



# THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

This thesis has been submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for a postgraduate degree (e.g. PhD, MPhil, DClinPsychol) at the University of Edinburgh. Please note the following terms and conditions of use:

- This work is protected by copyright and other intellectual property rights, which are retained by the thesis author, unless otherwise stated.
- A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study, without prior permission or charge.
- This thesis cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first obtaining permission in writing from the author.
- The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any format or medium without the formal permission of the author.
- When referring to this work, full bibliographic details including the author, title, awarding institution and date of the thesis must be given.

# **Sex or Sensibility?**

**The making of chaste women and promiscuous  
men in a Sri Lankan university setting**

**Eshani Samantha Ruwanpura**

**Ph.D.  
University of Edinburgh and  
Queen Margaret University  
2011**

## **DECLARATION**

I declare that this thesis has been entirely composed by me and is my own original work with acknowledgement of other sources, and that the work has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Signed:

Date:

## **DEDICATION**

For the students at Kelaniya, especially Samadhi and Aruni, because they warmly welcomed a stranger into their circle of friends.

## ABSTRACT

It is often claimed that education confers a range of benefits to individuals. From realising their thinking capacities to overcoming class boundaries, the outcomes of education are considered especially beneficial for women. Feminist theorists make a direct and strong link between education and female autonomy. Those who critique this line of thinking point to the numerous societal and structural factors which come into play in preventing education from delivering its promises of a world with greater productivity, equality and freedom. However even these critics concur that higher education does help to overcome the many structural inequalities which affect the everyday lives of women and also men from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

This thesis explores the ways in which the sexuality of students, at a Sri Lankan university, is constructed. It looks at the extent to which social factors – be it through personal interactions, established norms or explicit rules – exert control over and determine how individuals can express their sexuality in a setting which is ostensibly liberating and progressive. Based on 15 months of fieldwork at the University of Kelaniya, the findings are used to argue that when it comes to constructing their sexuality students continue to be constrained by a reiteration of social and cultural expectations which are at play in larger society. The onus on women to uphold these expectations is reinforced by other women and the men play a key role in ensuring their maintenance. Hailing predominantly from working-class backgrounds, these young women expect university education to provide them with the ticket out of their working-class background to better opportunities. Thus they endeavour to maintain, produce and reproduce social norms which will mark them as respectable and chaste women. The potentiality of a better life offered by university education becomes the very thing that constrains women students from using their autonomy to express their independence and sexuality.

Based on these findings, it is then argued that since higher education itself is shaped and constrained by factors of nationalism, class and gender, the numerous benefits it offers to women do not always provide them with the autonomy that is needed to overcome the double standards that apply to how sexuality is constructed in most societies. The intersections between gender, class and nationalism dominated the milieu in which this Sri Lankan university is placed and thus it is these factors, rather than education, which determined the ways in which women could construct their sexuality. The aspirations brought on through their university education of a better life, rather than liberating them, further constrained their behaviours. As such these women engaged in a system of surveillance – both of self and the other – which maintained and reproduced notions of respectability and sexual sobriety in their everyday behaviours.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Acknowledgments</b>	1
<b>Glossary of Sinhala terms</b>	2
<b>List of commonly used English terms</b>	5
<b>List of Illustrations</b>	6
<b>Introduction</b>	7
<b>Chapter 1: Sexuality, Gender and Youth: Exploring the Nexus, Applying the Concepts</b>	17
<b>Chapter 2: Researching Sexuality: Setting, Methodology and Methods</b>	60
<b>Chapter 3: Being Ragged: A Rite of Passage into Student Life</b>	92
<b>Chapter 4: Disputed Language: Using Impolite Speech, Giving Words New Meaning</b>	118
<b>Chapter 5: Performing the Ideals of a Good Woman: Chaste and Sexually Ignorant</b>	151
<b>Chapter 6: Living the Script of Masculinity: Laddish Behaviours and Sensual Dancing</b>	181
<b>Chapter 7: Courting Behaviours: Men Seeking Love and Men in Love</b>	206
<b>Chapter 8: Women in Relationships: Falling in Love with Men, Loving Women Friends</b>	235
<b>Conclusion</b>	265
<b>Appendices:</b>	
<b>Appendix A: List of Participants</b>	280
<b>Appendix B: Picture of the Osariya</b>	281
<b>Appendix C: Map of Sri Lanka</b>	282
<b>Appendix D: Map of the Kelaniya Campus</b>	283
<b>Appendix E: A Few Pages from the Risqué Tabloids</b>	284
<b>Reference List</b>	285

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the following people:

My supervisors Professor Jonathan Spencer and Suzanne Fustukian – for providing me with academic guidance and seeing me through to the end of this project.

The funders – the Scottish Executive, Lloyds TSB Foundation for Scotland, the University of Edinburgh and the International Federation of University Women for their generous financial support.

The academic and administrative staff at the University of Kelaniya – for granting me permission to carry out the fieldwork, for allowing me to sit in on their lectures and for introducing me to students.

The students at Kelaniya – for including me in all their activities, for introducing me to their families, for patiently answering all my questions, for writing down their thoughts for me and for responding to my numerous requests.

My friends in Sri Lanka, in the UK and the rest of the world – for keeping in touch with me, for giving me the semblance of a social life, for helping with translations and for pushing me to keep going.

My family – for their unfailing love, encouragement and emotional, financial and, despite my lack of faith, spiritual support!

This Ph.D. was made possible by the role each of you played in motivating me!

## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

<i>Æṇaya</i>	Nail (At Kelaniya: also means a woman)
<i>Akkā/akkalā</i>	Older sister/older sisters
<i>Ammā</i>	Mother
<i>Ātal</i>	Good time or good fun
<i>Ayiyā/ayiyalā</i>	Older brother/older brothers
<i>Baḍuva</i>	Item, thing or good
<i>Bælli</i>	Bitch
<i>Balu kama</i>	Doggish or perverse ways
<i>Barī</i>	Chum (impolite)
<i>Bath</i>	Rice (cooked)
<i>Bīpaṇī</i>	Drink (impolite command)
<i>Bottama</i>	Button (At Kelaniya: also means nipple)
<i>Bōṭṭuva</i>	Boat
<i>Canḍiyō</i>	Thugs
<i>Caritē</i>	Character
<i>Cuṭi</i>	Small or tiny
<i>Gæhæṇu</i>	Women
<i>Gæhæṇu gati</i>	Feminine traits
<i>Gahanavā/gahanna/gahalā</i>	Hit (in various tense)
<i>Gala</i>	Rock (but commonly used to refer to a woman's thighs)
<i>Gihī Vinaya</i>	The Daily Code of Conduct
<i>Goda giya/goda yanna</i>	Come ashore/go ashore (At Kelaniya: also means getting into a romantic relationship)
<i>Ira</i>	Line (At Kelaniya: also means cleavage)
<i>Kæṭaya</i>	Coin till (At Kelaniya: also means cleavage)
<i>Kakul</i>	Legs



<i>Kalu</i>	Black or dark
<i>Kāpaṇi</i>	Eat (impolite command)
<i>Karapaṇi</i>	Do (impolite command)
<i>Kaṭak/kaṭa</i>	Mouthful (usually of food)
<i>Kiyapaṇi</i>	Say (impolite command)
<i>Kokka</i>	Hook (At Kelaniya: also means a romantic relationship and/or partner)
<i>Kollā</i>	Lad
<i>Kolu kama</i>	Laddish ways
<i>Kuṇuharapa</i>	Swear words
<i>Læjja-baya</i>	Shame and fear
<i>Lassanayi</i>	Pretty
<i>Mahā Śiṣya Saṅgamaya</i>	MSS or Student Council
<i>Macari</i>	Buddy
<i>Malli/mallilā</i>	Younger brother/younger brothers
<i>Maru vikāra</i>	Great rubbish or great nonsense
<i>Minissu</i>	Men
<i>Nændā</i>	Aunt
<i>Næva</i>	Ship
<i>Narigi/narigilā</i>	Younger sister/younger sisters
<i>Pæṇiyā</i>	Unsuccessful Casanova
<i>Pauruśatvaya</i>	Personality
<i>Sirā</i>	Serious
<i>Sōdanavā</i>	Wash (At Kelaniya: also refers to showing interest in women)
<i>Sudu</i>	White or fair
<i>Tamusē</i>	You (impolite pronoun)
<i>Topi</i>	You (impolite pronoun)
<i>Umba</i>	You (impolite pronoun)

<i>Væḍyi</i>	Too much
<i>Vareṇi</i>	Come here (impolite command)
<i>Vāta</i>	Nuisance
<i>Vēsi</i>	Whore
<i>Yakō/yakek</i>	Devil
<i>Yamaṇi</i>	Let's go (impolite command)

## LIST OF COMMONLY USED ENGLISH TERMS

This list contains some English terms, which students often used, even when they spoke in Sinhala.

Affair/Love affair	Ice-cream	Thigh sex
Almond	Item/s	Three-quarters
Bag	Junior	Thrill
Batch	Kiss/Kissing	Tsunami-skirt
Batch-fit	Lecturer	Unbelievable
Beautiful	Lip kiss/Lip kissed	University
Blouse	Love	Upset
Blue movies	Manager	Vest/s
Boyfriend/s	Milk-bar	Video/s
Bra Strap	Miss	Wheel/Wheeling
Breasts	Mod	
Bucket/Bucketing	Muscles	
Bus/Bus stand	Musical shows	
Bust	Nightclub/s	
Campus	Normal	
Clique/s	Note	
Cream	Packet	
Cut	Part-time love/Part-time lover/s	
Damage/damaged	Physical	
Dance/Dancing	Piece	
Deck	Polite	
Denims	Posh	
Dips	Posters	
Discount	Public rag	
Dream girl	Quality	
Drink/s	Rag/Ragging	
English Language	Ring-cut	
Exercises	Rub-man/Rub-men	
Face-mask	Seat	
Fairness Cream	Senior	
Fashion	Sex	
Fit	Sexy	
Foreign	Shirt/T-Shirt	
Fun-trip/s	Shock/Shocked	
Gang	Station	
Girlfriend/s	Support	
Going down party	Sure	
Gum	Take-over	
Husband	Thank you	

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- Figure 1* Decorated, make-shift archway at the start of Wevalduva Road, which is erected every year, to welcome the batch of new students.
- Figure 2* Continuation of Wevalduva Road. A view from near the Buddha Statue, looking down to the south end of road.
- Figure 3* The *Tel Bæmma*, the oval shaped island on the middle of Wevalduva Road.
- Figure 4* An alternate view of the *Tel Bæmma*.
- Figure 5* The building at the entrance to the Faculty of Science.
- Figure 6* A building which houses the Faculties of Humanities and Social Sciences.
- Figure 7* The statue of a meditating Buddha on the Wevalduva Road, immediately in front of the *Tel Bæmma*.
- Figure 8* The 'Enough foolish ways now!' poster, pasted on a notice board in the gym canteen.
- Figure 9* The corner behind the pillar, of the motorcycle park of the Faculties of Humanities and Social Sciences, which provides couples with some privacy from inquisitive eyes.
- Figure 10* One of the garden areas with the benches where students have lunch, couples romance and friends meet.

## INTRODUCTION

### November 26th 2007, University of Kelaniya

The wooden chairs in the mini auditorium were arranged in theatre style with a broad centre aisle separating the rows of seats into two distinct divides. I sat with the Head of the Department of Medieval Studies, Professor Ramanayake, and spoke about my research while we waited for the third-year students of the department to come for the ‘special meeting’ he had convened.<sup>1</sup> The students trickled in, mostly in pairs and sat on the front two rows facing us – two men and a Buddhist monk on one side of the divide and nine women on the other side. A turnout of 12 students from a batch of 14, I felt, was a positive sign and so I tried to imprint their faces into my memory with as much precision as possible. Professor Ramanayake introduced me as a ‘Researcher from the United Kingdom who will be working at this university for the next year’, appealed to the students to help with my research and left the room so that I could talk with them freely.

Three years later, I still have vivid recollections of that first meeting. I stuttered, for what seemed like an eternity then, about my research and how I would appreciate any support they could extend. At the end of my well practised but poorly delivered spiel, when I asked if they had any questions for me, there was complete silence. After several ‘Are you sure you have *nothing* to ask me?’ one student, who I now know as Ayoma, enquired how I would like to be addressed.<sup>2</sup> I responded to this by saying ‘Call me Eshani’ and enquired after their names which each of them provided and fell silent again. In the silence that followed I noticed the two men and the Buddhist monk looking expressionlessly at me and the women looking down at their feet or notebooks. Two women who sat in the corner of the front row, Kumari and Ayoma, lightly held each

---

<sup>1</sup> Names of people and academic departments have been changed to protect the identity of informants.

<sup>2</sup> In this thesis words in *italics* within direct quotes indicate that the speaker is emphasising that word/phrase.

other's hands during that entire time and gave barely perceptible, yet knowing, smiles to each other.<sup>3</sup>

The mid-afternoon heat of an already scorching day only added to my nervous tension and so after a considerable period of awkward silence, though in hindsight it could not have been more than five minutes, I thanked the students for their time and walked out of the auditorium perspiring profusely. I started down the adjoining staircase in great haste to leave the premises, with a feeling of despondency enveloping me over my failure to engage with the students and questioning if researching about women's sexuality would even be possible. It was then that one woman, Nilooshani, came running up to me and said, 'Doing research on a subject which no one talks of directly is not going to be easy but it is important so I will "support" you in any way I can'.<sup>4</sup> I thanked her, more for lifting my spirits with that statement than for her offer of help, before heading down to the little garden near the English Language Training Unit to put on paper the experiences of my first day of fieldwork. In my notebook I have underlined 'Men and women sit separately', 'Two women held hands during the entire time' and Nilooshani's comment.

### **The Motivation to Study 'the Unspoken' and 'the Invisible'**

The three underlined phrases in my notebook transpired to be focal in how my research was carried out at the University of Kelaniya (UoK, Kelaniya or the University from henceforth). The separate spheres occupied by men and women, the familiarity between women friends and the diffidence, especially of women, to engage in conversations which touched on explicit aspects of sexuality dictated the approach to my fieldwork. I could not say sexuality (*lirigikatvaya*) was the main focus of my research because sexuality was commonly perceived as sexual intercourse – a taboo subject at every level

---

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix A for details of participants.

<sup>4</sup> English words in a statement otherwise spoken in Sinhala are indicated by double quotation marks in direct quotes. I use single quotation marks for same in indented quotes and the stand-alone phrases students use.

in polite society. This explained the silence, the blank expressions and the 'looking down at their feet' which I received on my first day at Kelaniya. Therefore I modified my language and spoke of gender relations and how these are played out in everyday interactions between men and women, women and women, and men and men on campus. This circuitous route enabled me to garner a rich body of information and rendered the invisible visible, the unspeakable speakable.

My interest in understanding how women construct their sexuality emanated from the approaches to sexual health adopted by health and development interventions in Sri Lanka. Most interventions which purport to address the reproductive and sexual health of young people – be those implemented through the government or through non-governmental organisations – advocated abstinence till marriage. More importantly these interventions were replete with moral undertones and double standards, espousing chastity and virginity in women while maintaining a deafening silence on the sexual practices of men. The importance of behaving in accordance with the highly lauded 'Sri Lankan culture' and not falling prey to 'Western influences' were the rallying cries of these interventions. Policy makers and practitioners alike advocated this idealized notion of a 'Sri Lankan culture' and saw themselves as moral guardians of it. Thus existing cultural values with their asymmetrical views on female and male sexuality continued to be reinforced through programmes for young people, giving them little opportunity to question notions of culture, sexuality or gender which were the fundamentals of these interventions.

The numerous sexual and reproductive health programmes I worked in, prior to pursuing my doctoral studies, followed a similar approach to young people and their sexuality. Even though my work took me from urban cities to rural villages and I worked with a range of professionals, with the exception of a handful of practitioners, the others all had a strongly moralistic attitude when dealing with young people's, and especially young women's, sexuality. No amount of discussion, critiquing of the palpable double standards or presentation of facts resulted in these practitioners wanting

to adopt a more open approach to their interventions. They argued that young Sri Lankan women did not fault cultural expectations and so willingly adhered to them. Neither understanding the socialisation process which inculcates these expectations nor the transient nature of all cultures was deemed important in implementing these interventions. It is this line of thinking, at odds with how I perceived young people and their sexuality, which roused my interest and made me want to explore how young people themselves understood their sexuality.

I believed the rhetoric promulgated by policy makers and practitioners alike had little relevance to the lived realities of young women. I believed that young women were aware of their sexuality and as sexually active as young men with the only difference being that, unlike men, they could not talk about aspects of their sexuality openly. The national average of teenage pregnancies in Sri Lanka of 8%, although low compared to other countries in the region, was to me an indication of consensual pre-marital sex (DHS 2002). Moreover even though it is older women who represent the largest percentage of those seeking abortion services even young, unmarried women resort to this illegal service to avoid the stigma associated with pregnancy outside of marriage (Rajapaksa and De Silva 2000). Given this data and my experiences in the development sector, I was confident that young women, if given the opportunity to air their opinions, would question the disparate values attached to male and female sexuality and want to negotiate for a space within which there was a greater balance in expectations of appropriate sexual behaviours.

I embarked on this research with the belief that young women would no longer meekly succumb to the expectations of a culture which had such different values attached to female and male sexuality but actively resist it or at least manoeuvre a happy medium. I also believed that, since Sri Lankan university students are known to agitate over issues of social injustice which affect them, a university would provide an ideal setting to engage in an ethnographic study which explored the constructs of female and male sexuality. The injustice of allowing men and women vastly different means through



which to express their sexuality was surely a fundamental concern for these students? And I was confident that, as university students who had reached the pinnacle of free education in the country, these women would oppose these traditional norms which repressed their expressions of sexuality. I did not doubt that men and women at Kelaniya would provide me with information on sexuality which would paint a very different picture to the one advocated by development practitioners and policy makers.

I located myself at Kelaniya because it had all the 'right ingredients' for this research: it was a residential campus, had an approximate balance of men and women and was located close to the capital city thus exposing its students to facets of city life. At the same time, in its approach to education, to student life and to university activities, Kelaniya adopts a strong Sinhala Buddhist perspective which coloured not only the university vision but also the atmosphere at campus. A Sinhala Buddhist perspective not only asserts an ethno-nationalist approach to the mundane but has a marked bearing on women and their comportment as upholders of 'Sinhala Buddhist moral values' which highlight docility, virginity and nurturance in the domestic sphere. It is in a context which, by and large, advocated these values that I embedded myself for a period of 15 months and explored how women students especially, who have left their natal environments to pursue a higher education, construct their sexuality.

Understanding how women construct their sexuality is important not only in its own right but also because these constructs represent how individual and social values can be expressed. As I detail in the literature review, sexuality is shaped by a host of structural factors and feeds into numerous other domains of a woman's life and determines how women can manoeuvre their everyday behaviours. A woman's feeling of self-esteem, her ability to negotiate gender relations, the confidence with which she can navigate public spaces, the goals and careers which she can aspire to and the ways in which she complies with or contravenes societal expectations are all linked to her sexuality. As a social construct which affects and controls the everyday behaviours especially of women, studying women's sexuality provides an insight into other aspects

of their lives thus increasing our awareness of the complexities inherent in gender norms and relations.

With this in mind, I sought to explore the ways in which moral understandings of sexuality, prevalent in wider society, would be played out by young men and women at Kelaniya. Is university the liberating space it is often professed to be? Do women have the freedom to defy sexual mores and construct a different understanding of sexuality once at university? What role do men play in this process? How do gender relations get played out at university, which is often seen as the vanguard of transition to liberal thought and ideas? Do women leave university feeling empowered and independent individuals? These are some questions I wanted answers for, when I embarked on this research in November 2007, which started out with the meeting of 12 students but gradually grew into a larger project involving students from other departments, academic years and interest groups. It is their stories which fill the pages of this thesis.

### **Structure of the Thesis**

This thesis details how the experiences at Kelaniya reinforces societal norms and cements the ways in which women students, who come from predominantly rural, working-class backgrounds, are allowed to construct their sexuality. It explores how everyday practices, language and gender relations interact with each other to determine how women can negotiate and construct an identity for themselves as educated women who value traditional norms and female chastity. The first chapter outlines the key arguments and literature on issues of gender, youth and sexuality. For the most part I trace how these arguments apply in South Asia and Sri Lanka, with some reference to other parts of the world. Constructions of gender, youth and sexuality are often tied to notions of nationalism, class and respectability, and therefore I also explore how these concepts link to gender and sexuality. I finally review the literature which links education to increased female autonomy. This literature is important for my thesis because much of the findings reported herein are based on the experiences and

perceptions of women students who have reached the pinnacle of free education in Sri Lanka.

The second chapter describes the setting at Kelaniya and the methodology used in the research. I first paint a picture of the location, the students whose voices fill the pages of this thesis and the ways in which I negotiated a role for myself at Kelaniya. Next I detail the epistemology and methodology used in this research. This is followed by a description of the process I used in carrying out the fieldwork, the sources of evidence and the limitations of the methods used. This section includes literature on the strengths as well as the challenges of ethnographic research. I conclude this chapter by discussing issues of reflexivity and ethics in researching and writing about sexuality, and outline how these relate to my experience at Kelaniya.

The next five chapters, Three to Eight, set out my findings from this research. I begin by discussing how the ritualistic practices of the rag, a phenomenon common in most Sri Lankan universities, are played out at Kelaniya. The imposition of the rag on university entrants by senior students is the initial means through which age and gender hierarchies are reinforced. The rag is also the means through which new entrants are taught to strike a balance between the conflicting values of independence and subservience. The violence and the sexual innuendos of these rituals at one level maintain the status quo of gender relations and the chastity expected of women. Yet at another level they invert established norms of propriety by exposing women to explicit sexual messages and 'rough language'. I argue these inversions and the sexualisation of everyday practices lays the foundation through which women's sexuality is shaped while they are at university.

Closely linked to Chapter Three, the fourth chapter looks at how the language of the rag furthers the controls placed on women but also provides them with an opportunity to show their disdain for 'suitable language'. The language use at Kelaniya provides women with some freedom from the constraints placed upon them by society to use

polite and proper words in their speech. Language which is largely considered impolite, masculine and therefore inappropriate for women to use becomes the accepted norm for university students. However the possibility of being perceived as women who are not respectable prevents them from using this impolite language outside of the university context. The language of the university sub-culture is also replete with double-meanings and terminology objectifying women. Therefore I contend that this new language, even though not all students perceived it as such, is simultaneously liberating for and controlling of women.

The fifth chapter explores how the social context at Kelaniya moulds the ways in which women modify their deportment and act out gender relations. By living away from parental protection, becoming interested in fashion, travelling unaccompanied on public transport and establishing friendships with men who are not kin, women experience some freedom from social constraints. These same aspects, however, are also monitored and controlled, some explicitly and others implicitly, both by university administration and the larger student body. The fear of being watched and the internalisation of values which hold female purity in high regard make these women highlight their chastity over their autonomy and independence. In this chapter I show how societal norms which control female sexuality are not always imposed on women but also self-generated and maintained by peer groups.

Chapters Six and Seven are devoted to exploring the ways in which masculinities, as they are enacted by the men at Kelaniya, play a role in shaping female sexualities. In Chapter Six, I examine how men maintain their place in the 'gender regime' (Connell 1987) without expressing overt sexism or violence towards women or to fellow students within campus. The displays of hegemonic masculinity, which apply in their everyday life outside of campus, get played out differently within the university setting. I highlight how men too have a keen awareness of appropriate and inappropriate behaviours because at university, they will fight only when provoked by other men or to protect women, give furtive glances but rarely make catcalls, engage in sensual dancing

with each other but find outlets for sexual intercourse outside of Kelaniya. I explain how, even through these adapted behaviours, men can determine the limits imposed on women and their sexuality.

The seventh chapter focuses on the importance men attach to romantic relationships, the role they play in shaping how an 'ideal woman' should be and the conventional societal norms they adhere to when looking for a 'sexually pure' romantic partner. 'Ideal women' are hard to come by and so when men find this person, they display a gentle masculinity in their interactions with her, which point to how notions of masculinities get expressed differently according to context. These varied expressions of masculinity also show how romantic relationships provide ideal grounds in which the power differences of gender relations, at least in the short-run or ostensibly, get reversed.

In the penultimate chapter I return my focus to women. In light of the range of masculinities enacted by men, I examine how women students seek out, establish and sometimes avoid romantic relationships. I show that women do not always adhere to traditional ways of finding a partner but still take the necessary precautions to ensure romantic relationships will not jeopardise their reputation as chaste women. By obtaining parental approval, setting firm boundaries and fantasising about unattainable men, they reduce the risks of societal censure they so fear. Romantic love is not openly coveted but plays an important role in their social life at university. Intimate friendships with a few women, on the other hand, are actively pursued and cherished. I contrast the restricted romantic relationships between men and women with the carefree nature of the intimate friendships between women and argue that the emotional and physical intimacy of these same sex friendships provide a fulfilment comparable to opposite sex relationships *sans* the possibility of being labelled as a 'loose character'.

I weave my findings together in the concluding chapter. In the conclusion I contend that university is not the unequivocally liberating space many believe it to be. For women who come from sheltered, often rural, backgrounds Kelaniya allows them to unshackle

a few traditional values and broaden their perspectives of the external world. Coming to UoK is an opportunity which allows them not only to educate themselves but also adopt a new identity as educated women. Nevertheless it is still a place where women's behaviour is continuously watched – by fellow students – thus making it impossible for them to deviate from societal expectations which deem that women, as upholders of 'Sri Lankan culture and tradition', should remain chaste and virginal. I reason that while university education provides an opportunity for women to express certain levels of autonomy and independence in their everyday lives, this does not apply equally to their sexuality. While some leeway is allowed to women to express their sexuality through their dress, the language they use and the freedom of movement, for the most part women remain controlled by societal expectations.

