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## Malaysia

Garin Nugroho's quest for beauty

*Kala Malam Bulan Mengambang* - 'noir' parody?

Viewing Indonesian cinema

Transnational Tamil cinema

Theorizing 'indie' films

*Wayang* - hadiah sejati seniman rakyat

## **Malaysian Tamils and Transnational Tamil Cinema: Diasporic Identities, ‘Crisis Heterotopia’ and ‘Aura’**

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*Increasingly, the processes of globalisation and transnationalisation are proving to be crucial for the negotiations of transnational Tamil cinema and its diasporic audiences in more ways than one. In recent times, transnational Tamil cinema has expanded its territory beyond the shores of traditional diasporic markets in Singapore, Sri Lanka and Malaysia. It now caters to new and expanding markets such as South Africa, Japan, North America and Western Europe, besides its traditional diasporic markets. In a similar fashion, more than ever before, the identities of diasporic Tamils are being greatly impacted by the transnational Tamil cinema and its counterparts in other media. The processes of globalisation and transnationalisation have also caused the emergence of new sites of diasporic identity negotiations. These new sites are as much heterotopic and auratic as crisis ridden and non-auratic. This paper employs the notions of Michel Foucault and Walter Benjamin to examine the negotiations of identities by Malaysian Tamils in the sites constructed by transnational Tamil cinema.*

### **Transnational Tamil Cinema and Malaysian Indians**

The world of the transnational Tamil cinema is the world of Tamil diaspora in more ways than one. One of the important markers of the transnationalisation project of territorialised cinemas is language (Ravindran, 2006<sup>a</sup>, pp. 250-254). What makes the Tamil diasporic cinema transnational is the distribution of the individual markets across the world, albeit with the semblance of unity of a single market, the diasporic market. Thanks to the role of the language marker of Tamil,

the transnationalisation project of Tamil cinema is able to make inroads in this market.

According to *Ethnologue* (2008), Tamil is spoken by 74 million people around the world, including 61 million people in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Members of the Tamil diaspora have their primary locations in regions as varied as South Asia, South East Asia, North America, Western Europe, Australia and the Indian Ocean Region. There are traditional and new diasporic belts of their distribution. The traditional diasporic belts include countries like South Africa, Sri Lanka, Mauritius, Malaysia, Singapore, Reunion and Fiji. The new locations include countries like Australia, Sweden, Norway, UK, Switzerland, USA and France. Tamil is one of the two classical Indian languages (Sanskrit was the first to get the status). Tamil has a recorded history of major genres of literature and grammar spanning over 2000 years. Tamils are diglossic in their language use. The diglossic nature of their language use has its implications in the formations and negotiations of identities. The diglossic language use, coupled with the pride in the literature and classical status of the language, is very likely to be one of the sources of influence in the negotiations of identities by the diasporic Tamils.

Transnationalisation and transnationalism are projects borne of the larger movement of globalisation. Transnationalism denotes the ideology of the transnationalisation project. Rather, it is the engine of the transnationalisation *juggernaut*. Transnationalism as an ideology exists not as the precept of any 'utopian' project, but as a lived experience on the 'heterotopic' space of transnational individuals, individuals who belong to polar or multiple locations in the transnational social space. Transnationalism may also be likened as the politics of the "multicultural incorporation" of transnational migrant communities (Kivisto, 2003, pp. 5-28). Transnationalism survives on the transnational social space. And the transnational social space emerges from multiple locations, constructions and flows of transnational migrants over a long period of time. According to Thomas Faist (2000, p. 199), the transnational social spaces "consist of combinations of sustained social and symbolic ties, their contents, positions in networks and organizations, and networks of organizations that can be found in multiple states of multiple actors in multiple locations". On the other hand, Ramji (2006, p. 646) argues in favour of a conception of transnational space that allows an examination of both larger cross-national processes and the micro level processes involving human relationships. Kivisto (2003, p. 23) says, "Transnational social spaces exist and it is likely that they will persist, (as) the product

of globalising forces. This includes immigrant transnational social spaces. ...transnational immigrant communities need to be conceptually distinguished from the larger social spaces in which they are embedded." According Kivisto (2003, p. 5), "Transnational social spaces exist both 'from above' and, in the case of contemporary immigrants, 'from below.'" He considers the conception of Thomas Faist (2000, p. 199) as representing the former.

