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EXPLORING THE DIASPORIC MALAYSIAN INDIAN'S NATIONAL IDENTITY THROUGH MULTI-VOICED STORYTELLING IN MUTHAMMAL PALANISAMY'S,

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Abstract

This paper explores Muthammal Palanisamy's life-writing *From Shore to Shore* by concentrating on how the author, a postcolonial diasporic Malaysian Indian female, problematises and legitimises the hybridity caused by migrant traversals, where life-writing and its textual devices disrupt normative constructs of national identity which are fixed within homelands. In doing so this paper textually appropriates the role of the migrant in the construction of a bottom-up national identity through migrant Indian indentured labour identities. The analysis will look at how the appropriation of multi-voiced stories involve cultural and historical discontinuities between the narrator, a diasporic Malaysian Indian, and her father, a migrant, which, in turn, enables the narrativisation of a national identity for the narrator.

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Keywords: : Postcolonial diasporic Malaysian Indian, multi-voiced storytelling, textual appropriation, hybridity

About Author

Kavitha is a senior lecturer at Universiti Malaysia Sabah and has been working on Malaysian Literatures in English with a particular interest in life-writings and their contributions in the making of the country's history. She completed her PhD at the University of Nottingham, United Kingdom with a thesis titled, "Construction of national identity in contemporary Malaysian state narratives and life-writings in English by women writers of Malay, Chinese, and Indian ethnic origins".

Exploring the diasporic Malaysian Indian's national identity through multi-voiced storytelling in Muthammal Palanisamy's, *From Shore To Shore* (2002)

Kavitha Ganesan

Introduction

To understand a nation through its narrative discourse is pertinent for a postcolonial nation like Malaysia due to the text's engagement with issues like nation and identity construction. The postcolonial cultural theorist, Homi Bhabha, shares Benedict Anderson's view that nation is imagined, and opines that it is continuously constructed through narratives written by the people who occupy its space. The nation is imagined because, regardless of how small a country may be, its citizens may never know of one another, yet, in their imagination they exist as a whole community due to the sovereign geographical boundaries they share (see *Imagined Communities*, 1983). As a matter of fact Bhabha argues that a nation is an empty space until meaning is ascertained not only through the narratives written by the people but also by the state hence calling for a relational and discursive reading of these texts. He explains that, due to such "act[s] of narration", a nation is under continual narration and is open to new meaning where a collective identity may be constructed, or even contested.

Bhabha asserts that in narratives written by the people who occupy the boundaries of a nation—in this paper's case, migrants—the limits and thresholds of the nation may be articulated. The boundary is Janus-faced where on one hand the migrant is facing life in the new land, but on the other, is turned backwards towards the past. At the boundary, during textualisation, time is not linear and does not exist exclusively; the spatiality of the narrative is multiple and is presented from heterogeneous perspectives. Bhabha concludes that the migrants actively participate as cultural agents at the boundary, during which process, they discontinue inherited histories and cultures of their homeland, and recreate a new identity of national significance for themselves (the theoretical framework of this paper is based on Bhabha's "Introduction" to his edited volume, *Nation and Narration*, and his essay in the same volume, "Dissemination",1990,pp.1-7;291-322).

When taking Malaysia as a case study it is necessary to bear in mind that nationalism is used by the state to set the norms and limits of the nation particularly in top -down narrativisation where the state revisits the period preceding independence when negotiation talks with the colonial government witnessed the granting of citizenship to the Chinese and Indian migrants thus validating the claim of the Malays as the bumiputeras (sons/daughter of the land) that places them at the centre for the nation (for details on Malaysia's history, see Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 2001; and, Sandhu and Mani, *Indian Communities in South-east Asia*,1993; for an account about the plight for belonging suffered by diasporic Malaysian Indians, see Nagarajan, "Marginalisation and Ethnic Relations",2009).

