

## **AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A MALAYSIAN INDIAN WOMAN:**

### **FROM SHORE TO SHORE**

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#### **Abstract**

This paper is part of a series of studies done to perpetuate interest and attention towards multiethnic Malaysian women's autobiographies, not only for their literary value, but also as potential sources of alternative perspectives on Malaysian history (Haslina, 2013). The notion that Malaysian women of all ethnic backgrounds live in a gendered world, in which women are assigned to the home and passive and uninvolved in the country's political changes may be the reason why there seems to be an attitude of inattentiveness or an indifference towards autobiographies by Malaysian women. Women's life narratives are representations of their lived experiences written and published with the purpose of sharing it with others. However, only a small number of Malaysian women have published autobiographies; rather than being evidence of insignificance, according to Lim, the number points to "the unfavourable conditions under which they wrote" (1994). This paper attempts to draw insights from life writing that can greatly enhance our historical understanding of the development of women in Malaysia and also for its literary significance. It seeks to answer a call for the creation of a new practice of reading women's autobiographies, especially those by women from multiethnic communities (Smith & Watson, 1992). This paper reads into a Malaysian autobiography entitled *From Shore to Shore* by Muthammal Palanisamy (2002) in an attempt to erase the notion that Malaysian women's life narratives are trivial, but instead allow readers to make clearer connections with the literary, historical and social cultural viewpoints.

**Keywords:** Alternative Perspectives, Lived Experiences, Malaysian Indian Woman, Malaysian Women's Autobiographies.

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#### **1. Introduction**

In their introduction to *De/Colonizing the Subject* (1992), Smith and Watson call into question the usage of Western literary and theoretical practices, elaborating that "it does us no good, it does literary practice no good, to take up critical definitions, typologies, reading practices, and thematics forged in the West through the engagement with canonical Western texts and to read texts from various global locations through those lenses" This paper will discuss the life and life story of a Malaysian Indian woman autobiographer, Muthammal Palanisamy, in terms of her historical location, which will also encompass the cultural, social, economic and political milieus of her time. Information from archival research – such as the history of Indian migration into Malaya and the British rule of Malaya – will help situate her life story in the socio-political and historical context of the era and this will, in turn, help suggest the relevance of a Malaysian woman's autobiography.

#### **2. Discussions**

##### ***From Shore to Shore* by Muthammal Palanisamy: General Background**

Autobiography gurus, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson argue that autobiographical storytelling in both the oral and written form is all around us (Smith & Watson, 2001) and it encompasses "a history of the self" and this is what makes autobiography "the queerly moving, tangible, vibratory kind of narrative that it can be" (Kazin, 1964). Such a narrative is *From Shore to Shore* written and published by a Malaysian woman of Indian descent. Muthammal Palanisamy (henceforth Muthammal) was born on 5 February 1933 in Kampung Raja Semalon in the Manjung district of Perak. She grew up on rubber estates, where life was difficult and food was scarce. Muthammal, in an interview published in *The*

*Star* online (Augustine, 2005), describes how she tried her best to stay in school despite being able to have only one meal a day. Her parents placed a great deal of importance on education and this later influenced her as she not only created a learning environment at home for her four children, but also became a teacher and headmistress, a career which she pursued for over forty years. Growing up, Muthammal would listen to stories told by her grandfather and parents about their life experiences; she passed down this oral tradition to her own children and grandchildren, until she was prompted to write by her brother. Wanting to ensure that the stories would not be lost to future generations, Muthammal took three months to write her autobiography when she was 69 years old.

*From Shore to Shore* concerns her family's experiences as indentured labourers from India and their struggle to make new lives for themselves in Malaya—beginning with her father setting sail for Malaya, sometime between 1912 and 1913. More than that, however, *From Shore to Shore* chronicles the life of an entire class of people who spent their lives at the mercy of their foreign employers in a land that was completely alien to them. In an interview with Anasuya Menon of *The Hindu* (The Hindu, 2006), Muthammal reveals that her family's seven-year exile in India during World War II was difficult, having to survive by spinning yarn and selling caked of dried cow dung. Muthammal now lives in Sitiawan with her Scottish-Indian husband, Spence Grant, the son of Robert Grant, a Scottish manager of one of the Malayan estates.

