bells and ran about noisily, pursued by those young male relatives who would be reaching or had already reached marriageable age. This part of her great-grandmother's life had become a ritual for matchmaking eligible young girls and men among the relatives.

Her great-grandmother was one of those rare young women who, country-born and country-raised, suddenly realized that there was more to life than following the time-honored tradition of being given in marriage to some young man, bearing children, serving her lord and master, bringing up her children, worrying about sickness and death, and receiving in return for the fulfillment of her last days on earth, the tidings of the marriages of her grandsons and granddaughters.

She wanted to and did break out. (The storyteller never mentioned how she got to this new country, but the next thing Sumathi knew was

that her great-grandmother was already a railroad worker here.) Her descendants were awestruck by the magical leap from one station to another. "An ordinary house girl become a railroad builder? How many of you could have done that?" they asked.

From the time she arrived in this country and until she died, she was never spared this admiration. A comely and full-bosomed young woman, she had, from the beginning, refused to discard the sari for a more protective and practical garment.

"The sari is good for anything!" she declared. "I wore the sari to the rice fields. It didn't stop me from ploughing and planting! And not one tear anywhere on it!"

"*Amma*, there are all kinds of tearing," her dumpily dressed companions said, giggling and sniggering.

She had a mile-long stubborn streak; she went her graceful, provocative way, carrying loads of granite stones to the gangs of men who laid the sleepers. In all that dazzling heat, white dust clouds and flash of metal, she was a soft, desirable dream, and the men often paused in their work to gaze at her.

"Not yet rest time!" the foreman shouted at them, and they picked up their tools as they would in an elusive, sensual dream.

"You've to look after yourself," the women warned her.

"I was born in a sari!" she sang out.

"Some man will tear it off you!" they said.

They were jealous, she thought, for the men would often offer her a cold drink from the stone bottles they stored in cool places. They were not offended when she didn't accept; they only laughed with pleasure. Even the white supervisor, in khaki shorts and shirt, the pot-like brown hat on his head, extended only to her the flat flask he drank from. She sniffed at the sharp sour smell, and throwing the basket at his feet, stumbled away smiling to herself. He gazed thoughtfully at her broad rump and thin waist, gulping thirstily from the flask.

The workers lived in rows of small, terrace brick houses; lorries picked them up every morning and brought them back in the evenings. Those railway quarters, usually on the fringe of small towns, came to life as the lamps were lit. The men would have gotten together at a toddy shop, if there was one, or at some Chinese sundry shop, where at the back, they could drink cheap *samsu* or some other brew and celebrate their release from work. The younger men loitered at the other shops or on street corners, bought some food and returned to their quarters. The

married and single women would be preparing the evening meal, listening to a common, battery-powered valve radio.

Though Sumathi's great-grandmother shared a house with seven other women, she kept to herself and made sure no one trespassed into her corner of the living space. The first chore she did when she returned from work was to wash and spread out her sari to dry. Then she shared the cooking duties with the other women, ate her meal and went to sleep, ignoring the strange, nocturnal rituals of courtship that went on all around her.

Lying in that corner, so the succession of storytellers claimed, she must have entered her dream-self. For what else could have made her not see or hear the things that were going on around her? In that dreamland, she saw what she would be one day. She wouldn't always be working; she would have money in her pouch—she was already embroidering one—and there would be a caring family around her. Her brothers' and sisters' faces appeared briefly in that dreamland, cruel and malicious. She had gone to the rice fields, though women weren't needed there, to show them that she was as good as any of them. But they had always made difficulties for her. Sometimes she couldn't find the plough; sometimes the plough bull would have strayed away though she had tied it by its tether to a tree the previous evening. Once, her brothers had stood in her way and said, "No woman does this kind of work!" and spat on her. Now in this new land, she would make good; she would have a husband she could respect, a house that answered her needs. She would be the woman she was born to be.

She began saving from the time she joined the railroad gang; she stored her meager hoard in some inaccessible fold of her sari. And she kept her distance from the other workers.