While there is a divergence of opinions regarding what constitutes the transnational social space, there is no disagreement on the view that transnationals are those who are on the move across multiple borders in their constructions of two homes and two homelands. Transnationalism, transnational social spaces and transnationalisation are conditions of modernity. This paper defines the transnationalisation of media as a process borne of modernity. In particular, it is a project which articulates the needs of transnational individuals and gives vent to their 'networked individualism' (Wellman, 2002, pp. 10-25), 'identity performances' (Merchant, 2006, pp. 235-244) and 'self-reflexive' projects (Giddens, 1992, pp. 35-108).

Similarly, the transnationalisation of Tamil cinema ought to be primarily seen as a process borne of the forces of modernity and the subjects of modernity, which are always geared towards the tasks of 'networked individualism' (Wellman, 2002, pp.10-25), 'identity performances' (Merchant, 2006, pp. 235-244), and 'self-reflexive' projects (Giddens,1992, pp. 35-108). This is not to undermine the market and business driven processes of the transnationalisation of Tamil cinema. Undoubtedly, they are the public face of any transnationalisation project. But the ideology of transnationalism inheres more in the transnational social space (made possible by the needs of the subjects of modernity and the forces of modernity such as globalisation and media technologies etc..) than in the market and business plans of the producers of transnational cultural goods. The location of the later is not merely secondary to the former, but is more dependent on the former. This is proved amply clear if one takes a bird's eye view of the history of transnational Tamil cinema and its growth over the past fifty years. Before the advent of globalisation and new media technologies, Tamil cinema's transnational project did not extend beyond its traditional markets such as Malaysia and Singapore. Globalisation and other forces of modernity have endowed the transnational Tamil cinema with new markets, new audiences and new narratives. The emergence of a truly varied and distinctive Tamil diasporic cinema has been made possible

only after the emergence of a vast transnational social space in the era of late modernity.

The transnationalisation of Tamil cinema has also profited from the operationalisation of globalisation and its implications within the national borders of India. Interestingly, the domestic diasporic market is an important driver of the growth of the transnational Tamil cinema as there is a growing momentum of domestic migration of Tamils to other states in India for reasons of livelihood. This is a less studied dimension of the transnationalisation project of Tamil cinema. The cultural location of the transnational Tamil cinema is no longer rooted in the physical location of the Tamil film industry, Tamil Nadu. The cultural locations of the transnational Tamil cinema are where a sizable section of the Tamil diaspora lives. The locations could be Thiruvananthapuram (India), Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), New York (USA), Melbourne (Australia), Colombo (Sri Lanka) or any place where there is scope for weaving a diasporic thread in the narratives of Tamil cinema.

Among the several pointers to the deep inroads made by the transnationalisation project of Tamil cinema in countries like Malaysia, the scale and nature of publicity drives that accompany the release of Tamil films is a significant one for study. The influence of Tamil cinema in the psyche of the Malaysian Tamil is strong and deep. It is not uncommon to find school children and college students discussing the trends in Tamil cinema. No hour passes on local Tamil FM stations and *Astro Vanavil*, the popular 24 hour Tamil satellite channel, without a content sourced from Tamil cinema. Spaces of all kinds are intensely mediated by what emanates from the plane of the transnational Tamil cinema. Be it the socio-religious spaces of *Thaipoozam*<sup>1</sup>, which attracts the largest single gathering of Malaysian Indians every year; or lifestyle/event spaces of parties or the functional space of a hair cutting saloon or the event space of kindergarten students, there is a sure location for Tamil cinema.

In this context, it is not surprising to note that Malaysian Tamil newspapers closely resemble their counterparts in Tamil Nadu in the volume of film advertisements they carry everyday. And it is not surprising to read about the upgradation of projection and sound systems whenever a Tamil blockbuster hits theaters in Malaysia, as it was done for the release of *Chandramuki* and *Sivaji: The Boss*, films from the stables of the Tamil super star, Rajinikanth.

## **‘Crisis Heterotopia,’ ‘Aura’ and Diasporic Identities**

Given the widespread dispersions of the markers of the transnational Tamil cinema in the social lives of Malaysian Indians, it is also not surprising to come across accusations against Tamil films that they are responsible for the rising levels of crime among certain sections of the Malaysian Indian community. Ravindran (2006<sup>a</sup>, p. 241) says that “the alleged negative influences of homeland films are a cause for concern among Indians in Malaysia and Singapore even though there is no empirical evidence to prove the negative linkage between homeland films and violence.” In her study on Tamil cinema’s location in the lives of south Indians in Singapore, Chinniah (2001), emphatically says: “Tamil movies cannot be indiscriminately blamed to be the negative force hindering the growth of local South Indian teens.” According to Ravindran (2006<sup>a</sup>, p. 242), “the perceived linkages between the violence on screen and the violence on streets require a broader and in depth examination of many more interconnected variables than film mediated ones.” The view of Nadarajah (2000) that “the assignment of Tamil cinema and/or Tamil schools as main causes of Tamil Malaysians community problems (sic) is not only limited and careless but also dilutes the focus on more serious preventive measures addressing the community’s socio-economic and political marginalisation” lends support to the conclusions reached by Chinniah (2001) and Ravindran (2006<sup>a</sup>, pp. 250-254).

