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Research Article

Which tongue? The Imported Colonial Standard or Motherland Vernacular? Exploring "Death" as the Birth of Postcolonial Malaysia in Muthammal Palanisamy's Funeral Chant

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Abstract
This article examines "death" in a funeral chant set in the plantation estates of Malaysia, and written in English and Tamil, as a metaphor for the birth of the nation. It explores how the death of communal linguistic elements, both in orality and symbolic references, lead to the deconstruction of motherland identity markers which are then replaced by the reconstruction of diasporic identities that are observable through the use of standardized English. For this purpose, the Malaysian Indian life-writer, Muthammal Palanisamy's English version of an *oppari* (Tamil for funeral chant), which was published in Malaysia (2002) will be read in relation to the Tamil version published in India (2007) through transliterated and translated texts of the chant. In so doing, the paper highlights the inherent gap between the two versions that can be usefully deployed to address whether English is an enabling tool through which ethnic Indians can express their identities in a postcolonial nation like Malaysia or is it perpetually contaminated by colonial history and values. On the other hand, the paper also draws attention to the question of whether the displacement of the vernacular language, i.e., Tamil, witnesses the inevitable cultural death of a diasporic community or does it display a form of inclusivity within the polyglot linguistic environment of the adopted land, Malaysia.

Keywords: Malaysian Literature in English; migrant/diasporic Indian; national identity; funeral chant; plantation estates

Introduction

This article examines the construction of national identity by exploring two versions of a funeral chant written in English (2002) and Tamil (2007) by a second-generation Malaysian female life-writer of Indian descent, Muthammal Palanisamy, whose origin can be traced to the plantation estates of Malaya[i]. The funeral chant is one of the obvious motherland markers of the life-writing, *From Shore to Shore* (in Tamil *Naadu Vittu Naadu*) which calls into question, how during the process of translocating the chant for an English readership, native cultural markers are de-constructed, and in its place new host land (national) markers are re-constructed by writers of migrant/diasporic background such as Palanisamy.

This article's engagement with national identity warrants explanation because Malaysia's emergent identity, particularly in the Peninsula, is construed upon a perpetually conflicting understanding regarding those of migrant ancestry. This is because, the period of arrival of the Chinese and Indian migrants in the mid-19th and early 20th centuries to British Malaya as indentured labourers, was used to ascribe them with an immigrant identity, which, surprisingly has continued until the present day because their descendants are still known as the "pendatang" (new arrival/immigrant) hence perceived as the outsiders. Modern Malaysia's norms and limits are set along the lines of ethno-religion as it is used to distinguish between the Malay-Muslim "bumiputeras" (sons/daughters of the soil) who are viewed as the original people of the land as opposed to the non-Malay *vis a vis* non-Muslim Chinese and Indians demonstrating that the issue of belonging is a contested one in Malaysia. Such conflict is encapsulated by Virginia Hooker as she writes, "[m]ost description of the population of Malaysia include accounts of Chinese and Indian groups as if they were not settlers of long-standing in the region. This is based on the misapprehension that the majority of the forebears of Chinese and Indians, now living in Malaysia, migrated there in the mid or late 19th century. On these grounds, they are not considered as "native" as others" (2003; 25-26).

Identification based on ethno-religion has invariably included the languages spoken in the country with consequences to the writing tradition. Malay is the national language and it is used as the mainstream language for cultural integration; works written in Malay are given the official recognition as the National Literature. Chinese and Indian vernacular languages, on the other hand, are perceived as mediums through which associations with the ancestral motherland is secured, hence not accepted in the agenda of nation-formation. English, due to its colonial legacy and as part of the decolonisation process, was abrogated during the years following independence through the implementation of numerous policies. Writings in English (Malaysian Literature in English, MLE), Chinese and Tamil have been, to-date, relegated to the position of sectional literature. A fierce advocate of Malay literature, Professor Ismail Hussein, even went as far as to say that "Chinese, Tamil or English [are] foreign literatures" or "aimless literature" because in his view they were written in "non-indigenous languages" and could not be "understood by all Malaysians" (Quayum and Wicks, 2001:52-53).

The English and Tamil versions of Palanisamy's life-writing, even though only the funeral chant is included in this article, belong to both MLE and the writing tradition in Tamil. Although on one hand, Palanisamy's work highlights the plural, polyglot multi-linguistic environment of the country as she belongs to a small pool of bilingual writers, on the other, it shows that writing, particularly in English or a vernacular language, is a socio-political act especially considering the state narrativised ethno-linguistic demarcation that is still in use in Malaysia. It is for this reason that this article situates Palanisamy's funeral chant within the tropes of national identity.

In order to better understand MLE and the way it is connected to those of migrant background, it is necessary to examine its origin. MLE is a tradition that started in the late 1940s free from its initial metropolitan bias and grew at a slow pace following the state's anti-colonial approach against the English language especially between the years of 1960s and 1980s. Many of the first and second generations of MLE writers were non-Malays of migrant ancestry who attended English-medium schools as a result of the education system in place during the colonial

rule (Patke and Holden, 2010). This is an important point to consider, because, Palanisamy belongs to this early generation of school-goers who attended English-medium schools, thus enabling her to write in English. Palanisamy's primary education in Tamil school duly gave her the ability to dabble in Tamil writings; besides *Naadu Vittu Naadu*, she has also published a collection of Tamil plantation folksongs, *Naatupura Padalgalil En Payanam*, 2006.