During British rule, in mid-19th and 20th centuries, indentured labourers from China and India were brought in to fill labour shortage in British Malaya. In present-day Malaysia, as this period of arrival is taken to define the non-Malays—Chinese and Indians—collectively as pendatang (new arrival/migrant), the question of belonging for those migrants who stayed back and their descendants who made Malaya, later Malaysia, their only home, remains unanswered in contemporary Malaysia's socio-political makeup (see for example Pak, "Malaysian ethnic minorities missing out on education opportunities" *BBC News Asia*; also see Barr and Govindasamy (2010) "The Islamisation of Malaysia" *Australian Journal of International Affairs*). This paper addresses such pressing issue where through the reading forwarded in the succeeding section, the state's construction of a nation based on nationalist principles is deconstructed—in its place, through the examination of a narrative strategy, i.e. multi-voiced storytelling, the bottom-up construction of national identity from the perspective of a postcolonial diasporic Indian female is reconstructed.

In short, this paper explores Muthammal Palanisamy's life-writing *From Shore to Shore* (hereafter *Shore to Shore*) by concentrating on how the author problematises and legitimises the hybridity caused by migrant traversals, where life-writing and its textual devices disrupt normative constructs of national identity which are fixed within homelands (the book was later translated into Tamil by the author and published in South India as *Naadu Vittu Naadu*,2007. Palanisamy had also written and published a compilation of folksongs in Tamil, having gathered them from the migrant Indian workers and their descendants who have settled in the plantation estates of Malaysia; see *Naatupura Padalgalil En Payanam*, *My Journey Through Folksongs*, title of book translated by researcher,2006). In doing so this paper textually appropriates the role of the migrant in the making of a bottom-up national identity through mi-

grant Indian indentured labour identities, where national belonging is narrativised from the perspectives of crossing, geographic re-location, and diaspora. The story is told by the author, a second generation Tamil-speaking Indian female, whose parents, emigrated as labourers from India to one of the rubber plantations in the state of Perak in British Malaya (the term 'Indian' was a broad category used by the British colonisers todescribe the South Asians who immigrated to Malaya. According to the 2010 Population and Housing Census of Malaysia, the Indians in Malaysia who presently comprise 7.3% of the total population, can be classified as Indian Muslims, Malayalis, Punjabis, Sikhs, Sinhalese, Indian-Tamils, Sri Lankan-Tamils, Telugus, and Other Indians; see http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/download_Population/files/census2010/Taburan_Penduduk_dan_Ciri-ciri_Asas_Demografi.pdf). Following the outbreak of World War II they left for their ancestral village in India as a family only to return seven years later after the surrender of the Japanese Army to permanently settle in Malaya.

Since the text includes details of the family's temporary absence from Malaya during the Second World War it can be interpreted as going against the norms of nationalist principles that require the people occupying the land to come to its defence. Nevertheless in this paper the construction of belonging will be examined through new ways of identifying with the nation. This is based on the view that national identity does not just depend on the doctrines of nationalism, but rather, the realities of postcolonial conditions. The Martinique-born psychologist and activist, Frantz Fanon, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, wrote—"National consciousness, which is not nationalism, is the only thing that will give us international dimension [my emphasis]". Fanon's concept of "international dimension" is implied throughout the paper, as it looks at how with global-level migration either for intellectual, economic or security reasons, particularly after the collapse of the British Empire, the political and cultural realities of the world population are increasingly influenced by the consequences of movement (see *The Wretched of the Earth*,1967,p.199). Instead of following the conventions of nationalism that call for the defence of the land through the process which sees people who occupy the land homogenised and their specificities and differences overlooked, the analysis in this paper will explore how postcolonial conditions embrace such differences so that the hybridised identities of migrants can be seen as providing useful insights into the examination of national identity in a life -story.