The age of modernity is the age of crises and risks (Giddens, 1992, pp. 109-143). The age of modernity is also the age of identity politics. The politics of identities cuts through the vast swath of the transnational social space in its dimensions of postcoloniality, neocoloniality and the globalism of media flows. The case of the politics of diasporic identities is no different. It is also defined by the conditions of postcoloniality, neocoloniality and the globalism of media flows. Diasporic identities are seen as expressions of new found assertiveness in conditions of postcoloniality and neocoloniality (Rajgopal, 2003, pp. 63-64). In exploring the new Asian identity in the films of Gurinder Chada, a well-known U.K. film maker of Indian origin, Rajgopal (2003, pp. 63-64) says, “I argue that the new diasporic identity represented is closer to what black feminist theorist bell hooks describes as a “site of radical possibility, a space of resistance.” It is in this sense that the collapsing or fragmentation of identity in the postmodern framework is inadequate when discussing

postcolonial Third World cultural productions. For one major problem inherent in the very characterization of the state of postcoloniality is that it fails to take into consideration the issue of neocolonialism ...”

In contrast to the emergence of the “assertive diasporic identity” (Rajgopal, 2003, pp. 63-64) witnessed in other diasporic locations, the diasporic identity of Malaysian Indians is as ambivalent and fluid as any hybrid identity can be. Hybridity is to be seen as a defining marker of diasporic identity for more reasons than one. In its essence, diasporic identities are conventionally seen as sourced from the spatial and temporal locations of original homeland and settled homeland. At another level, Ang (2003, p. 9) sees the role of hybridity in how it “problematizes the concept of *ethnicity* which underlines the dominant discourses of diaspora.”

In the contexts of Malaysian Indians, as Ravindran (2006<sup>a</sup>, pp. 252-253) pointed out, the inability to reconcile the innate differences between what is projected by the transnational Tamil cinema as the original homeland and what Malaysian Indians imagine and expect the original homeland to be is the source of their hybrid identities as well as their identity crises. Says Ravindran (2006<sup>a</sup>, p. 252), “Malaysian Indians seek to negotiate their identities primarily in the contexts defined by Giddens’ ‘time-space distancing’ (1992, pp. 8-108). They are equally divided in their longing for inputs from the cultural homeland and in their dismissal of what comes to them through homeland films. There is a clear division in time and space in their negotiations of identities borne of the two important locations, the settled homeland and the cultural homeland.” Moreover, what is at play in the identity politics of Malaysian Indians are not only the factors of ethnicity, language, religion and race, but also the perceived denial of opportunities for recognition from the bounded social space of the settled homeland and the imagined social space of the original homeland. What Nadarajah (2000) says attests to the perceived denial of opportunities from the settled homeland. And the strident criticisms of the Malaysian Tamil intellectuals in Malaysian Tamil newspapers, against the apathy of homeland social space towards Malaysian Tamils, is a testimony to the perceived denial of opportunities of recognition from the homeland.

In a sense, the crisis of Malaysian Tamils’ identity is emblematic of a ‘crisis heterotopia’ Foucault (1967) mentions in his work. Reading the negotiations of Malaysian Tamils in the ‘crisis heterotopias’ of their diasporic space and the diasporic cinema they sponsor is the objective of this paper. This paper employs the Foucauldian concept of ‘heterotopia’

and the Benjaminian concept of 'aura' to relate to the encounters between Malaysian Tamils and the transnational Tamil cinema. Ravindran (2006<sup>b</sup>, pp. 419-454) examined the same along with an analysis of *Kannathil Muthamittal* (A Peck on a Cheek, 2002), a Tamil film by a well known director, Manirathnam.