Although there were also English-educated Malay writers during the early years of MLE, the idea that a colonial language cannot be used to instil the spirit of independence among the non-elite masses, resulted in MLE becoming a mainly non-Malay creative platform. Even though these non-Malay writers used English, their focus was mostly on issues of belonging—as exemplified by Palanisamy's life-writing especially through the use of narrative strategies such as the funeral chants. Many non-Malay MLE writers continue to engage with themes of national belonging which is often perceived by the critics of MLE as a stumbling block for literary creativity as it limits the exploration of other important themes. Ganesan (2019) forwards a reading of writings about nature as an example of how divisiveness among MLE writers can be overcome through a shared concern for the environment. Since the Malay language, its culture and literature are recognised as the nation's sole official tradition, studies have also been conducted to examine the extent to which the writing tradition in Malay has influenced the MLE writers' style of writing as the latter group prefers to experiment with travelogue-cum-journalistic forms of literary works similar to their predecessors in the Malay language (Ganesan, 2018).

This is not to say that the writers of Malay ethnic origin were absent from MLE. The conflict of choosing a suitable creative medium while still having allegiance to their ethnic *vis a vis* national identity has affected the Malay writers: some completely abandoned writing in English and switched to writing in the Malay language such as the prolific writer Muhammad Haji Salleh, while some others dabbled in both Malay and English such as Adibah Amin, not to mention the likes of Salleh Ben Joned, who continued to write in English. The younger group of writers including those of the present generation who are both from Malay and non-Malay ethnic backgrounds, continue to write in English which demonstrates a promising future for MLE, mainly because, the state's attitude towards English has shifted; the language does not pose a threat to national unity and following the view that fluency in English is necessary to compete in the world market, policies that encourage the use and growth of English have been implemented in recent years (Quayum, 2007).

Malaysian Tamil writing tradition warrants a brief discussion. Tamil literary writing free from the motherland influence started after the Japanese Occupation through the publication of Tamil newspapers. Tamil historian and writer, M. Ramaiyah, notes the year 1946 as the birth of Modern Tamil Literature in Malaya with the publication of memoirs that highlighted a local sentiment. Although in the 1950s and 1960s, Tamil language and literature grew, it depended and circulated only among small groups of people (Ramaiyah, 1996). The seventies, eighties, and nineties witnessed mostly self-funded and self-published individual writers who wrote Tamil literary works, religious as well as self-motivational books. The sale of these books either depended on official launching by politicians from the ruling government and their donation or the initiative of the writer who sometimes has to go from state to state or school to school to sell and promote their books. This proves that Tamil writings in the country had somewhat an arrested

growth due to the complexity surrounding ethno-linguistic divisiveness; a worthy point to note here, the Tamil version of Palanisamy's life-writing was published in India.

Theoretical framework

This article is discussed by deploying Homi Bhabha's conceptualization (1990) on how the nation-space and its thresholds are more audible in the discourses articulated by those on the fringes because, new groups of people such as the migrants (also the diasporic Indians in this case), who occupy the border of a nation, can identify with the host nation as the complexity of their multiple belongings provides them with grounds to construct and reconstruct their identities both at once as a descendant of migrant ancestry and as a citizen of the new host nation.

Bhabha's conceptualization is deployed in contrast to notions of loss, alienation, exile, and anxiety of historical and cultural discontinuities which have been traditionally used to examine migrant/diasporic works by scholars like Walker Connor (1972), William Safran (1991), and Robin Cohen (2001). Instead of viewing the migrant/diasporic people as a dislocated community with loyalties to their homelands, this article takes the stand that a new way of thinking is possible when the divide between the Tamil and English versions of a funeral chant is used as a space to examine the authorial self where identity is constructed and reconstructed across differing linguistic, cultural, and religious elements. The reading forwarded in this article sees the gap between the two versions as a textual location where 'othering' is created and then crossed, for a new 'becoming' identity to emerge.

The examination of Bhabha's belonging for those of migrant/diasporic background through narrative prose or verse is also consistent in works of postcolonial theorists like Paul Gilroy (1993) and Stuart Hall (1996). By drawing examples from Britain's black community, Hall called for a mobile and flexible framework to study the changes and generational differences of a diaspora, rather than generalising them as sharing common features across the board. Gilroy's view, which challenges a given way of thinking about roots by replacing them with the contingencies of routes, has been crucial in the new approach towards understanding diasporic people. This means that in this article, by taking to heart Bhabha's, Gilroy's, and Hall's framework particularly regarding belonging for those of migrant/diasporic background, I will detail how Palanisamy's Tamil *oppari* depicts a commonality with the motherland before examining how this becomes fragmented, and later, through the English version, examine how the Malaysian-Indian hybrid identity becomes audible, a position only enabled by the contingency of route.