Shore to Shore is told by the author-narrator-protagonist textually manifested as the narrative's persona from the first person perspective. The narrative starts with the story of her father, Palanisamy Gounder or Ayyan (Tamil for father or grandfather) who tries his hands in all sorts of menial labour in the rubber plantation, ranging from weeding and tapping to husking coconut husks, determined to make a living in the new land. These details set the contours of the Hindu-Tamil working-class background in the plantation estates of Malaya. In explaining the characteristics of the Gounders and drawing similarities with her Ayyan, the narrator details how such people are hardworking, resourceful, independent, and thrifty: conversely, she also points out that the Gounders are also very prideful and vengeful—the mixture of all these traits define Ayyan (Gounder refers to one of the castes in India that is categorised according to the type of labour bestowed upon a clan, family, or village; see Palanisamy,2002,pp.10-11). The readers are informed that in wanting to improve himself, which will lead to better opportunities, Ayyan learns numerous languages, and eventually becomes the head mandore, or the estate overseer at the rubber plantation in Perak. As part of his job responsibilities require to recruit plantation workers, Ayyan constantly travels to South India.

One such trip sees him going to a Gounder village where he marries Valliammal. In the same village, he comes to know of an old man, an ex-convict sentenced for attacking a man with a sickle over a road tax dispute. The old man's young daughter, already a rebel in her village for having gone to school at a time when girls are prohibited from leaving the boundaries of their homes, becomes the talk of the town as she returns to her parents at the age of ten, after running away from an abusive husband, 20 years her senior. Ayyan promises to take the family to Malaya in his next trip. However, due to the problems caused by the villagers, since the girl had removed the sacred thali from her neck when her husband was still alive, the old man, also a Gounder, moves his family to Malaya, the promised land, sooner than intended. This young girl, Palaniammal, eventually becomes Ayyan's second wife in Malaya. Together, they have eight children: the narrator is the second, in addition to Ayyan's eight children with his first wife.

Ayyan's hard work earns him good fortune, as by the early 1940s, he becomes the owner of about 200 acres of land cultivated with rubber and coconut trees. But this is short-lived, as with the start of the war, Ayyan moves both his families to India. There they suffer from extreme poverty for seven years trying one mode of survival after another, where along with their parents, the children work in dire living conditions in order for the families to survive. When the war ends Ayyan moves his families back to Malaya this time to permanently settle down. The family starts all over again, where Ayyan, with renewed optimism, goes back to make a living from the lands he owned.

Even though his land yields a profit, Ayyan's two families make it difficult for the families to overcome the clutches of poverty. Life in Malaya slowly returns to normal but Ayyan's financial gains cause a stir among relatives that sees him taking heavily to drinking, which he

finally succumbs to. The narrator and her family are forbidden from attending his funeral rites, which are held at his first wife's home. As he left all his fortune to his second wife, the family dispute mounts, and eventually sees Amma dividing the fortune equally between the two families. Without someone dependable to oversee their lands, life takes a dramatic turn, as the families struggle to cope with their new responsibilities. Amidst all these, a year after Ayyan's death, the narrator marries Spence, an Englishman of Scottish ancestry. After having completed her teacher's training course and having taught at various schools, the narrator finally becomes a teacher in the same English school, and later, the principal, where she once struggled to learn the language with her siblings. In her old age, Amma suffers from dementia and her death sees the narrator making another culturally defiant move for an Indian woman by entering the cremation grounds to collect the ashes. Now, during the course of telling her story, and in her late seventies, with grown up children and grandchildren, the narrator continues living a life of simplicity and hard work with her husband in Perak, near the plantation, where she attributes the difficult and extraordinary lives they led to the brave people who preceded them.

Although the whole narrative is interrupted by various narrative strategies such as funeral chants (*oppari*) and folksongs, the narrative persona is the most important one as it is through her that numerous fragmented accounts of the multi-voiced stories are brought to attention in the narrative. As the persona's storytelling traces the journey of her migrant Indian-Gounder family and its diaspora in Malaya, it interlinks different generations, and in doing so, traces the generational changes within the family. Her storytelling replaces the temporal linearity of the narrative with a spatial plurality, since through the many-voiced storytelling, various cultural and historical elements of the migrant Indian working-class identities surface. And, since it is the persona's appropriation of stories that forms the main feature of the narrative, by unlocking the complexities within the narrative persona, it will be possible to determine the migrant Indian indentured labour identities in *Shore to Shore*.