### **2.1 Muthammal Palanisamy, the Autobiographer (b.1933)**

A Google search revealed a Facebook address belonging to Muthammal Palanisamy, which then became our initial means of communication. With the date and time fixed for an interview, I met Muthammal at her daughter's house in Rawang in 2011. Muthammal is currently living in Sitiawan, Perak. At 78 (at the time of interview), Muthammal still actively participates in the lives of her grandchildren and she also continues to write—at the time of writing, she is working on a Tamil version of *From Shore to Shore*, and a children's book on rhymes in English. During the interview, I also met Muthammal's daughter, Raja Letchumy, who proudly told me that she had assisted in the editing of her mother's book, as she had become very familiar with her mother's stories, spending her formative years listening to them. Muthammal is hardly renowned; but her autobiography deserves scrutiny as her life narrative tells of the experiences of her migrant parents from South India working hard to achieve a better life for themselves and their children, especially in their struggle to provide their children with an education—a means by which they believed would lift them out of poverty and change the destiny of their future descendants.

### **3. *From Shore to Shore*, the Life Story**

#### **Muthammal's role models: Amma and Apparayan**

Upon arrival to Malaya, Muthammal's mother, or Amma ("mother"), "was sent to an estate in Batu Caves in Kuala Lumpur" (Palanisamy, 2002: 34). Life was very hard, but Amma was "the first to adapt to their new life in Malaya" (Palanisamy, 2002: 34). Determined to send her brother, Sinnasamy, to school in the strange new land, Amma learnt to tap rubber within six months and became one of the youngest rubber tappers. She had also learned "to make and mend fishing nets from her Malay neighbours," as well as pillowcases with floral embroidery, and simple dresses for her children and stepdaughters (Palanisamy, 2002: 41). Amma even "learned to speak reasonably good Malay in a short while" (Palanisamy, 2002: 41). Muthammal's description of her mother's perseverance and diligence also echoes the struggles of other women like her in Malaya, at that time, whose self-determination and assertiveness revealed their wisdom as they took control of often deplorable or unfortunate life situations (Glück et al., 2005).

When Amma married Ayyan and moved to Perak with her family, he had already a wife and two children. Ayyan's first wife, Valliammal, did not disapprove of her husband taking another—Valliammal "lived just as she had in India and her husband was always right and

was never to be questioned” (Palanisamy, 2002: 36). Muthammal describes the house they lived in and the neighbours she grew up with:

We grew up in a house built on high ground, surrounded by acres and acres of coconut trees and a deep, clean river running through the land. It was a house with an attap roof, wooden pillars and a flight of steps up that was hand-cut and very crude. We had many Malay neighbours and I still remember our nearest neighbor, Tua. He had a daughter whom we called Kumari; most probably her name must have been Kamariah (Palanisamy, 2002: 37). What nature had to offer was very much part of life in Kampong Tebok for Muthammal and her family, as depicted in the following excerpt:

We had no bathroom in our house; we bathed at a nearby well, drawing water with pails. My father had built a toilet across a small fast-flowing stream. Only adults were allowed to use it for safety reasons. No flushing necessary, high tide and fast flowing water did the job (Palanisamy, 2002: 37). Ayyan was a good swimmer and he made sure that his children, including the girls, learnt to swim. The river water was crystal clear and contained fish, crab and tiny prawns (Palanisamy, 2002: 42).

Although Amma “was happy as she had everything she had ever wanted” (Palanisamy, 2002: 37), Muthammal reveals that her mother had a “nagging fear.” Among the concerns and feeling of insecurity that Amma had to live with—besides the responsibilities of earning income for the family and raising her children—Amma was uncomfortable with the thought that she was not the legal wife or perhaps she was worried that her husband might take on yet another wife and neglect her though his faithfulness was not suspect. The people around her did not accept her as the legal wife but they were polite to her because they feared Ayyan (Palanisamy, 2002: 37).