Oppari

Oppari is an Indian-Tamil ritual of mourning, enabling those close to the demised to release their pent-up sorrows through the choice of vocabulary, verse structure, and pronunciation that are meant to evoke emotional responses from the mourners. This implies that an *oppari* depends mainly on its sense of orality, and there is a distinction between the performers and their audience. This is the reason why, the performers commonly undergo a routine before singing the *oppari* as they start by hugging the mourning family members, beating their chests, crying out aloud,

blowing their noses into their sarees, and finally, proceeding to sing the *oppari*. An *oppari* is not performed singularly as it often includes a plurality in singing voice to mourn the passing of the bereaved. In Malaysia—according to Palanisamy—*oppari* is a dying tradition that was mostly sung in the plantation estates by the first- and second-generation migrant Indians[ii]. The death of *oppari* in present-day Malaysia can be interpreted as one of the markers demonstrating a fragmented belonging with the ancestral land, India.

It is worth considering—at this juncture—how a funeral chant that is meant for a listening and responding audience, can re-create similar effects in the written form, particularly through the use of English. And, since the original chant has been sung in Tamil, during the conversion from Tamil to English, what linguistic and cultural features have been maintained, and conversely, what has been lost? More importantly, how can the changes undertaken in the English version of the funeral chant portray a Malaysian cultural and linguistic context which depicts the construction of national identity?

To begin, it is important to look at the *oppari*'s orality through the varying rhyme patterns (Refer to Table 1) by examining the chant sang during Palanisamy's sister, Kamala's death[iii]. The pain and angst of losing Kamala, one of the eight siblings, at a young age is repeated in the *oppari* through the use of rhyming sounds, rhetoric questions as well as Indian-Hindu cultural and religious markers that are aimed for an emotional purgation.

In Table 1, the rhyming sounds that are deployed at the beginning of the verse, are repeated in lines 1 and 3, and then, in lines 2 and 4 (refer to Tamil alphabet chart in Appendix). The interesting point here is, the long and short syllable sounds, [kuu] and [ku], are combined with the sound [ko]—all three syllables come from the same root consonant, [k]. This means that in the Tamil version, one root sound is used as the base, but a variation is given by combining long and short syllable sounds, which are all placed at the start of the lines that make up the stanza, and the song progresses in this way by incorporating the combinations of long and short syllable sounds that come from other root sounds.

Table 1: Rhyme Pattern

Spelling in Tamil	**Transliteration**	**Rhyme Pattern**	
கொத்தோடு மல்லிகை	kottooTumallikai		a
கூடிப்பிறந்தீங்க இன்று	kuuTippiRandtiingka	inRu	b (long)
கொத்திலொரு மல்லிகை	kottiloru mallikai		a
குதித்தோடிப் போகுதம்மா	kutittooTi pookutammaa		b (short)

This is to say that, when different syllables are placed syntactically to evoke a rhyme pattern, the oral sense of the funeral chant is made audible; the sounds of the words determine the choice of diction, the structure of syntax, and together, they set the rhyme and mood of the whole funeral chant. In short, multiple root sounds and the syllables associated with them, either in long or short forms, are mixed, so that the intended meaning of the chant, which is for the listeners to respond emotively, is achieved in the *oppari*.

Another point that brings to light the chant's sense of orality is its conversational tone (Refer to Table 2). It can be said that this section, which appears in the middle of the *oppari*, is filled with questions and answers, where, by using Yama, the God of Death as the image, feelings of hopelessness and pain in relation to the deceased are invoked. The questions are rhetorical in nature as they are answered with questions, in the pursuit to depict Yama's indispensability in one's life. Here, the intended conversation is not between the singers or the mourners, but rather, between the mourners and their conscience. This is why it can be said that the questions posed through the chant are meant for members present at the funeral house as they are expected to respond to the questions on a personal level by connecting to the cultural and religious figure of Yama.

Table 2: Conversational tone in funeral chant

Transliteration	**Tamil-to-English translation**
eman varum vazhi paarttu	Keeping a look out for Yama
elloorum kaattirundtoom – paavi	We waited anxiously – the crook
endta vazhi vandtaanoo	How did he come
endta vazhi poonaanoo	How did he leave
vandta vazhi aRiyalaiyee	We did not know his route
vaTakkut ticai pookiRavan	If he was headed north
vazhitavaRi vandtaanoo	Did he lose his way
tekkut ticai pookiRavan	If he was headed south
ticaimaaRi vandtaanoo	Did he lose his direction
tikkut teRiyaamal	Not knowing his way
tappukaLum ceytaanoo	Did he commit mistakes
etiraaLic caNTaiyinaa	If the enemy wages war

Additionally, as the stanza also shows the reference to the singers of the chant through a pluralised noun, 'we', as opposed to Yama, 'he', it can be said that it highlights the plurality in the singing voice, a crucial rustic element for the Tamil version. Likewise, the word"caNTai*yinaa*" in the following line—"etiraaLic caNTaiyinaa" "if the enemy wages war", where the suffix "yinaa" is a colloquial version of the formal suffix, "yenraal", is used to accentuate the backdrop of a rural setting in the song. When the *oppari* is read from this perspective, it is obvious that both the orality and rural element of the chant are crucial markers in demonstrating the Indian-Tamil-Hindu ethno-religious identity.