The discussion therefore focuses on how the multi-voiced stories are appropriated, and in the process, examine the persona's heterogeneous speaking positions, shifting perspectives, and hybridised identities that highlight her postcolonial, diasporic, and working-class conditions. More specifically, the analysis will look at how the persona's appropriation of the stories involve cultural and historical discontinuities, which, in turn, enable the narrativisation of a national identity within the text. The complexities surrounding the appropriation of storytelling will be investigated through the accounts given by Ayyan and the narrator because these layered stories represent the ways in which migrant and diasporic identities are articulated and at the same time distinguished from one another.

That said, parallels have to be drawn between the persona, storyteller, and protagonist in relation to the authorial self as *Shore to Shore* is a form of life-writing (Lejeune writes: "In order for there to be autobiography, the author, the narrator, and the protagonist must be identical". He terms this the "autobiographical pact", see *On Autobiography*,1989,p.5). The authorial self can be perceived as the postcolonial female writer whose multiple identities are textually transformed in the form of the persona, as well as through the roles she plays as the narrative's storyteller and protagonist. The persona's combined roles, on one hand as the persona-storyteller, and on the other, as the persona-protagonist, depict complex multi-faceted and contrasting identities of the authorial self. It can be said that the persona is in a textually *authoritative* position to articulate and construct the migrant Indian indentured life experienced in the plantation estates of both colonial and postcolonial Malaya.

Nonetheless as the text is narrativised through the first-person point of view, the persona-protagonist combination reveals a *marginalised* condition as the voice of 'I' shows an identification with the poverty-stricken migrant Indian labourers of the plantation sites. Such complex mixture of empowerment and marginalisation can be considered as exemplifying the postcolonial diasporic female writer. It is also due to this that the postcolonial female writer can be considered different from male nationalist writers and female life-writers from the West who use the same life-writing mode as a form of self-representation (Boehmer explains that male writers resisted against colonisation by self-fashioning their fight for freedom and histories by giving a masculine perspective in their writings. With the growth of Western Feminism, colonised women began writing feminised accounts of the decolonisation process. In both cases, the autobiography was used as the literary medium. As they used the same form, the postcolonial women writers narrativised their distinctiveness through narrative strategies that focused on their specific conditions and multiple identities. See *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*,1995. A similar idea is observable in Trinh's work, *Woman, Native, Other*,1989, as she asserts that postcolonial women had to break away from stereotypical representations given by male writers who represented all women as the same). In *Shore to Shore*, the complicated representation of the many-voiced stories through the persona-storyteller and persona-protagonist combinations, which are appropriated, in turn, shape the author-cum-persona's heterogeneous speaking positions and shifting perspectives, and as a result, determine her hybridised identities that show the construction of a national belonging in the text. Boehmer's description of the postcolonial female writer can be used to explain the persona-storyteller as someone who occupies a narrative space that is digressive, interruptive, and many-voiced—all elements that

demonstrate the text's narrative multiplicity and also, its hybridity.

Home, belonging, and national identity in *Shore to Shore*

The numerous multi-voiced digressive stories in *Shore to Shore* start with the ensuing story, which is an account iterated by the persona-storyteller of her father, Ayyan's arrival to Perak in British Malaya:

> This brings me to the first of my little stories… Ayyan used to tell this story to us over and over again and it never failed to bring tears to our eyes every time we heard it[.]
> Ayyan was sailing away from home in India in search of a better life in Malaysia, then known as Malaya. … Ayyan had set sail with just a *dothi* [a long piece of cotton cloth wrapped around the waist] and *thundu* [a small piece of cloth casually slung across the shoulder]. He endured many sleepless nights as conditions on the ship were appalling and the filth and lice made sleeping a nightmare. Ayyan was barely in his teens, but he resolved to always look ahead and not look back (*Shore to Shore*,pp.6-7).