The young men kept away from her or made jokes about lonely birds who didn't know about the warmth of a nest. The common compound, with the houses for the married and unmarried built around it, seemed to give them some sense of restraint. The housewives, who swept it in the absence of the workers, brushed it with some sense of law and order. The eldest married man, acting as a moral guide, cast severe glances in the young men's direction.

But as the tracks moved farther and farther away from their usual quarters, their behavior became less predictable. They were housed in makeshift huts, and as the tracks cut through the country, they were taken apart and put up again in the new work sites. Both the married and the unmarried men were somehow getting in her way; she couldn't

load her basket without some man watching her from the bushes. She couldn't get to the sleeper site without another brushing past her. The foreman didn't do anything at first; hardly any of the men were absent from his task for a noticeable length of time. Some of the other women too, felt their gaze and their hands.

"I didn't see you coming," one man said, when a woman accused him of molesting her.

"Don't you have ears?"

"In all this noise?"

They were laying tracks far away from any town or other habitation, the unpredictable jungle all around them. The women had heard many, many stories about the dangers that lurked there. They had heard about all kinds of snakes: one-bite poisonous ones, the sharp-fanged slow killer, and the body-crushing monsters. But they kept their minds on their work, and when they went into the bushes to relieve themselves, they went in pairs or even in groups. They kept their eyes peeled for tigers. The tiger, for them, was the most fearsome of the animals that roamed the jungle.

"Can you see your limbs being torn apart?" they asked. "Like a *rakshasa* tearing you to pieces!"

They gave the tiger all kinds of power. It was the silent watcher, a benevolent protector, and an arbiter of justice.

"You don't molest it, it won't molest you," the women said, almost like a prayer.

Some of the women went hunting for a pestle-like stone and planted it at the foot of a tree. They wrapped a piece of red cloth around it, made three white strokes across the rounded head and placed a yellow-and-red dot on the middle line. They prayed at this simple shrine before and after work. The more pious among them struck their heads before it, saying, "Shiva! Shiva! Protect us from all harm!"

Sumathi's great-grandmother, wrapping the sari more tightly around her body, knelt before the stone Shiva and mumbled a private prayer. No one knew what boon she wanted from the gods, but she went about her work with renewed confidence. Her self-assurance only provoked more taunts and not-so-subtle assaults upon her person. The men stood in her way; they sat on the mound of stones beside the sleepers so she couldn't empty her basket. She could never bring herself to plead with them. She waited patiently, silently, for the man to stop making lewd remarks at her and move away. The other women were also taunted and abused but not so persistently.

"It's the sari. Wear something else," her fellow workers said.

"I'll wear what I want," she replied.

The men became more demanding, more hard hearted. They sent this or that woman for their bottles of sun-warmed coffee or containers of water.

"Just up the track," the man said. "I'm fixing this steel thing."

Some woman went to do his bidding, grudgingly.

Then they sat outside their huts, in the evenings, and grumbled among themselves. The men went to the nearest one-street town to drink some brew.

"A slave's slave!"

"They'll come back drunk," one woman said, "and the peace will go."

"Something must be done."

"We must tell the foreman," Sumathi's great-grandmother said.

The other women laughed.

"He's looking for a poultice," one of the women said, "for the swelling between his legs!"

The women laughed again, but bitterly.

"We must go to someone higher than," Sumathi's great-grandmother said.

The women went back to their grumbling.

"I can't go to the bushes," one young woman said, "some man is always behind me."

"I've seen bushes shaking," another said. "Winds don't shake them like that!"

"We must do something," Sumathi's great-grandmother said. "We can't keep back our water forever."

"You tell us what to do."

"We must keep together as a group," she said, "in spirit."

"She's a thinker, I tell you. But where to get the spirit?"

"Why make fun of yourselves? So others can make fun of you? Get their fun from you?"

The women fell silent, staring into the frightening darkness around them. They hadn't heard her speak so strongly before. The kerosene lamplight seemed to fall on her for the first time, and they saw a face bright with thought.

"Bells," she said. "We need bells. Small ones. On our ankles. There are temple bells to call people to prayer. We'll have ankle bells!"

"Ankle bells! Ankle bells!"