Educational establishments do not operate in a vacuum and at Kelaniya the influence of the 'Sinhala-Buddhist culture', with its link to the nationalist project, is strongly felt. As such, women, the bearers of tradition in most cultures, are expected to uphold values of chastity and respectability in this university setting. The intersections between gender, class and nationalism which dominated the milieu at Kelaniya, rather than the education, determined the ways in which women could construct their sexuality. Based on this I argue that the onus placed on women not to transgress societal norms of sexuality can sometimes be enhanced by their education: university education is seen as the ticket out of their working-class backgrounds into the middle-class. In their efforts to move into this class, which is seen to bring them better prospects, women attempt to maintain, produce and reproduce social norms which will mark them as respectable and chaste women who are considered 'worthy' of being accepted into the category of the middle-class.

## CHAPTER 1

### **Sexuality, Gender and Youth: Exploring the Nexus, Applying the Concepts**

#### **Introduction**

A review of the literature on sexuality reveals that numerous social factors, ideologies and movements affect its construction. These factors intersect to determine how sexuality is understood and expressed differently according to context. Gender, class, ethnicity, nationality, education and age are but a few categories in which notable differences in representations of sexuality can be observed and, of these, gender provides us with the most obvious marker of sexuality. Given the centrality of gender in my research and in understanding sexuality, this chapter contains a survey of how gender roles are constructed and the link between gender and sexuality in various contexts. I also review literature on the construction of youth and the link between youth and sexuality because the participants who inform this research are university students who fall between the ages of 18 and 24, and thus belong to the internationally accepted definition of youth (UNFPA 2008).

These three areas of focus – sexuality, gender and youth – are all social constructs which are inextricably interwoven. The complex ways in which these areas intersect is evidenced in the academic literature, be it that which explores sexuality in Kenya (Nelson 1987), gender and sexuality in Polynesia (Ortner 1981) or youth and sexuality in Mexico (Hirsch 2007). Therefore this review will examine the social and cultural factors which contribute to the construction of gender, youth and sexuality in diverse contexts but primarily focus on South Asia. Academic arguments do not always reflect the complexities of lived realities and, in everyday life, there is much overlap and contradictions in how sexuality, gender and youth are constructed as well as performed. It is the overlap and the complexities of these three constructs I hope to illustrate in this chapter. I first detail how these constructs are understood at the conceptual level and follow this with literature on their applicability in the South Asian and finally in the Sri

Lankan context. In the concluding section of this chapter, I explore the literature that links education to female autonomy and the critiques of this argument to support the stand I take in my analysis of how education affects the constructs and performance of women's sexuality.

## **Gender, Youth and Sexuality: An Exploration of the Concepts**

### *The construction of femininities and masculinities*

When the words sex and gender are used – be it in common parlance or in academic writing – it is understood that the former refers to the biological factors and the latter to the socio-cultural factors that contribute to the making of men and women. The differences we observe between the two sexes, originally thought to have arisen from biological factors and therefore resistant to change, are now strongly linked to cultural factors, which explain why the ideals of masculinity and femininity differ according to contexts. Archer and Lloyd (2002) elucidate this distinction by stating that sex refers to the binary categories 'male' and 'female' while gender refers to the masculine and feminine characteristics that are attributed to men and women. They say that these two terms 'enables us to distinguish reasonably clearly between sex differences (...) and gender roles and gender stereotypes' (Archer and Lloyd 2002:17). According to Jackson and Scott (2001), however, distinguishing between sex and gender is no longer viable because such a distinction not only continues the dualism between nature and culture, but also reinforces essentialist thinking.

Butler (1990, 2006) also collapses this sex-gender distinction and argues that all bodies are gendered and notes that 'gender is the repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being' (Butler 2006:45). It is this appearance which makes it possible to interpret certain acts 'as expressive of a gender core or identity' and consequently results in reassurance for those who do adhere to the given script and highly punitive actions for those who do not perform their gender role



well (Butler 1990:278-279). Even though Butler proposes that bodies are restricted by social directives, she also argues that they are not mere lifeless entities on which gendered codes can be enacted thus pointing to the complexity of gender performances as being ‘what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure’ (Butler 1990:282). Therefore, gender is best understood as what one does, not what one is, and it is this doing that is restricted by regulatory frameworks and thus limits persons in their performances.

West and Zimmerman (1987) take a similar stand when they argue that individuals do gender in their everyday interactions and the way in which they perform their gender is shaped by social situations. They however argue that

to be successful, marking or displaying gender must be finely fitted to situations and modified or transformed as the occasion demands. Doing gender consists of managing such occasions so that, whatever the particulars, the outcome is seen and seeable in context as gender-appropriate or, as the case may be, gender-*in*appropriate, that is, *accountable*. (West and Zimmerman 1987:135, emphasis in original)

Since individuals are held accountable for their performance, behaviours that are perceived as concurrent with culturally approved practices for men and women are not remarked on, while those who do not adhere to the normative conceptions of femininity and masculinity run the risk of being assessed. Despite this possibility of assessment, West and Zimmerman contend that doing gender is unavoidable and that all individuals portray and achieve their gender, often appropriately, through everyday interactions, in social situations and different contexts.

If gender is taken as that which is accomplished by social practice and through social interaction, it can only be effectively understood if the ways in which structural constraints impact on men and women is taken into consideration (Connell 1985). For Connell ‘the concept of a *social* structure expresses the constraints that lie in a given form of social organisation’ and he argues that ‘these constraints on social practice

operate through an interplay of powers and an array of social institutions' (Connell 1987:92, emphasis in original). If we take kinship systems, class relations and religion as examples of these social structures, it can then be understood how the rules and regulations, the tensions and the fluidity inherent in these structures exert their powers and determine the ways in which gendered bodies are able to perform. Moreover since these structures connect to and overlap with each other in diverse ways, and affect men and women differently, they further complicate the performance of gender. I use the argument that gender is a reiterative performance that is evident in every social interaction, is constrained by social structures and marks the differences between feminine and masculine practices in a variety of situations to analyse the gendered behaviours which get highlighted in this thesis.

De Beauvoir's statement that 'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman' succinctly captures the role played by family and society in producing 'feminine' women (de Beauvoir 1953/1988:295). Tracing family and societal influences on females from infancy through puberty to old age, she details the different experiences – both subtle and obvious – which shape the ways in which women are allowed to express themselves, often as the 'Other', in a male dominated context. To be accepted, it becomes imperative for a woman to express her femininity, often associated with notions of passivity, charm and chastity. So much so, de Beauvoir argues, even well meaning mothers will strive to mould their daughters to fit into the feminine world since it will be easier for the daughters to do so than to challenge these well established norms and expectations. The crucial point for a woman, regardless of her achievements, becomes the maintenance of her femininity.

It is this position as the 'Other' which marks the ways in which women are viewed in most societies. The confinement of women to the domestic sphere (Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974; Yuval-Davis 1997), their fertility and maternal roles (Rosaldo 1974), the perception that women are closely linked to the family (Martin 1993), or the alleged links they have to nature (Ortner 1996), more the norm than the exception, all point to

the secondary status given to women. Using a psychoanalytic perspective, Chodorow (1974) argues that this secondary status can be explained by using the dynamics of a mother-daughter relationship. She explains that mothers tend to treat their infants differently according to sex and identify more with a girl child because of her own experiences as a girl and later as a woman. It is this greater identification with the girl child and her subsequent socialisation which leads to the development of a 'feminine personality', one which internalises the importance of mothering, nurturing, connecting with other people and being flexible. These qualities, especially the mothering role, Chodorow argues are fundamental in accounting for the universal secondary status of women.

This secondary status assigned to women is considered an aspect of patriarchy, defined by Lerner (1986) as the dominance of a group deemed superior (men) over a group deemed inferior (women), which establishes the rules and values by which women should live. Lerner explains how the values, customs and laws of patriarchy play a role in shaping the roles and behaviours considered appropriate for women which have resulted in them having to live in a 'relatively greater state of un-freedom than did men' especially in relation to their sexuality (Lerner 1986:214). Walby (1990) similarly argues that patriarchy routinely disadvantages women in different aspects of their social life including their sexuality. She however contends that women are not passive victims of patriarchy and that some women actively contribute to maintaining patriarchal values in order to strengthen their own interest. The support women extend to maintaining patriarchal values is especially marked when it comes to the performance of femininity and sexuality norms, be it in their private or public lives.

The influence of patriarchy, be it in the public or private domain, can be observed in different contexts and periods of time. Moreover the pressure placed on women to perform the feminine role, which is strongly linked to chastity and respectability, further reinforces the impact social structures have on the everyday lives of women. Defining respectability as a 'term indicating "decent and correct" manners and morals, as well as

the proper attitude towards sexuality', Mosse (1985:1) argues that respectability informs the ways in which we interact with others, the ways in which others respond to these interactions, how we perceive others and how we perceive ourselves in relation to these others. Tracing the emergence of respectability in modern Europe, Mosse illustrates how respectability was not only strongly tied to class and nationalism but also to women who were considered the guardians of morality, virtue and traditional order. The expectation that women should embody notions of respectability also spread to non-European contexts, as I detail subsequently in this literature review, and eventually became a marker of an 'ideal' woman.

Similar to the making of an 'ideal' woman, the construction of an 'ideal' man is a complex process influenced by historical and cultural processes (Connell 1987, 2001a; Gilmore 1990; Segal 1990; Whitehead and Barrett 2001). The few who emphasise a biologically determinist understanding of men and masculinities argue that men's 'nature' is unchangeable due to genetic predispositions (Bly 1990; Udry 2000). For Whitehead and Barrett (2001) the danger of such theorising, apart from ignoring the diversity among men, is that it justifies the oppression of women, ethnic minorities of both sexes, men with alternate sexual identities and all other groups which do not fall into the category of the 'hegemonic man'. Yet, even among those who take a social constructivist view of masculinities, there is limited consensus as to how masculinities can be best understood or theorised.

According to Connell masculinity can best be understood as 'simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture' (Connell 2001a:33). In these gender relations, whether it is among men or between men and women, there is a masculinity which occupies a dominant position and he refers to this as 'hegemonic' masculinity. It is this form of masculinity which, even though hardly ever realised, oppresses gay men, heterosexual men who do not ascribe to the ideals of a 'real man' – and are thus seen as feminised – and women. Connell however

points out that even this hegemonic masculinity, because it exists with other forms of masculinities, is open to challenge and change (Connell 1985, 2001b). For Seidler, however, the concept of hegemonic masculinity does not take into account the pressure society places on men to live up to prevailing ideals of masculinity or the consequences faced by those who do not follow the standard script of what it means to be a 'real man' (Seidler 2006:51).

The crucial point of masculine behaviours, which come into play in all gender relations, is that they are acted out in opposition to femininity (Segal 1990; Jackson 1991; Connell 2001a). These practices and performances are also, Connell (1995) argues, enacted for the benefit of other men – those who one sees as competition. Therefore to be masculine, one must not be feminine and it is those who are considered feminine – women, homosexuals and men who do not adopt the normative constructs of masculinity – who then are subordinated and oppressed. However, these practices are not set in stone and, as many argue, our ideas of acceptable practices which define masculinity keep changing over time and according to context. As Brittan explains masculinities, or aspects of men's behaviours, fluctuate and change over time: for example, macho styles of self presentation are no longer fashionable, role reversals have taken place in marriages and fathers play an active role in child rearing (Brittan 2001:53).

The construction of femininities and masculinities and the gendered performances which colour all social interactions in everyday life becomes especially pertinent in understanding the relationship between gender and sexuality. That gender plays an important role in the expression of sexuality and does so in diverse ways in numerous contexts has been amply documented (Freud 1905/1977; Rich 1980; Mosse 1985; Weeks 1986). With this knowledge I attempt to explore how heterosexuality, which Rich (1980) argues is compulsory in most cultures, where individuals have to unambiguously perform their gender and develop sexual feelings ideally only towards those of the opposite sex, is conceptualised and theorised in the next section.

### *The language of sexuality*<sup>5</sup>

Tracing how sexuality was thought of and practiced, from the early 17th century to the present day, for Foucault (1978), the interest in human sexuality during the Victorian period resulted in prolific discourses on the subject even though the rules of propriety established with whom and where sex could be discussed. This fascination with sexuality seemed to point to how social order and class could be determined through one's comportment. Foucault explains that sexuality, for the bourgeoisie, became a key means through which they could affirm and distinguish themselves as a specific group, a body with its own health, hygiene, descent and race – distinct from the nobility and the working class. Unlike the nobility who had a blood ancestry which distinguished them, the bourgeois had to depend on their health and progeny to preserve their lineage and social class, and so they resorted to controlling their sexuality in order to do so. The sexuality of the proletariat, according to Foucault, became a subject of interest only during the 19th century when a campaign to moralise the poorer classes came to the fore. It is only subsequent to this that a more complex and elaborate understanding of sexuality, albeit still with clear class differences, gained ground in the all societal contexts.

Mosse (1985) makes a similar argument when he links sexuality and respectability with the middle-class. It was however not merely class boundaries that were determined by this bourgeois invention. The resulting discourse on sexuality also helped distinguish the normal from the abnormal, the legitimate from the illegitimate and the desirable from the undesirable. These newly established standards were maintained through the power of institutions and discourse which determined not just the docility of the sexual body but also the ways in which sexuality was thought about and expressed according to social class (Foucault 1978). Yet Foucault does not suggest that sexuality should be considered a natural given which has to be controlled or an obscure subject which has to be examined. For him sexuality 'is the name that can be given to a historical construct:

---

<sup>5</sup> The theorisation and conceptualisation of sexuality I focus on in this thesis does not address the specificities or details of same-sex sexualities. While realising this is a limitation, I justify this narrow focus because the research participants, in every instance, identified and saw themselves as heterosexual.

not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledge, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power' (Foucault 1978:105-106).

These strategies of knowledge and power, while playing an important role in determining relations of sex are, however, not all encompassing or uniform. As Foucault elucidates, knowledge and power affects sexuality differently according to factors such as social class, gender, generation and sexual preference. Yet even among these categories, power is not uniformly distributed but is mobile and fluid thus resulting in various forms of domination and subordination. The power that Foucault speaks of is one which is omnipresent, which comes from everywhere and is 'produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another' (Foucault 1978:93). Lukes (2005) explains that power is both effective and real in a variety of ways, can be possessed by individual or collective agents such as states, institutions or movements and is 'most effective when least accessible to observation, to actors and observers alike' because power is a capacity, a potentiality which does not always have to be realised (Lukes 2005:64-72). It is this kind of invisible power that can be effective even without active intervention, which ranges across contexts and has the capacity to bring about significant results (Lukes 2005:86).

It is this kind of power which also features strongly in Weeks' (1986) exposition on sexuality even though power is also fundamental in understanding gender relations and adult-youth interactions. For Weeks this power comes into play 'through complex and overlapping – and often contradictory – mechanisms which produce domination *and* oppositions, subordination *and* resistances' (Weeks 1986:37, emphasis in original). To him class, gender and race are particularly important structures of domination which affect the expression of sexuality. Of these three structures, while class and race plays an important role in how sexuality is expressed, for Weeks (1986) gender plays a far

greater role in regulating individual sexuality. Using Foucault's thesis, Weeks (1986) details how even in present day context, sexual morality is strongly linked to the middle-class and how the middle-class judges behaviours, their own and that of others, according to standards they deem appropriate. Therefore even those from the working-class feel the pressure to, though not all do, conform to these standards. Class structures however are not independent and so affect men and women differently. Weeks details how class and gender relations come together, especially in shaping women's sexuality in numerous ways: through economic and social dependence, marriage, burdens of reproduction and the power men have to define sexuality. The fact that these structures of domination come together and exert their power differentially to shape sexuality supports a social constructivist view of sexuality. One which allows for an explanation of how a range of sexualities, even within the same class, gender, age and cultural contexts, can exist.

This social constructivist view, as espoused by Foucault and Weeks, stands in contrast to the more essentialist understanding of sexuality. A biological understanding of sexuality emphasises the instinctual and fixed nature of sex. Arising out of studies on sexology, the sex instinct, often seen as an insatiable drive, is considered fundamental to all humans (Freud 1905/1977). For Freud, an individual is strongly governed by his/her id – the individual's libidinal drive or sexual instinct – and it is the superego, the moral arm of the individual, which has to curb and control this naturally occurring sexual instinct to ensure an individual governed by societal norms. By emphasising the fixed and instinctual nature of sexuality, this line of thinking also advocates a biologically determinist view of masculinities and femininities, their sexualities and gender appropriate behaviours. Freud (1905/1977) for example saw female sexuality as especially voracious and therefore in need of monitoring thus, perhaps inadvertently, providing an ideal justification for the control men exerted over women. Apart from biologically determinist views on sexuality allowing for unequal relations between the sexes to exist they also fail to account for the cultural variations in sexuality that numerous anthropological studies have revealed (Ortner 1981; Ardener 1987; Gilmore



1990).

A woman's sexuality, as Weeks (1986) argues, is determined by a range of factors and of these the interplay between class and gender relations plays a particularly important role. Another factor which affects the construction of sexuality is age where there are not only marked differences in how youth and older people are allowed to express their sexuality but also fears attached to what these expressions mean for young people and society in general. Given that the research for this thesis was carried out among university students it becomes imperative to understand the construction of youth and this I do in the next section of this chapter.

#### *Understanding youth, their identities and practices*

Youth is a socially constructed category which in some contexts, especially in developing countries, is not salient and is just emerging (Durham 2000; Dehne and Riedner 2001; Bucholtz 2002). This is unlike adolescence which Schlegel (1995a) suggests is a near universal life stage of the socialisation process. Schlegel (1995b) contrasts adolescence and youth and argues that, even though the line between these two categories is blurred, the former should be seen as stage in which an individual's reproductive capacity matures while the latter as a social stage where individuals are afforded greater privileges and rights but are still not considered adults. She also explains that, since it is possible to distinguish differences in the behaviour patterns of adolescents and youth, it is best not to consider youth as a continuation of adolescence. Keeping in line with this thinking, in most Western contexts of today, there is a clear understanding of youth as a period of transition, from adolescence to adulthood, often associated with stress, disruption, uncertainty and change (Montgomery 2007; Buckingham 2008). This understanding of youth as a problematic category which is in transition to adulthood dominated much of earlier research on youth where social deviance, violence and drug use, for example, were in the forefront of youth issues. Both Amit-Talai (1995) and Wulff (1995), however, argue against this trend of

perceiving youth as being in a state of ‘becoming’ and suggest it is more important to understand them as active agents of their own right and as a force which both shapes and is shaped by cultural contexts and structures.

The acceptance that youth is a historical and cultural construct means there are differential definitions and understandings of the concept according to context. Buckingham captures these differences when he defines youth as a period which ‘lasts from the end of compulsory schooling to the entry into waged labour; and this is clearly something that varies significantly between different social groups and between different cultural settings’ (Buckingham 2008:4). Durham (2000) proposes that instead of defining youth, they should be thought of as a ‘social shifter’, a term she borrows from linguistics, to signify the importance of context in determining the meaning and the referential function of the word. By doing so, she argues, we can better understand youth by ‘draw[ing] attention to the ways relations are situated in fields of power, knowledge, rights, notions of agency and personhood’ (Durham 2000:116-117). This line of thinking makes it possible to view youth in their complexity as those who create contexts through resisting adult authority and reacting against societal norms as well as those who renew and maintain contexts by conforming to and obediently accepting social norms and relations.

Others who have researched youth have highlighted the importance of class, gender, ethnicity, culture and occupation, rather than chronological age, in defining youth, their experiences and social relations (Hall and Jefferson 1976; McRobbie 1991; Lebra 1995; Liechty 1995). Bucholtz (2002) writes that different social factors can lead to individuals in the same society – be they preadolescents or persons in their 30s and 40s – being categorised as youth. All these factors come together in constructing the category of youth and this is why Durham argues that it is imperative to understand youth ‘neither as autonomous liberal actors nor as overdetermined victims’ but as those who are heterogeneous even within the same society, those who are affected differently

by generational relations and those who participate in political spaces across culture and in local spheres in various ways (Durham 2000:113).

Youth participation and their experiences, especially in societies which are undergoing significant social and cultural transformations, have received special attention in the academic sphere. Bucholtz (2002) draws on the literature which details how the psychological stress and the difficulties experienced during one's youth get further compounded by rapid social changes because young people then have to navigate between tradition and innovation. She however suggests that it is more useful to understand the relationship between youth and social change along the lines of a continuum where 'youth are as often the agents as the experiencers of cultural change' (Bucholtz 2002:530). It is in this dual role that youth establish an identity for themselves which is not only flexible and shifting but also has agency to respond to and shape the cultural forces which affect their everyday lives. From not falling within a specific age structure to having flexible identities, it seems that youth is best understood as 'a very shifty category that seems to fit many people at some time but no one consistently' (Durham 2000:116).

Notions of identity formation, self-awareness of strengths and weaknesses, resistance to adult authority, emergent sexuality and the start of significant peer relationships feature repeatedly in accounts detailing the numerous ways in which youth is constructed in today's context (Sayers 1997; Kehily 2007; Buckingham 2008; Weber and Mitchell 2008). The importance of this period in shaping individual sexuality – be it through romantic relationships, friendships or rites of passage – has been documented for various contexts (Schlegel 1995b). Van Gennep (1960) argues that in contexts where rites mark the separation of the child from the asexual world and incorporates her/him into the adult world of sexuality, it is not physical maturity but rather social factors which determine when these rites should be conducted. One social factor which is fundamental to the shaping of femininity and youth sexuality is gender relations (McRobbie and Garber 1976; McRobbie 1991). Constructions of femininity and gender

relations, as I detailed above, underlie individual sexuality and it becomes especially marked during adolescence and youth. From the separation of young girls and boys into separate spheres to the surveillance of a young girl's sexuality, Schelegel (1995b) documents how gender and sexuality get especially highlighted during adolescence and youth in different cultural contexts.

It is this interrelationship, the one between gender, sexuality and youth, which I explored in my research. These three socially constructed concepts affect each other and are affected by each other in different ways according to the cultural context and I turn to this next. In the second sub-section of this chapter, I present a review of the literature which focuses on gender, sexuality and youth in different contexts but focus especially on South Asian examples to show how different social factors come together in shaping the construction of gender, sexuality and youth.

### **Gender, Youth and Sexuality: Global and South Asian Examples**

#### *Femininities, masculinities and gender relations*

The importance of chastity and respectability, as two foremost values expected of and adhered to by women in most cultures, abounds in ethnographic literature. Be it studies which explore the lives of working-class women in England (Skeggs 1997), the constraints placed on the behaviours and clothing styles of young women in Brazil (McCallum 1999), the expressions of sexuality of unmarried Israeli-Palestinian women (Sa'ar 2004) or older married women experiencing sexual violence in Bangladesh (Mookherjee 2004), chastity and respectability in a woman feature as highly valued characteristics in most contexts. Skeggs (1997) portrays how working-class women in north-west England try to produce and maintain images of respectability through their behaviours, appearance, relationships and even their abodes. Similarly the importance of respectability, especially in relation to women and their sexuality, is depicted by Sa'ar (2004) in her exploration of unmarried Israeli-Palestinian women who are expected to remain chaste and virginal regardless of age.

All these studies reveal that respectability plays an important role in constructing an 'ideal' woman and that it cuts across class boundaries. According to Bourdieu, even though class is determined 'by the structure of relations between all pertinent properties which gives its specific value to each of them and to the effects they exert on practices' some of these properties are inseparable from others. He provides sex as one such example, stating that 'a class is defined in an essential respect by the place and value it gives to the two sexes and to their socially constituted dispositions' (Bourdieu 1984:106-107). We see in Skeggs' writing how working-class women strove to prove their respectability and femininity by comparing themselves to those from the middle-classes and through 'multitudinous efforts *not to be* recognised as working class' because they were aware of common perceptions which linked working-class women with a permissive sexuality (Skeggs 1997:74, emphasis in original). This feeling of having to prove themselves comes from what Bourdieu refers to as the 'sense of one's place' which 'common folk' are expected to know, almost unconsciously, and act accordingly (Bourdieu 1987:5). He argues that it is also this 'sense of one's place' which prompts those from the middle and the upper classes to 'keep their station in life' and act according to the precepts expected of their background.

That class affects men and women in different ways is also portrayed by Liechty (2003) in his work on Nepal. Arguing that class is constituted by the processes of negotiation and renegotiation, Liechty depicts how the concept of *ijjat* (glossed as respectability, prestige, dignity or honour) 'is often the conceptual lens through which people constructing middle-class culture ascertain suitability' (Liechty 2003:83). Even though *ijjat* applies to both men and women, Liechty claims that the moral middle on which the middle-class build their identity is strongly linked to women adhering to norms of sexual propriety. Kunreuther (2009) writes that property laws of Nepal are another means through which women's behaviour is controlled because, she contends, these laws contain 'moral ideas about women's respectability, tied both to the regulation of their sexuality and to the proper way to pass down and receive inherited wealth'

(Kunreuther 2009:551). Moreover these laws reinforced the class-gender nexus by casting women who demand their portion of inheritance as greedy, arrogant and exhibiting qualities inappropriate for respectable middle-class women.

According to Ganguly-Scrase (2003), for women from lower middle-class Bengal, a range of factors including public discourse, education, employment and age come into play when determining how women can challenge or reinforce existing gendered expectations of respectability. Bannerji (1994) illustrates how the sartorial practices imposed on women, by both male and female reformers, in colonial Bengal contributed to signifying respectability and indicated class, national culture and modesty of these women. Be it through sartorial practices or public discourse, the link between women and respectability features prominently in the Indian context. Moreover the emphasis on women to maintain their respectability is also tied to gender relations and further reinforces the secondary status awarded to them in the Indian context (Bhatty 1988; Jeffery and Jeffery 1997, 1998). According to Jeffery (1979) the ubiquity of the negative ideology pertaining to women has resulted in many women internalising and believing these values, despite being aware of their subordination.