In India, Amma was taken out of school at the age of nine, and was pushed into marriage by her mother. Muthammal and her sister did not face the difficulties in attending school that their mother did back in India. Still, Muthammal and her sister had to attend a Tamil school in Wallbrook Estate with their stepsisters on barefoot, at the age of five (Palanisamy, 2002: 38). Muthammal’s brother, Muthusamy, and her stepbrother, Nachiappan, attended the English school instead, and they wore white canvas shoes (Palanisamy, 2002: 43). Descriptions like these reinforce the stark contrast between the treatment of boys and girls in the early days of Malaya, and remind Muthammal’s audience of the extent of women’s development in Malaysia, especially in the context of educational opportunities available to men and women.

Both of Muthammal’s parents saw the importance of education in the lives of their children, and did what they could to ensure that both their sons and daughters received the education necessary to enhance their lives. And since Ayyan was a man who was also concerned about the well-being of his fellow labourers, he encouraged their children to go to school as well. Since English was not taught in Muthammal’s Tamil school, Ayyan, “employed a private tutor, who came to our home to teach us English” (Palanisamy, 2002: 39).

There were only two teachers. The one teacher I can still remember is Mr Abraham whom students nicknamed Hanuman (The Hindu monkey god). It was the duty of the class monitor to see that the supply of canes never ran short; the canes were made from the stems of wild coffee plants. Pupils in Standards One and Two had to use the slate and pencil while those in Standard Three used dip pens and exercise books. The slow learners used their fingers to write on sand (Palanisamy, 2002: 38).

Amma diligently monitored her children’s education and ensured that they were exposed to a lot of books. Akka, Muthammal’s elder sister, was “the only one who passed the government exam,” and at only eight years old, “she had finished reading a number of novels by the famous Indian novelist Vai Mu Gothai Nayagi Ammal” (Palanisamy, 2002: 39). Muthammal’s parents were highly generative people who provided her with an early

advantage; and believed that in teaching and nurturing their children, they would be able to better prepare them to face the challenges in life.

Another person in Muthammal's life who played an important role was her grandfather, Vedikaara Kuppana Gounder, or who she referred to as Apparayan. Muthammal probably inherited her storytelling abilities from Apparayan. Apparayan belonged to a family clan famous for their fearlessness, known as the Gounders. Muthammal tells of how her grandfather had used a shotgun to kill his enemy who had rushed towards him with a scythe, and who had earlier stolen his wife's *thali* and his son's silver anklet. Taken pride in her grandfather's act of fearlessness, Muthammal describes Apparayan's behaviour after the killing:

Apparayan returned to his village in the early hours of the morning and slept soundly—the first time in a long while. He then went about his duties as if nothing had happened. He didn't feel guilty. He was not afraid of consequences either and had proven that he was a true 'Gounder' in every sense of the word (Palanisamy, 2002: 69). A warrant for his arrest was issued and Apparayan was on the run for some years, leaving his family to fend for themselves. However, [b]y the 1930s, things were getting more relaxed. The incident was more or less forgotten but the warrant for his arrest remained. Although Apparayan spent more time in the village he never went back to farming, which became the responsibility of his youngest son (Palanisamy, 2002: 70).

Ayyan, who had brought his two wives and children to India for a holiday that was supposed to last a few months, ended up having to stay in India for seven years with the Japanese occupation of Malaya in 1942. According to Muthammal, it was "seven years of misery and hardship," (Palanisamy, 2002: 56) and during this time Apparayan tried as much to help Muthammal and her family. Muthammal also describes her early advantage of being Apparayan's "precious granddaughter," taking pride in his love for them, and his survival instinct: Once when we visited his village, he made me ride Ayyan's brand new bicycle and invited the villagers to watch his precious granddaughter riding a bicycle, a rare feat even among boys those days...