"So we can hear ourselves," she said. "So they can hear us. Move out of our way."

"So we can hear where we're going."

"To the bushes."

"To the stone heap."

"To the foreman!"

"To the white man!" she said. "If the foreman won't listen, the white man will."

They heard the men coming back, drunk and noisy; they put out their lights and went to sleep.

"Bells? Anklets?" the foreman said.

"Don't you see? The men are not working like before," Sumathi's great-grandmother said.

"When they're out here too long," the foreman said, "their minds go wild."

"The women will go out of their minds because of them," she said. "We must wear anklets. You won't let us? Take us to the white man!"

"Bells? Anklets?" the white man said, his face reddened by the sun and drink. "Jolly good idea! Something to hear them by! No more mutes in the midday sun!"

"We can go now," the foreman said. "The *tuan* has agreed."

"Belling the cat!" the white man said, laughing at the retreating sensuous hips.

The work went on smoothly after the women began wearing the anklets. Their sounds mingled with the breaking of stones and the hammering of metal into place.

"Kling-Kling!"

The men moved out of their way.

"Kling-Kling-Kling!"

The women stood guard over their sisters who had gone to the bushes.

"Kling-Kling-Kling-Kling!"

The women came to the aid of a sister about to be molested by a man.

"Sisters in belldom!" the white man said approvingly, from a distance.

The track kling-klinged its way through the country. The workers forged past *kampung*s and small towns, hills and valleys, slopes and

scrubland. Where they cut into mountain sides, the land stood exposed, inviting cries of excitement and wonder. Where they dug into the earth to lay the foundations for the rails, black, brown or red soil covered the men's and women's feet and hands and, sometimes, their faces. Sumathi's great-grandmother felt, as the tracks opened up the country and connected the various towns and ports, that she, too, was part of a great and awesome design.

As more of the Shiva stones sprang up under the trees, the more the women saw themselves drawn into the land. A different mood came over the men; the inescapable jingling of the ankle bells drove them into sensual fantasies and frenzies. They stopped moving out of the way of the bells.

"Kling-Kling!" the men mimicked, the words becoming licks that caressed.

"Kling-Kling," another said, reaching out and fingering the bells as he would the intimate parts of the woman's body.

"Kling-Kling-Kling!" he said, rattling the bells, as the other women came to huddle around their sister.

The foreman strode up with his rattan stick; he waved it with the authority he thought he had gained from the white man.

"Have you all become children?" he shouted. "Get back to work!"

"We must stop work," Sumathi's great-grandmother said when the women gathered outside the huts in the evenings.

"Children! Children!" the foreman shouted sarcastically when the women put down their baskets in their on-the-spot strikes. "Get back to work!"

The bells that were meant to protect led the men to the women. Now and then shrieks were heard from the bushes and a man would come out buttoning up his shorts.

"Went there first," he said. "She followed me."

"Why can't she go farther inside?" another said. "Wants to show her backside to the whole world!"

The foreman's silence gained the weight of suppressed laughter; he winked at the men.

The women kept their anklets on. When a sister was assaulted, they made a ring around her and raised a clamor that sounded like a whole temple of bells. Even the men paused in their derision to listen to something that rang deep inside them: the memory of cows grazing on thick grass, sugar-cane harvests and offerings, camphor flames and incense

smoke, a child's innocent cry. When they came out of their trance, they were more brutal to the women.

The men betrayed them. When they went into a town, they kept ahead of them. The kling-kling of the anklets seemed an insult to them.

"The klings are here!" a shopkeeper warned. "Klings don't buy! Klings only look!"

The women in their frugal fineries attracted and repelled the townsfolk. They hung together fiercely, their nose-rings and plaited or coiled hair binding them into a unique sisterhood. The townsfolk had never seen such unashamed curiosity. The women trooped through the various shops, testing pots and pans, admiring necklaces and bangles; they flung folds of textiles across their breasts and waists, imagining the blouses and saris that could come from them.

At one time, they found themselves in a Chinese shop and were amazed by the display of antiques and figurines. Sumathi's great-grandmother sat on a throne-like chair and played the queen to her sisters. The proprietor rushed up to her.