The secondary status assigned to women is also reinforced, in subtle and sometimes not so subtle ways, by women themselves. Das (1988) argues that if women had not internalised patriarchal values the existing social order would not prevail. From religion to reproductive capacities and education to employment, nearly every aspect of the social world is structured so that existing gender relations and women's secondary status are maintained. For example, Das shows how the ritual celebration at the onset of the first menstruation in India contributes to reinforcing the 'interiority of feminine domains' and marks a woman's body as sexually mature (Das 1988:197). It is after this that a woman's body and her conduct become a metaphor for family honour and thus results in the loss of freedom. It is also at this point where the system of surveillance becomes especially felt and women start self-monitoring and internalising norms of honour and respectability. This system of surveillance is similar to the panopticon

which Foucault (1977) uses as a metaphor for the observation that takes place in most societies. Foucault argues that the awareness and the fear of being watched but the inability to assess the position of the observer or determine the direction of the gaze lead individuals to regulate their own behaviours.

Focussing on the construction of masculinities in the southern state of Kerala, Osella and Osella (2000, 2004, 2006) provide us with a detailed and nuanced picture of the complexities inherent in the construction of masculinities. Studying men from Brahmin, middle and low caste backgrounds, Osella and Osella (2006) argue that speaking of hegemonic masculinity in a plural society like India does disservice to the varieties of masculinity which can be hegemonic at different times and in different contexts. At the same time they show us how several markers are fundamental to the construction of South Asian masculinities: being a worker, breadwinner and provider who is socialised towards hetero-normativity and setting up of a home. Other studies from India similarly point to the diversity of masculinities where men can be supportive, progressive and sensitive to women's issues (Chopra 2007; Panjabi 2007), adopt a variety of roles from being a local patron, a householder or a cosmopolitan man (De Neve 2004) and attend numerous clinics to allay their fears of sexual impotency (Srivastava 2004).

Masculinities in other south Asian countries point to similar complexities. Walle's (2004) work with Pakistani men explores how the enactment of masculinity varies according to the ways in which they perceive women. He argues that notions of masculinity can be developed by adopting both moral and immoral values. Mookherjee (2004) follows three couples to show how the Bangladeshi men, whose wives were raped during the Liberation War, express their masculinities by showing they are men of principle. Performing these varied masculinities, however, does not always come easily and these men have had to withstand much social pressure and scorn. As Cornwall and Lindisfarne (1994) explain, understanding men requires delving into the complexities, ambiguities and contradictions which exist within the construct of masculinity.

### *The double standards of sexuality?*

The differently expressed and constructed female and male sexuality has been accounted for in contexts as varied as Polynesia (Ortner 1981), Nepal (Ahearn 2001a) and Mexico (Zavella 1997). The general trend in studies which explore aspects of human sexuality in different contexts is that men are allowed greater freedom than women to experiment with and express their sexuality (Obeyesekere 1984:485-486; McCallum 1999; Shefer and Foster 2001; Osella and Osella 2006). The exceptions to such findings are few with studies from some countries in the African continent showing less restrictive attitudes towards female sexuality (Nelson 1987; Caldwell *et al* 1989) and the freedom with which young unmarried Australian aboriginal women can express their sexuality (Burbank 1995). Ahlberg (1994) and Parikh (2005), however, point to the various restrictions and expectations placed on young girls and women's sexuality in some African countries and critique the broad generalisations made about the sexuality of African women.

In South Asia, female sexuality is viewed contradictorily, as both voracious and in need of being kept under control as well as one which is dormant and has to be stimulated by a suitable person to elicit the appropriate response. This is similar to views expressed by Freud who saw, in the sexuality of the average uncultivated woman, 'the same polymorphously perverse disposition' as the sexual desires in children who have not yet mastered the need to control sexual excesses (Freud 1905/1977:109). This line of thinking, often couched under the language of protection, results in female sexuality being controlled by keeping women inside and away from the gaze of men. Chatterjee shows how women from the middle-class of late 19th century Calcutta were depicted as those who oppressed and imprisoned men through their sexuality. It is women's sexuality that 'binds him [the man] to a pursuit of worldly interests that can only destroy him. The figure of this woman is typically that of the seductress' (Chatterjee 1993:62). This depiction of the woman as a seductress, as one who has an insatiable sexual appetite and is therefore the downfall of man, can also be found in Western contexts (Weeks 1986).



By linking sexual desire to the uncultivated woman, Freud (1905/1977) points to the importance society and culture plays in taming the sexuality of women. It is this lustful sexuality that has to be controlled for the betterment of society as a whole and especially to protect the wellbeing of men, who could not be held responsible for their sexual desires in the face of temptation. The differential constraints placed on women and men in expressing their sexuality is a universal phenomenon (Vance 1992). For example Osella and Osella (2006) attest to the double standards implicit in the Kerala context where male sexual activity is overlooked while women are expected to remain chaste and pure. More disturbing double standards are evident when women have to prove their innocence in rape cases which Kannabiran (1996) highlights through the example of a Muslim woman who was gang-raped by four policemen in Andhra Pradesh in 1978 and had to prove her chastity and integrity of character in court before her experience of rape could be considered a crime.

#### *Coming of age through rituals, marriage and employment*

The construction of youth in different cultural contexts is, as I detailed above, often tied to notions of femininity and masculinity as well as sexuality. In cultures which have formal rituals to mark the transition period between childhood and adulthood, young boys and girls have to change the ways in which they present themselves subsequent to these rituals. Many of these initiation rites are often of a sexual nature because it is only subsequent to their successful completion that boys and girls are assimilated into the adult world of sexuality (van Gennep 1960). In some cultures, especially those in the South Asian continent, coming of age rituals mark the changes young girls have to make when presenting themselves in public. For example, in India, the onset of first menstruation is often significant and is ritually announced. It is only subsequently that the female body is defined as sexually mature and societal expectations of appropriate behaviours are reinforced (Das 1988). This point is reiterated by Jeffery and Jeffery (1997) when they write how young girls, who have attained puberty but are unmarried, are prevented from moving around freely outside of their house.

It is not only in South Asia that adolescence and youth plays an important role in determining the controls placed on a young girl's sexuality. According to Davis (1995), despite the changes in gender relations arising from exposure to international media, youth in Morocco, while desiring romance and modernity, have to contend with the importance attached to women's chastity and virginity at time of marriage. Goddard (1987) writes that in Naples, even though young girls are given considerable freedom of movement, it is usually within a confined area. They are allowed to wander further afield or attend social outings only if they are accompanied by women or a male relation. Former aristocratic women of Japan had to prepare for their marriage when they were adolescents and repress any expressions of their sexuality until after marriage (Lebra 1995). The importance of marriage in conferring adult status and giving explicit permission to engage in sexual relations is common in many contexts and is not always limited to women (Gilmore 1990; Foxhall 1994; Busby 2000).

Gilmore (1990) walks us through examples from African countries where young boys have initiation rituals at the onset of physical puberty and an apprenticeship period, the successful completion of which marks the achievement of manhood and their right to marry. Not all cultures, however, have formal coming of age rituals. The importance of male-male interactions which dictate appropriate behaviours for men (Adrião *et al* 2002; Chopra 2004) and female-male interactions (Kandiyoti 1994) play an important role in the entry into manhood in cultures with no rites of passage. According to Osella and Osella (2006), young men from impoverished backgrounds in Kerala hardly experience the liminality of adolescence and for them, employment, providing for the family, marriage and fatherhood become significant markers of being considered an adult male. Young unmarried men from families who can afford to give them a higher education, on the other hand, use this period to enjoy the pleasures of youth and socialise in gangs.

It is not just age but also gender, class, culture and context which affect the construction of youth and their experiences. In the next section of this chapter I focus on how these

three concepts, gender, sexuality and youth, are played out in the Sri Lankan context before questioning what these constructs mean to young women in institutes of higher education.

### **Depicting the Context: Gender Relations, Sexuality and Youth in Sri Lanka**

*The pear-shaped island off the east coast of India*

With a population of just over 20 million and development indicators which surpass those of other countries in the region, Sri Lanka was recently declared a middle-income emerging economy by the International Monetary Fund (IMF 2010). A country with multi-ethnic and multi-religious groups, but a Sinhala and Buddhist majority who dominate the social and political landscape of the country, the positive macro level indicators do not reflect some of the micro level inequalities in the country. High unemployment rates among educated youth, income inequalities especially between the urban and the rural areas, the poor quality of health and social services in districts where the recent ethnic conflict was fought most fiercely and an inflation rate which is not in line with the average salary affect the everyday lives of men and women (Dunham and Jayasuriya 2000). As a colony of the Portuguese, the Dutch and subsequently the British, Sri Lanka was under colonial rule, from the colonisation of only the coastal areas to the entire island, for more than 400 years. As such the colonial influence was, and still is, felt in numerous aspects – from education to dress – of Sri Lankan life (de Silva 1981; Jayawardena 1995, 2000; Jayaweera 2002; Wickramasinghe 2003).

Attempts at resisting colonial rule took numerous forms, from violent clashes between the colonisers and Sri Lankans during the early years to more organised political associations agitating for change in subsequent periods. It is only during the last quarter of the 19th century that local resistance to colonial rule became more organised and ‘took the form of religious revival, formation of political associations, and incipient trade union activity’ (de Silva 1981:339). According to de Silva it was in the shape of reviving Buddhism that this resistance movement, spearheaded by locals in the

maritime regions, made its most effective demonstration. Buddhist revival was a first step in the process of inculcating a sense of national pride among Sri Lanka's populace, which was furthered by the establishment of a series of schools, some supported by the theosophists, in which Buddhism and 'Sri Lankan culture' was taught (Jayawardena 1995). These schools played an important role in producing a group of Sri Lankans who no longer felt they had to slavishly follow western mores and who agitated for political change.

School education where students were taught in English, initially provided by the British government and missionary schools, were available only to a few and played a key role in a certain class of Sri Lankans gaining fluency in English, emulating British values and even converting to Christianity (de Silva 1981). The vernacular schools, large in number but providing poor quality education, were available to the masses. The education obtained from these schools, however, did not provide opportunities for upward mobility, given that fluency in English was fundamental for higher education and entry into the civil service (Sumathipala 1968). Moreover, until the early 20th century, when Ceylon University College was set up in 1921 and granted university status in 1942, university education was only available to those who could afford to go to Britain or India or to those who wished to study medicine and law at the colleges in Sri Lanka. Even though women were allowed entry into university education (Ceylon University College) from its inception, the medium of instruction was English until the early 1960s, thus limiting university education to a privileged few.

The new government's language policy of 1956 where English as the medium of instruction in schools was replaced by Sinhala (and Tamil), resulted in an influx of students who were qualified to enter university but to whom the medium of instruction, which was still English, was unintelligible (Seneviratne 1999).<sup>6</sup> According to Seneviratne (1999), the two monastic universities, whose language of instruction was

---

<sup>6</sup> English was subsequently replaced by Sinhala and Tamil, the two vernacular languages, as the medium of instruction. I only refer to the changes that took place in the Sinhala-medium.

Sinhala, accepted the challenge of admitting students from the Sinhala-medium, even though their curriculum was limited to traditional subjects, and thus would consequently require a broadening of the curricula. Subsequent to 1960, when the language policy was gradually extended to universities (Hettige 2009), university examinations were conducted in Sinhala and a quota system of admitting students was introduced, more Sinhala-medium educated students from rural areas were admitted to university. This tipped the balance of the student population demographics from it being one dominated by students from western province, English-speaking backgrounds to one where a majority of students were from Sinhala-speaking backgrounds and from other provinces.

The increasing number of students qualifying for university entrance, despite the expansion of the university system, resulted in only approximately 15% of those qualifying for university admission securing a place in a state university (UGC 2008). Moreover a large number of student graduates, who leave the university system with monolingual skills, have found it difficult to obtain employment, especially in the private sector, thus resulting in high levels of unemployment among educated youth (Gunawardena 2002). This has plagued Sri Lanka for more than nearly four decades while the student preference for employment in the public sector, coupled together with the shrinking of the public sector, has further compounded this problem.<sup>7</sup> Class based discrimination, high levels of unemployment, limited opportunities for social advancement have all led to high levels of frustration among youth and their disillusionment with the socio-political and economic systems (Lakshman 2002). According to Lakshman (2002) the central role youth have played in political violence in Sri Lanka and the involvement of Sinhala youth with the *Janatā Vimukti Peramuna* (JVP), both in the 1970s and 1980s, to agitate for a revolutionary transformation of the state, can be attributed to these factors.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> See Jeffrey *et al* (2008) for similar processes at play in India against the backdrop of neoliberal policies.

<sup>8</sup> The *Janatā Vimukti Peramuna* (JVP) is a mainstream political party which historically espoused a Marxist/socialist ideology.

Sri Lankan history is marked with conflict and, from ancient times to the present post-independence period, violence has been a notorious feature of the country. The post-independence violence, both the two southern insurrections and the separatist movement spearheaded by Tamils in the north, has been strongly linked to youth and their frustrations with the unwillingness of the state to meet their needs (Hettige and Mayer 2002). In all three conflicts, even though male youth were the primary suspects, targets and perpetrators of violence, the involvement of young women in the conflict and the violence against them is recognised. These conflicts have resulted in a context in which young women's sexuality has been targeted (Tambiah 2005).<sup>9</sup> For instance, the story of Premawathie Manamperi, a beauty queen from Kataragama and the horrific violence she was subject to during the initial JVP uprising in the 1970s, because of her alleged links to the movement, is common knowledge.<sup>10</sup> It is known that she was raped and tortured the night before; stripped naked and made to walk across this otherwise sacred town the following day, while two members of the armed forces continued to beat her.<sup>11</sup>

#### *The making of young men and women*

In this section I present the literature which explores how the context in Sri Lanka shapes the ways in which gender relations between young men and women and their sexuality are constructed by first introducing the reader to the notion of *læjja-baya* (shame and fear), a fundamental concept in shaping gender relations and sexuality, in Sri Lanka. Combining the words *læjja* (shame) and *baya* (fear), to form *læjja-baya* this phrase is commonly used to refer to people in two ways: approvingly of those considered to have shame and fear and so behave according to accepted norms and disapprovingly of those who behave contrary to established norms and so do not show enough shame and fear (Obeyesekere 1984:504-508). Obeyesekere explains how

---

<sup>9</sup> I refer to Tambiah's (2004, 2005) work below.

<sup>10</sup> Kataragama is a multi-religious sacred city in the southern coast of Sri Lanka.

<sup>11</sup> See Coomaraswamy and Perera-Rajasingham (2008) for similar accounts of sexualised violence during the recent conflict with the LTTE.

notions of *læjja-baya* are instilled in every Sri Lankan child from very early in the socialisation process and says that *læjja-baya* refers to ‘shame and the fear of ridicule’, which one can expect if they do not adhere to norms of propriety. When adolescent girls and young women are told to show *læjja-baya*, it is often in relation to sexual modesty and chaste behaviour because they know that by subverting norms of sexual modesty, they are leaving themselves open to social ridicule. Thus a person ‘must not only have a sense of shame but also be sensitive to the reaction of others who may shame them’ (Obeyesekere 1984:504). Hence the girl child internalises norms as she does not wish the repercussions of deviating from them and, as Raychaudhuri (2000) argues, internalised values become the best form of control since they not only lead to unquestioning observance of values but also justify their perpetuation.

*Læjja-baya* as a mode of socialisation – shaming and ridiculing those who transgress – can happen at every life stage, to both men and women, but takes on a special meaning after a girl attains puberty. In Sri Lanka, rituals which mark the first menstruation are still practised, sometimes as grandly as wedding celebrations. Even though these rituals may no longer have the same significance in the present day context as they did historically, they undeniably indicate a change in the girl’s life and expected conduct. Winslow writes about the coming-of-age rituals for young girls and explains how these ‘puberty rituals separate out age statuses. They move individuals through socially defined niches and make statements about what those social definitions mean’ (Winslow 1980:605). The traditional reading of these coming-of-age rituals is to announce the suitability of the girl for marriage but as Winslow elucidates, in practice young girls no longer marry at such an early age. Early marriage may no longer be a trend in Sri Lanka but attaining puberty is a definite marker which compels young girls to adopt a comportment in line with adult female behaviour: they should restrict movements in public, refrain from frequent interactions with members of the opposite sex who are not kin and avoid being alone or in unknown places. The adherence to these behaviours by pubertal girls and young women is especially important in Sri

Lanka where there is no tradition of women's seclusion and so a young pubertal girl is often chaperoned and watched thus creating a system of panopticonal surveillance.

The behavioural changes which young Sri Lankan girls are expected to adhere to after attaining puberty are linked to their imminent transition into adulthood, which can take place only through marriage. However, the average age at marriage for Sri Lankan women has increased from 18 to 25 years during the past century (Malhotra and Tsui 1996; De Silva *et al* 2003) which has resulted in a larger number of women who, even though legally adults, will not be identified as such according to local understanding and thus need to be effectively 'surveyed'. Such surveillance however is not always possible because not all young women remain confined to their homes after puberty. According to Jayaweera (2002), education of women has contributed to more young women spending longer periods in academic institutions and seeking employment away from the protective gaze of the home, thus putting the onus on the women to adhere to societal norms.

There is limited research on the experiences of puberty and the subsequent moral socialisation of Sri Lankan male youth. The interest in youth, but especially male youth, has been in relation to their involvement in conflict, high suicide rates and (un)employment. Hettige (2009) provides an historical account of the impact educational and economic reforms had on Sri Lankan youth to show how ethnicity, class, gender, religion, geographic location and linguistic capabilities play a key role in reproducing the inequalities prevalent among youth. He attributes the involvement of youth – both in conflict and in protest campaigns – to these inequalities. Frustrations resulting from these inequalities 'have been at the heart of the three youth insurrections that Sri Lanka has experienced since the early 1970s' which involved Sinhalese youth in the southern districts and Tamil youth in the northern districts (Gunatilaka *et al* 2010:2). It is often in relation to these uprisings that youth has been the focus of study, with university students receiving special attention, especially because of their



involvement in the two southern insurrections of the 1970s and the 1980s (Amarasuriya 2009).

Given the above focus, it is not surprising that other issues which apply to male youth have received little attention in academia. According to Caldwell *et al* (1998), traditionally, Sri Lankan boys had no adolescence. They claim that most young boys worked on the family land and a few became monks thus resulting in no specific ritual or phase in which they made the transition from being a child to an adult. Boys have no rituals which mark their entry into puberty in any of the ethnic communities in Sri Lanka. Yet spaces, as well as events, which only adolescent boys or young men frequent are common in Sri Lanka. The *arikeliya* ritual is one such event and within the space of this ritual adolescent boys and post-adolescent men are provided with vicarious means to express their sexual desires (Obeyesekere 1984:483-486).<sup>12</sup> Even though these homosocial spaces are important and provide young boys with an outlet to express their sexuality, they are always seen as a transient space because heterosexuality and marriage remain the main markers of adulthood.

Young boys are not subject to the same level of surveillance as girls during their pubertal years. Yet their ability to digress from social conventions remains limited because as de Silva claims even young boys were imbued with values of *læjja-baya* from an early age (de Silva 2005:107). Focussing on demeanour as the main expression of *læjja-baya* she writes how boys are encouraged to adopt 'courteous, accommodating demeanour towards the group and towards the external world'. Prostrating themselves before their parents to pay homage to them, not arguing, showing deference and being morally upright were important markers of an accommodating demeanour which even teenage boys are expected to exhibit.

While there may not have been a distinct phase of adolescence or youth for Sri Lankan boys and girls in the past, this is no longer the case. Changing social and development

---

<sup>12</sup> See Obeyesekere (1984) for details of the *arikeliya* ritual.

contexts have resulted in the construction of a distinct phase which is, more often than not, considered difficult and challenging in many ways. According to Caldwell *et al* (1998), Sri Lanka is one of the first Asian countries where adolescence/youth as a separate phase was established. They attribute this to the early Westernisation of the country, the economic growth and the practice of young people living with their parents, which resulted in them delaying their age at marriage for reasons of education and employment. With marriage still being the marker of adulthood, the period of being a 'youth' can now be as long as ten years or more. This is a lengthy period in which young people, especially young women, are expected to remain chaste even if they venture out of the village for higher education and employment or form romantic relationships.

#### *Men, women and their sexuality*

The onus placed on young women to adhere to norms of chastity is especially pronounced when they are unmarried. Strongly linked to *læjja-baya* is the notion of respectability, where women who show *læjja-baya* are seen as respectable while those who do not are seen as being from a lower social class and therefore not respectable. The notions of respectability Mosse (1985) talks of did not only spread to other socio-economic classes in Europe but also spread to non-European contexts. Often as a result of colonial rule and in reaction to it, respectability shaped the construction of an 'ideal' woman in the Sri Lankan context. According to Gombrich and Obeyesekere the missionary influence in shaping the sexual mores of Sri Lankans was particularly strong and was instilled in the local people through missionary schools (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988:256). De Alwis (1997) illustrates how the timetables at missionary boarding schools for young girls during the colonial period served to establish a daily routine and through the various lessons, prayers and activities helped inculcate standards of respectability, discipline and moral values as ideals to be achieved in women's domestic lives.

Writing on the colonial subject, Woolf (1913/2008) and Knox (1817/2004) point to practices which indicate that female sexuality, unlike in the West, was not controlled by chastity and morality. The lack of sacramental value given to the marital union and the acceptance of concubinage during and before colonial rule, especially in rural villages, stands as further testimony to the ease with which female sexuality was accepted. Moreover the practice of polyandry, not uncommon during early colonial Sri Lanka, has also been documented (Knox 1817/2004; Davy 1821/1983).<sup>13</sup> Yalman (1971) speaks of Kandyan marriages allowing women greater freedom to move in and out of the marital union with little negative consequences to them, again pointing to a more liberal view of female sexuality. It is important to clarify that the ease with which marriage was entered into and exited, as well as the lack of prominence attached to female chastity, even though common among the poor and ordinary people, may not have applied to aristocratic families (D'Oyly 1929, cited in Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988:260).

It is the sexuality and marital practices of the ordinary person, which clashed with Christian concepts of sex and marriage, which became a focal point of censure directed at the way of life of the colonised (Risseuw 1992). The reaction to these criticisms was one point of contention in the nationalist project and, along with attempts to revive a 'Sinhala Buddhist culture', strongly fashioned on Victorian values, eventually contributed to the reconstruction of sexuality and femininity in the Sri Lankan context. Jayawardena (1986) argues that men who belonged to the colonial nationalist movement reacted against the images which colonial rulers had of themselves and their women as indecent and backward. They did so by promoting notions of respectability and chastity in women's comportment and attire which fell in line with Victorian values. Similarly, the *Gihī Vinaya* (The Daily Code for the Laity), the prescriptive pamphlet written by Anagarika Dharmapala, a foremost nationalist who played a key role in setting the foundation for the anti-British political struggle in Sri Lanka, was paramount in affecting the desired change in women's behaviour (De Mel 2001). This pamphlet, with 30 of its 200 rules specifying how women should conduct themselves,

---

<sup>13</sup> Polyandry is a form of marriage where a woman has two or more husbands at the same time.

was fashioned on Western notions of respectability and propriety for the emerging Sinhala elite (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988:214-215).

Women should protect their chastity by showing frequent concern for their husband's wellbeing and not thinking of other men.
Women should wear sari blouses which completely cover her breasts, the midriff and the upper back.
Women should not address servants with pejorative pronouns.
Women should not comb their hair or check for lice in the presence of men.
Women should not air their sleeping mats, pillows, covering sheets etc. in places where men pass by.
Women should, when their husbands are at home, enquire into the well-being of the husband, provide him with water to wash his face, hands and feet; give a clean towel to wipe the face and then offer him food.

*Some examples of the rules detailed for women*  
*Source: Dharmapala (1994).<sup>14</sup>*

It is not only bourgeois women who have to contend with being respectable. Exploring the ways in which notions of respectability are produced, reproduced and negotiated by women in informal settings in the eastern districts of Sri Lanka, Ruwanpura (2008) argues that most women in these districts were keen to endorse common perceptions of decency and respectability. To not do so would have resulted in them being excluded from community support structures like childcare, home employment opportunities and

---

<sup>14</sup> The above rules are taken from *Gihī Dīna Caryā*, a pamphlet obtained from the Anagarika Dharmapala Trust in Colombo. Staff at the Trust did not know the original year of publication of this pamphlet and said the pamphlet was only known as *Gihī Dīna Caryā* and not *Gihī Vinaya*, as is referred to by Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988) and De Mel (2001). I use the term *Gihī Vinaya* in this thesis since that is the term used in all academic literature.

savings schemes which the women could not have afforded to lose out on, given their situation in life.

Jayawardena (2000) however argues that class plays an important role, not only in the constructions of femininity but also in allowing women to transgress norms of propriety. She explains that women from wealthy Sri Lankan families, unlike those involved in wage labour, were able to transgress cultural restrictions through education, employment opportunities and access to a westernised lifestyle during the colonial period. She depicts how some wealthy Sinhala women, showed scant regard for patriarchal restrictions by entering politics, wearing trousers and short dresses, sporting short haircuts and marrying foreigners as early as the beginning of the 20th century. However not all women whose class status allowed them the privilege of flouting social convention chose to do so and Jayawardena concludes that a majority 'remained firmly rooted in the patriarchal family within the walls of caste and class; they played the domestic roles of good mother, loyal wife' (Jayawardena 2000:297).

