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Kampus Sultan Abdul Jalil Shah



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TRAUMA OF TAMIL LABOURERS DURING BRITISH COLONISATION IN
MALAYA AS REFLECTED IN MALAYSIAN
TAMIL FOLK SONGS

LOGESWARY A/P ARUMUGUM



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Kampus Sultan Abdul Jalil Shah



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ABSTRACT

This study was aimed to discover the historical background of the Malaysian Tamil folk songs, to analyse the trauma and to evaluate the impacts of the trauma experienced by the Tamil labourers during the British colonisation in Malaya as reflected in the Malaysian Tamil folk songs. Qualitative approaches with historical, descriptive and explanatory designs were used for this study. A total of 146 Malaysian Tamil folk songs that met the research objectives were analysed. Historical trauma theory and thematic analysis were used to collect information from the folk songs. Data were analysed using narrative and discourse analysis. Narrative analysis describes the content of the folk songs while discourse analysis explains the usage of terms and words used in the folk songs that can be related to the emotions and trauma. The findings showed that physical abuse, economic destruction and segregation were the significant traumas experienced by the Tamil labourers during the British colonisation. The result also showed that physical, social and psychological impacts affected the Tamil labourers significantly. As a conclusion, Malaysian Tamil folk songs exposed the suffering, frustration and the shattered hopes of the Tamil labourers during the British colonisation. The study implicates that the Malaysian Tamil folk songs serve as a historical documentation of the Tamil labourers in Malaya during the British colonisation.





TRAUMA BURUH TAMIL SEMASA PENJAJAHAN BRITISH DI MALAYA SEPERTI YANG DICERMINKAN DALAM LAGU SASTERA RAKYAT TAMIL MALAYSIA

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini bertujuan meneroka sejarah latar belakang lagu-lagu rakyat Tamil Malaysia, menganalisis trauma dan menilai kesan trauma yang dialami oleh buruh Tamil pada zaman penjajahan British di Malaya seperti yang digambarkan dalam lagu-lagu rakyat Tamil Malaysia. Kaedah kualitatif dengan reka bentuk sejarah, deskriptif dan penjelasan telah digunakan dalam kajian ini. Sebanyak 146 buah lagu rakyat Tamil Malaysia yang menepati objektif kajian telah dianalisis. Teori trauma sejarah dan analisis tematik telah digunakan untuk mengumpul maklumat daripada lagu-lagu rakyat tersebut. Data dianalisis dengan menggunakan analisis naratif dan wacana. Analisis naratif menjelaskan intipati lagu rakyat, manakala analisis wacana menerangkan penggunaan istilah-istilah dan frasa- frasa tertentu yang dapat dikaitkan dengan trauma. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa trauma yang terdiri daripada penderaan fizikal, kemusnahan ekonomi dan pengasingan merupakan trauma yang ketara dialami oleh golongan buruh Tamil semasa penjajahan British. Dapatan kajian juga menunjukkan bahawa kesan fizikal, sosial dan psikologi telah meninggalkan impak yang ketara terhadap golongan buruh Tamil. Kesimpulan daripada kajian menunjukkan bahawa lagu-lagu rakyat Tamil Malaysia telah mendedahkan penderitaan, kekecewaan dan harapan golongan buruh Tamil yang sudah berkecai semasa penjajahan British. Implikasi kajian menunjukkan bahawa lagu-lagu rakyat Tamil di Malaysia berperanan sebagai dokumentasi sejarah golongan buruh Tamil di Malaya semasa penjajahan British.





CONTENTS

	Page
DECLARATION OF ORIGINAL WORK	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	iii
ABSTRACT	iv
ABSTRAK	v
CONTENT	vi
LIST OF TABLES	x
LIST OF FIGURES	xi
TRANSLITERATION	xii
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION	
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Research Background	3
1.3 Problem Statement	11
1.4 Objective	11
1.5 Research Questions	12
1.6 Importance of Research	12
1.7 Research Limitations	13
1.8 Sources	14
1.9 Instructional Definition	16
1.10 Summary	20



**CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW**

2.1	Introduction	21
2.2	Literature Reviews	21
2.2.1	Studies on Trauma	22
2.2.2	British Colonisation	26
2.2.3	Sociological and Anthropological Studies of Tamils in Malaysia	28
2.2.4	Studies on Folk Song	36
2.3	Summary	42