...When people were resting after the temple ceremony, he would quietly take out a Tamil daily and feigning to be slight of hearing make Akka read aloud from the newspaper. By the time she had finished, a crowd would have gathered, gaping in awe as it was rare for a girl to know how to read. Apparayan would then beam with delight...

...How I wish him to know that it was his instinct to survive and fight against all odds that rubbed off on us and inspired us throughout the tough years ahead and made us what we are today. We loved that wonderful man with all our heart and wherever he may be I wish to tell him that my children and grandchildren too are proud of him and take pride in being his descendent (Palanisamy, 2002: 71).

#### **4. Resisting oppression**

Ayyan, Muthammal's father, who "loved learning and had a good memory" (Palanisamy, 2002: 23) was out of school at the age of nine, as his own father "had disappeared" and the family faced the hardship of living in poverty. At the age of twelve or thirteen, Ayyan joined a group of workers from Tamil Nadu and set sail to Malaya sometime in 1912 in search of a job, as he had "overheard that wealth and fortune awaited young boys if they travelled to a distant land" (Palanisamy, 2002: 23).

The main areas in India from which these labourers were recruited were Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. Labour from Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh went almost exclusively to the Malay Peninsula. The other areas supplied the main centres of Indian emigration in eastern and southern Africa, the West Indies, South America (Guyana) and Oceania (esp. Fiji). About 86 per cent of these emigrants were low caste Hindus (Tate, 2008: 2-3)

However, the condition of indentured labourers in Malaya was deplorable and her family had to bear the contempt of the 'white' plantation managers. It was this informal but effectual bonding of the labourers to the estates and the consequent stunting of their opportunities and social consciousness that constituted the most exploitive aspect of the plantation system. The low wages and high profits, the high death rates, the violence of supervisors, the shoddy barrack-like housing lines, the apologies for estate schools, the labourers' addiction to toddy, the prevalence of violence and quarrels arising from the lack of women, marital instability, and so on, have been rightly commented upon by other authors (Stenson, 1980:26).

Muthammal describes how upon arrival in Malaya, Ayyan, who was still a child, was assigned to the *chokra* or children's gang in an estate called Sungai Wangi, belonging to the Golden Group of Companies in the district of Dindings, Perak. He and the other children were paid miserably to weed farmland (Palanisamy, 2002: 25). He worked day and night doing extra jobs like domestic chores to earn extra money. Additionally, he learned to speak Malayalam, as most of the estate staff came from Kerala.

At the time Ayyan stopped going to school, it was "against local customs" for girls to receive a similar education (Palanisamy, 2002: 22). Girls and women of that time had to succumb to "unnecessary traditional beliefs, customs and religious taboos" (Palanisamy, 2002: 29). But, although Muthammal's mother, Amma, had a miserable childhood being raised by her own mother, Veerammal—a "typical woman of that society where caste, customs and beliefs were as important as breathing" (Palanisamy, 2002: 29), and who considered schooling for girls as "unnecessary"—she was still Apparayan's favourite child. As such, he gave Amma his blessings and sent her to school at six years of age. On the way to school, however, Amma would receive nasty remarks from village ladies sympathetic to Veerammal, who said things such as "It won't take long for you to elope with one of those boys in your class because who else would marry you?" (Palanisamy, 2002: 30)

Ironically, it was due to Apparayan that Amma had to stop schooling. When a warrant was issued for his arrest, Amma had to leave school, aged just nine years old. Veerammal then started entertaining marriage proposals for her young daughter (Palanisamy, 2002: 30). The frightened young Amma had to go through a traditional wedding ceremony with a man who was 20 years her senior in a hastily arranged marriage. Amma was treated like a servant, and had to do all the household chores for her husband and his mistress; when she protested, she was threatened with physical violence (Palanisamy, 2002: 31). Amma defied her abusive husband by doing the most "unspeakable thing" for a young girl—she removed his *thali*, flung it into the house, and ran to her father's home—knowing that if she were to be caught by her husband, she would be killed, as "dying by the husband's hand was supposed to be a blessing" (Palanisamy, 2002: 32). Amma cried and begged Apparayan for help. Veerammal cried too, but out of the shame that her daughter had brought onto the family for removing the *thali* "while her husband was still alive" (Palanisamy, 2002: 32).