The women Jayawardena (2000) refers to lived in the colonial period. It is no longer only women from higher classes who can transgress social norms. Hewamanne (2003, 2008) and Lynch (2002) attest to changes in dress and demeanour exhibited by women workers in the garment industry in Sri Lanka. According to Hewamanne (2008), even those who ostensibly adhere to expected norms find ways of circumventing the rigid rules which constrain many aspects of their lives. They do so, however, through indirect means, means sometimes allowed in the cultural repertoire or in contexts where there is less surveillance of their behaviours. Moreover, the decline in arranged marriages, the rising age at marriage for women from most socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds (Caldwell 1999) and the periods young women spend away from their homes on education (Jayaweera 2002) make rigid adherence to cultural restrictions a near impossibility. Despite these changes and the many achievements made by women, a woman's sexual morality continues to be the prime determinant of her femininity and how she is judged in society.

Sri Lankan women are assigned the responsibility of dressing appropriately, behaving chastely and living decorously. According to Tambiah (2004), female sexuality in Sri Lanka, regardless of class and ethnic boundaries, is rarely accorded any positive value and is seen as something which should be contained to the marital union. In this sense, a woman's sexuality and expressions of it are monitored from early childhood both in relation to her same sex and opposite sex friends. As such the notion of *læjja-baya* becomes particularly applicable in relation to sexuality because the consequences of having no shame and fear in this sphere can be severe for women. Tambiah (2005) uses the examples of a call for a dress code for women by the LTTE, the consequences faced by a woman who was allegedly a sex worker and the public stripping of a woman suspected of being a suicide bomber at a security checkpoint to argue that the militarised nationalist project in Sri Lanka has increased the controls placed on female sexuality. This trend continues even today, nearly two years after the government of Sri Lanka declared victory over the LTTE, according to news items which appear in the Sri Lankan and international press.<sup>15</sup>

The academic interest in Sri Lankan women's sexuality and their respectability is not matched by a similar curiosity about Sri Lankan men and their sexuality. Instead, the literature on Sri Lankan men centres on their expressions of violence. Jeganathan (1998, 2000) argues that a particular type of masculinity is constructed through violence and practices of fearlessness. For de Silva (2005), notions of masculinity draw upon the nexus between status, respectability, *læjja-baya* and *ahirisaka* (without harm/innocent). She depicts how men and young boys adopt different behaviours according to context, the presence of intimates and in confrontation with authority but argues that 'for many young people – even the boldest and the most self-assured in fact *wished* to see themselves as performing within the codes of "appropriateness"' (de Silva 2005:236, emphasis in original). We see, even in these examples that the performance of

---

<sup>15</sup> For example, newspaper articles published in September 2010 report that the Vice Chancellor of the University of Sri Jayewardenepura had allegedly sent six female students for a virginity test because they were seen talking to some men at 6.30pm near the university premises, and this was considered inappropriate behavior.

masculinities, similar to femininities is also affected by cultural norms of appropriateness and respectability.

Reed (2002) highlights the ways in which traditional dancers of the drummer (*berava*) caste aspire to make themselves respectable through socially valued habits of cleanliness and tidiness in dress and manners. Considered low ranking in the caste hierarchy, it is predominantly the men of this caste who dance and play the drum and so they have to earn the respect of the societal elite through both their dance and everyday behaviours. The subaltern status of their caste, rather than their gender status, determined the efforts which these men had to exert to be seen as respectable. Similarly Gamburd (2000), who explores how husbands of migrant workers coped with their new status of no longer being the breadwinner, shows how some men squandered the money their wives earned on socialising while others maintained their respectability by adopting the role of a responsible carer towards their children and family.

Simpson (2004) explores the link between masculinity and sexuality in Sri Lanka through the perceptions of a Sinhalese speaking audience on the Barlow-Drewitt case of same sex parentage. Simpson draws out the importance of homosociality in the Sri Lankan context which makes it possible for men to express affection and even physical contact before marriage without receiving social opprobrium. Obeyesekere also claims that same sex intimacy is common in the Sri Lankan context which he argues 'cannot be viewed as "homosexual" or as an expression of homosexuality' (Obeyesekere 1984:486). He attributes these levels of intimacy between men to the lack of access men have to women, outside of marriage. Unlike Simpson, however, Obeyesekere is quick to distinguish between the intimacy expressed through interfemoral sex which is socially accepted and 'anality' which would receive severe social censure.

Even though few in number, these studies reflect the complexities inherent in how Sri Lankan men construct their masculinities and their sexuality. While constructions of masculinity and sexuality *per se* have received very little attention, these ethnographies

stand witness to how in their everyday lives men do not always have the freedoms to engage in behaviours without fear of reprobation. They show that men often have to and do juggle a range of different expectations effectively to make sense of their everyday surroundings. Notions of respectability, *læjja-baya* and *ahiṅsaka* often used to describe the proper comportment and sexual naiveté of women, also apply to men. Thus as de Alwis (1995) suggests, even though women were the primary targets of the ‘respectability’ projects during the colonial period, men’s behaviours, manners and morals too seem to have been affected in the process.

This concern with respectability however cannot deny that Sri Lankan men are allowed a greater leeway when expressing their sexuality. Obeyesekere (1984:483-486) highlights the widespread practice of sexual behaviours between young men – albeit not anality – resulting from the lack of access to women. Miller (2002) echoes similar findings when she writes that same-sex sexual activities, especially during adolescence, are common between Sri Lankan boys. She too asserts that these behaviours are thought of as a passing phase especially driven by the lack of access to similar aged members of the opposite sex. Moreover, the newly codified behavioural category of men who have sex with men (MSM) and male sex work, according to Rathnapala (1999), is documented in ancient Sri Lankan texts and is common in folklore which points to the acceptance of a range of sexual practices for men. In their comparative study of university students and youth from a neighbouring community, Silva *et al* (1998) report that 63% of young men have engaged in some form of same-sex sexual behaviours. These behaviours take place either through male sex workers or among friends or those who are transgender and/or transvestites, who commonly prostitute their services to other men (Miller 2002).

The freedom allowed to young men to engage in same-sex behaviours does not always apply in how they can express their sexuality with women. As Obeyesekere (1984:483-486) emphasises, societal norms which value chastity in women lead to unmarried men having limited access to women. This however does not imply that sexual relations are



always limited to the marital union. The limited research which explores the sexual behaviours of young Sri Lankan men suggests that they use sex workers, older sexually active women or engage in anal and interfemoral sex with their girlfriend to protect her virginity (Silva *et al* 1998; Silva and Schensul 2003). According to Silva *et al* (1998) young men – especially those attending university – are concerned with protecting the virginity of their partner and thus have created a repertoire of non-penetrative sexual behaviours they can engage in with their partner through which they obtain gratification. An island wide survey on adolescents carried out by UNICEF (2004) revealed that 14% of school going and 22% of out-of-school adolescent boys admitted to having heterosexual sex.

Sexual activity outside of marriage – be it penetrative or non-penetrative sex – it seems is not unusual for young Sri Lankan men. For young women, on the other hand, respectability and the importance of being a virgin at marriage seems to shape their lives quite strongly. Yet none of the studies I cite above, with the exception of Hewamanne (2008), have focussed on how young women express their sexuality through their everyday behaviours or how they navigate the social constraints placed on their sexuality. They offer a broader, conceptual and even historical account of how the construction of gender, youth and sexuality are not only intricately interwoven to each other but are also coloured by factors of class, ethnicity, nationalism, education, history and religion. Moreover while these studies refer to the interplay between gender and sexuality of women in the colonial period none of them specifically examine the relationship between education and sexuality.

### **Education, Nationalism, Women's Autonomy: Constructive Connections?**

#### *Promoting nationalistic sentiments through educational establishments*

Everyday practices which take place in educational establishments, from singing the national anthem to the recitation of prayers, inculcate feelings of nationalism in their students. According to Hans (1958), in most Asian countries under colonial rule, these

practices were based primarily on the desire to do away with colonial domination and are a reflection of how feelings of nationalism were inculcated in a country's citizenry. Smith explains this better when he says that colonial rule provided local nationalists with the impetus 'to rediscover the unique cultural genius of the nation and to restore to a people its authentic cultural identity' (Smith 2001:27). The reiteration of this 'authentic cultural identity' takes place through banal practices such as wearing the national dress, newspaper articles which create a sense of solidarity and sporting events (Billig 1995). These practices make 'patterns of social life become habitual or routine' and result in socially constructed and invented traditions, national identities and gender norms being thought of as natural and even eternal (Billig 1995:42).

Benei (2001, 2008) details the numerous ways in which nationalistic sentiments and passions are produced in children, not only through their curriculum but also the everyday practices of their teachers, development of linguistic skills, partaking of religious education and appropriation of gendered behaviours. She shows how school teachers conformed to gendered notions of nationalism prevalent in the larger Indian context by, for example, adhering with pride to the Indian (and Maharashtrian) cultural precinct which required married women to wear sari to work and conveyed this as the norm to their students. Jeffrey *et al* (2004) state that cultural and religious nationalisms are inculcated in Indian students at a more structural level through restructuring 'school and university curricula to reflect the ideological concerns of politicized Hinduism' (Jeffrey *et al* 2004:964).

The situation in Sri Lanka – in school or in university – is no different. Even though Venugopal (2010) argues that the rise and presence of Sinhala nationalism is not all pervasive or uniform, it cannot be denied that the drive during the British colonial period to revive Sinhala and Buddhist culture was based on a notion of cultural purity.<sup>16</sup> This resulted in literary publications by the likes of Anagarika Dharmapala and

---

<sup>16</sup> Since my fieldwork was carried out with a predominantly Sinhala-Buddhist group of young people I focus only on Sinhala nationalism in this thesis.

Piyadasa Sirisena (Wickramasinghe 2006) and theatre productions by John de Silva (De Mel 2001) during the late 19th and early 20th centuries which were instrumental in propagating Sinhala nationalistic ideas among literate and illiterate citizenry.<sup>17</sup> Nationalistic sentiments were also propagated through the newly established schools built by wealthy Sri Lankan philanthropists during the last quarter of the 19th century (de Silva 1981). Moreover schools run by the Buddhist Theosophical Society ensured that Buddhist studies, Sri Lankan history and culture were integrated into the school curriculum (Jayawardena 1995). The education provided through these schools produced alumni who 'made their influence felt in the twentieth century in politics and education, helping to quicken the pace of political agitation, generating more enlightened attitudes in social and economic issues, and *engendering a pride in Buddhism, the Sinhalese language and the cultural heritage associated with these*' (de Silva 1981:347; my emphasis).

This pride in Buddhism and the Sinhalese language continues to this day, especially among the middle-class who embrace and espouse ethnic and gendered notions of nationalistic sentiments. From reciting Buddhist prayers to a daily rendition of the national anthem, government funded Sinhala schools inculcate in students feelings of attachment to religion and the country. At a more structural level, the syllabi of subjects like history, political science and social studies paint a picture of a nation state that has been wronged by the colonial rulers and is lily-white in its treatment of the ethnic minorities who live in the country. At an individual level the school uniform for girls – short-sleeved, shirt-collared, white dress which falls below knee length to always be worn with a petticoat – continue to reinforce gendered notions of chastity that are at play in larger society. Moreover, the now explicit dress code for women teachers – of the Indian sari or the Kandyan *Osariya* – also contributes to propagating these nationalistic values.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Piyadasa Sirisena was a Sinhala novelist and newspaper editor who played an important role in propagating nationalist sentiments and John De Silva is a well known playwright who did the same through his plays. They were both active during the early 20th century.

<sup>18</sup> See Appendix B for a picture/sketch of the *Osariya*.

Students who enter state university, a majority from government funded schools, bring with them these nationalistic sentiments they have been imbued with and have them reinforced at academic level, through administrative regulations, in curricula and in everyday practices at university. Spencer details how the translation of nationalistic sentiments which especially attack ‘strangers to local culture’ who have a limited understanding of the context gets played out at some academic conferences by positing traditional culture, ‘in a more straightforwardly oppositional relationship to “the West” and modernity in general’ (Spencer 2007:70-71). In a context which increasingly promotes patriotism and does not allow a space for dissent, universities provide an ideal ground in which to further notions of nationalism, especially those which pertain to gender, morality and righteous bodies.

#### *The tenuous link between education and female autonomy*

From increasing productivity to being able to exercise freedom of choice, the expansion of educational opportunities is seen to play a key role in human development (Sen 1989, 1992, 1999). Sen makes this case particularly in relation to women who are restricted by the gender hierarchies of patriarchal societies and therefore face greater obstacles in attaining a sound education. Education is thought to especially benefit women because it elevates their position in society by opening opportunities for employment, increasing access to public space and allowing greater control over their time and earned incomes. The importance of education in increasing women’s autonomy and consequently giving them control over their fertility has been argued by many who suggest that education, aside from developing literacy skills, increases access to public space, delays age at marriage and ensures greater labour force participation – all of which contribute to increased autonomy (Jejeebhoy 1995; Cleland *et al* 1996; Dreze and Murthi 2001; Bongaarts 2003).

Women’s autonomy, according to Dyson and Moore is ‘the ability – technical, social

and psychological – to obtain information and to use it as the basis for making decisions about one's private concerns and those of one's intimates' (Dyson and Moore 1983:45). Others have pointed to the difficulties of actually measuring levels of autonomy given the social and cultural relativity of the concept (Sathar 1996; Jeffery and Jeffery 1997). Sathar (1996) explains that levels of autonomy can vary according to personal, household and extra-household spheres and that in different contexts women will have different levels of autonomy, regardless of their level of schooling and access to employment opportunity. Similarly Kritz and Gurak (1989) show how women in sub-Saharan Africa have greater economic autonomy because of the employment opportunities available to them but very little personal autonomy in making decisions about their bodies.

Feminist critics point to the complexities inherent in determining levels of female autonomy be it in the context of paid work in a globalised world (Koggel 2006), in deciding on contraceptive use (Beutelspacher *et al* 2003) or in interpersonal relationships (Iverson 2006). They all show that the link between education and autonomy is far from straightforward and much more complex than envisioned in theory or literature. Basu (1996) argues that even though education may increase literacy levels, the type of education a girl child receives will play an important role in determining if it leads to increased autonomy. According to her most schools are conservative and tend to reinforce existing gender stereotypes through their curricula and training activities. In Sri Lanka, the education processes continue to reinforce gender role stereotypes through its curricula content and subjects made available to boys and girls after the first two years of secondary education (Jayaweera 1999). For example, girls are expected to follow home science as their optional subject while boys are encouraged to sign-up for carpentry.

Karlekar (1988), Bhatta (1988) and Kumar (2007) make the case that even though education for women has gained ground in India, schooling is still only expected to train women to perform their traditional roles better, as opposed to developing their

critical thinking capacities so that they can challenge the existing status quo. Accordingly, schooling contributes to making women perform their wifely and motherly roles more effectively by producing a literate group who reproduce socially valued gender norms. However, the contention that education is expected to and often reinforces existing norms cannot be taken as invalidating the importance of women's schooling and access to education (Jeffery and Jeffery 1997, 1998). Those who critique the link between education and autonomy are not by any means suggesting that promoting women's education is not a worthy endeavour but simply questioning the suggested linearity of the argument or if education does always lead to women's autonomy and gender equality.

#### *Higher education and women's autonomy?*

The link between education and women's autonomy has often been made in relation to lowered fertility and thus primarily focuses on multiparous women who are married and have obtained secondary level education at most, or completed primary level education (Kritz and Gurak 1989; Caldwell 1996, 1999; Jeffery and Jeffery 1996, 1997; Visaria 1996). Jeffery and Jeffery (1997) illustrate how the argument that education leads to greater women's autonomy should take contextual realities into consideration. For example, the women they spoke with, even those who had received secondary school education, had very little say about what level of education they could study to, who they married, at what age they should marry, where they could live after marriage or if they should be given a dowry. Their inability to have a say in such matters not only reveals a lack of autonomy in general but also a lack of say in determining their sexuality.

Research on this conflicting role of education – empowering women and giving them greater autonomy or reproducing existing hierarchies and restricting women's development – has often focussed on primary and secondary school education in the South Asian context. Moreover, current research is limited to exploring the relationship

between education, autonomy and fertility rather than education, autonomy and control of individual sexuality. Research which focuses on the effect of higher education on women's autonomy or the control of their sexuality in the South Asian context is almost non-existent. For example Sharma (1979) explores the link between university education and modernisation in his study with university students in a Punjab university but sexuality or attitudes towards sexuality does not feature in his lines of enquiry. However, he does reveal that women are expected to and are more inclined to hold on to traditional values than men – regardless of their year at university or discipline.

Sundar (1988) looks at tertiary education and women's autonomy in relation to entrepreneurship in India and states that even though women are socialised into accepting the role of wife and mother as their primary responsibility in life the spread of education has resulted in more women taking up professions and pursuing careers. She however contends that even though these educated, entrepreneurial women may have more economic autonomy this does not guarantee that they have high levels of personal autonomy or decision making powers within the family. Seymour's (1994) findings in her research on Indian college women's aspirations paint a more hopeful picture. Interviewing middle and upper-middle-class women from three colleges, she observes that most women had clear career goals, cited a career as more important or as important as marriage and insisted they would continue to work after marriage. Yet most of them wanted their parents to play a key role in selecting their marriage partner thus leading Seymour to conclude that while higher education may effect some changes in Indian society, changes to the patrifocal family system may be a long time coming.

These studies reveal that education does not always have the liberating effects it is conferred with, especially when it comes to women. Nor do they directly explore the relationships between education, women's autonomy and sexuality. Sexuality of young women in school settings, however, has been explored in other geographical places (see Wilson 1978; Lees 1986). Proceeding beyond school level to university level, Holland and Eisenhart (1990) specifically look at the links between higher education,

achievement and sexuality among women in their ethnographic study of two American universities. They found that women who enter university with high standards and expectations to pursue a career subsequent to graduating from university often altered their educational and career aspirations and desired instead to fulfil traditional gender role expectations. They show how university education does not provide women the impetus to break away from cultural expectations placed on them and in fact contribute to, through social practices of the peer group, reproducing and maintaining existing gender hierarchies and appropriate sexual behaviours. The complex intertwining between women's education, autonomy and sexuality and the difficulties of shedding societal expectations which are inculcated from a young age are vividly portrayed by the women who speak in this study.

These findings, similar to the assertions made by those who critique the linear argument that education leads to greater autonomy, show that even in Western contexts education does not always lead to women's autonomy or empowerment and often reproduces and maintains existing social, class and gender norms. The lack of similar studies for South Asia and Sri Lanka in particular point to the importance of exploring the links between education, autonomy and female sexuality in the current context, so that it will enable a better understanding of the role of education in shaping women's autonomy and their sexualities.

### **Linking Gender and Sexuality among University Students?**

The gender, youth and sexuality nexus is complicated and dependent on a range of social factors. The above literature highlights the importance of not only gender but also class, age, nationalism, education and religion in shaping individual sexuality. It also shows that in Sri Lanka the extent to which nationalism and respectability are allied to each other and felt in the everyday lives of Sri Lankan men and, especially, women has been explored in numerous ways. While these studies draw on the importance of public discourse in shaping notions of respectability and propagating appropriate norms of



sexuality for women, they do not explore the intimate bodily practices which keep these norms alive. Moreover, the literature suggests that these norms are imposed on women through educational establishments, public discourse, nation states, religious tenets and cultural values. While this imposition is indeed a reality, it does not expound the active role women themselves play in generating norms of chastity and respectability or why they do so.

In a context where limited academic research has delved into the relationship between sexuality and gender in general and youth in particular, this thesis explores how being in a university setting affects the ways in which women can express their sexuality. While the relationship between education and female autonomy, especially of married women, has been thoroughly researched in the Indian context, this is not the case for Sri Lanka. Moreover research which explores the relationship between education and female sexuality of unmarried women, as in an answer to the question 'does education lead to higher levels of control over individual sexuality?' is virtually non-existent. The research for this thesis was carried out in a university setting in an attempt to examine the bodily practices of a group of students and provide answers to the question 'How does being in a university setting affect norms of sexuality among women?' In trying to answer this question I explore how the relations of power which pertain to sexuality are mediated and negotiated in determining respectability, appropriate forms of behaviour and sexual conduct of young women.

## CHAPTER 2

### Researching Sexuality: Setting, Methodology and Methods

#### Painting a Picture of the University and its Students

##### *A temple, a university and a town*

Located in the district of Gampaha, Kelaniya town is a mere 10 kilometres to the north-east of the city of Colombo. A popular outer suburb for commuters who work in Colombo city, Kelaniya is best known for its temple, the Kelaniya Raja Maha Viharaya. The historical and cultural significance of this temple exudes an aura of Buddhist sentiment, loudly emphasised by the numerous billboards and posters which spring up at different times of the year welcoming the traveller to the 'religious space' of Kelaniya. This historical and cultural significance lends to the perception that Kelaniya stands very much in opposition to Colombo: the city which epitomises the globalised Western world in Sri Lanka. The lack of morality and absence of tradition, often linked with the West, is therefore perceived to be characteristic of those who live in Colombo, even though in reality these differences are not as pronounced.

Differences in the built environments between Colombo and Kelaniya are made obvious only gradually, as the number of high-rise, modern and sleek buildings which mark the landscape of Colombo city decrease in frequency closer to Kelaniya town. In their place, small shops selling goods as diverse as lunch packets and ballpoint pens, multi-storeyed communication stores which offer telephone, internet, photocopying and CD burning facilities, independent clothes shops which sell locally made or factory-reject garments and hardware stores dot the road immediately before and after the University of Kelaniya. But no landscape is static, and during the 15 months I spent at Kelaniya, a flyover bridge to ease traffic congestion and several larger, modern looking buildings

were constructed to house chain supermarket stores, banks and other commercial outlets.<sup>19</sup>

The Kelaniya Raja Maha Viharaya, commonly known as the Kelaniya temple, has a dominant presence in the entire area.<sup>20</sup> Situated alongside the Kelani River, the temple is a mere four kilometres down the Biyagama road, which is to the east of the Colombo-Kandy road soon after one passes the Kelani Bridge. With its vast tracts of land, imposing *stūpa* and murals which date back to the 18th century, this temple is the foremost religious and cultural icon located closest to the district of Colombo. It is claimed that the last of the three visits Buddha made to Sri Lanka was to the location of the Kelaniya Raja Maha Viharaya. The bus fare from the university to the temple costs Rs. 20.00 and it is not unusual for Buddhist students, who form the majority of those attending Kelaniya, to visit the temple on the weekend.<sup>21</sup> *Pōya* days which fall mid week, thus making a trip home impracticable, will indubitably result in large groups of students visiting the Kelaniya temple to worship.<sup>22</sup> The temple becomes especially crowded on *Pōya* days thus making peaceful worship almost impossible but instead provides fertile grounds for social interaction. The importance of temples as a site of romance where stealthy glances at attractive devotees, exchange of letters and clandestine meetings between young couples in romantic relationships take place is oft portrayed in television dramas and the students at Kelaniya had a keen awareness of the opportunities their visits to the temple offered for socialising and to experience a budding romance.

The level of prominence given to the temple is closely matched by that given to UoK. According to its website the university can boast of two major campuses, seven locations, six faculties and four institutions (UoK 2009). The campus where the

---

<sup>19</sup> See Appendix C for map of Sri Lanka for location of districts and an inset of the Kelaniya area.

<sup>20</sup> See Walters (1996) for details on the Kelaniya temple and its significance to Sri Lankans.

<sup>21</sup> At the time the exchange rate was approximately £1.00 to Rs.200.00.

<sup>22</sup> The day of the full moon in every month is called a *Pōya* day. *Pōya* days have a religious significance to Buddhists and are public holidays in Sri Lanka.

fieldwork was carried out, is the Kelaniya campus which is located just off the Colombo-Kandy main road. Of the six faculties, five are located at the Kelaniya campus, with the Faculty of Medicine located elsewhere. The buildings which house the various faculties are located on either side of Wevalduwa road; a public road which, through a series of circuitous by-roads, links the Colombo-Kandy road to the Waththala-Hunupitiya junction on the Colombo-Negombo road (Figures 1 and 2). The university name board is placed just before the turn off to the Wevalduwa road on the Colombo-Kandy road and is a useful signpost for visitors unfamiliar with the area or the University location.<sup>23</sup>



*Figure 1:* Make-shift archway at the start of Wevalduva Road to welcome the new batch of students.



*Figure 2:* Continuation of Wevalduva Road.

The faculties of Science, Graduate Studies and Commerce and Management studies as well as the university library and the administrative buildings, are located south and north-west of the Wevalduwa road while the Humanities and Social Science faculties sit

---

<sup>23</sup> See Appendix D for a map of the Kelaniya campus.

on the north-east of the same road. The student centre, sports complex, centre for open and distance learning and the student hostels are located on the south-east side of Wevalduwa road. Other buildings like the medical centre, the works department, computer labs and the day care centre are housed in small buildings according to the availability of space on either side of the road. The *Tel Bæmma*, a popular meeting point, is the name given to the large oval shaped island situated in the centre of Wevalduwa road opposite a student hostel and the ‘milk-bar’, a small shop selling various paraphernalia (Figures 3 and 4). The *Tel Bæmma* also acts as the unofficial boundary between the Science and Arts faculties. The student hostels for men and women are geographically separate with strict physical and regulatory boundaries which are meant to prevent any opposite-sex access to the hostels. At strategic geographical locations, usually at the main entrance to different faculties, security guard huts are positioned so that entrance to those premises, especially when the university is officially closed, can be restricted to those with a valid identity card.