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

3.1	Introduction	43
3.2	Research Design	44
3.3	Research Framework	49
3.4	Research Method	50
3.5	Data Collection	52
3.6	Data Analysis	54
3.6.1	Thematic analysis	54
3.6.2	Narrative analysis	55
3.6.3	Discourse analysis	56
3.7	Trauma Theory	58
3.7.1	Historical Trauma Theory	59
3.8	Historical Trauma Theory Framework	63
3.9	Summary	64



CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1	Introduction	65
4.2	To Discover the Historical Background of the Malaysian Tamil Folk Songs	66
4.2.1	Tamil Folk Songs in Tamilnadu	67
4.2.2	Historical Background of Malaysian Tamil Folk Songs	71
4.2.2.1	The Source of the Malaysian Tamil Folk Songs	72
4.2.2.2	The Period of the Malaysian Tamil Folk Songs	78
4.2.2.3	The Typologies and Function of the Malaysian Tamil folk songs	79
4.2.2.4	The Characteristics of the Malaysian Tamil Folk Songs	80
4.2.2.5	The Essence of the Malaysian Tamil Folk Songs	85
4.3	To Analyse the Trauma Experienced By the Tamil Labourers During the British Colonisation in Malaya as Reflected in the Malaysian Tamil Folk Songs	91
4.3.1	Segregation	92
4.3.1.1	Displacement into Plantations	93
4.3.1.2	Isolation at The Work field	114
4.3.1.3	Caste Isolation	117
4.3.2	Physical Abuse	123
4.3.2.1	Restraint	125

4.3.2.2 Sexual Harassment	166
4.3.3 Psychological Abuse	175
4.3.3.1 Well -Orchestrated Migration As The Push Factor	175
4.3.3.2 Gaslighting	176
4.3.4 Economic Destruction	183
4.3.4.1 Economic Depression in India	184
4.3.4.2 Manipulation of Economy in Malaya	189
4.3.5 Cultural Dispossession	217
4.3.5.1 Motherhood	218
4.4 To Evaluate the Impacts of the Trauma Experienced by the Tamil Labourers during The British Colonisation as Reflected in The Malaysian Tamil Folk Songs	226
4.4.1 Physical Impact	226
4.4.1.1 Mortality	227
4.4.1.2 Malnutrition	239
4.4.2 Social Impact	255
4.4.2.1 Separation	255
4.4.2.2 Rupture of Family Structure	268
4.4.2.3 Loss of Resources	287
4.4.3 Psychological Impact	291
4.4.3.1 Depression	291

	4.4.3.2 Maladaptive Behaviours	303
4.5	Summary	312
CHAPTER 5	CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	314
5.1	Introduction	314
5.2	Summary	314
5.3	Conclusion	320
5.4	Significance of Research	322
5.5	Implication	322
5.6	Recommendation for Further Research	322

REFERENCES



LIST OF TABLES

Table No.		Page
1.1	Total Documented and Analysed Malaysian Tamil Folk Songs	15
4.1	Wages of Rubber Tapper across The Year 1924- 1938	214





LIST OF FIGURES

No. Figures		Page
1.1	The transmission of folk songs to documentation	5
3.1	Indirect causal relationship of colonisation on Tamil labourers as reflected in Malaysian Tamil folk songs	48
3.2	Research Framework	49
3.3	Words and meaning. Signal-thought-designata relations	56
3.4	Historical Trauma Theory Framework	63
4.1	Types of the work load designated to the Tamil labourers	145
4.2	Core temperature decrease leading to hypothermia	229
4.3	The FITT Model	270





This transliteration system is being used in **Tamil lexicon**.

Tamil Phonetics

Vowels

a	:	அ	e	:	எ
ā	:	ஆ	ē	:	ஏ
i	:	இ	ai	:	ஐ
ī	:	ஈ	o	:	ஓ
u	:	உ	ō	:	ஔ
ū	:	ஊ	au	:	ஔ

Consonants

k	:	க	m	:	ம்
ñ	:	ங	y	:	ய்
c	:	ச	r	:	ர்
ñ	:	ஞ	l	:	ல்
ṭ	:	ட்	v	:	வ்
ṇ	:	ண்	ḷ	:	ழ்
t	:	த்	ḷ	:	ள்
n	:	ந்	ṛ	:	ற்
p	:	ப்	ṇ	:	ன்

Aytam

k ஃ

OTHER LETTERS

j	:	ஜ்	s	:	ஸ்
ṣ	:	ஷ்	kṣ	:	க்ஷ்
h	:	ஹ்			

Source: Institute of Graduate Studies, UPSI. Received on 28 APR 2015.