In the case of the *oppari*'s figurative language, particularly, the image of Yama, the relevance of North and South points, as well as the symbolic meanings of the flower and *pooja* will be examined in the ensuing paragraphs. In the Tamil version of the chant, the reference to Yama has been specifically made in relation to the northern and southern points, making one to question its relevance. In her book, *Religion, Rites and Rituals: Puranic and Modern Perspective*, Rameshwari Devi (2006) has included a chapter on the concepts of space in Hindu rites and rituals, which investigates the four cardinal points, north, south, east, and west. According to her, the east point is most auspicious to the Hindus as it marks the rise of the sun, so during festivities and prayers, the altar and deities are set in this direction. Similarly, the west point is considered propitious for couples getting married, newborns and those moving into a new house are all placed in the west so that they face the eastern point while undergoing religious ceremonies. Contrarily, the south is considered to be the abode of Yama, the God of Death, and anyone seated in this direction, or in the opposite direction, north, and facing south, could be at the risk of facing death. It can therefore be said that the image of Yama is affiliated with the north and south points, in order to bring to attention, the Hindu cultural beliefs and religious identity within the oral framework of the *oppari*.

In relation to the symbolic meanings of the flowers and *pooja*, and particularly their relevance to the deceased and the mourners, it is possible to say that by using flowers as the medium, in the *oppari*, the different stages of human life are highlighted (Refer to Table 3). This is because the flower can be considered to be in a transitory state, like human life, where, by calling out to its uses in the garlands, *poojas*, and finally in adorning the funeral possession, the *oppari* performers are emphasising the different stages a human life undergoes from birth to death. And by suggesting that Kamala's journey in the world started with her siblings like jasmine that grows in a bunch, and came to an end when the flowers and garlands adorned her lifeless body, the *oppari* singers are implying that just like the flowers, one has to undergo a journey in life, where the final one, for all its grandeur, is still a lonesome one. The fragrance of the flower, just like the human soul to the body, keeps it alive and fresh: the existence of both is subject to the physical form holding them. In using flowers to symbolically refer to human life, body, and soul, it can be said that through the *oppari*, the Hindu belief in the karmic cycle of birth and death are foregrounded, thus once again affirming the cultural and religious identities of the Indian-Hindu community.

Table 3: Symbolic use of flowers and *pooja* in Tamil *oppari*

Transliteration	**Tamil-to-English translation**
pooccuuTTi maalaiyiTu	Adorned in flowers and garlands
kaNNee	My dear
pootteeril cenRiTuvaay	You will travel in a chariot of flowers
poNNu varum	Expecting their daughter
vazhipaarttu	Your parents will await your arrival
peRRavarkaL kaattiruppaar	Using flowers and water

pooveTuttu ndiireTuttu ndii poocai pala ceytiTudaay	You will conduct many poojas

Having discussed the orality and figurative language of the Tamil *oppari*, it is now imperative to examine how in the English version changes have been deployed, in order to look at what linguistic, cultural, and religious features have been transferred, and conversely, what have been left out in the Tamil-to-English conversion. The most important question is whether the written English form serves the oral function of the Tamil form. To answer these questions, it is necessary to investigate the rhyme scheme of the funeral chant in English (Refer to Table 4). It can be said that the significance of 'sound' has been maintained in this version. Nonetheless, the rhyme scheme does not have a fixed pattern: in fact, they are quite akin to that in Tamil, where similar sounding words have been placed in the beginning, middle and ending sections of the verse, such as in stanzas I, II and IV. All the stanzas in this version, except the third one, have a rhyming sound pattern incorporated in the last two lines, similar to a couplet. However, as all these rhymes and couplets do not adhere to any fixed scheme, it can be said that the English version reads more like free verse poetry than a funeral chant. The same can be said of the alliterations applied in the very last line of the verse—"Freed forever from the pain and pangs of the world"—denoting repetitions of the [f] and [p] consonant sounds.

Table 4: Rhyme scheme of funeral chant in English

Stanza I	Beautiful jasmines white and bright All eight in neat array One today, tearing our hearts has withered away	.....a....a ...a...a...b ...b.....b
Stanza II	White sparkling pearls eight on a string All strung in a pretty chain One breaks away leaving our hearts in pain.	a....a.....c ...c.....d .....d
Stanza III	North, South, East, West How the Yama came and went	.....e .....f
Stanza IV	No hint, not even a footprint We will my darling fight wars for you Be it enemies, panggalis or anybody But the Yama, God of Death-nobody fights, nobody	..g.....g .....h ....i...i....j .....i...j
Stanza V	Fare thee well my darling girl Magnificent is the chariot of flowers	.....k l

	The gates of heaven open with showers	l
Stanza VI	Can you see Ayyan and Amma	.....m
	Waiting for their beautiful girl	.....k
	Freed forever from the pain and pangs of the world.	.....k

The blend and mix of various rhyming words and verse structure make it difficult to classify the funeral chant in English according to a fixed poetic form. It can also be said that as free verse poetry, it lacks the oral nuances of the Tamil *oppari*; which, to an extent, can be the result of the written form, as well as the consequences involved in deploying the English language. This means that notwithstanding the etymological difference of the two languages, the life-writer's approach towards Tamil and English is similar: nevertheless, it ends up creating a gap in the orality of the chant. This is true because the Tamil version is reproduced from the original chant sung during Kamala's death, whereas, the one in English is not only re-produced but also, translated from Tamil. In trying to maintain the oral feature of the *oppari*; it can be said that the writer has attempted to transfer the linguistic details audible in Tamil to English by preserving the latter's syntax pattern, yet, due to the difference in the rhyme scheme and verse structure of the English language, the orality of the chant is lost. As a result, the chant's most important feature is forsaken. Here, it can be deduced that a derivative sound pattern does not have the same effect as the original one, and in fact, limits the audience from a listening to a reading audience.