*Figure 3: The Tel Bæmma.*



*Figure 4: Tel Bæmma with a view of Wevalduwa Road.*

Most buildings on this campus have an architectural style reminiscent of the 1970s, concrete blocks with glass windowpanes (Figures 5 and 6). These buildings are in close proximity to one another which lends to a sense of congestion at UoK. The main building, which houses the Department of Fine Arts, a single storey, large, airy and

roofless structure with a *bō* tree growing in the centre of the recital hall, is aesthetically pleasing and stands in contrast to the rest of the buildings at Kelaniya. There are two large, well maintained playgrounds but few other open green spaces apart from the small botanical garden behind the Faculty of Science which remains inaccessible on most days due to its maintenance. Several large trees, provide shade from the sun, are a riot of colour during the flowering season and give the feel of a verdant campus. It is not easy to describe either the Kelaniya campus or its location using lyrical phrases and it is hardly ever thought of as a particularly attractive campus. This lack of physical beauty, however, is more than compensated for by the friendliness of the student population at Kelaniya.



*Figure 5:* A building in the Faculty of Science.



*Figure 6:* A building in the Faculties of Humanities and Social Sciences.

### *A brief history of the University of Kelaniya and a description of the students*

The *Vidyālañkāra Pirivēṇa*, founded in 1875, was one of the two newly revived monastic colleges which offered Buddhist monks an opportunity to pursue their

academic interests in Oriental studies.<sup>24</sup> Embracing the strongly nationalist ideology advocated by Anagarika Dharmapala, the monks at the Vidyālañkāra Pirivēṇa used this centre to further their intellectual and political activities which portrayed, albeit superficially, a Marxist outlook (Seneviratne 1999:131). According to Seneviratne (1999) the primary connection these monks had to the local socialist movement was not its political ideology but rather its anti-imperialist sentiments. In 1959 the Pirivēṇa was granted university status but retained links to its historic roots and consequently Buddhism plays an important role at the university even today.<sup>25</sup> A statue of a meditating Buddha, situated on an island in the middle of the Wevalduwa Road, immediately before the *Tel Bæmma*, is one of the first sights which greet a visitor to the university (Figure 7). Every official event at university level, regardless of its importance, will include an address by a Buddhist monk. The chanting of short stanzas of Buddhist scripture/sutra (*pirit*) at these events is also not unusual. The chief incumbent of the Pirivēṇa, a Buddhist monk, is the Chancellor of the university. The motto on the university coat of arms states *Paññāya Parisujjhti* (self-purification is by insight), a Pali quotation from the Buddhist scriptures, written in Sinhala script. The presence of Buddhism is also felt by the availability of a well endowed Pali and Buddhist studies department at undergraduate and graduate level.

---

<sup>24</sup> A *pirivēṇa* is a monastic college which provides training for young Buddhist monks. The establishment of these colleges was a result of the heightened interest in Buddhist doctrine, during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which came about in response to and fears of the missionary threat.

<sup>25</sup> See Seneviratne (1999), for a detailed account of the history of the *Vidyālañkāra Pirivēṇa* and the politics behind it being granted university status.





*Figure 7: Statue of meditating Buddha on Wevalduva Road.*

As a major national university of Sri Lanka, Kelaniya provides higher education to more than 8000 internal undergraduate and graduate students in a range of academic disciplines (UGC 2008). From Sociology to Western Classical Culture most subjects in the faculties of Social Science and Humanities are taught in the Sinhala language, a few in English and even less in Tamil. The sheer volume of students necessitates conducting first-year undergraduate classes in lecture halls since the more popular subjects can have as many as 400 students per class. From their second year students decide, according to their grades and career goals, if they will follow a general degree or a special degree. A general degree is completed in three years and involves taking a range of different subjects with no special focus in any one field. A special degree on the other hand, takes four years to complete, includes following compulsory subjects from the chosen discipline and writing a thesis. This system is followed by all faculties except for the Faculty of Commerce and Management studies where only the four year degree option is available to students.

The student population at Kelaniya is socio-economically and geographically varied. The majority come from Sinhala speaking lower middle-class and working-class



backgrounds from districts outside of Colombo. There is very little variation in the ethnic and religious backgrounds of these students. An overwhelming majority are Sinhalese and the other ethnic groups; Tamil, Moor and Other comprise a mere 2.8% of the total student population (UGC 2008). For all students however, regardless of their socio-economic, geographic, ethnic or religious background, university education is an achievement since, on average, less than 15% of qualified students are admitted to state universities each year (UGC 2008). For students from low socio-economic backgrounds, university education is not only an achievement but also potentially their ticket out of financial hardship and social exclusion. Nearly all the students I knew were from rural districts and the first in their immediate and extended families to attend university. This applied equally to both men and women. A majority of them were also from rural working and lower middle-class backgrounds thus making the achievement of university admission even more significant for their families and communities. For the few from impoverished families, whose parents were recipients of the state welfare and benefits scheme Samurdhi, severe hardship, gritting commitment and immense sacrifice would have paved the path to university admission.

According to Holland and Eisenhart (1990), university education in the United States is not only a means of improving one's socio-economic situation but also of experiencing age-segregated living conditions, being away from parental protection and meeting peers with diverse values and perspectives on life. In Sri Lanka it is also a space in which close interaction between men and women can be justified and women do not have to fear stigmatisation for forming friendships with men who are not kinfolk. The absence of the protective parental gaze, the lack of a familial support network as well as the societal permission to form friendships with members of the opposite sex were the most commonly cited differences between home and university life students mentioned when I asked them to recall their first few months at UoK. Even though these differences had both positive and negative consequences, every student, without exception, bemoaned the feelings of loneliness they experienced during their first few months at Kelaniya.

It is amid this group of students and their university context that I embedded myself to research how young people construct their sexuality. Despite the difficult start where I unwittingly used an inappropriate word to describe my research and thus faced blank looks and little encouragement, the remainder of my time in the field, while having its ebbs and flows, was spent in a context where students were extremely hospitable. They also made an extra effort to involve me in their activities, discuss their problems with me, tell me secrets and share their intimate stories with me. I appreciate that talking about their personal and intimate lives was not easy for most women because as Nilooshani said on my first day at Kelaniya, sexuality is something which ‘no one talks of directly’ and the shrieking laughter, the embarrassed giggles, the heavy silences and silent tears stand witness to these difficulties. Yet none of them made me feel I was being intrusive or questioned the relevance of my research and its methods. In the next sections of this chapter, I turn to issues of knowledge construction, methodology, ethics and reflexivity.

## **Selecting an Epistemology and Methodology for Sexuality Research**

### *Constructing knowledge through standpoint theory*

My interest in understanding how young people construct their sexuality emanated from my work in the development sector where we followed a biomedical approach in implementing sexual and reproductive health programmes for young people. Therefore, when I entered the field site, I did so with a bias towards Western, biomedical understanding of sexuality and reproductive health. This did not mean that I had no respect for local beliefs but rather that I attached greater value to ‘scientifically established’ or biomedical meanings. Soon I realised that such a stand has a drawback in that

(...) it makes people’s everyday understandings inferior, epistemologically, to more scientific understandings. In this way of viewing things, one cannot predicate of people’s every day understandings the truth claims one makes for what is scientifically

established. (Crotty 1998:16)

The realisation that my perceptions and understandings of gender, sex and sexuality differed greatly from how they were locally constructed dawned on me almost immediately after I entered the field. Hence I made a conscious effort to keep my views under wraps and focussed on how students engage with the realities of their world to understand these same issues. This made it possible for me to explore how meaning is constructed differently and how students, depending on their gender, class, socio-economic background and year at university, could have different meanings for and ways of understanding the same phenomenon.

The different meanings people assign to phenomena, according to feminist standpoint theorists, can be explained by the structural differences in position that women and men occupy in society. These structural differences not only result in varied experiences and understandings of phenomena but also provide new resources for research and emphasise the plurality of knowledge and insight (Harding 1986, 1987). Proponents of standpoint theory argue that since the 'lived realities of women's lives are profoundly different from those of men' and a person's material life will set limits on how social relations can be understood, women and feminists are placed in a better position to carry out research on issues which focus on and impact women (Hartsock 1987:158). They maintain that all knowledge is situated, partial and there are several standpoints from which knowledge is produced (Haraway 1988; Harding 1997; Hartsock 1997). Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis (2002) take this argument a step further and suggest that it is not only knowledge but also imagination, which transforms experience into knowledge and challenges existing knowledge, which is situated and socially determined.

As a woman, interested in exploring the ways in which young people and especially young women construct their sexuality, my gender gives me a vantage point which can be used to critique existing ideologies on the topic. Moreover as a woman I fall into the category of 'potentially ideal agents of knowledge' because my subjugated status in the

gender hierarchy will make me more aware of and sensitive to the constraints political and social structures place on women, their relations, actions and perceptions (Harding 1986:655). However, since all knowledge is situated, it then follows that just as much as the knowledge I obtained from students is situated according to their material life and social setting, the way in which this knowledge is analysed and presented in this thesis is determined by my engagement with the information, the phenomena or concepts which in turn is affected by my situation in life. Therefore, the truth claims made in this thesis, and the ways in which my imagination would have transformed my experiences at Kelaniya into knowledge, should be read as being partial and situated not only according to my gender but also my class, education and age.

Using standpoint theory as an epistemology, or a theory of knowledge, is not without limitations. Hawkesworth (1989, 1999) and Heckman (1997) critique standpoint theory and claim that it does not question the validity of knowledge claims and privileges the experiences of the knower without giving due consideration to human fallibility. They therefore conclude that standpoint theory is not effective as an epistemology in its current form and either needs to be recast (Heckman 1997) or used as an analytical tool because it will then ‘encourage the researchers to consider competing accounts of the same phenomenon’ (Hawkesworth 1999:150). In neither of their writing, however, are the contributions or basic tenets of standpoint theory in ensuring less distorted research rendered invalid. For this reason, and since I believe that meaning is made possible only through engaging with a particular object, phenomenon or concept – be it tangible or otherwise – it is this epistemology and corresponding methodology that I use in presenting my work.

Given the sensitivity that researching human sexuality entails, my choice of methodology was pivotal and would have determined the outcome of this research. Only an ethnographic approach, one in which the researcher engages with the field on a long-term basis and immerses in the context to better understand the people and the place (Peacock 2001), would have made it possible for me to obtain the intimate details

that I needed to answer the questions which had aroused my curiosity in this topic in the first instance. The wide range of methods that an ethnographic approach allows to gather data – from observation to informal conversations – proved to be ideal for my research (Crotty 1998). It made it possible for me to understand the subtle nuances of the language students used when they discussed aspects of their sexuality, the importance of context in determining individual behaviours and the fears and desires which most women were reluctant to openly discuss.

An ethnographic approach was ideal also because cultural taboos in Sri Lanka which prevent an open discussion of sexuality, would have made administering a questionnaire, or conducting structured interviews inadequate and inappropriate to understand the ‘how’ and the ‘why’ of sexuality among university students. Self-administered questionnaires, on the other hand, may have afforded participants greater anonymity and provided a larger body of empirical data useful for this study. However they would not have provided depth or an understanding of the ways in which people make meaning of their experiences (Ambert *et al* 1995) and it is these which were of foremost interest to me. Moreover it is only with time and the building of trust that students divulged their intimate stories, secret desires and recurrent fears to me and it is these details which make the findings of this research remarkable and worthy of attention.

## **The Observer, the Participant and the Interviewer**

### *Accessing the field site*

When I first visited UoK in October 2007, upon my return to Sri Lanka, it was with the hope that the Chief Medical Officer of the University Health Centre, whom I had met at a sexual health workshop the previous year, would remember me. My hope did not materialise and so I had to place myself in relation to others he knew in the development sector before discussing my doctoral research plans with him. In a context where social connections play a key role in achieving outcomes, I was pleasantly

surprised when he indicated an interest in my research and suggested I write an official letter to the Vice Chancellor (VC), attach a copy of my research proposal and request permission to locate myself at Kelaniya. I submitted these documents unsure if it would be to any avail since I did not have the necessary contacts at Kelaniya.

I did not hear anything from the university for nearly five weeks and so I contacted a friend who knew the Head of the Department of Medieval Studies at Kelaniya. I was introduced to Professor Ramanayake by my friend who suggested that I drop in at the VC's office on that very day, albeit without an appointment, since the VC was relatively free and presently in office. I did as he suggested and was granted a brief meeting with the VC who requested a shorter, three-page version of the proposal and a list of specific questions I would ask students. I forwarded these documents immediately and two weeks later received a signed letter of approval from the VC.

In the three-page document I submitted to the VC, I stated that ethnographic research often unfolds in situ thus making it difficult, if not impossible, to declare with certainty how the research would pan out over the period (Peacock 2001). Stating this was especially important given the sensitive nature of my research topic and the ways in which my questions to men and women were likely to change according to context and deviate from the template I had submitted. However I assured him that obtaining written permission would not reduce my sensitivities to the context, the appropriateness of methods to be used or blind me to the potential harm that could be faced by research participants who will contribute to my study (Murphy and Dingwall 2001; Skeggs 2001).

### *Observing, participating and discussing*

My first day of fieldwork at Kelaniya, with which I began this thesis, drove home the point Ayella (1993) makes when she argues that access to a field site is a continuous process of negotiation and re-negotiation. She takes the stand that even though it is not

possible to determine problems of access in advance, researchers should not let their agenda be set by the researched group and context. Following a similar line of thinking while at Kelaniya, I believe, would not have augured well for my research. Even though I had obtained official permission for my research, and therefore had access to the field, my interactions with the students and how I could approach my research interests were constantly negotiated and very much determined by the students. From how I spoke about my research interests to how I conducted my interviews subsequently, the context played a strong role in determining the agenda of my research.

Research on sexuality, given its link to morality, is considered sensitive in nearly all contexts. The strongly private nature of an individual's behaviours, desires and fantasies can easily lead to sexuality research being considered intrusive and problematic (Lee 1993). The link between morality and individual sexuality was often unspoken and yet palpable in the general milieu at Kelaniya. For this reason I decided to spend the first four months of the 15 months I spent in the field largely observing the context and participating in any student activities open to me. I went to university every day during the week, sat in on lectures, participated in group seminars, attended rehearsals, accepted every invitation to shared lunches and agreed to give informal English language lessons. I also sat on benches or under trees and engaged in more observations and enquired from students what these observations meant in the context of Kelaniya.

Being embedded in the research context is advantageous in many respects. At Kelaniya, it enabled me to merge with students and made the research context more natural and observation more possible. I was not the 'researcher with a notebook' which Wax (1980) argues makes the tension between the host and the fieldworker visible and detaches the fieldworker from the context. Emerson *et al* on the other hand, state that field notes should be 'written more or less *contemporaneously* with the events, experiences and interactions they describe and recount' because field notes are representations of a context in a form which can be reviewed (Emerson *et al* 2001:353, emphasis in original). Given the value of both these observations, I opted to use the

time spent at lectures and group seminars to write field notes – both of that particular context and of my experiences during the day – but never took my notebook out during the other more informal interactions lest it changed the dynamics of the context. But all observations and the corresponding notes are selective and dependent on the focus of the researcher (Emerson *et al* 2001) and, as I detail in the next section, would have been coloured by my demographic and socio-economic background.

It was after about four months of observing and participating that I attempted the first focus group discussion (FGD) with a group of six women I knew well and who were friends with each other. The words ‘an utter failure’ succinctly capture the outcome of that exercise. Even though we had agreed to talk of gender issues and how these issues impact their lives at Kelaniya, they said very little and instead kept smiling or gave monosyllabic answers whenever I asked a question. The possibility that FGDs may not be appropriate for research on sexuality in the Kelaniya context had been niggling at the back of my mind and was confirmed when at the end of discussion two students said to me, ‘You will not get any information like this, you better talk with us separately if you want to know anything’. The penchant most women had for doing things in small groups clearly did not extend to talking about sensitive topics which, if they revealed too much, had the potential to affect their reputations negatively. I subsequently realised that even though these women were friends, there are degrees of friendship and trust which result in differential levels of intimate exchange because information which was not forthcoming in this small group setting came pouring out when I spoke with students on their own or in the presence of their closest friend.

The reluctance to talk about how gender issues impact on their everyday life, even within the confines of a familiar group, conveyed a sense of the difficulties I would have to face when I asked questions on individual sexuality. Hence I shelved the idea of focussing on sexuality and conducting FGDs for the moment and, as an interim measure, concentrated again on informal discussions and taking notes. Eventually a male student, who patiently indulged my numerous questions about the university sub-



culture, said he would be happy to be interviewed provided it was not in the presence of anyone else. This first interview lasted for nearly two hours because there was an exchange rather than a unidirectional flow of information. We spoke of our family backgrounds, educational aspirations, the differences in life at our respective universities before focussing on issues which had some link to sexuality. With my first interview successfully completed, I started interviewing other students and continued with a style wherein the interviews were more akin to general conversations than structured interviews.

This conversational style of interviewing where information was not only gathered but also given, I believe, made the information richer and more personal. Yet the secrecy around sexuality, and the morality linked to it, were never far from the surface. With the exception of four women, the observable change in demeanour and responses which occurred whenever I indicated an interest in knowing about their intimate relationships made it impossible for me to continue with that line of questioning. Women who had been speaking freely began to give monosyllabic answers, giggle shyly or look away – thus pointing to their embarrassment and reluctance to share information. Withholding information or being reluctant to talk openly about an issue can be as revealing as information that is divulged, and the diffidence shown by these women when it came to their intimate lives spoke volumes about the constraints placed on them by society to maintain their image as sexually naive and chaste women. Conversely, in my interviews with men, I found them to be much more forthcoming about their personal experiences and open about their intimate lives, pointing yet again to the different ways in which sexuality and morality are linked to men and women.

I have recorded interviews from 36 students, of which 20 are women and 16 are men. With the exception of three students – two men and one woman – they were from districts outside of Colombo and Sinhala-speaking poor, working-class or lower middle-class families. Of the three exceptions, two men were from an English-speaking middle-class background in Colombo and the woman was on the cusp of the Sinhala-speaking

and English-speaking middle-class. With the exception of one of these men, who was from an ethnic minority group (Burgher) and a woman who was Muslim, all other students were Sinhalese. I interviewed any student who was willing to talk with me and give me their time regardless of their year at university or the field they were studying. Since I depended on a small group of students who introduced me to their friends, a majority of the students I interviewed were from the faculties of Humanities and Social Science. They were also, more often than not, in a senior year at the university. Needless to say, despite my assurances of anonymity, the extent to which students were forthcoming during interviews depended greatly on the rapport I had established with them during my time at Kelaniya. Outside of these 36 interviews, the informal conversations I had with other students, numbering more than 20, also inform this thesis.

Some men and women were interviewed several times over the course of the year. Students with whom I had established a close rapport were approached for interviews on numerous occasions when a particular issue relevant to my research cropped up at the university or in their lives. Not all these interviews were recorded but in total they number at least another 15 interviews. It is these men and women who invited me to share their lunch of rice and curry because they pitied my fare of brown bread sandwiches. It is they who insisted that I ate off the same rice packet as them and months later laughed at my initial reluctance which I thought I had successfully disguised. Refilling my plastic water bottle from the public taps because it was 'perfectly safe to do so', running down Wevalduwa road to the pickled fruit seller before he leaves for the day, sitting on the *Tel Bæmma* in the evening to share a miniature pot of curd and treacle and travelling with them by bus to Kiribathgoda on the spur of the moment to shop for clothes soon became a part of my everyday life at Kelaniya. These students allowed me into their circle and showed remarkable levels of warmth. They brought me generous portions of sweetmeats and curries 'made in village style' after going home for the weekend, introduced me to their family members and invited me to their homes.

Apart from the students at Kelaniya, I also interviewed five university lecturers and a student counsellor from the University. I also had informal conversations with other lecturers at the outset of my fieldwork in order to familiarise myself with the university setting. In addition, to obtain a historical perspective on university education in Sri Lanka, I interviewed alumni from different state universities in the country. Beginning with two women who had attended Ceylon University College in the 1930s when tertiary education first became available in the country, I interviewed 18 men and women who had graduated from different state universities at different periods and studied different subjects during the last seven decades from 1930. The voices of these other informants, except on rare occasion, do not directly inform this research. Yet the knowledge I gained from these interviews undoubtedly plays a role in the data I present here as well as in how I analyse the data.

The ease with which students allowed an outsider to enter into their lives made my task of establishing relationships with them relatively easy.<sup>26</sup> According to Peacock (2001) ethnographers run the risk of developing close ties and intimate relationships with research participants, which then leads to ethical issues and creates difficulties in exiting the field site. As such, they are warned against establishing levels of intimacy which could jeopardise the research findings and advised to maintain distance. While this stand has been criticised by feminist researchers (Oakley 1981; Cook and Fonow 1986), it is generally accepted that a healthy distance should be maintained between the researcher and the participants (Miller 1952). However in the Sri Lankan context, the cultural prohibitions placed especially on women in discussing their sexuality would have made it impossible for me to gather information from them if I had not managed to achieve high levels of intimacy and corresponding levels of trust with them.

Developing trust and intimacy took time as well as effort. I availed myself of any opportunity to spend time with students: joined them at the canteen to eat coconut

---

<sup>26</sup> I refer to those who inform this research interchangeably as 'informants', 'students' and 'friends' because of the dynamic nature of my relationship with them.

flatbread (*pol roḥ*) in the evenings, helped with their English assignments and listened to their woes about the difficulties of university life. The one-to-one interactions with the students to whom I taught English proved to be conducive in developing close friendships. Students wanted to visit Odel and Majestic City in Colombo, the Sri Lankan version of a department store and a shopping centre respectively, because they were curious about these places which they had heard much about but not visited. I accompanied them to both places and observed at a distance the amalgam of emotion that registered on their faces: gleeful amazement at the range of products and utter incredulousness at their prices.

From merely observing and taking notes during my first months at Kelaniya to going on a ‘fun-trip’ to the hill country during the April holidays, the ways in which I interacted with students were numerous and varied. These interactions continued to change during my time at Kelaniya. At first I was the ‘researcher’ who they had to indulge, but soon I became the ‘friend’ who they shared their lunch with and took on their shopping expeditions. The transition from being a ‘friend’ to becoming a ‘confidant’ took more time but within one year of being in the field I was included in their plans for ‘fun-trips’, was the recipient of ‘ring-cuts’ during all hours of the day, allowed to spend nights in their dormitory rooms during university events and the first point of contact when they needed accommodation in Colombo.<sup>27</sup> These times I spent with them were largely enjoyable but not always easy. Sometimes they involved a great deal of pretence: laughing at jokes which I did not find funny, admiring fashion which was not to my taste and avoiding taking sides in their squabbles. Yet within half a year, I was able to adopt a hybrid position and become the chameleon they were comfortable with. It is this which made it possible to develop strong friendships and achieve varying levels of trust and intimacy with different students: some trusting me with their fantasies while others merely responded to my questions.

---

<sup>27</sup> ‘Ring-cuts’ was a system through which students kept in touch with each other, without having to spend money. A person gives a ‘ring-cut’ to tell the other that s/he is being thought of; to remind friends of an appointment; or as a reminder to bring/buy something. The person giving the ‘ring-cut’ hangs up after no more than two rings. The receiver then has to return the ‘ring-cut’ following the same procedure.

Gathering the information I did would not have been possible without discussing everyday events, engaging in conversational style interviews and establishing high levels of intimacy. It was the varied interactions I had with the students which allowed me to obtain information which was intimate and personal. I took copious field notes on my observations, listened to and participated in informal conversations which I subsequently recorded in my note book, wrote down the responses to my questions verbatim, conducted formal interviews and transcribed these, copied text messages I received from students and noted the essence of phone conversations I had with them. I also asked students to keep diaries or share with me in writing their thoughts on particular issues and received two diaries and several notes. Despite gathering such varied 'evidence' I was aware of the need, in my position as a researcher, to consider how all these conversations I had with the students, be they the formal interviews or informal chats, would colour and be coloured by my gender, class, education and age. Interviewer bias, power differentials, issues of anonymity, maintaining confidentiality and drawing on every day interactions become all the more sensitive when researching a topic which is closely linked to an individual's private sphere (Lee 1993). It raises many questions and ethical issues which are not applicable in other research contexts and it is these issues of ethics and reflexivity in researching and writing on sexuality I consider in the final section of this chapter.

## **Reflexivity and Ethics in Researching and Writing Sexuality**

### *Reflexivity and positionality at Kelaniya*

An individual 'conscious of *being self-conscious* of oneself as an Other' is how Tedlock defines the ethnographer who actively engages with the concept of reflexivity in carrying out fieldwork (Tedlock 1991:85, emphasis in original). Reflexivity refers to the importance of retaining awareness and making assessments of the impact and influence the researcher has on the research process and the subsequent findings (Bourdieu 1977; Watson 1987; Pollner 1991; Salzman 2002; Maton 2003). An individual's social position – be it class, gender, ethnicity or education – will impact the ways in which the

research is carried out, the responses of the participants, the analysis and finally even the written document publicising the findings. Few *et al* (2003) also point to how aspects of skin colour/tone, linguistics, sexuality and physical attractiveness could affect interactions with and reactions of research participants.

Reflexivity, in relation to the research findings detailed in this thesis then, is an awareness of how my position as an unmarried Sri Lankan woman from an English-speaking middle-class background, living in Colombo, who received her secondary and tertiary education in Western countries and was now at Kelaniya for research purposes, impacted on the research process. It is also an awareness of how my sexuality, skin colour, physical appearance, fluency of language and personality could have coloured the ways in which the research participants reacted to my position as a researcher. From the questions I asked, to how I understood what the participants said, from the responses I got, to how I reacted to them, and from the way I analysed the findings, to how I write about them, are coloured and constructed by my positionality. Therefore I will attempt, as suggested by Watson (1987), to be reflexive not only in this introductory chapter of the thesis but also in the process of analysing and writing about my data.