In his essay 'Of Other Spaces' (1967), Foucault brings out clearly the characteristics of 'utopia,' 'heterotopia' and 'mirror.' These three spaces seem to be different from one another and yet appear to be related to each other as well. According to Foucault (1967), utopias are "sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of society. They present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces." In contrast, 'heterotopias' are counter sites with real places. According to Foucault (1967), 'heterotopia' is "a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality." Regarding 'mirror,' Foucault (1967) said: "The mirror is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place. In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror. But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy." Elaborating on his vision of 'heterotopia,' Foucault (1967) formulated six principles of 'heterotopia.' These principles attribute the following as traits to 'heterotopias.' Every culture has its heterotopias. Existing heterotopias transform their functions as society changes and history alters its course across different time periods. Several incompatible sites can find themselves in a single heterotopia. Heterotopias are about what they are linked with, the slices of time. Heterotopias need to have entry and exit points. Heterotopias need to perform a differentiating function between their real places and other spaces with the view to expose them or create another real space that mimics ours in every possible way. Ravindran (2006<sup>b</sup>, pp. 419-454) sought to see a missing trait in the Foucauldian scheme and advanced a seventh principle of 'heterotopia,' which gets its 'auratic' character. Said Ravindran: "Heterotopias hold the potential to be auratic if the characteristics of uniqueness, authenticity and relative

distance from the sites they seek to contest are native to them. But all heterotopias can not be auratic. ...Auratic heterotopias are not as common as other heterotopias. This does not mean they are the exceptions. Heterotopias that inhere auratic losses are the exceptions. Aura is neither a positive nor a negative attribute of heterotopias. It is what makes heterotopias auratic and discernible. Aura is a shifting location in the heterotopic space.”

Auratic heterotopias personify the sites where Walter Benjamin’s notion of ‘aura’ finds a new context just as Foucault’s notion of ‘heterotopia’ finds a new dimension. In his essay, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’<sup>2</sup> (1936), Walter Benjamin bemoaned the loss of ‘aura’ in the face of the rise of mass culture and its media such as photography and cinema. In the Benjaminian logic, the factors of authenticity, uniqueness and distance cause the emergence of ‘aura.’ These factors are greatly disturbed by the tools of mechanical reproduction and the copies they engender. According to Benjamin (1936), “Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence. ...The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced. Since the historical testimony rests on the authenticity, the former, too, is jeopardized by reproduction when substantive duration ceases to matter. And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object. ...One might subsume the eliminated element in the term “aura” and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art.”

As in the case of Foucault’s scheme of ‘heterotopia,’ Ravindran (2006<sup>b</sup>, pp. 419-454) pointed to a ‘serious limitation in the Benjaminian conception of both ‘aura’ and its destruction’. He said: “The Benjaminian notion of ‘aura’ becomes a possibility because of tradition, history and the cultist rites and rituals. ‘Aura’ becomes an impossibility with the de-linking of traditional, historical and cultist relationships from the work of art in its state as a copy. ... ‘aura’ is not pre-given. It is not something that is born and later destroyed due to extraneous factors. It can not be permanent even if those extraneous factors allow it. It is acquired and exists as a transient trait. ‘Aura’ inheres in films and their subsets not because of historical contexts of production, but because of the factors

of uniqueness, authenticity and distance in their non-historical and contemporaneous contexts such as 'identity performances, 'networked individualism' and 'self reflexive' projects of individuals in the age of modernity. 'Aura' can not be destructed nor it can be created by extraneous factors of historical processes."

Ravindran (2006<sup>b</sup>, pp. 419-454) conceptualises Tamil diasporic films as auratic heterotopias, in view of their narrative characteristics and their locations in the diasporic space of Tamils. According to him, the diasporic space of Tamils is not only placeless, like other heterotopias, but "it is the 'other space,' where the 'utopian' longings of the diasporic self meshes with the identity crises of the self that finds itself at the crossroads of the 'utopia' and the real; and between the 'utopia' of the 'original homeland' and the real space of the 'settled homeland.'"

In his conception of heterotopias, Foucault accorded an important place to heterotopias borne of crises such as aging, menstruation etc. Said Foucault (1967), "In the so-called primitive societies, there is a certain form of heterotopia that I would call crisis heterotopias, i.e., there are privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis: adolescents, menstruating women, pregnant women, the elderly, etc. In our society, these crisis heterotopias are persistently disappearing, though a few remnants can still be found."