Moreover, in the context of the conversational tone, unlike the Tamil *oppari*; the speech rhythm is altered due to a condensed verse structure as the succeeding stanza depicts:

North, South, East, West

How the Yama came and went

In these lines, which have been reduced from eleven to two in comparison to the original chant, where, there was a prompt in the song, persuading the listeners to question their consciences, here, there is a sense of finality. This is because the answer precedes the rhetorical question, highlighting a sense of defeat in the context of Yama. Instead of initiating the process of mourning and crying, this stanza works in reverse, where pain and sorrow are buried along with the finality in Yama's role as the God of Death that comes from all four directions. Contrary to the Tamil version, which specifically mentions the north and south points, in this version, the inclusion of all the cardinal points into a compressed stanza implies that the pace is too fervent for the audience to emotionally connect with the chant. As a whole, the absence of questions in relation to Yama, which is a crucial element in the chant, changes the emotional weight and results in a sterile form of funeral poetry. Viewed from this perspective, the stanza offers a sense of closure, quite opposite to the idea of spiritual journeying foregrounded in the Tamil *oppari*. Moreover, the rustic flavour brought to attention in the Tamil version has been overtaken by Standard English.

In contrast to the *oppari* where the image of flowers was used to highlight the deceased according to the Indian cultural context, in the case of the English version, the expression, "gates of heaven" can be seen as drawing associations with the Christian belief in the existence of heaven

and hell. This is to say that, good and evil deeds are judged, rewarded, and punished (Casey, 2009), as opposed to the Tamil version, through the expression, "an abode for devout people", emphasising the Hindu belief in the karmic cycle, where, all people who have done good deeds are given a collective identity, and Kamala's soul will find its place amongst them. Therefore, with regards to the figurative language used in the English version of the *oppari*, it can be said that the religious reference is very different from that made in the Tamil version—the question then is, how can this gap, where the English and Tamil versions do not meet, be used to examine the construction of national identity. Since it has been mentioned that the figurative language of the English version highlights a Christian religious belief, how can it provide access to examining the aspect of representation with regards to the use of English?

The linguistic elements incorporated in stanza IV—"[b]e it e/ne/mies, pang/ga/lis or anybody [b]ut the Yama, God of Death-nobody fights, nobody [my emphasis]"—show a combination of oral features. In wedging the Tamil word, *panggali*, in its plural form as '*panggalis*', between similar sounding words, 'enemies' and 'fights', a linguistic appropriation of the English language occurs. Here, three crucial issues emerge. To begin, both 'enemies' and '*panggalis*' are three-syllable words and placing them one after another creates a rhythmic structure. Secondly, to a non-Tamil reader of the chant, the locations of the two words imply that there is a morphological difference between them, thus compelling one to deduce the meaning of the unknown word. The syntax of the verse which reflects both the words as nouns in contrast to the verb 'fights' gives further lexical detail to speculate on the meaning of the new word. So, besides providing a unique sound pattern and intonation, the inclusion of the Tamil word can be seen as crossing the boundaries of Tamil and English, where, through textuality and grammar rules, a linguistic environment that expands to an English readership is enabled.

More specifically, to the non-Tamil speaking Malaysians comprising various ethnic groups, these lines bring to light both Standard English and its variant within the oral framework of the funeral chant. The issue of Standard English deserves further explanation. If one were to examine the lines again it will be possible to say that the image of 'Yama' has been translated as 'God of Death', unlike the word '*panggalis*' which has been left untranslated. This can be interpreted as stretching the use of English through its standard form to include the cultural specificity of the Indians, particularly since an appropriate register such as 'the Yama' has been used. Further, by giving a genderless representation to Yama, the persona is able to create a distance, where at the moment of textual construction, Yama becomes a universal figure of death. Due to this, the persona can establish a sense of belonging with the non-Tamil speakers of Malaysia, since the use of Standard English, at least in the context of Yama, enables a sense of de-personalisation, which, in turn, creates an identity of national significance for the persona.

As a matter of fact, in the original *oppari*, where a rustic accent was audible, in the English version, a combination of standard English and high registers make the piece readable and comprehensible to English-speakers, where it does not only speak across multiple linguistic and ethnic boundaries but also across multiple class orientations as the rural oral form is brought to the formal metropolitan written form. In a case like Malaysia, such crossovers are crucial as they cut through the multi-lingual environment and varying demographics of its people. They also make it possible for a tradition such as the *oppari* to be introduced, appropriated, and therefore,

reinvented for a multi-cultural readership. In short, literary forms like the *oppari* bridge the outside with the inside, while at the same time, maintaining specificities of the inside as observed through the use of words like '*panggalis*' and 'Yama'.