The way in which I was introduced to the students on my first day at Kelaniya as a 'researcher from the United Kingdom' marked a chasm between the research participants and me. I used numerous strategies to shake off that label but it is axiomatic that my socio-economic background, age, education and city identity all came together in making it difficult to cross the bridge of difference. It is these differences which drove my efforts at negotiating a legitimate identity for myself in the field (Jacobs-Huey 2002:793). I downplayed the differences which were open to change and repressed aspects of my cosmopolitan upbringing so as to fit in with the cultural milieu at Kelaniya. At times, especially during the early stages of being in the field, I adopted a persona which contradicted many of my own values. Making the physical changes required little effort. I adopted a dress code which suited the context at Kelaniya – skirts below knee length, loose fitting trousers, t-shirts or blouses with sleeves and *kurtā*

outfits – to blend in with the students. I let my hair grow long and wore it tied at the nape of my neck to avoid any links to erotic images associated with loose hair, common in Sri Lanka (Obeyesekere 1981). Not expressing my opinions on various issues required greater effort and a constant engagement with the guise I had donned in order to appeal to those whose lives I was interested in studying.

Despite these efforts my naïve assumption that I could eventually overcome the major boundaries between myself and the research participants, was never allowed fruition. A text message from a woman student saying that I was their ‘dream girl’, the use of the untranslated English term ‘posh’ to describe me, or gently being told that I should ‘return to England and live there’ because my values were too different to fit into the Sri Lankan context they knew, proved to be subtle and not-so-subtle reminders of the differences between us. These differences however, which were to a great extent hierarchical, did not always fall in line with the standard ‘relationship of power in relation to the researched’ (Bhavnani 1993:101). Similar to Bhavnani’s experiences in the field, there were instances when the research participants and I ‘were inscribed within multiple faceted power relations which had structural domination *and* structural subordination in play on both sides’ (Bhavnani 1993:101, emphasis in original). Continuously fluctuating levels of domination and subordination, on both sides, affected the questions I could ask, the responses they gave, the language we used, the numerous ‘interview appointments’ which never materialised and the level of ease we felt with each other.

The typical imbalances of the research relationship were often inverted in my interactions with male students, given culturally prescribed gendered norms. Because I was an unmarried, even though older, woman there were cultural restrictions placed on the ease with which I could discuss aspects of sexuality with men. The initial discomfiture on both sides, although soon overcome, was palpable. My age made me an older sister (*akkā*) or a ‘Miss’, both of which allowed for some level of freedom which

they would not have felt with a younger woman.<sup>28</sup> Still, cultural norms often determined the language of the discussions and interviews. Men would say ‘You understand what I am trying to say, no?’ instead of articulating the words they use for vaginal sex, anal sex, masturbation or penis. Yet, when two male students, with whom I had developed a good rapport, invited me to their boarding house and then showed me numerous clips of local pornography they watched regularly since they thought it would ‘help me with my research’, the discomfiture was clearly on my side. It is instances such as these which brought home the point that perceptible power differences and unequal relationships implicit in most research settings (Oakley 1981) also get inverted and played out differently in some contexts.

The interplay of subordination and domination brought upon by gendered relations was largely absent in my interactions with women. With them however, I felt more keenly, and had a greater awareness of, structural domination brought upon by class and age differences. Their appreciation of the privileges afforded by my class, while unabashedly expressed as envy, was also tinged with some censure. They approved of the freedom it allowed me to pursue a higher education, to live abroad and, in their eyes, to have no financial constraints. But they were apprehensive of the ease with which I claimed my single status, the absence of an urgency to ‘start a family’ and my lack of adherence to social and hierarchical formalities. Given these ‘lapses’, in their eyes, I had not adequately maximised on the benefits afforded by my class and so was somewhat of an oddity. I was an oddity by virtue of my class and age but I believe it is this ‘oddness’ which, despite my class and age, also made it easy for them to approach me and subsequently engage in a reciprocal relationship during the time I spent at Kelaniya.

---

<sup>28</sup>The English term ‘Miss’ is commonly used to refer to women, irrespective of their age or civil status, and denotes a level of formality in the relationship. Depending on the context it can refer to either a difference or an equality of status. In most academic settings (including schools) all women teachers and lecturers are referred to as ‘Miss’. At Kelaniya women lecturers, especially the younger ones, were referred to as ‘Miss’ regardless of their official/academic title which denotes the formality of the relationship and the respect accorded to lecturers.



Wax claims that ‘in most communities, whether exotic or domestic, the hosts judge fieldworkers by patient observation and by wondering how such persons can be useful’ and explains how a reciprocal relationship is developed in most fieldwork situations (Wax 1980:275). The women at Kelaniya did not take long to determine my utility value to them: it was my fluency in the English language and this corresponded with their desire to better their language skills. During my very first week in the field, a student invited me to share her lunch and, while filling my stomach with food and my mind with information about the University, enquired if she could ask a favour of me: ‘Could you please teach me English, so that I can improve my language skills?’ Needless to say I agreed immediately and then she presented her only caveat, ‘Don’t tell anyone else that I asked you for this help’ because she did not want to risk being laughed at for her ambition. The link between fluency in English and social class – a marker of difference between us – became a source for developing relationships because similar requests were made by other students and soon private English classes – some individually and others in small groups – became the norm.

I was markedly different from the research participants because of how my class, age and gender came together and it is this which came to the fore in marking me as an ‘outsider’ despite the fact that I was Sri Lankan and thus an ‘insider’. This is why as Narayan argues, instead of emphasising the insider/outsider dichotomy, it is more apt to think of ‘shifting identifications amid a field of interpenetrating communities and power relations’, because ‘the loci along which we are aligned or set apart from those whom we study are multiple and in flux’ (Narayan 1993:671). It is my identity as a Sri Lankan, and my language fluency, which enabled me easy access to the students, but certain aspects of this same identity had to be hidden because it did not fit in with the ideal notions of a ‘Sri Lankan woman’ in the eyes of the research participants. My Sri Lankan identity and experiences also helped in better understanding the emotional dimensions of behaviours and developing a familiarity of the daily lives (Ohnuki-Tierney 1984), especially those experienced by some women. It is because I was an ‘insider’ that a male student could laughingly admit to the double standards of sexual

morality he subscribed to by saying, ‘What to do, that is the way things in this country are, no?’ And it is because I was an insider that women students were able to openly speak of the sexual harassment they faced while travelling in public transport.

During my fieldwork at Kelaniya I realised that being Sri Lankan and merely having an intuitive understanding of some issues did not always make me an ‘insider’. My ‘outsider’ status, arising from gender, class and age differences, was often brought to the forefront when students spoke to me, patiently explained things to me, or even chided me for my inability to understand their perspective. It is because I was different, an ‘outsider’, that one student told me she would ‘like to show a little cleavage’ but feared doing so since societal prescription did not allow it and another said ‘I might as well as be honest with you about my sexual experiences’ and proceeded to tell me that she has had sex with her boyfriend. Kelman (1980) suggests research participants may feel free to discuss morally laden topics with ‘outsiders’ since the fear of judgement or criticism for non-compliance with local values does not come into play and I believe that it is my status as an ‘outsider’ which made it possible for women to divulge these very intimate details to me.

The shifting identities I adopted during my time in the field, both as an ‘insider’ who understood the intricacies of the everyday moral standards esteemed by Sri Lankan society, and as an ‘outsider’ who did not subscribe to all moral values expected of them, helped in carrying out this research. These fluctuating identities, determined by the research participants when they introduced me to others as a ‘new friend in the “department”’ or a “Miss” from England doing research at Kelaniya’, and by myself when I chose to hide, reveal, underplay or emphasise different strands of my identity according to the situation, continued for the entire duration of fieldwork. Yet in no time these fluctuating identities became second nature and I believe helped to establish a reciprocal relationship which was based on trust and camaraderie. This is not to deny any power differences in our relationships but to acknowledge that our interactions with each other were always in flux and displayed an interplay of structural domination and

subordination – a give and take – which undoubtedly affected the research process and findings.

### *Ethical researching and ethical writing*

Obtaining ethical clearance for this research from the Research and Research Ethics Committee of the School of Social and Political Science of the University of Edinburgh consisted of filling in a form which contained three main questions and three sub questions. Since my responses to these questions indicated the ‘absence of reasonably foreseeable ethical risks’ I did not have to subject my research proposal to a higher level assessment. In the overall research process, however, obtaining ethical clearance is a mere formality which serves well for bureaucratic purposes but is of little significance in the field. In their examination of ethnographic studies, Murphy and Dingwall (2001) identify a plethora of ethical issues, which demonstrates the ineffectuality of formal ethical clearance if researchers do not adhere to acceptable standards of behaviour while in the field. My time at Kelaniya reinforced the notion that guidelines for ethical research, contained in the ethical clearance form, were merely that: principles on which to base your research and not prescriptive rules which could be rigidly adhered to, thus further emphasising the importance of individual sensitivities in guiding good research.

An ethnographic approach, used in this research, has its own set of ethical concerns. The most important is what Hopkins refers to as ‘a kind of anthropological colonialism’ where one studies those who are unable to defend themselves from these studies (Hopkins 1993:123). Linked to the ethnographic approach are also ethical issues of participant-observation, informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality and integrity. The concept of participant-observation, a basic tenet of the ethnographic approach, has been problematised by Jarvie as an impossible task for a single person to do because it requires being ‘both a stranger and a friend’, two roles which are mutually exclusive (Jarvie 1969:505-506). His main contention with this method is, however, not with the theoretical or practical difficulties of simultaneous participant-observation but with the

‘fieldworker’s uneasiness: his struggle to be honest, fair, and truthful’. These struggles were foremost in my experiences at Kelaniya as I ‘participated’ and ‘observed’ during my first few months at Kelaniya.

There were many occasions in which, *prima facie*, I participated enthusiastically in student activities: from sharing a lunch packet to helping out at event rehearsals. Such participation, however, was often driven by the ulterior motive of obtaining information and as such lacked the feelings inherent in more genuine friendships. Indeed there were instances in which participating was fraught with a sense of artificiality and lacked honesty because, as the ethnographer, I felt compelled to refrain from reacting to the situation or voicing my opinion. There were other instances in which I would sit under a tree, seemingly engrossed with my notebook but surreptitiously and yet continuously observing a couple being coy with each other or two women holding hands and giggling at a private joke. Murphy and Dingwall (2001) claim, in complex and mobile settings, seeking and obtaining consent from all those involved is not practicable but this awareness was not always adequate to assuage the feelings of guilt I experienced as I gazed into the intimate lives of these students, without their explicit consent to do so.

Ethical issues pertaining to informed consent did not only apply when I was observing students from a distance. Most ethnographers, Thorne (1980) argues, do not share their research goals or methods and instead provide basic information which would suffice to gain access and carry out the research. Similarly the level of information I provided to the students, who were the direct participants in the research, was limited. Given the reaction of the students on my first day at Kelaniya when I said I was interested in studying sexuality, I soon became vague in how I explained my research interests, especially to those who I did not know very well: gender relationships, constructions of femininity, ideals of masculinity and romantic relationships were mentioned before the term sexuality was introduced. This begs the question, if indeed the students who willingly spoke with me had given their ‘informed consent’ since they were not always fully informed of the nature of my research.

Taking this a step further are the questions ‘How and when should one inform?’ and ‘Should informed consent be renewed?’ which closely resonate with ethical concerns I experienced in my research (Thorne 1980:289-290). My daily interactions with students were very much a part of my research findings which made it impossible to ‘offer them an explicit moment of choice’ or tell them ‘they have a right to decline participation or to withdraw from being studied at any time’ (Thorne 1980:290). So even though students were aware of my researcher role and I had informed them of using participant-observation, it is unclear if they realised that every phrase and action of theirs had the potential of being fodder to my research. Occasionally, however, a student would laughingly say, ‘Be careful how you behave! “Miss” is here and she will write about this in her notebook’ which points to how my presence may have altered their everyday interactions and through that the findings written in this thesis.

Should informed consent be renewed? Wax argues that ‘*consent* is not contractual, but developmental; it is a process, not a single event’ and explains that even though consent plays a moral role during initial stages of research relationships, as these relationships deepen and friendships are established, consent becomes inadequate (Wax 1980:282 emphasis in original). At Kelaniya I developed strong bonds of friendship with several students and I realise they were forthcoming with intimate details of their life only because of the close relationships I had established with them. That being the case, it becomes necessary to consider if it is ethical to use the general conversations I had with them in my research and if it is ethical to use the conversations students had with each other, which I was privy to, in my research. This ambiguity of informed consent came into play during my entire time in the field. And it is for this reason that I frequently told students to flag any conversations or interactions they did not want me to include in my research and I have respected their wishes in this thesis.

Finally, in my endeavour to conduct ethical research I guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity to all my informants and said I would change their names and details in

writing up the findings even though I was aware that such changes cannot fully protect the interests of the informants. I assured them that I would not divulge what they said to any other person at Kelaniya or discuss one student with another. When I recorded interviews, I downloaded them onto the computer and deleted the interview from the recorder as a preventive measure in the event of theft. Even though students knew this, for some, recorded interviews were problematic because ‘their voices were just as identifying as names’ (Page 1988:172) and the intimate stories they shared with me, if they reached another’s ear, could destroy their good name. People’s unwillingness to discuss sensitive topics in the presence of a recording device is also highlighted by Jeffrey *et al* (2008) who resorted to handwritten notes in their research. Even though very few students rejected the recorder in its entirety several recorded interviews are conducted in four or five files because they requested for the recorder to be turned off when they discussed their most intimate stories with me.

The sensitivity of the topic I researched and the risk students took in trusting me with their personal lives makes it imperative that I grant them the anonymity and the confidentiality they deserve when I write their stories in this thesis. Even though I have changed all names and details, as Glazier (1993) and Davis (1993) claim, changing names of people and contexts will not prevent the informants themselves and others close to them from guessing whose stories are being represented in the written text. There is however very little probability, unlike for Glazier and Davis, that my research participants would have access to the textual representations I have made of them. Still the onus lies on me to ensure that my representations of the context, persons and events are as accurate and as unproblematic as possible because the men and women who contributed to this research do not have an opportunity to contradict or challenge my writings of them and their lives. It is this accuracy I endeavour to achieve in the following pages.

The complexities and difficulties inherent in data analysis and interpretation make my aspiration for accuracy in textual representations challenging. At the outset there is the

concern with accuracy of translation: the language in which I conducted nearly all the interviews is not the language in which I write this thesis. Haraway's claim that 'translation is always interpretive, critical and partial' was keenly felt during my attempts to find the exact nuances or cultural connotations of words used by participants, in the English language (Haraway 1988:589). The difficulties I encountered in doing this point to the complexities and politics involved in translations. And so the meanings given to words, even though most were double checked for accuracy with different sources, can only be as Müller argues 'the replacement of text in a source language by text in a target language *equivalent* in meaning' (Müller 2006:207 emphasis in original). Moreover the translations in this writing are only equivalent in meaning because they are my interpretations of both languages – Sinhala and English. In instances when the closest English equivalent for the Sinhala word did not convey the nuance or the meaning of the word, I use *holus-bolus* to highlight the indeterminacy of translations and bring out the politics inherent in all translations (Müller 2006).

Reay talks about the power of the researcher in giving a space to the numerous voices of the participants – be it in selecting the data which will be used in the written text or the interpretations given to this data – and highlights the unease she felt with making these decisions (Reay 1996:62). Similarly Tarlo draws attention to how certain voices dominate while others stay hidden in her textual representations but argues for this 'authorial control' because in her opinion the researcher has the competence to make intelligent judgements in selecting appropriate material for inclusion in her writing (Tarlo 2003:17-18). In this thesis too there are voices which are heard frequently and which dominate. There are others which are provided a space but play an auxiliary role. I realise that in some instances the voices which dominate are those with whom I had a good rapport or were less constrained in sharing their opinions: they were more forthcoming with information and intimate details. This being the case, it then goes without saying that the representations of the students, interpretations of what they say and the knowledge contained in this thesis should be read as being situated and partial.

The chapters in Caroline Brettell's book, *When They Read What We Write* (1993), raise some important questions on issues of representation, confidentiality and anonymity in conducting field work and in subsequently writing about one's findings. The sensitivities and the moral underpinning surrounding sexuality in the context of Kelaniya makes these issues even more pertinent thus making me especially conscious of the potential harm that my interpretations of their actions and the textual representations could have for the informants. As Spencer (2001) argues the researcher has the responsibility of representing the issue and the people studied in all its complexities as well as for the subsequent outcomes emanating from her/his representations of the researched. The realisation I am ultimately responsible for the questions asked, the responses received, translation of language, interpretation of data, what is written and how it is written is what I have kept in mind as I narrate stories which do not belong to me, in the remainder of this thesis.

## **Conclusion**

A majority of the students who inform this research came from similar geographical, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. As such, with the exception of ethnicity and gender (with women), we had little in common with each other and the differences between us were difficult to bridge. Although the starkness of these differences mitigated over time, they were keenly felt in certain instances: during interviews, when observing interactions between men and women and in informal conversations. Moreover the links between Kelaniya and cultural interpretations of Buddhism propagated especially by the middle-classes resulted in the endorsement of traditional values, which maintained gender hierarchies and sexual double standards, by administrative staff, academic staff and its student body. Thus young men and women, even though they had migrated to an ostensibly liberating space of a university setting, found themselves in an environment which was not very different from their homes and so seemed compelled to uphold existing values.



In such a context carrying out research on sexuality, a taboo topic especially among unmarried women, was not easy. It required adopting numerous strategies of information gathering and ensuring I did not transgress any boundaries – be they implicit or explicit – in my conduct or my line of questioning. When men and women spoke I sometimes had to struggle, not only to understand or place their experiences, thoughts and perceptions but also to give these voices due consideration as valid and authentic representations of young people. Despite these struggles, I attempt to portray the students in all their complexities and with minimal corruption. Nevertheless, I accept the knowledge I convey through this piece of writing is partial, situated and constructed by my positioning as a woman researcher from a different background who went into the space of university students in an attempt to understand their constructions of gender and sexuality (Haraway 1988). Just as much as the knowledge I convey in this thesis is situated and constructed according to my position, it is important to note that the students' knowledge is similarly situated and constructed.

The stories which fill the ensuing pages are of individual young men and women, who even though from similar backgrounds, would have had specific life experiences which colour their perceptions. Thus the voices of these young men and women are by no means representative of even a faction of the student population at Kelaniya and I do not claim that they provide the only accurate perspective of the processes which come into play in how their sexuality is constructed within the university context. What these stories do offer the reader is an illustration of how young men and women interact with each other and an insight into how these interactions affect the various constructions and representations of sexuality. Through these illustrations I strive to give students the agency that is rightfully theirs as I represent their voices and take the reader through a journey of how sexuality is constructed through the intersections of education, class, gender and culture.

## CHAPTER 3

### Being Ragged: A Rite of Passage into Student Life

#### Introduction

I begin the content chapters of this thesis with my findings on the rag, a rite of passage which nearly all university entrants to Kelaniya experience and some mete out to others when they become senior students. An inescapable aspect of the university experience for most students, ragging plays an important role in determining how their social life at university is lived and experienced. At Kelaniya the rag served as an induction to new students, both men and women, on how they should transform their behaviours while at campus and adhere to social norms prevalent in the university. Similarly, in analysing the findings of this research and in writing this thesis, ragging served as the foundation through which I could unravel how aspects of gender, sexuality, class and respectability were played out at Kelaniya. The ragging which students experience on their first day at university exposes them to the gendered and age based norms at Kelaniya and I show how these norms continue to colour their everyday behaviours and make them adhere to scripted performances, especially in relation to their sexuality, during their time at university.

Drawing on the stories of those who were ragged and those who rag, I use this chapter to show how the ragging process serves to shape and reinforce norms of gender, sexuality and even class. I show that the equalising effect which proponents of the rag allege it achieves, only applies to the limited sphere of class equality and, even in that sphere, the equality is often superficial, short-lived and mostly affects a certain group of students: those who live in university accommodation. I describe how the numerous rituals, restrictions and rules of the rag are applied to and experienced by men and women differentially, but are all based on gender and age hierarchies common in the larger social milieu. These rituals and rules thus act as a further prompt to women to safeguard their sexuality, comply with social conventions and endeavour to maintain

their respectability. I demonstrate how women who do so and remain within the norms of propriety are protected whereas those who do not have to face negative consequences.

Ragging is a common phenomenon in all state universities in Sri Lanka and is the process by which new students entering university are subject to varying degrees and forms of mental, verbal and/or physical violence by senior students (Silva *et al* 1998). Even though not all students perceive the rag as violent it is clearly understood as a way in which senior students play a key role in shaping and controlling the sociality of new students. All new students have to ‘suffer the “rag”’ (*ræg eka viñdinna*), while some claim that they willingly ‘eat the “rag”’ (*ræg eka kannna*), to be accepted as ‘fully fledged’ members of the student community. Rathnapala (2006) contends that ragging was a practice in British universities during the colonial period which was transferred to the Sri Lankan context when a university system was first established in the country. While the origins of the rag and its emergence in the Sri Lankan university system remain unclear others agree that it existed in the Sri Lankan university system from its inception (Silva *et al* 1998; Jayasena 2002).

The severity, the violence and type of ragging varies according to university, faculty, accommodation, gender and social class of the student. Much of the rag which is reported as being cruel and sadistic is driven by the political agenda of student groups (Matthews 1995) and at Kelaniya, it was not easy to find students who wholeheartedly approved of the rag. However, many of them spoke nostalgically about certain aspects of the rag and argued that there were some advantages to being ragged. A smaller, though unwavering, group insisted that ragging was worthy and essential in a university context. The extent to which they went to explain why all students should be ragged and how they ragged them was fascinating. These explanations revealed that the execution of the rag was no mean feat: several weeks of planning before the new academic year started, and meetings every evening among senior students to discuss the day’s progress and activities for the following day, were the norm. Notwithstanding the violence

inherent in the rag, the elaborate planning which goes into it suggests that abuse of power may not be the only driving force behind the rag.

### **A Liminal Space: Being Neither Here nor There**

#### *The what and the why of the rag*

All students who entered Kelaniya, with the exception of those registered with the Faculty of Science (unless they venture outside the boundaries of their faculty), expected to face the rag. The two types of ragging – the *vāta* rag and the common/night rag – varied in intensity with the latter being considered the more severe of the two.<sup>29</sup> Students who stayed in university accommodation had to face both the *vāta* rag and the common/night rag which often took place during late evening or at night while those who stayed in private boarding houses or travelled from home only had to face the *vāta* rag. In both types of rag, men and women were ragged in different ways depending on the sex of the ragger and her/his intentions. Even though general violence, of varying levels of intensity, is widespread in both the common and the *vāta* rag, in this thesis, I only concentrate on the violence which is overtly gendered and sexualised.

*Vātayak* is something or someone which/who is an irritant or nuisance. Accordingly the *vāta* rag, which takes place in public spaces, is considered an irritant because it consists mainly of questioning students, getting them to sing songs, lecturing to students about campus politics, asking them to mimic mild, yet embarrassing scenarios and delaying them from attending lectures. Doing the *vāta* (*vāta karanavā*), the *vāta* rag, the morning rag, the ‘public rag’ and the outside rag denote one and the same thing. For many pro-raggers and hostellers, the *vāta* rag is not ‘the real thing’ because they are not given a free hand in its execution. However they continue the practice because it is the only means through which day students and those living in private accommodation, usually

---

<sup>29</sup> The term ‘common rag’ has alternate meanings. Some refer to the rag which takes place in hostels at night as the common rag while others refer to the rag which takes place in common and/or public spaces as the common rag. I use the term ‘common rag’ to refer to the one which took place in the hostels.

more economically privileged, could be ragged. The *vāta* rag is also known as serving the oil (*tela bedanavā*) and it often takes place at the *Tel Bæmma*.

The *Tel Bæmma* is a large oval shaped island located on the first half of the Wevalduwa road. It separates the Humanities and Social Sciences faculties and student hostels from the library, the senior common room and entrance to the main library. It is where students often meet their friends. It is also where senior students stand/sit during the rag season to serve the oil (*tela bedanna*). To *tela bedanna* is to make students aware of campus politics and motivate them to join the ‘right’ student political group.<sup>30</sup> The rag is usually carried out by members of the Student Council, and since it is almost always the *Ēkābaddha Śiṣya Peramuṇa* which heads the Council, it is common to hear senior students singing praises of socialist ideology, in their bid to entice the freshers to come on board. First-year students cannot stand or sit on the *Tel Bæmma* until their ‘bucket’ has taken place: they can approach the *Tel Bæmma* only if a senior beckons them.

The rag is organised and planned out by the most senior hostel students who have overall responsibility for the rag. Students from different years are given varying tasks for implementing the rag and those who abuse their powers can be punished by the senior student body. One afternoon, during the early days of the rag, a woman’s shriek reached my ears followed by a man’s voice shouting ‘run, run’. Curious to find out what was happening I ran towards the commotion but could not see anyone in sight except for a few men who were laughing and walking away. That afternoon Lakshman, a second-year student, filled me in on the incident. A second-year student who was ‘wheeling’ his girl friend, chaperoning her around the university, had been taken to task

---

<sup>30</sup> There are two main student political groups at Kelaniya, the *Śiṣya Sahayōgitā Padanama* and the *Ēkābaddha Śiṣya Peramuṇa*. The common expectation is that students from all non-science faculties at UoK should join the *Ēkābaddha Śiṣya Peramuṇa*, which is affiliated to the JVP. Students from the Faculty of Science are expected to join the *Śiṣya Sahayōgitā Padanama* which is affiliated to the United National Party (UNP), a mainstream, right-wing political party. However, these distinctions are not set in stone and many students decide not to join either group or to join according to their political views, regardless of their faculty affiliation. The student group which wins the annual elections establishes the *Mahā Śiṣya Saṅgamaya* (MSS - also known as the Student Council), which works with the Inter University Student’s Federation, and holds overall responsibility for campus political (and non-political) activities.

for violating the ragging rules. To ‘take a “wheel”’ is to travel in a three-wheeler – the three-wheeled motor taxis commonly used in Sri Lanka – considered superior to travelling by bus. So ‘wheeling’ one’s girlfriend during the rag is to give her an undue advantage over others and such injustice is not to be tolerated. The commotion I heard was the punishment the man got for contravening ragging protocol: being hit on the head by a plastic garbage bin by senior hostel students when he was ‘wheeling’ his girlfriend to class.