Muthammal relates Amma's story, not only in terms of the latter being a young girl who had to endure the treatment of a traditionally patriarchal society, but also as a daughter to a woman who was more absorbed with how society viewed her and her family, rather than the safety and well-being of her daughter. Amma eventually migrated to Malaya with her family as a young girl and was later accepted by Ayyan as his second wife. It must be noted that this is not the only episode in which Muthammal speaks of the resistance shown by a tradition-bound Indian woman towards patriarchal oppression; other episodes, in which she proudly tells of how she and her family ignored criticisms from members of the Indian community they lived in when they broke the shackles of patriarchal oppression, especially with the help of her visionary mother, Amma, and her father, Ayyan, will be detailed below.

## 5. Celebrating a Heritage

In wanting to keep the memory of her ancestors alive, Muthammal takes the role of a commentator of the social and cultural history of an era beginning around 1912, when her father first came to Malaya. Not only does she relate to her readers the names of her family and friends, and the kind of people they were, but she also narrates the traditions that were practiced, the roles of men and women, the social structure and integration of the community that comprised various races, and how they lived through good and bad times. She captures in her autobiography the sights, sounds and smells of living entrenched in Indian customs and practices, that historians sometime fail to capture when relating events of historical significance to present and future generations. The reader is unable to ignore the descriptions Muthammal gives of the bold and brave women who were pillars of strength in pulling together the family unit while trying to survive the harsh realities of life on a rubber estate.

...the cultural background and past of the Indian Malaysian should not be ignored, for to try and understand the psyche and make-up of the modern Indian in Malaysia without knowing something of his cultural, religious and historical background would be an exercise in futility, as indeed it would similarly be in the case of the Malay without an understanding of the cultural background of Islam (Tate, 2008: 2).

## 6. Sharing with the world

Although Muthammal is not a war heroine or political activist, her decision to write and publish her life story did not happen without some degree of internal conflict. Her decision to write her autobiography and see it published only happened when she was almost 70 years old.

I may be blamed for exposing my family secrets. But they are true and some of them may hurt. But I mean no harm to anyone I am merely putting this book together so our rich history is not forever lost with the passage of time. My grandfathers may be labeled as criminals—one a jailbird and the other a murderer and fugitive. Amma could be accused as someone who took away another woman's husband and deprived her of many things, Periamma could be termed an inefficient woman who allowed her husband to do what he liked. Ayyan could be called a drunkard, an arrogant, unfair and fun-loving man. But they were after all only too human and did what they had to do. I, made from their flesh, blood and bones, truly believe they are great warriors and fighters, who have fought many battles to give us a better life (Palanisamy, 2002: 184).

The many scenes Muthammal depicts in her life story show a sense of belonging and commitment to others, which are traits that are characteristic of highly generative people (McAdams, 2006). They spring from an attitude of concern towards the social world. The above excerpt from *From Shore to Shore* suggests that her decision to write and publish her life story is with the knowledge that she may have to face the possibility of losing the *love* of some members of her family, who may not find her decision acceptable. But her decision to proceed in writing her autobiography anyway is one that suggests her coming to a decision to exercise *power* over her situation, and do what she thinks is best.