The original Tamil version did not have any stanzas or punctuation as opposed to the English version which consisted of six stanzas and various textual markers. This means that in English, the appropriated form, albeit through a free verse, informed the readers of the changing moods as it altered between short and long pauses as well as run-on lines. In doing so, the chant is able to use the dominant discourse of English prose form in order to gain textual space for an ethnic ritual such as the *oppari*. Conversely, the song-form of *oppari* that existed mostly among rural Tamil-speaking community is translocated to a wider English-speaking audience. Specifically, for a Malaysian readership, through its form, the English version can present issues of national identity by being a discourse of multiplicity and crossovers, thus erasing notions of fixities and binaries. In this way, the space that the chant's form occupies shows exclusivity as this case is only possible in Malaysia, given its history and ethnic diversity. And, with regards to the figurative language in the English version that foregrounded a Western religious belief, one can situate the whole funeral chant as an anti-thesis to these ideas, where, Kamala's death can be metaphorically interpreted as giving a new beginning to the persona-author. As it speaks of demise and the mourning that follows, it can be said that the chant is set on erasing identities and values associated with the motherland, just like Kamala and her siblings, who have been cut loose from the bond that attached them, especially so for the persona-author, who reproduced the chant within her textual frame. Although to an extent, the chant explains the migrant world through the ritual of death, it also shows how death rites can transform the status of the living to survive within the continuum of life, thus giving them a changed way of life than the old one they knew before Kamala's death. Here, death itself functions as the platform of transition. Equally, the reference to Christianity through the use of images in the English version can be deconstructed, so that the persona-author gains agency to reconstruct her identity at the moment of textualisation. This means that by using the image of 'heaven', the persona-author is constructing an identity that represents the colonial centre. Yet, by including them in the context of a funeral chant, the identity associated with the mother colony is deconstructed, and in its place, a new hybrid identity that includes the pluralities of language, culture, and religion is reconstructed. This new construction reminds us that for those of migrant descent, identities occupy an in-between space that can be endlessly renewed through the continua of transformation.

Conclusion

Although as mentioned earlier the trajectory of nation-building in Malaysia is founded on the binaries of insider/outsider, the evidence put forth in this article suggests that it is through a form of narrative in-betweenness that a nation-centred identity is emergent in the chant. This is because, when the Tamil rustic cultural context and the rhetoric of emotional purgation during mourning is left untranslated in the English version, a more standard use of the English language emerges thus making it accessible to the non-Tamil speaking Malaysian readers. By drawing associations with a Western/Christian tradition through its use of figurative language, the funeral chant in English shows a sense of disassociation with the Hindu belief systems, i.e., motherland

markers. It is at this point of the text that a deconstructive reading is forwarded in order to examine how even the supposed Western/Christian tradition becomes dismantled and, in its place, the diasporic Indian's 'becoming' national identity is reconstructed. Such form of identification depicts that the migrant/diasporic people are crucial in nation-formation as it is only through them an extension to the country's polyglot linguistic environment can be advanced.

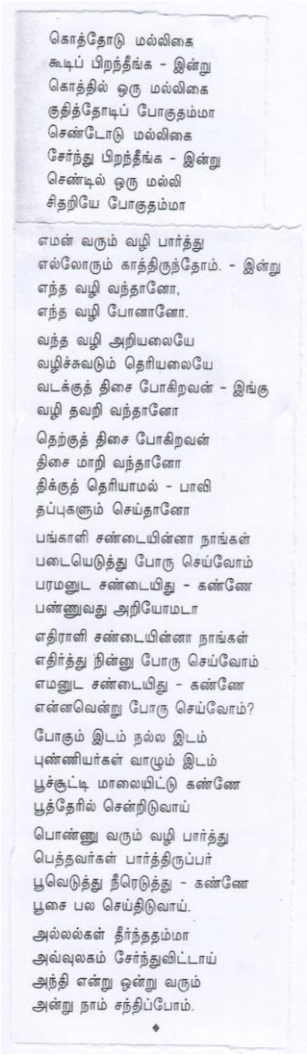
Appendix

Table 1: Tamil (Transliterated) and English versions of the funeral chant

Funeral chant as presented in *Shore to Shore*[1]	Tamil-to-English translation of funeral chant[2]	Transliteration of funeral chant[3]
Beautiful jasmines white and bright All eight in neat array One today, tearing our hearts has withered away	Like jasmines in a bunch Born together as siblings – today One from the bunch Has come off loose	kottooTu mallikai kuuTippiRandtiingka inRu kottiloru mallikai kutittooTi pookutammaa
White sparkling pearls eight on a string All strung in a pretty chain One breaks away leaving our hearts in pain.	Like jasmines in a bouquet Born together as siblings – today One from the bouquet Has withered away.	ceNTilee mallikaiyaay ceerndtu piRandtiingka – inRu ceNTiloru mallikai citaRiyee pookutammaa
North, South, East, West How the Yama came and went No hint, not even a footprint	Keeping a look out for Yama We waited anxiously – the crook How did he come How did he leave	eman varum vazhi paarttu elloorum kaattirundtoom – paavi endta vazhi vandtaanoo endta vazhi poonaanoo vandta vazhi aRiyalaiyee

[1] *From Shore to Shore*, pp.15-16.
[2] The funeral chant has been translated word-for-word by the author of this article.
[3] See the original *oppari* in Tamil from *Naadu Vittu Naadu* on the next page; the transliteration has also been done by the author of this article.