Senior students meet every evening to discuss what took place during the day and to plan how the rag should be carried out the next day. The rag is planned for a period of eight to 10 weeks but can go on for longer and sometimes even lasts the entire term (Bastiampillai 2000). The rag at Kelaniya lasted for more than 12 weeks during my fieldwork. The final two or three weeks of the rag is when the most senior students (the third and fourth year students) ‘take-over’ the rag to ensure that the second-year students have executed their duties effectively. The rag is deemed to be effective if the first year students are well versed about different aspects of the university sub-culture, seen as being compliant and respectful of the senior students, disregarding of class differences and open to the idea of joining the Student Council. If these are found to be lacking, the second-year students are given a talking-to and the ragging continues for several more weeks.

It is only after senior students are satisfied in all these aspects that the ‘bucket’ takes place where the first-year students are drenched with putrid water from buckets filled with remnants from the university canteens, sand, dried leaves, urine and other bio-degradable produce. The ‘bucket’ or ‘bucketing’, as it is commonly known, marks the end of the rag season. During the ‘bucket’, the first-years are offered a chance to drench the senior students with water in return – although not the same putrid water – as a symbol of them now being equal and there is much hugging and embracing to signify the notion of brotherhood and solidarity. The freshers’ social, providing a further opportunity for the freshers and the seniors to interact on an equal footing, is held after

the ‘bucketing’. This social is an important event for the freshers. Even though there was no freshers’ social during my fieldwork, Dilini and Praneetha showed me photos of their first-year social. Both women were dressed in beautiful and colourful saris, wore a great deal of make-up and were full of smiles.

During the 2008/2009 academic year, the administration at UoK took several steps to prevent the rag. One afternoon as I sat in close vicinity, but hidden from the gaze of the raggers, a senior member of academic staff walked by and shouted at the raggers, took away their student identity cards and chased them away. On another occasion I saw a lecturer, a Buddhist monk, leading the first-year students from one building to another, conjuring up visions of the Pied Piper in the very last scene of the fable. There was, however, a difference between the picture image of the Pied Piper and the Buddhist monk - none of the ‘children’ following the Buddhist monk seemed happy and carefree but rather worried and subdued and kept looking down at their feet. Maybe they were pondering on the consequences they would have to face the next day when the lecturer was no longer there to protect them? Students who are protected often have to face a more severe rag the next day and so some students preferred to refuse any temporary protection.

Several lecturers I interviewed said they no longer intervene because freshers sometime say ‘No “Madam/Sir”, it is OK we were just talking with the older brothers (*ayiyalā*). They are not “ragging” us’. The subtle sniggering from the *ayiyalā*, who could be students in the lecturer’s class, only strengthened the lecturers’ resolve to not intervene in the rag, thus aiding the perpetuation of the practice. The plural of older brother (*ayiyā*), *ayiyalā* is the term used by all juniors – regardless of the batch – to refer to men of a senior batch. It is especially common to hear women using this term to refer to men, not only those from senior batches but also other young adult men they come across. The use of kinship terminology to refer to unrelated men and women is common in the larger societal context and is also significant when it comes to establishing romantic relationships at university, as I detail in the next chapter.

In an unprecedented effort to curb ragging, the administration prohibited senior women students from entering the first-year women's hostels thus sparing first-years from the common/night rag. First-year men could not be given similar protection since male hostels are not differentiated according to the year at university. The male freshers, who had to face both the common and the *vāta* rag, were 'bucketed', rather abruptly, after nine weeks into the semester – with the most senior students carrying out their rag for a period of just one week. There was no clear reason for this abrupt end to the rag, but rumour had it that the administration was going to come down hard on the senior students and to prevent that, the male freshers were 'bucketed'. Even when I left UoK in January 2009, more than 12 weeks after the rag started, the women had not been 'bucketed' because ragging protocol did not allow for the 'bucket' to take place without them having experienced the common/night rag. So the women had to continue with the prescribed dress code of the rag even though the rag was ostensibly over.

My main source of information on the what, the why, and the how, of the rag was Lakshman. He was an advocate of the rag and firmly believed that prohibiting it would 'destroy the university sub-culture' and fought very hard against the steps taken by the administration in 2008/2009 to curb the rag. Lakshman was a senior member of the MSS and explained that the rag is carried out for three reasons: to equalise all first-year students regardless of their ethnicity, religion, class, caste and sex; to educate them about the university sub-culture and to convince them to join the MSS and become active members. Doing away with the arrogance (*gæṭṭa*) which comes from class affiliations, the development of student personalities, the education of hostel students on how to use shared facilities and live in crowded quarters while respecting others feature prominently under the first reason. There is also an unofficial, albeit leading, reason why the rag is carried out by senior male students: it is to find themselves a partner (*kokka*) from the 'new ship of goods' (*alut nævē baḍu*) which came into the university.



### *Lining the pathways for the 'vāta' rag*

Despite having been at Kelaniya for close upon a year, when I walked into the campus on the first day of the start of the 2008 academic year, everything looked different and alien. It felt like my first day at UoK when everything was new and unfamiliar. The difference was not the new batch of students who had entered campus or the aesthetically pleasing decorations placed in strategic locations welcoming new students. It was primarily the way in which students – both senior and first-year – were lining the pathways by locating themselves in very distinct ways on the Wevalduwa road and the by-lanes leading to different faculties. The *Tel Bæmma* and the pavement opposite it were crammed with senior students adopting superior postures. The first-year students stood on the road, at a lower level to the pavement, facing the seniors, looking nervous with downcast eyes. Similarly, on the pathways leading to the different faculties, seniors were standing on the pavements looking towards the road while the first-years were standing on the road facing the seniors.

The seniors stood most commonly in groups of three or four. They were loud and boisterous and had their arms crossed or arms around the shoulder of their friend and conveyed a sense of confidence. Less common were senior students who stood on their own or in groups of two. The seniors were often in single-sex groups but mixed-sex groups were not uncommon. However, such mixed groups were always dominated by members of one sex – predominantly men, with one or two women, or predominantly women, with just one man. Although Seth, a final-year student, said that he had 'never seen so many women on the road ragging freshers'; and indeed during the initial stages of the rag there were significant numbers of women raggars, these all-women groups dwindled away five or six weeks into the rag.

The freshers often adopted a submissive stance and stood on the road facing the senior students. Similar to the seniors, the freshers groups ranged from mere one or two persons to more than 10 people. They stood in single or mixed sex groups which constantly fluctuated because senior students could call on any fresher passing by and

send off those who had been ragged adequately. So, it was not uncommon to see a single first-year student standing by her/himself and facing a group of seniors, a group of two or three first-years facing a single senior, a large group of first-years standing in front of an equally large group of seniors or a single first-year student standing in front of a single senior student. The size and composition of the group of first-years changed frequently even though it was most common to see at least two students at a time since they preferred to go around campus with at least one other person, probably buying into the belief of safety in numbers.

All freshers, regardless of sex, were ragged by both senior men and women students. More men than women ragged and they ragged both men and women freshers – almost equally or at least at a level where there was no glaring discrepancy. When senior women ragged, they ragged more women freshers. It was only once that I observed an all-women group ragging three men. They kept pointing to the drawings the men were asked to do and laughed raucously at the poor quality. In Aruni's eyes, these behaviours contravened accepted gendered notions of behaviour because she reacted with a scathing 'mad people/men' (*pissu minissu*) while we watched them. To her, these women were engaging in masculine behaviours which she did not approve of and, as a woman, she wanted to distance herself from them. She thus used *pissu minissu* as opposed to *pissu gæhænu* (mad women) to refer to these women even though they were from her batch.

The gendered dimensions of the rag according to Ramesh, a timid young man, were obvious from the very start as this excerpt from his letter suggests.<sup>31</sup>

Senior female students were actually kind to first-year male students. But they were not kind to first-year female students. Even though some senior male students showed us some kindness a majority were not even

---

<sup>31</sup> These letters/essays were written by the first-year students upon my request. They were written in a combination of English and Sinhalese, even though I told them to write in the language they were most comfortable with. I have changed the English to be grammatically accurate only when absolutely essential to comprehension.

considerate. But a majority of them were very kind to first-year female students.

It was common to hear women shouting at and using abusive language on first-year women but it was equally common to hear senior men using abusive and sexually laden language on them. Words like *topi* (impolite pronoun for either sex), *umba* (impolite pronoun for either sex), *vēsi* (whore), *yakō* (devil) and *bælli* (bitch) could be heard at every turn. The effect these terms had on the first-year women was obvious because crying women wiping away their tears was a common sight. Keeping in line with notions of respectable women, it was not as common to hear senior women using abusive language on men. Spencer (1990:608) argues ‘the ideal for women is restraint and the consequent avoidance of public attention’ and these women, even though not overtly concerned with the ideals expected of women, did not blatantly flout these expectations either. The rag allowed them a space through which they could push the boundaries of respectability but not break them.

This space and flexibility allowed to senior women to push the boundaries of respectability and express their authority is used to keep the first-year women in place. All women have to adhere to the dress code which only allows ankle-length flared skirts, blouses with sleeves and shirt collar and flat-heeled slippers. They are not allowed to wear any jewellery, not even a wristwatch. In a country where only recent widows or those in extreme poverty do not wear at least a small pair of earrings, these women were belaboured by the senior men for not wearing any jewellery. ‘Why don’t you have even a pair of earrings on you? Do you think you have to act like some recently widowed (*vændambu*) woman?’ were common questions thrown at first-year women. On the other hand, if these women wear any jewellery, they are verbally abused by women raggars (and sometimes by the men as well) for contravening the rules. ‘You bitch, didn’t we ask you to not wear any jewellery? Do you think that ugly face changes just because you wear earrings and that men will fall for you?’.

Turner talks of three phases of transition rites as separation, being in the margins or liminality, and re-aggregation (Turner 1974:232). During the phase of being in the margins, which Turner refers to as the liminal period, the person(s) undergoing the ritual becomes ambiguous, is neither here nor there and has very little access to aspects of her/his past or future state. The first-year students, in that sense, are in a state of 'neither here nor there' since nothing they do is considered acceptable as the examples of the earrings illustrate. It is in such a context that the freshers negotiate a space which allows them to develop a sense of comradeship with each other: commonly known as 'batch-fit'. 'Batch-fit' or the cohesiveness among students of one batch, created through the ragging process, is an important justification given for the rag. The expectation is that this comradeship will help students not only during their years at university but also when they face the outside world.

Such seemingly altruistic motives are not all which drive the rag. Lakshman very generously shared his thoughts with me on how some men, including himself, made use of the rag for personal gain.

It's mostly men who rag... Why because there are more women students in the [new] 'batch', no? There is an underlying motivation to get a partner [*kokka*], no? So because of that men engage in it more. For women of course, there is no point in talking with students from a 'junior batch', no? There is very little chance to come ashore [*goḍa yanna*], no? Why because the 'junior batch' will have only younger brothers [*maliḷā*], no? Only younger brothers. So, they [women] don't have much of an interest... Their participation is less.

The desire to get a partner (*kokka*) is a personal motivation which drives men to participate in the rag. This motivation is driven by the pressure, especially on men, to find a good woman and get into a relationship. This pressure is much less on women and moreover, since women are not expected to pursue men, engaging in the rag does not offer them this personal motivation. Women referring to a man from a junior batch as a younger brother (*mali*) is common practice as is men referring to a woman from

senior batches as an older sister (*akki* or *akkā*). The use of these terms precludes any possibility of romantic relationships between older women and younger men because according to age-based norms intimate/romantic relationship can be founded only between an older man (*ayiyā*) and younger woman (*narigi*). Silva *et al* (1998) discuss this phenomenon in relation to how the rag serves to maintain existing gender norms of perceived male and age superiority, in romantic relationships. At Kelaniya, a woman from a senior batch, becoming romantically tied to a man from a junior batch is an anomaly and such relationships have a special term: *lambert kokka*.

I asked Aruni if she would rag a first-year man, if university culture did not frown upon older women getting into relationships with younger men.

Even if having a *lambert kokka* was OK, I still wouldn't get into a relationship like that because that would mean that I did all the hard work of chasing the boy and all he had to do was say OK. So, even if I had feelings towards a younger brother [*malli*] which was not really the kind of feelings that I should have towards a *malli*, I would not 'rag' him and then get into a relationship with him. That is not what I like. I like the man to come behind me [Laughs]. Besides, I would feel shy [*læjjayi*] to go behind a man.

Aruni parrots the culturally accepted and gendered expectations of starting a romantic relationship. A 'good girl' as Lynch (2007) points out, is circumspect in all aspects linked to her sexuality and for Aruni this also involved being chased and playing hard to get. Moreover, she invoked the often referred to notion of shame (Obeyesekere 1984:504, 1997) as another reason why she would not 'go behind a man' since to do so and not show any shame would be violating behavioural norms of a respectable woman.

Unlike men, who were quite proud of their ragging skills, none of the women I spoke with admitted to having ragged. Their reasons varied from not wanting to waste their time to thinking that the rag was an appalling experience which they did not want to inflict on another person. The socialisation of women to absorb virtues of compassion

and consideration for others, foremost in the nationalist project (Chatterjee 1993; Obeyesekere 1997), continues to this day and thus women performed this ideal by showing a reluctance to rag freshers or saying that they had not engaged in ragging. The importance of being considerate was expressed differently by Samadhi and Aruni. The three of us were surreptitiously watching some women rag junior men and I asked if they had ragged their juniors. They both answered in the negative and when I asked for reasons Samadhi said that she has been with friends when they have said, 'Look, look there is a good looking *malli*, lets "rag" him for the fun of it'. She went on to say that often her heart said, 'Do it, do it, do it,' but she never did because she did not want to inflict the difficulties she had experienced on another. Aruni, on the other hand said that her ragging experience at Kelaniya was not so bad but still did not rag because she did not see any value in it.

Most students at Kelaniya, apart from those who rejected the rag in its entirety, distinguished between the *vāta* rag and the common rag. A majority of them found the *vāta* rag niggling but not violent. Some of them found it acceptable and even enjoyable. Thushari, a first-year student, who was generally very disapproving of the rag, wrote the following:

During the 'rag' season some students got beautiful experiences. They were asked to marry someone. They tell a boy to choose a girl and if he doesn't they choose a girl for him. Then they order him to hold her hand. Then they get someone else to do the registration of the marriage. Another person is asked to recite the *aśthaka* [Sanskrit couplets usually recited at formal village rituals]. A few others are ordered to sing the *Jayamaṅgala Gāthā* [a medieval Pali text chanted at Buddhist weddings]. After that, the bride and the bridegroom are taken in a procession. Actually, it was a very funny incident.

Being forced to mimic a socially sanctioned life event, one considered especially important for women, is seen as a beautiful experience. Thushari gave no thought to the lack of choice given to her in performing this act. Both men and women took it for granted that they would marry in the near future and so having to perform a marriage

ceremony was not seen as violent or forceful. With the exception of Samadhi, who questioned the validity of the marital institution, others accepted it as an important part of their life cycle. Thus the rag provided them with a means of enjoying a staged performance of a ritual which many men and women would, often willingly and with enthusiasm, experience at some point in their life. However, not all students perceived the mimicking of such experiences in a positive light.

Fatima was a first-year Muslim student, clad in a long-sleeved *salwār-kameez* and headscarf, nearly in tears when she walked into the English department, and related her experience to me. Having to hold a ‘boy’s hand when he is not the person I will marry is against my religion but they just mocked me when I pleaded to be excused’ she lamented. The issue of uncertain boundaries in gendered interactions, where actions that men perceive as harmless fun can be harassing for women (Quinn 2002), also applies in the ragging process. It is not merely gender roles which come into play in understanding the impact of these behaviours but also the cultural, religious and family contexts. All these factors come together in shaping perceptions and two women of similar age and socio-economic background but different religious and family upbringing can have a very different take on the same action as was the case with Thushari and Fatima: a pleasant experience for one woman was harassing for another.

### **Stories of Violence and Stories of Charm: The Many Facets of the Rag**

#### *Selling vegetables to overcome inhibitions*

Men and women experience the sexual violence of the rag differently. For men the violence was more overt and tangible while the women had to endure more subtle forms of violence. Kanishka was a final-year student who completely opposed the rag and escorted freshers to their classes whenever possible. He had many stories of what his friends had endured during their rag, which he had thankfully escaped because he could afford to live at and travel from home, even though it was a two-hour commute each way. Being stripped naked and having your head shoved into the commode while the

seniors flushed the commode or being stripped naked and having to crawl underneath a row of six dining-table chairs without knocking on even one chair, according to Kanishka were commonplace. To him, this kind of ragging was deplorable, violent and an abuse of power.

Lakshman, however, saw this kind of ragging as acceptable and even character building. With his voice dropping to a conspiratorial level, he told me how the men were asked to remove their clothes and given ‘A thing called a “physical”, to do “dips”. Next they give for the body... they give “exercises”. It is “exercises” that they give. So I of course think it is very good for the body.’ During our conversations, Lakshman kept telling me that he was divulging secrets and wanted my assurance that his name would not be mentioned to anyone when I interviewed others. After giving him my word, I asked him about feelings of embarrassment that some men may feel about being naked in the presence of others, to which he promptly replied ‘in that situation we are trying to do away with shyness. Shame and fear (*læjja-baya*).’ In the conversation which followed about *læjja-baya*, Lakshman expounded that a man could be made weak by having too much *læjja-baya* and therefore it was important, especially for university students, who by the virtue of being educated (*ugat kama*), to rid themselves of their shame and fear.

Doing away with notions of *læjja-baya* and developing a good personality were two frequently cited reasons as to why the rag was important. This applied not only to men but also to women albeit for women it only applied to specific aspects of *læjja-baya*: *læjja-baya* in relation to their sexuality had to be maintained at all times. The women at Kelaniya were not forced to display their nudity. For them, the sexual aspects of the rag related to playing on words, reciting poems with double meaning and sometimes touching their breasts/nipples. Kumari said that one of the first things she remembers about her rag was senior students coming into her room in the middle of the night, pulling them out of bed and asking them to act like women who locate themselves in open market places to sell fruit and vegetables (*vaṭṭi ammalā*) and walk around the



room. The term *vaṭṭi ammā* is also used to refer to a woman who has no *læjja-baya* and think nothing of shouting at people or scolding them in public.

As *vaṭṭi ammalā* they had been asked to sell *kohila* (*Lasia Spinosa* - a marshy herb common in Sri Lanka and cultivated as a root vegetable) and pineapple (*annāsi*) with the person in front selling the *kohila* and the one behind selling the *annāsi*. So, Kumari and her five roommates had walked around the room with their arms up in the air as if they were carrying a *vaṭṭiya* (a large, flat and round tray-like basket made out of young bamboo and reed) shouting, ‘*Kohila, kohila!* Who wants *kohila*? It’s very cheap’, and the ones selling the pineapples had cried out similar slogans. At this point the seniors had shouted at them for not knowing how to sell the vegetable and the fruit and given them proper instructions to follow. The word *kohila* had to be pronounced as two words: *kō hila* (which then translates to ‘where is the hole?’) and the word *annāsi* also had to be pronounced as two words: *anna assē* (which translates to ‘there it is, underneath’). So as one student cried out ‘Where is the hole?’, the other had to respond with a ‘There it is, underneath’ while the senior students taunted them with comments about the size, the shape and the purpose of the hole (*hila*).

For Kumari, having to shout out about her sexual anatomy and being scolded for not acting like a proper *vaṭṭi ammā*, was both embarrassing and distressing. It was however, she explained, a way in which she realised that aspects of her sexuality would be held to ridicule and laughter by others – especially men. Women did not always speak of the sexual connotations of the rag in a completely negative light. The women I spoke with had not experienced any enforced nudity during their rag so, while admitting to feeling shy and even annoyed with the seniors, they did not feel their sense of respectability was too affected. When they recounted their experiences which had sexual connotations, it was more often than not, with some amusement, a little bit of giggling and quite a lot of appreciation for it having reduced their *læjja-baya*. None of the women wanted to do away with notions of *læjja-baya* completely but rather to have

*læjja-baya* when it came to their sexual behaviours but not in other aspects of their lives.

### *Instilling fear and punishing defiance*

The sentiments Aruni expressed on the rag at Kelaniya, were similar to what others conveyed: the ragging at Kelaniya was mild compared with what their peers experienced at other universities. I once received an email from a student saying that a woman was raped during the rag at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura. Similarly the case of a young man, from the University of Peradeniya, who died of kidney failure due to severe ragging, made the headlines in 1997. Perceptions of the rag and its severity were always seen in relative terms by the students. Seth and Mahesh, who went to the same school, compared the ragging at Kelaniya with what they underwent in their school and found the *vāta* rag pale in comparison. The common/night rag for men was reported as being harsh and even inhuman in comparison. Mahesh, a final year student who did not experience the common/night rag because he did not live in university accommodation, found the *vāta* rag

A lot of fun. There is an element of fear definitely. As first-years like, we were like, I was... I can remember being scared but, but it was not a bad kind of fear. It was... I don't know if it's possible to say if fear is good or bad but one of the biggest challenges I had was to like, for me personally, personally it was like I learnt to interact with the different types of people you met here [because of the rag].<sup>32</sup>

The concept of fear, couched in different ways, was prominent in every conversation I had or letter I received about the rag. This fear is linked to the verbal, mental and physical violence inherent in how the rag is carried out today. It is the obligatory nature of the rag, the inability to refuse and defy the commands, which cause this dread and results in them having to play a symbolically inverted role, which everyone has to do at some point in their life (Turner 1978). The power conferred upon the senior students

---

<sup>32</sup> This interview was conducted in English.

creates an imbalance which the freshers cannot challenge. Most often the seniors who do not believe in the rag do not take any steps to address this imbalance or prevent its occurrence. The turning of a blind eye is a form of action (Enloe 2004) and it sends out a message that ragging and the fear associated with it is acceptable, is the norm and part of the larger social order. Thus as Richter-Montpetit (2007) argues it reflects on the violence embedded in the social context and the relations of inequality therein.

All first-year students tried to avoid the rag. So they did not walk around campus unless absolutely necessary which generally meant that they went from one lecture to the next or from a lecture to their place of accommodation. The library and/or the computer centres were hardly used since that involved traversing further afield. According to Hemantha (2006) in some universities freshers are not allowed access to the library and have to sit for their first term exam without any of the extra readings prescribed by the lecturers. At Kelaniya, even though such stringent rules were not enforced, the freshers were not allowed to veer away from the main paths of the university or use any of the garden areas. No shortcuts could be taken and with the exception of one woman, who faced dire consequences as a result, I did not see any fresher challenging these restrictions on their mobility and access to public areas.

One evening I was sitting in the Pali and Buddhist studies car park, covered by the supporting pillars, when Kumari walked by with a friend. She came over to ask me why I was seated by myself and set herself down to keep me company. The sun had just set and the university was relatively deserted except for a few couples in their usual hiding places. Kumari was explaining to me, as she frequently did, why I should not sit by myself when we heard footsteps rushing towards us. We stopped talking and looked up to see a young woman, wearing a blue denim skirt which fell to knee length and a green short sleeved, collarless t-shirt, rush past us. She was followed, in quick succession, by a group of four men shouting obscenities at her and asking her to stop immediately. The woman kept walking even faster and then broke into a slow run into the garden area saying 'Please, older brothers, (*ayiyē*), let me be,' but the men were too quick for her

and soon surrounded her. At this point, amid protests from Kumari to remain hidden, I stood up to observe the confrontation albeit from safe distance.

From where I was standing, it was not possible to hear all the words hurled at the woman but phrases like ‘bloody bitch’, ‘teach you a good lesson’, ‘dressing like a bloody whore’ and ‘get out’ were shouted loudly in Sinhala and the men kept pointing their fingers at her face, at such close proximity, that she had to pull back and turn her face away several times. After a good five minutes of this verbal harangue, they let her go but made her walk back in the same direction as she had come from and they walked behind her jeering loudly. She, crying and looking down at her feet, had to hurry away. As the men walked past me, they said ‘Just look at her, only a first-year and trying to show her “part”’ but since they got no reaction from me they walked away talking to and laughing with each other and then separated into different paths.

Kumari, who remained seated during all of this, stood up after the men left and, while condemning their actions, said that the woman was also to be blamed because she had not only worn clothes which were prohibited during the rag season but also traversed into proscribed spaces. Kumari’s thoughts on this incident were no different to those of others with whom I spoke about this incident. Even those who opposed the rag did not see the harm in complying with the dress code or avoiding the garden spaces since that would lead to less confrontations and problems. It was easier for women to comply with restrictions – no matter if they are imposed by society or the university rag – than to challenge them and face the consequences. The complying and subservient woman will be offered protection and sympathised with whereas the transgressor can only expect blame (Vance 1992) and it is this line of thinking about women which dominated at Kelaniya.

### *Using feminine charms to face the rag*

It was more acceptable for women to use their femininity to avoid the rag and its severity. Samadhi and Aruni regaled me with stories on how they used their ‘feminine charms’ (*gæhæñu gati*) to beat the system. They are both fairly fiery, liberal minded women who often questioned male domination in society and try to subvert the norms they are expected to live by. During her first week at campus, Samadhi had tried to challenge the raggers but soon realised it made things worse for her. So she adopted the ‘ideal and expected’ role of a woman, acted submissively, showed ‘just the right amount’ of *læjja-baya* and cried at the slightest affront. She was shouted at for crying but keeping in line with ‘ragging protocol’ she was pacified prior to being sent away. A crying woman is a submissive woman who is socially more acceptable than one who challenges a man or refuses to comply with his demands. Hewamanne explains how the women she worked with used tears to negotiate their positions since ‘tears called attention to an internalised quality in young women as “fragile, sentimental beings” who needed to be protected and forgiven’ (Hewamanne 2008:98).