**NOTE:**

1. The above transliteration is used to spell titles of Tamil works and the Tamil folk songs for want of appropriate English equivalents.
2. In the case of author's names, the spelling used by these persons or spelling in common use is adopted.
3. In the case of character's names, the popular spelling adopted in English is given, for example Thandayutham, Muniammal, Veerayi, Kaatayi, etc.
4. Non-Tamil words are written as they would appear in their original language, for examples from English, railway station, depot, road etc.

A note on language: I have used the usual diacritical marks in transliterating Tamil sources. However, for names (of people, places, and rituals) that are widely known and frequently transcribed into English, I have used their more familiar forms (e.g., Nagapattinam rather than Na_kapat_t_ in_am; Ramasamy rather than Ra_maca_mi)





CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction



The term folklore is the combination of the words ‘folk’ and ‘lore’. Whereas ‘folk’ is people in general (ordinary working class); ‘lore’ is the stories and traditions of a particular group of people (Oxford, 2016). Folklore in the most recent western European scholarship refers to the village, buildings, farmsteads, plants, superstitions, language, legends, folktales and folk songs (Propp, 1984, p.4). The same subject has been discussed in different sources (Brunvand, 1998, p.5-6; Dorson, 1972, p.2; Dundes, 1965a, p.1-3) with detailed specializations along with its elements such as rituals, weddings, holidays, proverbs and so on. Combining the definition from the Western European Scholarship and the definition discussed in the books, the study views folklore as a fusion of verbal, material and traditional elements.





Folklore embraces the art of all people of upper class and the oppressed class. Feintuch (1976) has a coinciding view on this by arguing folklore is not restricted to a particular stratum of society, but rather represents traditional processes. Traditional processes in folklore disclose the characteristics of a community through verbal art. Haviland & Prins (2010) agrees to this by explaining that traditional processes carry the realities of human life (p. 613). The realities of human life in folklore can be scrutinized from folk literature and folk arts or beliefs.

Folk literature composed of folk songs, folk tales, ballads, proverbs, riddles and myths. Folk arts and beliefs encompass arts, crafts, practices, customs, religion, medicine and games (Sakthivel, 1996, pg. 16). In reference to what have been said previously, the study concludes that folklore is the tradition and story of a country or community expressed in different ways and means such as songs, dance, drama, beliefs, etc. Since folklore reflects the overall culture of the people in broader way and is considered vast, this research will shed light on only with reference to folk songs, i.e, a form of folk literature.

Folk song plays an important role in depicting the life experiences of human being. As pointed out by Kenny (1991) "...the oral tradition reaches down to our day...The oral is pure and true. It is not for the eye; it must be seen with the ear, heard in the heart, felt in the spirit" (p.5). Hence, listening to folk songs helps us know and comprehend the very human emotions. Besides expressing the emotion, folk songs also encapsulate the flow of life thereby providing information on history of a community. The function of folk songs as historical source has been authenticated by





Vincent (2007) whom stated folk songs stand as evidence just as the “stone carvings, brass plates and written literature” (p.22).

Thus, this research focused on how Malaysian Tamil folk songs serve as historical documentation of the Tamil labourers during the British colonisation in Malaya. It also sheds light on the trauma faced by the Tamil labourers as reflected in the folk songs. They used the folk songs to express the grief, frustration and the pain. For this reason, folk songs are considered an apt source to introduce the historical trauma of Malaysian Tamil labourers during the British colonisation.

1.2 Research Background



Folk literature, being a traditional creation conveys the history, social and cultural essence of the people (as explained earlier in the introduction). This portrays the relationship that exists between these elements and folk literature. Sakthivel (1996) has asserted the relationship by stating that folklore intertwines with other disciplines of study (p.20). There are

1. Folklore and history
2. Folklore and sociology
3. Folklore and anthropology
4. Folklore and psychology
5. Folklore and philosophy
6. Folklore and linguistics





The intertwining relationship can also be related to the study of folk literature. Since the current study focuses on Tamil labourer's history, hence the relationship between folk literature and history is highlighted.