The most obvious point about the excerpt is the shift in the narrative space the persona-storyteller occupies. In the first paragraph her storytelling is set on a linear flow as marked by the phrase, "first of my little stories", but disrupted by her recollection of Ayyan's story, a position that makes her narrative move backwards in time. Additionally, while constructing one story, another one is constructed, this shows that the textual spatiality of this excerpt is digressive. When the first story can only be related by incorporating the second one, it also depicts a heterogeneous speaking position in storytelling. Such disjunctive temporality and spatiality in the narrative makes identity an issue that is based on shifting but multiply co-existing elements. As a narrative strategy bringing to focus numerous diverse elements, the layered dual-voiced storytelling, persona-Ayyan-persona, shows that Shore to Shore opens with a note of arrival, where the image of Ayyan as the indentured immigrant in his dothi and thundu shows both the historical and cultural beginnings of the working-class Indian migrant in the soil of Malaya. It also shows a sense of continuity that is brought from the homeland, India. To the immigrant the apparels offer assurance but to other immigrants like Ayyan in Malaya they symbolise familiarity, enabling the fostering of communal kinship in the new land. Either way the pieces of clothing are a cultural baggage necessary for the migrant to reconstruct 'home' in the new land.

It is important to look at how this layered storytelling is significant to the persona of Shore to Shore. By including Ayyan's story at the very start of her narrative, the persona-storyteller has textually appropriated his traversal and geographic relocation. Even more significantly, by doing so, she is acknowledging the reasons that are instrumental to the formation of the Indian diaspora in Malaya, at least in the context of her family. In many senses then Ayyan's beginning in the new land is also the persona's beginning which has been highlighted by the shift in her storytelling. However, since she is layering her storytelling with Ayyan's, the persona is emphasising that just like the stories, the migrant and his descendant's identities are multiple—those formed earlier

are not erased but layered by new ones. Additionally, in describing his journey, the persona-storyteller through Ayyan is epitomising every emigrating labourer's dream, which is driven by a sense of hope and determination to start life anew in the unknown land. This means that through the persona-storyteller's textual re-presentation the voyage itself is a remarkable space for a new identity to take its shape. Journeying is not only important to the immigrant, but crucially also, to his descendant, the persona-storyteller, who, without having undergone the journey, is relating herself to the border crossing that her father undertook through the mental image of the voyage. So border crossing can be as much an imagined thing, as it is a physical thing, a point that makes it impossible to neatly contrast the generational differences that exist between Ayyan and the persona.

The question then is—why is the appropriation of Ayyan's story with the persona's necessary, and, in what way does it reflect on the textual construction of a national identity? The appropriation is important because while doing so, the persona is making a crucial distinction through the line, "sailing away from home in India in search of a better life in Malaysia, then known as Malaya". This implies that the persona is presenting varying notions of home in relation to Ayyan and herself. In the case of Ayyan, the tropes of homeland and belonging are constructed on a sense of nostalgia, hence, bringing to attention his feeling of displacement in Malaya. However in the case of the persona, the construction of home is presented through textually defined boundaries. This is because in articulating Ayyan's home within the contours of India, in contrast to Malaya, the persona-storyteller is textually de-territorialising the two countries. And, by noting the change from Malaya to Malaysia, she is also bringing to focus the re-territorialisation of Malaysia within her textual frame. Such mixture in the articulation of boundaries can be seen as portraying the persona's complex identity, where, at the moment of textual construction, for the persona, the concept of territory, or the binaries of inside and outside are disrupted and re-defined, highlighting her heterogeneous and shifting identities. So it can be said that the textual re-construction of home through the articulation of boundaries secures Ayyan to his homeland: however, to the persona-storyteller, it creates an in-between unstable space where identity is not based on fixed boundaries.

