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**Review of**  
**K.S. Maniam,**  
*A Stranger to Love*

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**K.S. Maniam. *A Stranger to Love. Petaling Jaya: Maya Press, 2018. 1st Edition. Paperback. 278pp. ISBN 978-983-2737-57-5.***

*For all those who believe in the heart there lives an irrepressible solicitude for the marginalised and betrayed.*

K.S. Maniam

Over the last four decades, K.S. Maniam has provided a body of work that has given voice to the disenfranchised and underprivileged in Malaysian society, but has also explored paths towards national healing and unification and toward a shared sense of purpose. In his latest collection of short stories, Maniam's concern with those who live liminal lives has not waned, as evidenced by the above dedication, but this condition now permeates the mainstream of modern Malaysian society. The tone of the stories is conversational and confiding, often confessional, describing the minutiae of business dealings and domesticity but ultimately revealing acts of desperation and dislocation. There is an emphasis on sensory perceptions that, once to be trusted, now mislead. Individuals living superficially successful lives are cut adrift, unmoored by their inability to find real purpose and connection, and haunted by their fear of failure and their blindness to corruption in a society that, at times, resembles a rotting carcass. This social sickness no longer predominantly stems from politics and the business elite; rather it is now a contamination of self-satisfaction that reaches throughout the socioeconomic strata of society. Maniam evokes a deep and pervasive shame for the direction in which our comfortable lives and materialistic obsessions have led us. Family, traditionally seen as a safe haven and the foundation of moral values, has also been corrupted and many of the stories function as a corruscating indictment of the malaise enveloping modern society and personal relationships. The prose repeatedly evinces the effects of corrosive consumerism on individuals and families, and of obsessive one-upmanship in business; the texts are filled with references to the superficial goods and services that define a consumerist society - cars, fine dining, alcohol, makeup, jewelry - and are often seen in sharp relief to the protagonists' more humble origins. These are hollow lives in which one validates one's existence through business advancement and a satiation of the senses. Small excesses become venal obsessions and the smug, self-serving facade of economic comfort, the numbing salve of modernity, is invariably punctured by betrayal, revealing the fragility on which these lifestyles have been built.

The opening story, "Sunlight Dancing on the Waves", details a father who sacrifices his present and future for futile dreams of a mythical, nautical past, while the second in the collection, "Guardian Knot", provides a microcosm of plantation life and the attempts of its inhabitants to escape its drudgery. These first two tales depict principal characters whose dreams are unrealistic or thwarted but the third story, "Just a Spirit", relates the story of a rich, successful man who, driven by a charitable impulse to serve society, is mercilessly exploited and retreats into his house and family in an attempt to reconnect with core values. The narrative emphasises the machinations of political corruption and big business, a contagion that is in equal parts repulsive and alluring:

The stink was so powerful and suffocating, I almost turned and rushed to the viewing room, but checked myself ... When I breathed again, after a while, the stink wasn't

only still there but seemed to be more potent. It also began to have a strange effect on me. I wanted to breathe in and savour the various flavours! (69)

Domestic disharmony is also a common theme in these stories. The centrepiece of the collection, “A Stranger to Love”, portrays the deception that lies at the heart of a seemingly harmonious marriage and hints at the pressures brought to bear on the modern Malaysian woman, who is caught between the traditional expectations of her gender and the practical necessities of the society in which she lives. The naive protagonist is incapable of acknowledging his wife’s multiple lives and the facade of their existence. Manjula is, at any given moment, loving wife and mother, dutiful daughter-in-law, business-woman, seductress, betrayer; she inhabits all these roles and more, and it is only at the conclusion of the narrative that her husband begins to tentatively grasp this reality. In “Afterwards”, a story that does offer a chance at redemption, a husband and wife are blinded to outside realities as they cocoon themselves in their comfortable, yet soulless, lives but this indifference is shattered when the protagonist is hounded by his younger self, who urges him to acknowledge “the pain of reality” (132) and rediscover the “inner space” of his idealistic youth. The mask of indifference that is modern life, the story tells us, suffocates potential, dulls the senses, makes one less human.

Though the collection does on occasion reference the redemptive power of re-establishing a connection to humanity through nature to overcome “the fearful emptiness” (149), the title of a story that entwines two versions of familial disconnection and betrayal, many of the characters almost inevitably retreat into loneliness and alienation. This is evidenced again by the story “A Puzzling Sorrow”, a curious narrative in which the protagonist relates various loosely-connected incidents in his childhood that connect his mother’s rural past to their urban present as he gradually retreats into his own “inner space” (225). Unlike a number of Maniam’s previous works, such as the short-story collection, *Haunting the Tiger* (1990) and the novels, *In a Far Country* (1993) and *Between Lives* (2003), in this story rural life offers little solace but rather, as is evidenced in one scene evocative of William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* in which young boys torture a water buffalo for no clear purpose other than pleasure, implies a mindless brutality that is a core component of our base natures:

The boys attacked with greater force, the spears going deeper into the animal’s flesh and drawing trickles of blood. The boys then did a savage dance around the wounded animal. It moved its body this way and that, trying to dislodge the spears. They fell off one by one. This enraged the boys again and they picked up their spears and struck the buffalo again and again, brutally, until the animal was streaming with blood and bellowing with pain. (217)

The final story in the collection, the ironically-titled “Blaze of Light”, underscores the illusions under which so many of these characters labour: namely that their confidence in their own perceptions, and in their insights into the lives of others and in being able to assess character, is clearly ill-founded. An old man, sure of his ability to “see people in their true character or situations for what they were” (259), is brought to the realisation that the “light” in which he has placed such faith is a lie. This light blinds rather than illuminates and, Maniam seems to imply, so too does the constant disconnection from society experienced in the bright lights of the metropolis: the obfuscation of truth, the petty elitism and, finally, the obliteration of what binds us to our essential humanity. The

city is shown as a prison, its inhabitants brainwashed and brutalized, just as the doomed Mayilan in “A Deep Rage”, writes in a forewarning of his own corruption and incarceration, as he “shrink(s) inside, soon (to) be a dot” (241):

*Here the roads rise higher and higher. And the buildings almost reach the sky.  
Blocking out the stars. But all built by man. Think of that. All built by man!* (emphasis  
in original, 243)

There is a bleakness in the subject matter of these stories that, while present to greater or lesser degrees in Maniam’s previous writing, now threatens to overwhelm the reader. Though at their core there may still flicker an intrinsic narratorial belief in humanity and the opportunity to reconnect with a spirituality that has lain dormant, that belief is clearly wavering. These are tales of parental love turned sour, of humiliation and contaminated dreams, of blighted individuals who, whether financially successful or not, carry within them an emptiness that oscillates between futility and impotent rage. Many of the characters seek ways to reconnect to an intangible past that may no longer exist and perhaps never did.

In spite of some technical flaws in editing and proofreading, this collection of nine short stories provides a worthy and acerbic addition to Maniam’s oeuvre, and one which has relevance not only within Malaysia itself, but well beyond its borders.