1.2.1 Folk Literature and History

As a historical source, folk literature interprets the life of the human and their experiences and therefore acts as a compilation of human knowledge. It preserves the knowledge by keeping alive the memory it conceals. This affirms the study of Dorson (1972) who affirmed the significance of folk literature in helping to reconstruct the history (p.13). Similarly, in the context of this research folk songs are proposed to serve as historical evidence. This is possible when the folk songs are documented.

The following section elucidates the process of documentation which enables the analysis of folk songs.

1.2.1.1 The Documentation of The Folk Songs

Folk songs may take the form of eye-witness evidence about the past and show degree of continuity by linking the present with the past using the oral transmission. Since the oral transmission contains evidence, folk song is also said to serve as an oral testimony (Vansina, 1985, p.3-12). Oral testimony has a significant place in oral history. Lourdu (2000) claims that, oral testimony only function as a piece of historical evidence once they are documented (p.77). He also cited the work of John



Vansina, who has delineated the process on how an oral testimony transmitted to a written form and attains the form of documentation. For the current research the same process has been equated with folk songs.

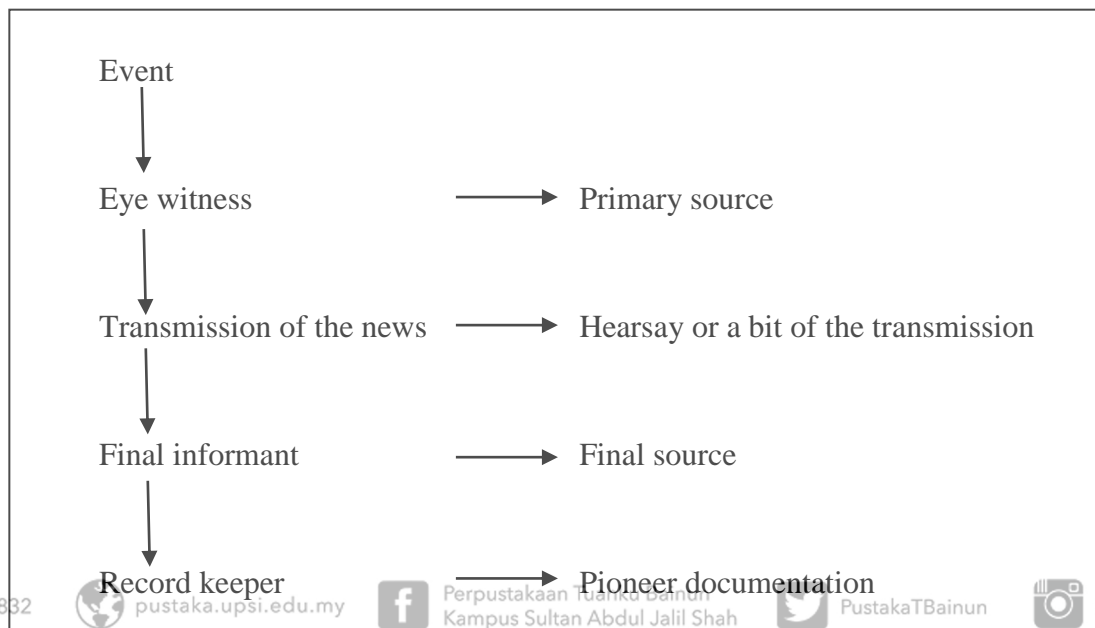


Figure 1.1. The transmission of folk songs to documentation

1.2.1.2 The Transmission of Malaysian Tamil Folk Songs To Documentation

The following section shed light on the documentation of Malaysian Tamil folk songs in three compilations by Murasu Nedumaran, Thandayutham and Mutthammal Palanisamy.



