

browser's corner

Heena Khan & G. Krishnan

Insider, outsider and everything in between

Set in contemporary Malaysia, the novel *Between Lives*, by K.S. Maniam, engages with the lives and preoccupation of the Indian diaspora, but from a strikingly feminine perspective, because all its anchoring characters are women.

The young social worker Sumitra is the protagonist, whose task at hand is to persuade an old woman, Sellama, to vacate her ancestral land for the development of a theme park. Sellama is drawn towards Sumitra, finding in her her long-lost sister Anjalai. There is also Sumitra's grandmother, who likes holding on to traditions, and provides the comic flavour of the book. Sumitra's mother, Gauri, is still recovering from the physical abuse inflicted by her husband. We also get to meet Sumitra's friends Christina and Aishah, of Chinese and Malay descent respectively.

The three friends together defend the land inherited by Sumitra. The novel, in fact, engages obsessively with the theme of attachment to land, to heighten the diaspora's sense of rootless-ness as it constantly tries to belong, finding no land to call its own. Sellama's refusal to vacate her rural dwelling in the face of encroaching resort development only heightens the novel's preoccupation with the theme of belongingness.

Further, Sellama does not just occupy her land but hovers about the place — she is everywhere. On her deathbed, she says: “now I will truly belong to the land, Amma”; and on dying, she does truly inherit what is hers. Sellama's ashes are scattered all over the landscape, to connote sacrosanct belongingness. Sumitra's surreal experience of bathing in the river, caught in the zone of nothingness, is word perfect — giving us a sense of the baptism of an objective, city girl into one reaching out for her roots.

Through memory, flashback, myth and history, the novel celebrates the intriguing space between reality and surrealism. As Sumitra and Sellama journey into lost history and ancestral heritage, they come to define nationhood and multiculturalism.

By the end of the book, Sumitra is also bestowed with the memory eyes of Sellama. *Between Lives* is an inward-looking novel, providing a passage through exile, memories and the sub-conscious, often transcending the temporal into the realm of metaphysical.

The author celebrates nature in the manner of a romantic. Sellama is an extension of that nature, devoid of scepticism or world-weariness.

While Sumitra gradually transforms from Queen Blue Ice to Anjalai Akka, she slips in and out of her present and past, her family life comprising her kebaya-wearing grandmother, eating *thosais* on banana leaves... her modern city existence immersed in the glossy pages of *Cosmopolitan*... truly a story between lives.

Know your idioms?

English coaching institutes, which have mushroomed on every street, promise to make you fluent in the language in six months. They often make students memorise rules of grammar and hundreds of sentences that they are supposed to pepper their conversation with.

A generation ago, English learners honed their skills by reading a newspaper and consulting a dictionary. Today's learners have Google. Yet, the digital divide denies a teenager in a village even the most basic reference material.

Know Your English, a compilation of some 300 idioms and phrases first published in a weekly column in *The Hindu*, fills this gap.

The material was written by S. Upendran, a professor in the Department of Materials Development at the English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, who inherited the column from his father, K. Subramanian. Future volumes in the series will deal with frequently confused words, grammar and usage, and vocabulary and pronunciation.

The entries give the meaning of the idiom, its use in sentences and its origin. Most people fluent in English learn the correct use of the expressions through years of reading, although they may not know — or care for — the origin of the expression.

One tedious feature of the column in *The Hindu* that has unfortunately found its way into the book is Upendran's excruciating guide to pronunciation. Under the word Gobbledygook, appropriately enough, the advice is: "The 'o' in the first syllable is like the 'o' in 'cot', 'hot' and 'got'; the following 'e' is silent." There is much more. In total, five lines, 57 words to learn how to pronounce "writing or speech that is very complicated, which doesn't make sense; gibberish or nonsense."

(This article was published in the Business Line print edition dated November 25, 2011)