We will my darling fight wars for you	We did not know his route	vaTakkut ticai pookiRavan
Be it enemies, panggalis or anybody	If he was headed north	vazhitavaRi vandtaanoo
But the Yama, God of Death- nobody fights, nobody	Did he lose his way	tekkut ticai pookiRavan
	If he was headed south	ticaimaaRi vandtaanoo
Fare thee well my darling girl	Did he lose his direction	tikkut teRiyaamal
Magnificent is the chariot of flowers	Not knowing his way	tappukaLum ceytaanoo
The gates of heaven open with showers	Did he commit mistakes	etiraaLic caNTaiyinaa
	If the enemy wages war	ndaangkaL etirttu ndinRu
Can you see Ayyan and Amma	We will stand by you	pooru ceyvoom
Waiting for their beautiful girl	And fight against him	pangkaaLi caNTaiyinaa
Freed forever from the pain and pangs of the world.	If the panggali brings a fight	ndaangkaL
	We will group together	paTaiyeTutt pooru
	And fight him off.	ceyvoom
	This is the war of the creator	itu parammanooTu caNTaiyaTaa
	How do we	ndaangkaL
	Fight him	ennavenRu pooru
	The place you are headed to	ceyvoom
	Is an abode for devout people	pookumiTam nalla iTam
	Adorned in flowers and garlands	puNNiyarkaL vaazhumiTam
		pooccuuTTi maalaiyiTu
	My dear	
	You will travel in a chariot of flowers	kaNNee
		pootteeril cenRiTuvaay
	Expecting their daughter	poNNu varum
	Your parents will await your arrival	vazhipaarttu
		peRRavarkaL kaattiruppaar
	Using flowers and water	pooveTuttu ndiireTuttu ndii poocai pala ceytiTudaay
	You will conduct many poojas	
	You've been released from the pains of the world	allalkaL tiindtatammaa ndii avvulakam cenRuviTTaay
	You've gone yonder	andtiyenRu onRu varum
	As the day approaches nightfall	anRu ndaam candtippoom.
	We will meet again soon.	



கொத்தோடு மல்லிகை
கூடிப் பிறந்தீங்க - இன்று
கொத்தில் ஒரு மல்லிகை
குதித்தோடிப் போகுதம்மா
சென்டோடு மல்லிகை
சேர்ந்து பிறந்தீங்க - இன்று
செண்டில் ஒரு மல்லி
சிதறியே போகுதம்மா

எமன் வரும் வழி பார்த்து
எல்லோரும் காத்திருந்தோம். - இன்று
எந்த வழி வந்தானோ,
எந்த வழி போனானோ.

வந்த வழி அறியலையே
வழிச்சுவடும் தெரியலையே
வடக்குத் திசை போகிறவன் - இங்கு
வழி தவறி வந்தானோ

தெற்குத் திசை போகிறவன்
திசை மாறி வந்தானோ
திக்குத் தெரியாமல் - பாவி
தப்புகளும் செய்தானோ

பங்காளி சண்டையின்னா நாங்கள்
படையெடுத்து போரு செய்வோம்
பரமனுட சண்டையிது - கண்ணே
பண்ணுவது அறியோமடா

எதிராளி சண்டையின்னா நாங்கள்
எதிர்த்து நின்னு போரு செய்வோம்
எமனுட சண்டையிது - கண்ணே
என்னவென்று போரு செய்வோம்?

போகும் இடம் நல்ல இடம்
புண்ணியர்கள் வாழும் இடம்
பூச்சூட்டி மாலையிட்டு கண்ணே
பூத்தேரில் சென்றிடுவாய்

பொண்ணு வரும் வழி பார்த்து
பெத்தவர்கள் பார்த்திருப்பர்
பூவெடுத்து நீரெடுத்து - கண்ணே
பூசை பல செய்திடுவாய்.

அல்லல்கள் தீர்ந்ததம்மா
அவ்வுலகம் சேர்ந்துவிட்டாய்
அந்தி என்று ஒன்று வரும்
அன்று நாம் சந்திப்போம்.