As ours is the age of crises, the heterotopias in the diasporic space are as crisis driven as any other location in the age of modernity. Contrary to what Foucault posited, crises are not disappearing from our midst; they are only re-emerging in new and more assertive versions. As products of modernity and globalisation, the crisis heterotopias in the diasporic space are driven by concerns of identity politics than by the concerns borne of the crises of aging, adolescence, menstruation and pregnancy which Foucault referred as 'the persistently disappearing.' It is easy to discern their locations in the diasporic narratives of the transnational Tamil cinema as well as the diasporic space of Tamils of Malaysia, going by the readings of the same in the following section of this paper which subjects to a Foucauldian-cum-Benjaminian analysis the encounters between 'crisis heterotopias' of the transnational Tamil cinema and the Malaysian Indian diaspora. What are the implications of the encounters between the two 'crisis heterotopias', the transnational Tamil cinema and Malaysian Indian diaspora? What are the contesting sites and other real sites in these two 'heterotopias'? These questions provide the contexts of explorations in this paper. To serve as the backbone of the present

work, three modified focus group sessions were conducted in the northern Malaysian city of Penang, where a sizeable Indian population lives, during March and April 2005. Thirty young participants were chosen for the focus group sessions from different socio-economic backgrounds. The focus group sessions consciously chose Malaysian Indian youth as participants as they are the subjects of the vexatious public debates in which the role of the transnational Tamil cinema is implicated. The format was a modified focus group. The discussions were made to flow from the contexts defined by the four Tamil films shown in the first part of the focus group sessions. To represent the diasporic narratives, *Kannathil Muthamittal* and *Nala Damayanthi* (2003) were shown. To represent the non-diasporic narratives, *Kadhal* (2004) and *Vasool Raja* (2004) were shown.

In the following paragraphs, the encounters between the 'crisis heterotopias' of transnational cinema and Malaysian Indian diaspora are subjected to a Foucauldian-cum-Benjaminian analysis. In this analysis, three contesting 'heterotopic' sites are being explored. They are: i) language identity, ii) social/caste identity and iii) cultural identity. The following responses of the focus group participants serve as the basis of analysis regarding language identity.

## **Language Identity**

**R<sup>6</sup>** Language and culture are the basis our identities.

**R<sup>5</sup>** We may also judge the issue of language based identities differently though Tamil films. For instance, in the film *Autograph* (2004), one of the lead characters, who is shown as a Malayalee, is wearing a saree printed with letters from Tamil alphabet. This may be read differently by our youngsters. It may be seen as fun stuff. But we must realise that even though the two characters come from different cultural backgrounds, they are willing to accept the cultural identities of the other. This shows how we should be negotiating our identities.

**R<sup>6</sup>** People displaced and dispersed have to accept that the transformation of their identities is depended on language.

**R<sup>1</sup>** Tamil films show us our identity in terms of language and area.

**R<sup>5</sup>** Our identities are dependent on how we are named. Tamil films are responsible for the popularity of culturally alien names among Tamils.

Many Tamil films do not have Tamil titles/names. What is being done by Tamil films is having an impact in this regard in Malaysia also.

As pointed out earlier by Ravindran (2006<sup>a</sup>, pp. 250-254), the language marker, particularly the one that is defined by the diglossic language practices of diasporic Tamils, holds immense significance for the Malaysian Indians in their entry into the 'crisis heterotopia.' Their entry and exits from this 'crisis heterotopia' are fraught with challenges from the locations of their names in the supposedly chaste confines of the diglossic binary. Their entry and exit from this 'crisis heterotopia' are not guided, but exacerbated by the encounters between the two 'crisis heterotopias.' The sense of exacerbation is borne not of any indifferent encounters between the two 'heterotopias.' The sense of exacerbation is more due to the ambivalent and fluid nature of the Malaysian Tamils' identity. The Malaysian Tamils' identity encounters simultaneously a site of 'aura' in transnational Tamil cinema (as regards the pointers concerning how they should be sourcing their language identity) and a site of helplessness in the lived spaces of their 'crisis heterotopia' (as regards the perceived inevitability that "people displaced and dispersed have to accept the transformation of their identities depended on language").

The site of helplessness in the lived spaces of their 'crisis heterotopia' is too quickly alternated with the site of 'aura' in Tamil cinema and *vice-versa*. It has been proved in the analysis of *Kannathil Muthamittal* by Ravindran (2006<sup>b</sup>, pp. 419-454) that 'aura' is transient and fleeting. What Malaysian Indians experience as 'aura' in terms of their language identity in Tamil cinema is also transient. It disappears in the face of the alternation function performed by its counter site in the lived spaces of Malaysian Indians' 'crisis heterotopia'. The 'aura' of Tamil, in its diglossic context, shines well on the *saree* of the Malayalam (a Dravidian language spoken in the state of Kerala) speaking character and actress in the Tamil film, *Autograph*. It is also an instance to prove that the site of Tamil language identity can only be articulated better in the counter site of the body of the Malayalam speaking actress/character. But this 'aura' can not last long. It can only metamorphose into a hybrid identity where ambivalence, fluidity and helplessness reign. In particular, the sense of helplessness expressed in the statement, "people displaced and dispersed have to accept the transformation of their identities depended on language," is also emblematic of the peculiar diasporic location of Malaysian Indians which can not spring surprises like the "assertive and new Asian identity" Rajgopal (2003, pp. 63-64) discovers in the films of Gurinder Chada.