## 7. Lessons from Malaysian cultural history

Two factors seem to stand out significantly in Muthammal's autobiography: the importance of passing on stories of past personal and family experiences, and the power of education as a vehicle of transformation. An active oral storyteller, Muthammal, who once found entertainment in her grandfather's stories as a child, sees these stories as not only relevant to her own family, but also to her community; and if these stories of Malaysia's past in general and the history of the Indian community in particular go unrecorded, they will unfortunately be lost along with any of the messages she may wish to convey. Muthammal projects stories of the past from her life into the present and eventually the future, along with a set of ideas that are shared not only by those in her community, but those from other ethnic

communities as well—such as the ideas of hard work, perseverance and the love for learning, such as is evident in her description of Ayyan:

Life on board the ship was hell. He was beaten for asking for extra food. And the recruits were frequently at the mercy of the *kanganies* or the recruiting agents for years to come.

Upon arrival to Malaya, Ayyan was sent to work in an estate called Sungai Wangi in the district of Dingdings, 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 and was paid pittance. So, whenever possible he learnt to tap rubber, which commanded better wages. He worked day and night... Since most of the estate staff came from Kerala, Ayyan soon learnt their language, Malayalam. In time he could speak Malayalam just as well as any Malayalee. A great number of estate workers also came from the state of Andhra Pradesh in India. They spoke Telugu and in no time Ayyan was conversant in this language as well...

...Ayyan had an insatiable appetite for work. In addition to his two jobs in the estate, he became a vendor of farm produce. With two baskets slung at the end of a bamboo pole balanced across his shoulders, he would walk to the Malay villages in Lekir and Pasir Panjang to buy chicken and eggs. He would return to the estate to sell the chicken and eggs for a profit. Within one year he could speak Malay too (Palanisamy, 2002: 25-6)

The projection of this same idea is also suggested in the following portrayal of Amma:

Amma, meanwhile, had learnt to make and mend fishing nets from her Malay neighbours. She also learnt embroidery from them. I still have vivid images of our pillowcases with floral embroidery... Amma was always learning new things. She even learnt to speak reasonably good Malay in a short while and she would sew simple dresses for us and our stepsisters. She treated all of us alike and even monitored the studies of my stepsisters...

...Amma would rear goats, chickens and ducks, which eventually made their way to our plates. No cash was needed to run the two homes. Our mothers had never done any shopping in their lives...

...Visitors to our home were served either buttermilk or young coconut-water, which was considered a treat. Amma made ghee and coconut oil for our domestic use. She also milked the cows. She was very strict with her daughters and she closely supervised us when we brushed our teeth, bathed, and changed to make sure we were clean all the time. It was a carefree life, with no worries and we did not envy anyone (Palanisamy, 2002: 41-3).

According to McAdams, there is a positive correlation between generativity and wide involvement in friendship networking and community work; as a personality psychologist, his studies show that highly generative adults tend to be “well integrated into society” and their life stories “describe many scenes in which they feel a sense of belonging and commitment to others” (McAdams, 2006: 140). Muthammal confesses that she comes from a family which practices the tradition of storytelling, and till today, at her family gatherings, she and her family members will marvel at their family history and reminisce at the “simple and selfless lives of our forefathers who struggled to give their families a better life” (Palanisamy, 2002: 6). With the support of her children, and the encouragement of her brother who said, “Let's leave behind a different sort of wealth for our future generations” (Palanisamy, 2002: 7), there is a strong suggestion that Muthammal's attitude toward the social world is mainly one of concern, and that the world, being a difficult place, can do with some help from her in making it a positive place to live.

### Conclusion

Muthammal narrates her life story with a sense of pride at her heritage and in her family's ability to face up to life's adversities. McAdams says that highly generative parents tend “to pass on values to their children and to emphasize the attainment of wisdom and insight in the family stories they tell their children” (McAdams, 2006: 56). Muthammal's decision to publish her life story, which even before that, was delivered in the form of regular oral

narration in the presence her attentive audience made up of her children and grandchildren, suggests her willingness to show more social responsibility as an effective and involved parent, community member and citizen of Malaysia. *From Shore to Shore* is one example of how the reading of a Malaysian woman's life narrative can be approached with renewed perspectives as it is through exploring the autobiographies of people of multiethnic groups that we may begin to learn more about ourselves and our racially diverse neighbours.



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