It is important that the notions of home and belonging to the diasporic Indian persona are discussed in contrast to that of her father, since she is the one who traced Ayyan's home in a distant land away from Malaya, so that his rooted identity is foregrounded in the textual space. Unlike her father's, the persona's conceptualisation of home can be said to be driven by a sense of trajectory, where boundaries are blurred and replaced by an identity that is configured by both inherited and disrupted concepts of belonging, in order for a rooted identity to take its shape. The persona's solidarity and allegiance towards Malaysia the nation is made possible through the construction of a discontinuous place and history in comparison to Ayyan, where her identity is based on the diasporic condition that clearly distinguishes her from her father, a position that emphasises the generational change between the two people. So, on the one hand, while the textualisation of boundaries highlights Ayyan's fixed rooted identity, on the other hand, it brings the persona's diasporic condition to attention, where the differences that existed within her in contrast to her migrant father is articulated, so that the construction of home connects her to the land, Malaysia. This means that within the textual space of the persona's appropriated storytelling, instead of boundaries, migrations and their consequences are legitimised, so that the diasporic identity of the Indian descendant is essentialised.

It can be said that as the first of the many digressive stories incorporated in Shore to Shore, this story, which is on migrant arrival, is aimed at legitimising the migrant's move to the new land, which enabled his descendant to secure her identity with Malaysia through the disjunctive notions of home and belonging. In short, just like the layered storytelling, the persona's sense of the nation is a result of layered conditions which occurred prior to the migrant's arrival—the English colonial period that created the Kangany System, the migrant traversal that took place as a consequence of the system, and finally, Ayyan's survival that caused his hybridised identities in the new place to take their form in order for the persona-storyteller to trace her similarities and differences in relation to him. In this sense, rather than the boundaries that existed between the nations, the movements that occurred between the two lands are essentialised. This is why while there is an overlap in identities between Ayyan and the persona, at the same time, there is also a marked difference between them, as illustrated by the identification with varying constructions of home and belonging.

Having examined the dual-voiced storytelling and their appropriation, it is also necessary to look at how Ayyan's "becoming" identity is narrativised within the text through a single-voiced digressive and interruptive storytelling by the persona:

> Upon arrival in Malaya, Ayyan was sent to work in an estate called Sungai Wangi in the district of Dindings, Perak (presently Manjung district). This estate belonged to the Golden Group of Companies, the owner of several rubber plantations. He was assigned to the *chokra* or children's gang to do weeding … whenever possible he learnt to tap rubber, which commanded better wages. … In addition to his two jobs in the estate, he became a vendor of farm produce. … Within one year he could speak Malay too. Before long, he became a *mandore* or estate overseer.
>
> [Ayyan] settled thefts, run-away cases, fights and other disputes unlike some *kanganis* who bullied and beat up helpless labourers. … He would wear short pants, shoes and a hat just like the European estate managers, whom he contacted without the usual 'go-between' and he would never take off his hat or shoes when he met them (*Shore to Shore,* pp.25-28).

Unlike the first excerpt, in this one, which outlines Ayyan' s survival in the plantation area of Malaya, the storytelling is about a time in the past, but told from the perspective of the present. This can be seen through the inclusion of the phrase, "presently Manjung district", which brings to light the persona's own perspective in the appropriation of her father's story. Due to such a shift in perspectives, it can be said that the persona's single-voiced storytelling is digressive. It is also interruptive because the textual frame of the excerpt traces the changes in Ayyan's past from a narrative point that is set in the present, as brought to attention by the use of simple and conditional past in the storytelling. It can then be said that the narrativisation of this excerpt is done from a position where the storyteller's space is

occupied by the authorial self's identity as a Malaysian. The issue then is, in what way this single-voiced storytelling is relevant to the discussion of this paper that is on migrant identity and his descendant's textual construction of a national belonging.