Malaysian Indians' identity is primarily defined by the ambivalent and fluid nature of hybridity. The ambivalence rears its head again in the language identity borne of naming a Tamil child. Here again, the encounters between the two 'crisis heterotopias' only result in the ambivalence of negotiations. "Our identities are dependent on how we are named. Tamil films are responsible for the popularity of culturally alien names among Tamils. Many Tamil films do not have Tamil titles/names. What is being done by Tamil films is having an impact in this regard in Malaysia also", says one participant attesting to the above. Whereas Tamil films are seen as responsible for how Malaysian Indian identities are derived from their naming process (the emergence of 'aura'), the same Tamil films are simultaneously seen as without 'aura' ("Many Tamil films do not have Tamil titles/names"). Here, the 'crisis heterotopia' alternates between their fluid 'auratic' and non-'auratic' locations. The following responses of the focus group participants serve as the basis of analysis regarding social and caste identity.

## **Social and Caste Identity**

**R<sup>5</sup>** In India, the social divide is shown to begin with birth, at least as shown in Tamil films. Caste and communal associations are also shown to be active in India. Many believe it is not so in Malaysia but they are also coming up here among Indians. This is a negative contribution of Tamil films.

**R<sup>10</sup>** India is a big country with a big population. What Tamil films show are unlikely in Malaysia.

**R<sup>6</sup>** In Tamil films, social divisions are brought to the fore strongly. Viewers only identify with the social group to which they belong. In the beginning, we do not know anything about our culture. We learn our cultural clues only from our parents. But when we are exposed to the social divisions such as Hindus, Muslims, Christians on Tamil films, we are likely to be divided be as well. When we move in our families, we only know our parents; but when we are exposed to the social reality, as shown by the films, our minds are poisoned about social relations.

**R<sup>5</sup>** Our ancestors who came from India to Malaysia were the oppressed people. We were united then. They had a sense of belonging as Indians. In Tamil films such as *Devar Magan* (1992) and *Tirupaachi* (2005), the characters are shown as belonging to places. When we identify with

those places of origin as shown in Tamil films, we are once again likely to be divided in terms of our places of origin. One might say, we came from Madurai (a temple city in south Tamil Nadu). The other might say, we came from *Tirupaachi* (a small town in Tamil Nadu).

**R<sup>3</sup>** What films like *Tirupaachi* (2005) show are cultural identities which can not be trusted.

**R<sup>9</sup>** In *Bombay* (1995), a Hindu is shown as marrying a Muslim. This may be acceptable there but not here. They show their culture.

**R<sup>10</sup>** Even though Tamil films show the divides among Hindus, Muslims and Christians. But they always make a turnabout and have happy endings. Why we do not relate to the moral of the story at the end?

**R<sup>5</sup>** The moral endings are only motivated by commercial considerations.

**R<sup>10</sup>** What Tamil films show in terms of social and communal divisions may be true of that place (India) but not our place (Malaysia).

**R<sup>5</sup>** But what is now being shown in Tamil films about Indian culture is a wrong one. For instance, in *Kadhal* (2004), 'thali'<sup>3</sup>, the symbol of marriage, is thrown away. Why the symbol of our culture should be shown in this manner?

**R<sup>10</sup>** That could not have been avoided as the film is about a true story.

**R<sup>5</sup>** Even if the story of *Kadhal* (2004) is supposedly true. They could have shown that incident differently. Tamil films are seen by others as well, particularly by people in countries like Japan. Why we should denigrate our cultural identities then? In the film, *7G Rainbow Colony* (2004), the lead characters fall in love and have sexual relations. Is it right? Do you think it is right? Love can be shown differently, it can be shown to transcend sexual relations. Many of our youngsters' ways of life are more like what Tamil films portray.

**R<sup>3</sup>** Tamil films do not erode our culture. They in fact promote our culture. For instance, we get to know about how to dress, particularly during wedding ceremonies, only from Tamil films.