I Murasu Nedumaran

Earlier, no effort has been made to perpetuate the documentation of Malaysian Tamil folk songs. Little care was given by the poet K.Perumal (1929-1979) and the writer S.Kamalanathan (1932-1992) (Murasu Nedumaran, 1997, p.12). They have published few folk songs in magazines and gave speeches on it. However, the condition does not last long as the first initiative to document the folk songs was taken by Murasu Nedumaran. He had successfully documented 18 folk songs, explained the essence of the songs and named the source for the songs in his book entitled ‘Malēciyat Tamil Kavitaik Kaḷañciyam’.

II Thandayutham



Thandayutham made the pioneer attempt of collecting the Malaysian Tamil folk songs. His appreciable contribution was financed under the grant of University Malaya. In 1980s, Thandayutham during his four years of university life had spent the weekends and semester breaks with his friends by exploring each plantation in search of the Tamil people who sing folk songs. He sound recorded his collections with the help of his friends and successfully collected ample folk songs. Since the older generation no longer alive he was unable to retrieve some of the songs fully. Some songs were partially written as the source could not transmit it fully due to the lapse of memory.

The folk songs collection by Thandayutham constituted verbal and written forms and they were not categorized. Thandayutham planned to share his fieldwork





experience of collecting the folk songs, the names of the source and transmit it into a stable written form. Sadly, just before executing his plans Thandayutham passed away. Murasu Nedumaran (1997), has notified in a statement by hoping that the Thandayutham's folk song collections will be able to convey detailed historical events in the lives of Tamils and thus it should be documented (p.150). After the death of Thandayutham, his wife Latha Thandayutham and friends took over the initiative and documented them in the form of a book entitled 'Malēciya nāṭṭuppuṟap pāṭalkaḷ' in 1998. It was the magnum opus for the late Thandayutham. Murasu Nedumaran also contributed by writing the glossary for the folk songs.

The book consists of eighteen subtopics which were categorized based on meaning of the folk songs and its structural form. They are namely plantations and labourer, Englishmen, war, labourer, kangany, love, lullaby, lament, miscellaneous, society, labourer songs, gods, Gandhi/ India/ independence/ Netaji, Gandhi's dream/ Tamilnadu political philosophy, relations, others, riddles and Kūṭṭāñcōṟu (vegetable rice). The categorizations were made upon the content of the songs.

III Mutthammal Palanisamy

Next documentation effort was continued by Mutthammal Palanisamy in her book entitled "nāṭṭuppuṟap pāṭalkaḷil en payaṇam" which was published in the year 2006. Her compilation comprises her experience in collecting the folk songs. Most of her song collections were transmission from Kongu Vellalar community. It is a community from Gounder caste that lives in western region of Tamilnadu and known as Kongu Nadu. Mutthammal has even included some of her own compositions. For





the purpose of this research, her compositions were excluded since they cannot be defined as folk songs. She has written her experience of collecting the folk songs in narrative form. They are more than ten songs which reflected the lives of the Tamil labours.

Most of the folk songs documentation will have information regarding the song such as the name of the place it is obtained from, name of the source, age and the social background of the source. But, Mutthammal compilation is beyond this. In her book Mutthammal, managed to unleash the background of each folk songs collection from the live experiences of her relatives. The compilation itself is from her lively moments. Some songs are engaged in her childhood memory.



The documented folk songs are noteworthy when analysing the lives of the people from the lower status. In accordance with this discussion, the following section focused on the documented Malaysian Tamil folk songs to analyse the lives of the Tamil labourers.

1.2.1.3 Malaysian Tamil Folk Songs

The advent of Malaysian Tamil literature is rooted upon Malaysian Tamil folk songs (Murasu Nedumaran, 1997, p.ii). Few scholars namely Murasu Nedumaran, Thandayutham and Mutthammal Palanisamy had documented the folk songs in Malaysia. The essence of the documented folk songs expressed loss, gain and hopes





of the Tamils. Most of the songs reflect the trauma experienced during the subjugation. This has been represented in the following verses.