In order to answer the question, it will be necessary to first define Ayyan's becoming identity according to the excerpt. The persona-storyteller has detailed how his identities were constantly evolving and becoming as a result of the various menial jobs he undertook. Ayyan's aspirations to make living possible in the new land saw him trying his hands in weeding to selling farm produce, where, by doing so, he turned the estate land he occupied to its bounty through hard work. As a matter of fact, these jobs also meant that Ayyan was slowly improving his income and status in the same agricultural environment where he started off as an indentured labourer. Ayyan's position within the plantation society evolved as he became the *mandore*, and later a *kangany*, before assuming the cultural identity of the English colonial masters through his appearance. Moreover, the excerpt also depicts Ayyan's ability to learn a new language that outlines his survival in the land from a

socio-cultural perspective. Through these appropriations of Ayyan's early life in Malaya, one can note the discontinued history and culture of the homeland, as Ayyan improved from a poor labourer to a *kangany*, where his migrant cultural baggage, the *thundu* and *dothi*, were replaced by short pants, shoes, and hat. This is why it can be said that the excerpt was aimed at presenting Ayyan's becoming identity in Malaya. Nonetheless, the question remains as to how Ayyan's becoming identity is important to the analysis of this paper.

This is because, as mentioned earlier, the persona-storyteller's appropriation in this excerpt is infused with her own perspective, implying that while narrativising Ayyan's becoming identity, she is at the same time, narrating her own becoming identity. In giving words such as *chokra*, *mandore*, and *kanganis* textual space, the persona's evolving linguistic identity is emphasised, since the words show a cross fertilisation of languages that is occurring at the moment of textual construction. The overlaps of the languages, where words from the mother tongue, Tamil, are appropriated according to the context of the Malay-speaking plantation environment in Malaya, and adopted to the literary medium, English, shows multiple stages of language transformation (with the exception of the word *chokra*, which originates from Hindi, the words *mandore* and *kangany* have their roots in the Tamil language). Just like the persona's multiple and complex becoming identities, the language environment in Malaysia does not exist in a single or pure form. Instead, it is a variety that results from a multiple blend and mixture of languages, which in this case, has come to the fore through the textualisation of the persona's self-constructed becoming identity.

The persona's appropriation of the plantation words, while highlighting the distinctive Malaysian linguistic identity, also legitimises the plantation grounds. This is because, the persona-storyteller as the authorial self, is able to present a linguistic variance based on the plantation life for contemporary society, particularly the Malaysian readers, who by and large do not encounter such words or their uses in other situations. In turn, it legitimises the plantation Indians in Malaysia, as it is only through them that the linguistic variance emerges, further contributing to the polyglot environment in Malaysia. To the wider English-speaking community of the world, on the other hand, this form of textualisation is able to give witness to the fertile transformation and appropriation that the English language has undergone, hence bringing to focus the text's and the persona-storyteller's postcoloniality. This can be clearly seen through the spelling of the word 'kangany' in its appropriated plural form as 'kangan*is*'. Such regional and cultural peculiarities can be usefully considered with other emerging forms of transformation undergone by the English language from other once-colonised countries. So, at this point it can be said that the appropriation of Ayyan's becoming identity shows the linguistic identity of both the persona and the nation, Malaysia.

The intriguing issue about this excerpt stems from the narrative position that the persona-storyteller occupies in relating the story. As had been mentioned, she occupies the authorial position as a Malaysian, and narrativises the becoming identity of Ayyan and herself through this perspective. This implies that the narrative point of this excerpt is infused with a national sense of belonging because the process of storytelling includes a retelling of the past in the context of the present, where, alongside the persona and her ancestor's life, the nation's story is also narrativised. In order to examine this further, it is necessary to look at the single-voiced digressive and interruptive storytelling and its relevance to the becoming identity discussed in this excerpt.