"Kling can't sit there!" he said.

He grabbed her by the shoulder and tried to push her away, but she shook him off and returned to her seat.

"I sit where I like!"

Her sisters laughed, but the man advanced menacingly towards her.

"Klings don't know where to sit! Klings don't know where to shit!"

He lunged for her, but she slapped his hands away. Her sisters grew alarmed; they stood in a knot, watching, not knowing what to do. The man's pale face turned a muddy color. He threw himself at her again.

"Come away!" one of the women said. "He looks like a money spider!"

"Spider or snake," Sumathi's great-grandmother said, "I don't care! He can't put his hands on a woman!"

His hands shot again and caught hold of her sari border.

"Kling! Kling!" he said. "No shame! Sitting on other people's chairs. Let's see your shame!"

He tugged brutally at her sari and began to loosen its folds.

"Run! Run!" the woman who had spoken earlier said. "Go and fetch the men!"

A woman ran out of the shop.

THE CHINESE continued to tug at the sari, muttering, "Kling! Kling!" She resisted him, her face dark with anger and humiliation.

By the time the woman returned with the men, she had somehow got hold of her sandal and was waving it before her, while with the other hand, she held on to her sari. The Chinese continued to pull at the sari until it was a tight band over her breasts.

The men who had followed the woman back swayed on their feet.

"Kling! Kling!" one of them said, suddenly. "There kling-kling; here nothing!"

"Showing this stranger what you won't show us!" another shouted.

"Think you know everything!"

The Chinese gave a final wrench at the sari and then flung the ends in her face.

"Next time don't sit on other people's property!" he said, and turning to the men, "You smell too much of drink. Get out of here!"

Sumathi's great-grandmother, rewrapping the sari around her body, took her time to move away from the chair.

Sumathi thought that the sight of her great-grandmother, her sari down to her waist, had ravished whatever reason was left to the men. Word went down the line to the rest of the workers, the foreman, and even the white man. The kling-kling of the women's anklets roused more than an abusive sense in them. The women were confronted by a mystifying savagery; they were assaulted by looks, words and actions. Now they couldn't go anywhere without brushing against a leering or a mocking man. The foreman wielded his stick with a great show of authority, but he didn't care whether the men obeyed him or not.

Sumathi's great-grandmother jingled her anklets fiercely wherever she went, but she couldn't keep the men out of her sari. Their lascivious remarks crawled into its nooks and folds and stayed there like dirt long after the workers had put down their tools. The women turned resentful gazes on her. A few of them even used the anklets to lure the men into the bushes.

Sumathi's great-grandmother got tired of them all. She withdrew into herself and didn't even come out to talk to the women after work. She went to sleep early and in the mornings prayed long and fervently at the Shiva shrine. She trod carefully at work, hoping not to attract unnecessary attention, but the men never left her alone.

Her silence was soon taken for submission. The men began to

abuse her even more ruthlessly. The few women who still respected her tried to draw her out of her self-absorption.

"We need women like you," they said. "Otherwise the men will walk all over us."

But something seemed to have run down inside her; she merely smiled at them and returned to her brooding.

She had trudged off one midmorning—she had earlier been trailed by the foreman—to find some calm for herself, when she heard someone following her. She stopped and listened; she only heard a slight wind among the trees. When she moved on again, jingling her anklets noisily, she heard someone call out to her.

"Let me take off that sari!"

She lost her mind and began to run, the voice coming at her from various directions. Remembering the incident many years later, she said she wasn't sure if the voice had come from inside her or from some desperate man. All she knew was that she was suddenly inside a deep and singing silence.

She had just sat down on a large, jutting root to recover her breath when she heard some animal at hand. Instead of the tiger of the stories, there stood the white man in the morning shadows, almost camouflaged by his work clothes. He seemed to growl at her in a strange way.

She got up and began to run again, the sari proving to be, for the first time in her life, a handicap; that was the only time she cursed it.

"Stop! Stop! Nobody's going to eat you!" the man shouted, panting after her.