♦

Table 2: Tamil letters and transliterations[4]

Alphabet chart: vowels, consonants, and syllables

Vowels		a	aa	i	ii	u	uu	e	ee	ai	o	oo	au
		அ	ஆ	இ	ஈ	உ	ஊ	எ	ஏ	ஐ	ஒ	ஓ	ஔ
	Consonants + Vowels = Syllables Example: க் + அ = க k + a = ka												
Consonants k	க்	க Ka	கா kaa	கி ki	கீ kii	கு ku	கூ kuu	கெ ke	கே kee	கை Kai	கொ ko	கோ koo	கௌ kau
c	ச்	ச Ca	சா caa	சி ci	சீ cii	சு cu	சூ cuu	செ ce	சே cee	சை cai	சொ co	சோ coo	சௌ cau
T	ட்	ட Ta	டா Taa	டி Ti	டீ Tii	டு Tu	டூ Tuu	டெ Te	டே Tee	டை Tai	டொ To	டோ Too	டௌ Tau
t	த்	த Ta	தா taa	தி ti	தீ tii	து tu	தூ tuu	தெ te	தே tee	தை Tai	தொ to	தோ too	தௌ tau
p	ப்	ப Pa	பா paa	பி pi	பீ pii	பு pu	பூ puu	பெ pe	பே pee	பை pai	பொ po	போ poo	பௌ pau
R	ற்	ற Ra	றா Raa	றி Ri	றீ Rii	று Ru	றூ Ruu	றெ Re	றே Ree	றை Rai	றொ Ro	றோ Roo	றௌ Rau
ng	ங்	ங Nga	ஙா ngaa	ஙி ngi	ஙீ ngii	ஙு ngu	ஙூ nguu	ஙெ nge	ஙே ngee	ஙை ngai	ஙொ ngo	ஙோ ngoo	ஙௌ ngau
nj	ஞ்	ஞ nja	ஞா njaa	ஞி nji	ஞீ njii	ஞு nju	ஞூ njuu	ஞெ nje	ஞே njee	ஞை njai	ஞொ njo	ஞோ njoo	ஞௌ njau

[4] Adapted from the Tamil Alphabet Chart, South Asia Language Resource Center (SALRC), University of Chicago. See http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/plc/tamilweb. Accessed on May 31, 2021.

N	ண்	ண Na	ணா Naa	ணி Ni	ணீ Nii	ணு Nu	ணூ Nuu	ணெ Ne	ணே Nee	ணை Nai	ணொ No	ணோ Noo	ணௌ Nau
nd	ந்	ந nda	நா ndaa	நி ndi	நீ ndii	நு ndu	நூ nduu	நெ nde	நே ndee	நை ndai	நொ ndo	நோ ndoo	நௌ Ndau
m	ம்	ம ma	சை maa	மி mi	மீ mii	மு mu	மூ muu	மெ me	மே mee	மை mai	மொ mo	மோ moo	மௌ mau
n	ன்	ன na	னா naa	னி ni	னீ nii	னு nu	னூ nuu	னெ ne	னே nee	னை nai	னொ no	னோ noo	னௌ nau
y	ய்	ய ya	யா yaa	யி yi	யீ yii	யு yu	யூ yuu	யெ ye	யே yee	யை yai	யொ yo	யோ yoo	யௌ yau
r	ர்	ர ra	ரா raa	ரி ri	ரீ rii	ரு ru	ரூ ruu	ரெ re	ரே ree	ரை rai	ரொ ro	ரோ roo	ரௌ rau
l	ல்	ல la	லா laa	லி li	லீ lii	லு lu	லூ luu	லெ le	லே lee	லை lai	லொ lo	லோ loo	லௌ lau
v	வ்	வ va	வா vaa	வி vi	வீ vii	வு vu	வூ vuu	வெ ve	வே vee	வை vai	வொ vo	வோ voo	வௌ vau
zh	ழ்	ழ zha	ழா zhaa	ழி zhi	ழீ zhii	ழு zhu	ழூ zhuu	ழெ zhe	ழே zhee	ழை zhai	ழொ zho	ழோ zhoo	ழௌ zhau
L	ள்	ள La	ளா Laa	ளி Li	ளீ Lii	ளு Lu	ளூ Luu	ளெ Le	ளே Lee	ளை Lai	ளொ Lo	ளோ Loo	ளௌ Lau
Grantha (Sanskrit) Characters													
j	ஜ்	ஜ ja	ஜா jaa	ஜி ji	ஜீ jii	ஜு ju	ஜூ juu	ஜெ je	ஜே jee	ஜை jai	ஜொ jo	ஜோ joo	ஜௌ jau
s	ஸ்	ஸ sa	ஸா saa	ஸி si	ஸீ sii	ஸு su	ஸூ suu	ஸெ se	ஸே see	ஸை sai	ஸொ so	ஸோ soo	ஸௌ sau

sh	ஷ்	ஷ sha	ஷா shaa	ஷி shi	ஷீ shii	ஷு shu	ஷூ shuu	ஷெ she	ஷே shee	ஷை shai	ஷொ sho	ஷோ shoo	ஷௌ shau
h	ஹ்	ஹ ha	ஹா haa	ஹி hi	ஹீ hii	ஹு hu	ஹூ huu	ஹெ he	ஹே hee	ஹை hai	ஹொ ho	ஹோ ho	ஹௌ hau

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Endnotes

[i] Both versions of the funeral chant are taken from Palanisamy's life-writing. The Malaysian (English) version was published in 2002 and the Tamil edition was published in South India in 2007.

[ii] Information obtained from Palanisamy during a face-to-face interview in August 2011.

[iii] The full version of the Tamil oppari and its English translation, along with the transliteration are given in the appendix. The oppari was translated from Tamil to English by the author, a Malaysian-Indian, with a background in the Tamil language. Also, the Tamil alphabet chart is given in the appendix section of this article.

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