In the above responses of the participants, what emerges is yet another evidence that the encounters between the two 'crisis heterotopias' are fraught with the challenge of negotiating an ambivalent hybrid identity. Hybridity is conventionally thought of as a fusion of strange objects. Here again, the hybrid identity is emerging from the fusion of

strange locales of India and Malaysia. The strange locales are also visualised as antithetical, even though there exists a relationship between the two homelands and the two 'crisis heterotopias'. This becomes very evident in responses like: "India is a big country with a big population. What Tamil films show are unlikely in Malaysia, ...In *Bombay*, a Hindu is shown as marrying a Muslim. This may be acceptable there but not here. They show their culture... and ...What Tamil films show in terms of social and communal divisions may be true of that place (India) but not our place (Malaysia)."

On the other hand, there are responses which take issue with the Tamil cinema for the destruction of symbols of cultural 'aura' such as *Thali*. *Kadhal* is a film that provides such a context. In this film, the 'aura' of the *thali* is seen as destructed when the girl, who marries her boyfriend against the wishes of her family, is forced to give up her *thali*, as it is thrown away. The destruction of *thali* is to prepare the girl for the marriage arranged by her family. What is transacted at the site of social identity in the 'crisis heterotopia' of Tamil cinema becomes unacceptable to the site of social identity in the lived spaces of Malaysian Indians, where the 'aura' of the site, *thali*, persists. This becomes more than evident in the response: "... in *Kadhal*, 'thali', the symbol of marriage, is thrown away. Why the symbol of our culture should be shown in this manner?. ...Even if the story of *Kadhal* is supposedly true. They could have shown that incident differently".

Another plane of contesting and transforming encounters is the one concerning the place of origin. Interestingly, there is ambivalence hereto as the places are primarily associated in terms of the casteist markers shown in Tamil films. For instance, in the following response we find that the location of the caste as a place marker is made to alternate with that of the place as a caste marker, thanks to the real cultural distance between the settled/lived spaces, the spaces of ancestors and the spaces contained in the 'crisis heterotopias' of Tamil films. "Our ancestors who came from India to Malaysia were the oppressed people. We were united then. They had a sense of belonging as Indians. In Tamil films such as *Devar Magan* and *Tirupaachi*, the characters are shown as belonging to places. When we identify with those places of origin as shown in Tamil films, we are once again likely to be divided in terms of our places of origin. One might say, we came from Madurai (a temple city in south Tamil Nadu). The other might say, we came from *Tirupaachi* (a small town in Tamil Nadu)". *Devar Magan* is a well known Tamil film of the 1990s, made by Kamal Hassan, a leading Tamil film actor and a film

intellectual known for infusing a innovative spirit in his cinema. The narrative of *Devar Magan* is primarily located in the contested social space of castes. The film reeks with casteist violence and was widely criticised for the same by many focus group participants. It shows no geographical markers directly, but allows the places of castes, as identified by the Malaysian Tamils, to emerge from the perceived geographical locations of the castes. The following responses by the participants provide the basis of analysis concerning hybrid identity.

## **Hybrid Identity**

**R<sup>1</sup>** We imbibe only the negatives from films like *Baasha* (1995).

**R<sup>4</sup>** We should be seeing the films not as good or bad films but depending on our process of identifications.

**R<sup>9</sup>** Our Tamil community is different from others. Instead of showing the downside of the society, the story lines should be changed to enable us to look at the Tamil community differently, not just from the side of political and police corruption.

**R<sup>2</sup>** Our films must move away from fight scenes which are culturally alien and must go back in time to use only culturally relevant martial arts so that our identities can be better related.

**R<sup>4</sup>** If we expect the film industry to change, we may not get the clues to solve our problems. They have to show the negatives so that we can learn from them. We should see the films by identifying with the films and their contexts.

**R<sup>6</sup>** In *Ayutha Ezuthu* (2004), the selfishness of the individuals is brought alive and there is a lesson for us in our lives. We are also selfish and we only care about our future and not the society or community.

**R<sup>3</sup>** We only like those films which concern our cultural identities. For instance, *Boys* (2003) failed because we could not accept the identities the film was trying to promote. Whatever be the level of our modernisation, we want to be culturally Indians in terms of our identities.

**R<sup>5</sup>** I am wearing Punjabi dress. It is not reflective of my identity. The way characters dress in scenes only exposed their bodies not their culture. How such scenes contribute to the promotion of our culture?