Then she tripped and fell, and he upon her.

What followed was turned into a ritual by generations of her relatives. She ran, the bells jingled; she stopped, the bells fell silent. She heard the man cursing and thrashing through the bushes and plants. Suddenly, she lost all her fear. She stamped her foot, the bells jingled more boisterously, and the man cursed and thrashed about more desperately in the bushes. She remembered his words "belling the cat," but this time he was going to be the cat. She ran about here and there, weaving a bell-trail of seduction; he followed, growling and swearing and panting. At last she got tired of the game; she held herself stiffly behind a huge tree trunk and slipped off the anklet with its bells. She managed to steal back to the shacks, dig up her tin of savings, and tuck-

ing the embroidered pouch into her bundle of clothes, she fled past the newly laid and gleaming tracks.

The following day, she found herself in the estate where she would also find her husband. She seemed content to help him run the small sundry shop business; she put the anklets away in a velvet-covered box. When, after her husband's death, she was forced to move out with her children to a shop in a small town, she never let the box out of her sight. She kept it on the small table beside her bed, where she spent her last days telling her stories to whomever wanted to listen to them. Now and then she would mutter, "The klings are coming! The klings are coming!"

When Sumathi went to bed, fully resolved to haunt her mother out of her subservience, she didn't, as she had expected, fall asleep straight away. The memory of the anklet with its bells, stored away in its velvet-lined box, kept coming to her throughout the night. Then towards morning, it seemed to come floating out of its furry hiding place and hang before Sumathi, the silence of the years of suppression bursting into a blood-rich clamor.

1997



Suchen Christine Lim

"Two Brothers"

*Suchen Christine Lim was born in Malaysia in 1948 but was sent to a convent in Singapore at age fifteen for an English education. A graduate of the University of Singapore, she describes herself as a Singaporean writer and a third-generation descendant of illiterate Chinese immigrants. In 1993 she was awarded the Singapore Literature Prize for her novel *Fistful of Colours*. She currently serves as a curriculum specialist in the Ministry of Education, Singapore.*

"Two Brothers" questions British colonial practices and stereo-

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types during the Straits Settlements period, when the British carried out their economic infiltration of the Malay Peninsula through the Chinese entrepreneurial class. It illustrates the power and divisiveness of English-language privilege in a Straits Chinese family caught up in this colonial process. Other Southeast Asian writers, such as K. S. Maniam in "The Kling-Kling Woman" (Malaysia) and Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo in "The Painting" (the Philippines), also feel compelled to reconstruct the past from the perspective of the colonized.

THE HUMBLE ADDRESS OF THE STRAITS CHINESE BRITISH ASSOCIATION, PENANG, S.S., PRESENTED TO HIS MOST GRACIOUS MAJESTY, EDWARD, KING OF GREAT BRITAIN AND IRELAND, DEFENDER OF THE FAITH AND EMPEROR OF INDIA, ON THE OCCASION OF HIS ACCESSION TO THE THRONE OF GREAT BRITAIN AND IRELAND, 1901.

May it please Your Majesty,

We the members of the Chinese community of Penang venture to approach Your Majesty and to offer our humble but earnest and heartfelt congratulations on Your Majesty's accession to the Throne of Great Britain and Ireland.

Many of us have the great fortune to be the subjects of Your Majesty while others have come from far and wide to make a home in this colony. We venture to say that no class or section of the inhabitants of Your Majesty's widespread dominions have greater reason to rejoice on this occasion than we who live under Your Majesty's wise and enlightened rule.

As the representatives of the British subjects of Chinese descent in British Malaya, we rejoice in the opportunity which is now afforded us, of giving expression to the strong feelings of loyalty, devotion and attachment to Your Majesty's throne, as well as gratitude for the security and prosperity we enjoy under the aegis of the British flag.

We pray the God who is Lord of all nations upon the Earth, that He may in His mercy bless Your Majesty's reign, and may your loyal subjects of all races and creeds continue to live in peace and prosperity!

And we, as in duty bound, will ever pray,

Ong Boon Leong, L.L.B. (Cambridge)
President, Straits Chinese British Association