āṅkilēyarkaḷum nammai
whitemen us
kūṭṭil aṭaittu vaittu
cage confined put
kotumaikal ceykinrārē...
cruelty doing

(Thandayutham, āṅkilēyar koṭumai, p. 7)

“...like herds of goat and cow
White men inhumanly
confined us in a cage...”

curukkā varalānnu ayyā aṭiccārē!
quick did not come sir whacked
Anta kampu etutulē aṭiccāru
that stick take whacked
ayyayō ammā! Appā! aṭukkumā
Yārukuttān paṭil colvēn turaimārē
to whom answer tell dorai

(Thandayutham, kūlikkāriyin vākkumūlam, p. 23)

“...beaten for the late coming
Kankani (supervisor) armed a stick to beat us
Owh dear mother! Father the pain is unbearable
To whom shall I answer dear superior”

These verses function as a medium to voice out the brutality and violence subjected on Tamil labourers during the colonisation. Representations of the colonisation clearly have been depicted in the folk songs. According to Murasu Nedumaran in his preface for ‘Malēciya nāṭṭuppuṇṇa pāṭalkal’ book, he mentioned that folk songs reflect the reality of folk people (Thandayutham, 1998, p. i). That is the reason folk songs are considered a good source in documenting the historical trauma impacts. Thus, analysis on the folk songs will facilitate us to have a further





understanding and feel the suffering of the Tamil labourers that has been uttered in their very own words.

1.2.2 The British Colonisation

The modern history of Tamils in Malaysia begins with their immigration to Malaya at the end of 18th century. Murasu Nedumaran (2007) has outlined this period of immigration as between end of 18th and 19th century (p.14). The immigration became a significant feature following the consolidation of British power in Malaya. It begins to intensify in the succeeding years. Manickam (2012) reasoned the intensification by outlining that, political and economical changes in South India caused the later migration to be on a large scale (p.7). The modern migrants were chiefly uneducated labourers (Sandhu, 2010, p.31).

The migration to Malaya which was meant for better life started to take a toll on Tamil labourers as they felt wretched, dispirited and toiled during the British colonisation. This has been clearly proven in the study of Stenson (1980) whom pointed to Tamils as “sucked oranges” under the British colonisation (p.21). The hardships faced by the labourers were clearly depicted in Malaysian Tamil folk songs. Hence, the research sheds light on the historical trauma of the Tamil labourers during the British colonisation in Malaya as reflected in the Malaysian Tamil folk songs. The analysis enables us to visualize each and every traumatic moment of Tamil labourers.





1.3 Problem Statement

It is quite difficult for anyone to comprehend the Tamil labourers in Malaya. This is due to the scarcity of literature on their daily struggles (from their own perspective) while in Malaya (Manickam, 2012, p.67). In the context of Malaysian Tamil literature, researches focusing on the anthropological studies of Malaysian Tamil labourers have been conducted. Most of these researchers have analysed the novels, short stories and poems to collect the data and information regarding Malaysian Tamils. However, there are very few studies that analysed their internal experiences. The previous researches had explored into details about their exterior environment while their internal conflicts and emotional upheavals remain hidden. This makes the efforts to understand them much more complex. So, in order to comprehend the internal conflicts and emotions of the Tamils, Malaysian Tamil Folk songs will be analysed. The finding will resemble the reality of the life from the labourer's own experience, perspective and helps to document the historical facts.

1.4 Objective

This research has three objectives as follows:

1. To discover the historical background of the Malaysian Tamil folk songs.
2. To analyse the trauma experienced by the Tamil labourers during the British colonisation in Malaya as reflected in the Malaysian Tamil folk songs.
3. To evaluate the impacts of the trauma experienced by the Tamil labourers during the British colonisation in Malaya as reflected in the Malaysian Tamil





folk songs.

1.5 Research Questions

This research has three research questions as follows:

1. What is the historical background of the Malaysian Tamil folk song?
2. What are the traumas experienced by the Tamil labourers under the British colonisation as reflected in the Malaysian Tamil Folk Songs?
3. How did the trauma impact the lives of the Tamil labourers as reflected in the Malaysian Tamil folk songs?



1.6 Importance of Research

The study was chosen because folk songs enable the researcher to comprehend the internal conflicts experienced and expressed by the Tamil labourers in their very own words. Moreover, this research will be documenting the unwritten historical heritage found in the folk songs. The research serves to prove that Malaysian Tamil folk songs help in reconstructing the history of the Tamil labour community in Malaysia.

The study was chosen based on the literature review collected. So far there are only three books that have documented the Malaysian Tamil folk songs. Furthermore, there are less historical approach studies that analysed the traumatic experiences as reflected in Malaysian Tamil Folk Songs. So, these reasons strengthened the purpose