**R<sup>4</sup>** In *Vasool Raja* (2004), we may like the character, 'Seena Thana,'<sup>4</sup> who is vampy and hybrid, but we identify only with Sneha, who is homely and culturally acceptable. So we want to accept only culturally ideal/ acceptable identities.

**M** How would you relate to the cultural identity of the Sri Lankan girl in Australia in the Tamil film *Nala Damayanthi* (2003)?

**R<sup>4</sup>** It is an ideal identity, even though the character is shown as hybrid she lives by her original culture and language.

Ravindran (2006<sup>a</sup>, p. 252) said that Malaysian Tamils "are equally divided in their longing for inputs from the cultural homeland and in their dismissal of what comes to them through homeland films. There is a clear division in time and space in their negotiations of identities borne of the two important locations, the settled homeland and the cultural homeland." In the responses quoted with regard to the sites of language and social identity, the same was proved correct once again. In the site of hybrid identity, what is allowed to emerge as 'aura' is not hybridity alone, but what masquerades as the cultural identity that is seen not as hybrid, but unique. It is not the 'aura' of the individual kind, it is the 'collective aura' of "our Tamil community." "Our Tamil community is different from others" and ... "whatever be the level of our modernisation, we want to be culturally Indians in terms of our identities" are the two responses which seek to get the identity politics of Malaysian Indians to new heights, even as the evidence of their ambivalent and fluid hybrid identities rear their heads in other sites. The hybrid identity in itself is not a "less ideal" identity, provided one lives by one's culture and language, according to the logic of the ambivalent Malaysian Indian identity. Like the Sri Lankan girl, who is made to enter into a marriage of convenience with an Indian chef to hoodwink the immigration system in *Nala Damayanthi*, the hybrid identity "is an ideal identity, even though the character is shown as hybrid she lives by her original culture and language." In this site, as in previous sites, the encounters between the two 'crisis heterotopias' are only reinforcing the central point of this analysis that irrespective of the nature of the contesting 'heterotopic' sites in the lived spaces and filmic spaces, negotiations of identities by Malaysian Tamils are far from the kind Rajgopal (2003, pp. 63-64) finds as the "new Asian identity," an identity that is as radical as it is assertive. The Malaysian Tamils' identities are as hybrid as the diasporic identities elsewhere, but only more ambivalent, traumatised and fluid. They are assertive only in their ephemeral sportings of cultural identities.

## **Conclusion**

It is hoped that the present work employed the concepts of Foucault and Benjamin more purposefully to deal with the 'crisis heterotopias' of the transnational Tamil cinema and the Malaysian Indian diaspora. The concept of hybridity is a fractured notion, as fractured as the identity it seeks to relate. It is also emblematic of the ambivalence and fluidity that defines the state of hybridity. The Foucauldian and Benjaminian analyses of the 'heterotopic' sites of Malaysian Tamils and the transnational Tamil cinema amply prove that the negotiations by the Malaysian Tamil film audience embody challenges to escape from the location of hybridity, even as its alternatives are seen as non-'auratic.'

## **Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> *Thaipoozam* is the single most important event in the religious and social calendar of Malaysian Hindus. It attracts millions of people from all over Malaysia and abroad. It falls during the Tamil month of *Thai* (January-February). The event celebrates the Tamil God, Lord Murugan. It attracts members of the ethnic Chinese community and foreign tourists.
- <sup>2</sup> Walter Benjamin wrote three essays during 1930s on the implications of the advent of the age of mechanical reproduction. In fact, the concept of 'aura' first emerges in his 1931 essay.
- <sup>3</sup> *Thali* is the 'sacred' thread, with three knots, tied around the neck of the bride at the time of marriage by the bridegroom in Tamil weddings. The yellow thread is worn with gold pendants of different deities and symbols of nature, signifying caste and social affiliations.
- <sup>4</sup> In its literal meaning, the name 'Seena Thana' is an empty signifier. But we know for sure that negotiations through films do not depend on empty signifiers or literal meanings. In recent times, Tamil films have transformed the potential of empty signifiers as the key drivers of audience imagination. Vampy characters like 'Seena Thana' in Tamil films are prolific by their occurrences and have a strong historical tradition. They serve the narrative function of anchoring the 'ideal Tamil woman' (the heroine) by their disruptive and yet

seductive co-locations in the narratives. They also provide commercially suitable contexts for the transnational Tamil cinema to test the moral fabric of the male (hero) psyche and its vulnerabilities. The eventual glorification of the hero rests squarely on females who are shown as either 'disruptive' (by being vamps) or 'ideal Tamil women' (by their co-location with vamps).

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