By giving representation to Ayyan and his position as the *kangany* who brought workers from India, the persona-storyteller has highlighted that he was instrumental in creating a 'little India' in Malaya. In many ways then Ayyan can be seen as the father of the plantation estates. It also meant that in the past, as a migrant Indian, he historically and culturally transferred the India he knew to the new land, Malaya. However, since the storytelling is single-voiced with interruptions from the persona-storyteller's perspective of a present narrative point, it can be said that she is historicising the nation through a complex linguistic adaptation, a position made possible by both her *Malaysian and diasporic identities*. As brought to attention earlier, whilst the diasporic Indian's ancestors at times broke away from their historical and cultural elements in order to survive in the new land, at other times, they also kept the motherland's continuity going by re-creating its images as Ayyan did by recruiting more Indian workers. Yet, his descendant, who is also the authorial self, has narrativised the history of the migrant and the changes that his presence has caused to the land through the articulation of the nation's unique linguistic identity. This, in turn, legitimises the working-class Indians of the plantation sites in Malaya for both local and international readership. At the same time, it also brings to attention the descendants of the working-class Indians, the Malaysian Indians, who, just like the linguistic variety, are distinctive in the making of contemporary Malaysia.

Unlike their forefathers, the diasporic Malaysian Indians are the ones who transcended the boundaries of the plantations, albeit textually, by using the English language as a platform to reach out to a broad range of readers, as they linguistically transformed the Malaysian plantation site as a hybrid ground, so that it bridges the plantation labourers with the wider Malaysian society. This means that the linguistic variance enabled the construction of an inclusivist identity between the persona-storyteller and the generic Malaysian, and in doing so, it created an exclusivist identity for Malaysians as a whole within the wider English-speaking community. Therefore, the single-voiced storytelling can be seen as a nar-

rative strategy that gave textual empowerment to the authorial self to articulate and essentialise her

diasporic working-class plantation identity through a Janus-faced perspective, where, by looking at the past and present, the linguistic identity of the postcolonial diasporic female and the national boundary she occupies could be expressed.

Conclusion

In examining the construction of national identity in *Shore to Shore*, the persona, who doubly performs the role as the storyteller and protagonist, brings to light the authorial identity of Palanisamy as Malaysian Indian. This is because it is through the persona that the narrative's multi-voiced storytelling intersects as ancestral stories are appropriated and made audible in the text. While the appropriation displays the persona's migrant roots, it also shows the authorial identity as through storytelling belonging is narrativised within the contours of Malaysia. In fact, at one point, her storytelling completely cuts her off from Ayyan as the persona proceeds with her conceptualisation of home, history, and culture in relation to Malaysia. Such discontinuity can be interpreted as the migrant descendant's move towards identifying herself with a different generation in contrast to her ancestors.

This brings the conclusion to the question raised earlier in this paper—how can a story tracing a family's temporary return to the homeland at a time when the adopted land was under colonial (Japanese) invasion be seen as a narrative of national identity? The distinctive Malaysian linguistic identity in which the plantation words were brought to textual space shows that the diasporic Indians' sense of decolonisation continues after the formal process has ended. Therefore this group of Indians' migration and their continued presence in Malaysia is essentialised—it is only through them that the plantation-based linguistic diversity continues to exist in the country. It is due to this that it can be said that the nationalist construction of the state is deconstructed in Palanisamy's text where a new identity is reconstructed that shows a bottom-up construction of national identity.

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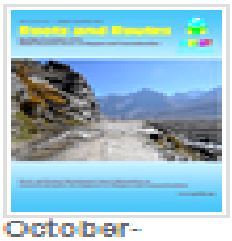
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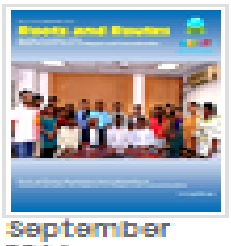
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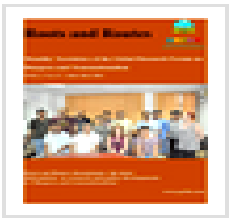
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