The accomplishments of the Mother’s Front in Sri Lanka are testimony to the power of tears (De Mel 2001).<sup>33</sup> During the rag there was many a time when I helplessly watched young women sobbing and wiping away the tears with their handkerchief or the back of their hand. My ambiguous position at Kelaniya did not allow me to intervene in any way except when I was with a senior student. I would then ask the student I was with to call the students being ragged, chat informally for a while and then send them away through another route so that they had to suffer less of the rag. While Samadhi and countless others like her may have used tears to protect themselves, for others their tears were the only means available to them to express their hurt in a situation of powerlessness. A few women were more strategic and performed the image of the ‘ideal, shy village lass’ to exploit the interest a ragger showed in them during the rag.

---

<sup>33</sup> Tears were not the only ‘tools’ used by the Mother’s Front to achieve their objective of seeking justice for their disappeared children/sons. Apart from a very public display of their grief, De Mel (2001) also details the unorthodox strategies used by them in their efforts.

Mihiri had realised relatively early in the rag that one ragger had set his sight on her because he had rescued her and then started to enquire about her. She saw this as a wonderful opportunity and continued to act as ‘an innocent village lass’, played along with his interest and gave him adequate encouragement but not quite commit to becoming his *kokka* at the end of the rag. Safe in the knowledge that he would protect her from being ragged by others, Mihiri was minimally harassed during the first two months of the rag. Just before they were to be bucketed, he had told her, ‘*Narigi*, I’m telling this only because it’s you. It’s the “bucket” tomorrow. You need not come to university’ and Mihiri had thanked him profusely using *ayiyā* several times and informed her close friends to stay away from university on the day of the ‘bucket’ as well. Mihiri said, ‘I came back to university the day after the “bucket” and just did not talk to him. I completely stopped. I just looked the other way and snubbed him a little [when he tried to approach me].’ She laughed with glee when she told me this story and was proud of how she used her femininity to avoid being ragged.

These women who used their femininity to avoid the severity of the rag, did so because they had a keen sense that a more direct and confrontational approach would only result in negative consequences. They realise that in a context which they, as younger women, are not given the space to question or challenge gender and seniority norms, it is easier and more effective to adhere to or at least portray the socially sanctioned role of a submissive and innocent woman. Thus by using their feminine charms they achieve their desired goal of not being ragged. However these circuitous routes which women have to adopt, if they are to avoid harassment, are only transitory strategies which in the long run, I suggest, contribute to reinforcing existing gender inequalities.

### *Finding a ‘kokka’ through gentle violence*

The personal motivation of finding a *kokka*, drove some men, even those who opposed the rag in principle, to do ‘a little bit of “ragging”’ in their second year. The strategy they adopted was to rescue the damsel in distress. The man identifies the woman he is

attracted to and plots with his friends to woo her. His friends corner the woman and severely rag her until the good *ayiyā* comes to her rescue. He then chastises the other men and pacifies the *nāngi* with a more gentle kind of ragging. It is a different courtship pattern to what is observed in the larger societal context but one which seems to be just as effective in establishing relationships. Many women I knew met their ‘*ayiyā*’ during the rag.<sup>34</sup> Romantic relationships emanating from the rag were common and accepted without demur. The violence inherent in these relationships, from their very start, is then no different to the violence which is found at the core of each social relationship (Bourdieu 1990).

Bourdieu distinguishes between overt and symbolic violence which is gentle and invisible, and asserts that the type of violence which can be found in each social relationship will depend ‘on the state of the power relations between the two parties’ (Bourdieu 1990:127). He goes on to say how this gentle violence, by virtue of its invisibility, is not recognised as violence and therefore leads to feelings of trust, obligation, loyalty and hospitality. It is these feelings of trust and obligation, at being rescued from the ragers, which are then used as the basis of the romantic relationships emanating from the rag. A few women played the system and turned it to their benefit but those who had got into relationships out of the rag often said ‘but really he’s a good *ayiyā* who helped me a lot during the rag’ when I asked them how they became the *kokka* of someone who ragged them. It is the very invisibility of gentle violence which makes it difficult for the one with less power to speak out because she is bound by the obligation of being saved.

If this approach of gentle violence does not have the desired effect, men turn to other, more innovative and reliable approaches. One afternoon, nearly two months after the rag had started I saw Lakshman and another man ragging a group of three women. I

---

<sup>34</sup> Even though *ayiyā* is the kinship term for older brother, it was also the term used by most women at Kelaniya to refer to their partner/boyfriend. See Kipp (1986) for an account of young romantic partners in North Sumatra using kin/sibling terminology to refer to each other as a mark of respect and affection.

realised I had taught English to one of the women during their university orientation and since I knew both parties well, I spoke with Lakshman and requested him to let the three women off since one of them was a former student. He enquired which one it was and when I pointed to Nalika he agreed to do so, mumbled something to his friend and started walking with me towards the Department of Medieval Studies. As we got closer to the department Lakshman started asking me questions about Nalika. ‘What was she like in class?’ ‘Was she a good student?’ ‘Was she polite?’ ‘Did I know anything special about her?’ I started responding to the questions but realised almost immediately that I was divulging too much information and stopped myself to ask Lakshman why he wanted to know all of this.

This is the thing you see, this information is not for me. My friend who was with me likes her and the thing is she is not giving him a firm word. We think she likes him but since she is being so vague, it’s difficult to really assess. He keeps washing [*sōdanavā*] her but so far there have been no results. Since you taught her and know her well, do you think you could put in a good word for my friend? He’s a really good bloke.<sup>35</sup>

I refrained from expressing my disbelief at this request and politely said that I could not help him or his friend for reasons too numerous to mention. He accepted my response in good humour and very nonchalantly said that he would ask some others to help out. I enquired from others if such requests are the norm and they said that ‘getting the help of others’, those who know the woman in question through another connection ‘to intervene’, when directly approaching the woman does not work was very common. I never met Nalika after that to find out if she had succumbed to the gentle violence Bourdieu speaks of and become her admirer’s *kokka*. But if she had, then it is imperative to question how relationships which begin on a foundation of violence, albeit a gentle kind of violence, and with such obvious power differences, play out in the long run.

---

<sup>35</sup> See Chapter Four for how the word *sōdanavā* is used at Kelaniya.



## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I highlight how for students entering Kelaniya the rag acts as an introduction, albeit a harsh one, into university life and how they have to fashion their behaviours in accordance with the rules set forth through the rag. The rag begins by instilling a sense of fear among university entrants so that no matter how students eventually recalled the rag: with approval, annoyance or humour, a sense of obligation, uneasiness and even fear were a huge part of it when they experienced it. The lack of choice given to students during the rag makes it ‘a matter of dread, it is demanding, serious, obligatory’ (Turner 1978:283) and this is how senior students convey to both men and women freshers the underlying message of the rag: comply with the commands meted out by senior students or suffer grave consequences for refusing to conform. Even though the stringent rules which apply during the rag are time-bound, they set the foundation for the age hierarchy which students have to comply with, while at university.

I illustrate how alongside this age hierarchy, gender norms also get played out during the rag. It cannot be denied that in every aspect of the rag, older men have an advantage over women and younger men. It was more acceptable for men to implement the rag and it gave them an opportunity to find a partner by using gentle violence, rebuke women who transgressed rules and express age based power differences. Undeniably the rag also allowed older women a space in which to express authority over younger women and even men but the ways in which women could navigate within this space was limited. Even as senior students, these women contained themselves and did not deviate fully from the norms of propriety expected of them: their language was not too abusive, they did not shout out and could not pursue a potential partner. Thus more than the age hierarchy, the rag served to maintain the gender hierarchy prevalent in larger society because despite the opportunity given to senior women students to rag, they continued to be constrained by societal norms in how they carried out the ragging. This gendered difference in how the rag was meted out functioned to further maintain gender norms at Kelaniya by exposing the freshers to patterns of gender appropriate behaviour.

Aside from age and gender norms the rag also helps to reinforce the importance of women's respectability in relation to their sexuality. The obligatory dress code for women, of long skirts and blouses with sleeves and a high neckline, is used to convey the ideal attire for women who are respectable and sexually chaste. I illustrate the consequences women who transgress these obligatory norms have to face and the lack of sympathy they receive from other women. Women who adhere to the rules of the rag and portray an image of the submissive woman, on the other hand, are treated more kindly. By performing a socially determined script these women escape the abusiveness of the rag but they do so at the expense of reinforcing gender appropriate behaviours. And yet it is important to give recognition to these small victories which point to how women work within the constraints placed on them and still manage to escape unpleasant experiences.

At Kelaniya, with the exception of those who condemned every aspect of the rag, many saw it as being both positive and negative. For them, the rag was an inconvenience, an imposition on their freedom but something which had to be faced since it represented a passage from one status to another (Turner 1974:288). Being in this liminal space gave them an opportunity to establish good friendships and rid themselves of *læjja-baya*. More than for men, the rag seemed to provide women with a transformative space wherein they could adapt the notion of *læjja-baya* and be more self-assured in certain aspects of their lives but still conform to the ideals of being respectable women when it came to their sexuality. Exposure to the rag, in that sense, helped to make them fear abusive language less, face adverse situations better, feel more confident to do things on their own and feel less shy to talk about parts and functions of their body which previously were taboo. This same exposure also led them to be doubly concerned about their respectability, comply with authority and resort to strategies which reinforce gender norms. Thus in a contradictory manner, the rag both diminished and reinforced notions of *læjja-baya* in women.

The gender and age based hierarchies reinforced through the rag sets the stage for how younger men and, especially, women should express themselves and behave while at university. Within a few weeks at university, the women learn the importance of maintaining *læjja-baya*, adhering to boundaries, using their femininity and finding circuitous ways of achieving their goals. In their quest to be perceived as respectable young women, many of them take on board the rules of the rag and become advocates for maintaining gender norms, showing adequate *læjja-baya* and portraying sexual chastity. Women's concern with these issues affected their everyday lives – their language use, their behaviours and even their thoughts – and thus become recurring themes in this thesis. In the next chapter I show how the language used by the seniors during the rag, extends beyond the ragging period and is eventually appropriated by freshers to label others, to objectify women and to caution or gently chastise friends. Yet similar to the rag which offers women a space in which to overcome certain constraints placed on them, I illustrate how language use at Kelaniya also works in paradoxical ways to both constrain and liberate women's behaviour.

## CHAPTER 4

### Disputed Language: Using Impolite Speech, Giving Words New Meaning

#### Introduction

Hook (*kokka*), *Kirivehera* (name of a popular Buddhist temple in Kataragama), button (*bottama*) and other terms I was familiar with were often used in contexts or sentences which, to me, seemed wholly inappropriate. A man asking another man ‘Did you have any luck getting a *kokka*?’ Or a woman telling her friend ‘Your *Kirivehera* can be seen in that dress’ left me wondering about the meanings of these phrases and words. Why were they used in contexts that were different to how they were used in the larger society? What did the speaker mean when s/he used them and how did the listener understand these sentences? Then there were other words, ones which given my middle-class upbringing I had been forbidden to use because they were considered impolite, which were widely used and could be heard in nearly every conversation. *Umba* (you), *bari* (chum), *vareni* (come here), *kāpani* (eat), generally thought of as rude commands by upper and middle-class society, were used by both men and women, especially when they were in same-sex groups, with total ease and a near lack of restraint.

In the previous chapter I showed how the rag, the introductory experience for nearly all students, sets the stage in shaping women’s sexuality and respectability by pushing them to conform to campus norms. In this chapter I focus on language use at Kelaniya, often an extension of that used during the rag, to show how language contributes to the construction of women’s sexuality and their performance as respectable women. In the first section of this chapter I describe how the language of the rag is extended beyond the ragging period and appropriated by freshers to communicate with each other. I argue that this appropriation gives women some freedom from the constraints placed on their language use and provides them with an opening to gently push the boundaries of respectability and femininity which apply to them. In the second section I detail how the distinctive speech community at Kelaniya functions. I draw attention to the differences

between the speech communities of men and women to reveal the idiolects at Kelaniya which reinforce, through the objectification of women, the labelling of ideal forms of relationships and even the semiotic resources used by women, norms of gender, respectability and femininity for women.

Ahearn defines language as a cultural resource, a set of practices and a form of social action which is 'inextricably embedded in networks of socio-cultural relations' (Ahearn 2001b:110-111). Citing Urban's work (1996), Ahearn explains how language both 'shapes and is shaped by socio-cultural factors and power dynamics' and these power dynamics are reflected in the everyday use of language. Schulz however argues that the extent to which language influences any society is not easy to measure but agrees that language is a reflection of 'the thoughts, attitudes and culture of the people who make it and use it' (Schulz 1975/1990:134). It then follows that since social sanctions for men and women are different in most societies, men and women will use language differently and these differences will be more obvious in certain contexts than others, as I reveal in the remainder of this chapter.

### ***'Umba', 'Bañ' and 'Kuṇuharapa': University Jargon or Taboo Words?***

#### *Good friendships and colloquial expressions*

The willingness to open their circle and include an outsider into their group of friends was something which amazed me about the students I met at Kelaniya. From my very first week in the field, I was introduced to others as 'our new friend' and mobile phone numbers were exchanged to send text messages and give 'ring-cuts'. After that I was always invited to join them for lunch, to go to the 'milk-bar' for a cup of tea or accosted for a brief exchange of pleasantries. Friendships, it seemed to me, were formed overnight based on the briefest of introductions and sometimes maintained throughout their university days. I consider myself privileged to have been considered worthy of being included into their circle of friends and by default into their shared lunches so easily. The daily/shared lunch had a certain ritualistic aspect to them. A group of about

three or four students gathers around a table or on a bench and each student takes out her lunch packet.<sup>36</sup> They open one packet and the students, using their fingers, eat from the opened packet. When they are done with that packet, they open the next packet and eat that. This pattern of eating is continued until all lunch packets have been finished.

It was during these shared lunches that I became conscious of the terms they use when referring to each other. Cultures place linguistic taboos on certain words and phrases and their usage is considered inappropriate in most contexts (Risch 1987:353). Quoting Trudgill (1974:29-31), Risch explains that many of these words are linked to sex and that it is the form of the word, as opposed to its meaning, which results in an irrational response from the society at large thus making the word taboo. In the Sinhala language there are certain taboo words which are strongly linked to the act of sex and sexual organs and these are considered inappropriate for use in nearly all communicative contexts. These words are taboo for both men and women but especially so for women and it is rare to hear them coming out of a woman's mouth. When the words or phrases are used, they are insulting to both men and women. If the words pertain to women's sexual organs they are insulting to women, while words for both men's and women's sexual organs are insulting to men, the latter being an attack on their very masculinity. These words are commonly referred to as filth by the English speaking middle-classes in Colombo and profanities (*kuṇuḥarapa*) by all Sinhala speaking communities.<sup>37</sup>

In the Sinhala language, there are also a set of words which are considered impolite for use in select social contexts, which are often used to rebuke people from a lower social standing than oneself. There are forms of address, second person pronouns, through which a speaker can express her/his status vis-à-vis the hearer (McConnell-Ginet 1980) and it is these types of words I refer to in this section. These words do not have sexual connotations and are commonly used in masculine parlance. They are the alternatives to

---

<sup>36</sup> I use the term 'her' because it is usually women who bring lunch packets and they call their men friends to share the packets with them.

<sup>37</sup> *Kuṇuḥarapa* words are similar to English swear words. They are laden with sexual idioms and refer to female genitalia, male genitalia and forms of sexual behaviour.

socially accepted words to address people as well as for commonly used verbs like eat, sleep, drink, run, etc. Similar to what Trudgill (1972) argues, these are words which have connotations of roughness and toughness associated with working-class life and so are considered more masculine. It is these words which I heard frequently used among friends, both men and women, especially if they were in same-sex groups or women with male students who were younger to them.

One day four of us were having lunch and we had just finished the second *bath* packet when Sakunthala took her hand away and drank some water from her recycled Evian water bottle. Gayani then took out her *bath* packet, a homemade one wrapped in a banana leaf, and opened it to reveal some delicious looking curries. We all dipped our fingers in, mixed the rice and vegetables to make small mouthfuls in each of our corners of the packet and were half way through it when we noticed that Sakunthala was not eating from this packet. ‘Why are *you* not eating?’ [*Æyi umba kannættē?*] Gayani asked her and Sakunthala replied ‘I have had enough *chum*, I’m not hungry’ [*Maṭa æti baṇi, baḍagini næhæ*] to which Gayani rejoined with an ‘Are *you* mad? Just *eat!*’ [*Tamuseṭa pissuda? Onna ohē kāpaṇi*].<sup>38</sup> This conversation *per se* would not have aroused my curiosity had it not been for the words *you* (*umba, tamuseṭa*), *chum* (*baṇi*) and *eat* (*kāpaṇi*). Risch (1987) explains that it is not the meanings of these words but rather their form that is important and it is this which made me question the women about using these words.

Words like this for *you* (*umba, topi, tamusē*), devil (*yako*), say it (*kiyapaṇi*), eat it (*kāpaṇi*), drink it (*bīpaṇi*) and do it (*karapaṇi*) are frequently heard during the rag season and are used by the raggers. Many first-year women were shocked at the tone in which these words were used during the rag because no one in their homes had addressed them or ordered them around using these words in such harsh tones. But the words themselves were not problematic since many of them explained how their mothers

---

<sup>38</sup> The words in *italics* in this English translation denote Sinhala terms which would be considered impolite by those from the middle-classes.

would use words like *umba* and *baṇi* to refer to them but the tone would be soft and loving. So the connotations of these words, while generally considered impolite, can also be thought of as loving depending on who uses them and how they are used. For example Hewamanne (2008) illustrates how the boarding-house owner, playing the role of an elderly figure, used similar words in kindness and affection when she had conversations with the women workers. Hewamanne also argues though that the boarding-house owner was able to use such words on the women because of her higher status in relation to the workers and by doing so she continued to mark herself apart from them.

These words were commonly used around the lunch table on a daily basis, and I was told that their appropriateness and acceptability had to do with who used them, the tone and the manner in which the words were used. These same terms, used by a close friend or among a group of friends, were acceptable, while a stranger (regardless of sex), a person of the opposite sex (unless they were extremely close friends) or students from junior batches using the same words would be neither acceptable nor appropriate. Conversely these words were also used by family members and friends to scold each other. When I enquired from Samadhi about the use of these words and how comfortable she felt using them or having them used on her, she said that even though she is used to hearing them and her mother uses these words to scold her, she does not like it when they are used. She wrote

When my mother [*ammā*] gets angry with me she shouts at me and she uses those words. Like this “What has happened to you? [*Umbaṭa mokada baṇi velā tiyennē*], Are you not paying any attention? [*Umba sihiyen nemeyida innē?*] Devil, get used to doing your things methodically! [*Yakō purudu veyallā piḷivelakaṭa vaeḍak karanna*] Otherwise one day people will scold us as well” [*Nætnam kavada hari minissu apiṭat ekka baninne*].

Samadhi comes from a rural, working-class family and still remembers her father physically abusing her mother and using a range of *kuṇuharapa* words with every blow.



Whenever she tried to intervene he verbally abused her using similar words. Therefore, hearing words like *umba*, *tamusē*, *yakō* during the rag was not a shock for Samadhi. But even for her, despite or maybe because of her familiarity with these words, she did not like to hear them used on her. The use of these words was linked with anger and annoyance in her home context but I have been with Samadhi when her friends have used these words on her in what could not be termed anything else but a sense of camaraderie. Reciprocating with similar address forms would have denoted equality between the speaker and the addressee (Wolfson and Manes 1980) and even though the exchanges I refer to took place among friends who were equals, Samadhi hardly used these terms of address on her friends in my presence.

The experience of students from urban and peri-urban lower middle-class families was different and many of these women mused over the distress they felt when *umba* and *tamusē* were first used on them. As Inushi, a first-year student wrote in her letter, ‘I hate the way they speak to us because even my parents have not spoken to or scolded me using such words’. The sense of distress was especially acute for the women who had been less exposed to these words. Ramesh conveyed the gendered differences of this distress when he wrote

Even though many seniors use words which are not common in daily speech, these words were not alien to us. However for my women friends, having to listen to these words was difficult because they had not used these words or heard many of these words used on them before.

This initial shock, however, was often replaced and quite a number of students, regardless of their social class, used these words with their friends and adopted a sense of linguistic solidarity while at campus. Ahearn (2001b) explains how people learn new ways of speaking and acting according to the social context and these linguistic practices contribute both to social reproduction and social transformation. Similarly, McConnell-Ginet (1980:3) details that ‘changes in social and cultural structures are often connected to linguistic changes’ and it seems that the socio-cultural practices of

the university context, which is different to what most women had been exposed to, contributed to changes in linguistic practices among some women. However, these new linguistic practices were restricted to the university setting and to certain contexts within the university thus pointing to the ubiquity of the social constraints placed on women by larger society.

Nayana was from a middle-class family and had her primary and secondary education in a leading school in the hill capital.<sup>39</sup> She switched between both Sinhala and English fairly comfortably and used the words *umba* and *bari* frequently when conversing with her friends in the vernacular. One day while she, Kanishka and I were having tea, she explained how these words had become common place in her vocabulary.

I was really ‘shocked’ on my first day at the university when these words were used on me and even cried a lot because no one had ever used them on me before. But then you get used to it and it becomes very ‘normal’. Now, I’m totally fine with it... totally fine and feel very comfortable using it on all my friends. It’s very ‘normal’ for me to use these words, even with my men friends. It shows how close we are to each other, no?

Nayana speaks Sinhala at home and both languages with her school friends. She said that she would not use these words at home or with any of her friends who were not from university. It is the same sense of closeness and affection mentioned to me by the students from rural backgrounds that Nayana used to explain why such words were used among her university friends. Ironically it was these same words which were used to mildly abuse and rag her during her first year. They were also words which she admitted she would ‘never use’ in contexts outside of the university even if she and her

---

<sup>39</sup> Assigning some students to conventional class structures was difficult. As Bourdieu (1987:13) argues, the many complexities inherent in modern social life make boundaries between classes similar to ‘flames whose edges are in constant movement, oscillating around a line or surface’. Therefore, the class categories I use should be read with care. Even though a majority of students were from rural working or lower middle-class, Sinhala-speaking backgrounds there were a few from urban and peri-urban areas whose class backgrounds were especially difficult to assess. Their parents worked in government departments or were teachers; they spoke in English but admitted to not being fully proficient in the language. Some of them spoke only in Sinhala at home while others said they spoke in both languages depending on the issue being discussed.

university friends were in informal settings with only each other. According to Trudgill (1972:182), women are more status conscious and 'aware of the social significance of linguistic variables' and it is possible that Nayana's awareness of this made her strategically manipulate the use of language according to context.

The complexity surrounding the use of this type of language is linked to their varied applicability for different students. For Gayani and Sakunthala these words were largely unproblematic and are used among friends to show affection and friendship. Samadhi on the other hand, who admits to using and being familiar with these words, associates them with scolding and prefers to not use them. Nayana, who went to a private all-girls boarding school and whose school friends were likely to have been from a socio-economic class different to that of the majority of students at UoK was shocked when these words were first used on her. Nonetheless, she now enjoys using these words but had self-imposed restrictions of when and where to use them. The social transformation brought upon by these new linguistic practices give women an opportunity to break free from the linguistic constraints placed upon them. However, it is both a transient and selective transformation since women are still expected to and continue to reproduce socially sanctioned gender norms in their linguistic practices.

The expectation that women should use polite language, which Brown (1980) hypothesises is an indicator of gender inequality and power differences in societies, is still played out when women speak to and address men and women from senior batches. Addressing them with *umba* and *bari* or the use of impolite verb forms in friendship was rare and I never heard such exchanges. Women were also circumspect of the contexts in which they could use such language. Men on the other hand did not have such strict restrictions and even used these terms in the presence of some junior lecturers. The only concession granted to women, wherein they could freely cross these gendered boundaries, was if the man/men they were addressing were junior to them or if these terms were used to express their anger/displeasure. If women used these words

in anger or used them in public then they would be judged negatively for using impolite language.

*A social licence from the rag?*

A temporary junior lecturer at Kelaniya, Sashini, explained how the experiences of being ragged and the resulting ‘batch-fit’ gave fellow batch-mates a licence to use words like *umba*, *bari*, and *tamusē*. The seniors, by virtue of their status, could continue to use these words on their juniors, even after the rag without it being considered impolite. She explained how her batch-mates started addressing each other using these terms after the rag.

Even your batch mates... because they think that just because we went through the ‘rag’ together with all the filthy words, that they can tell you anything. So then it took me like three or four weeks [after the rag] to tell the guys that I will not tolerate filthy talk. Because then the girls also have this mind set, “We were ‘ragged’ together no *bari*, so it is OK”. And then the *bari* thing and they all go back to this *umba*, *bari*, *umba*, *bari*. I mean *umba*, *bari* is fine as long as you are with your bosom friends. Not with all Tom, Dicks and Harrys [sic], no?<sup>40</sup>

Sashini’s voice dropped as she repeated *umba* and *bari* because for her these were not words which should be used in everyday speech. She had to fight for her right to not use or respond to these words after the rag. Her explanation of the social licence one gets from the rag to use impolite language held true for other women, from both urban and rural backgrounds as well as lower middle-class families, who had not used impolite language before but now used at least *umba* and *bari* in their everyday speech. Words like *topi*, *yakō*, *kāpari*, *bīpari*, however, were used less often by those who came from the more urban and middle-class backgrounds.

---

<sup>40</sup> This interview was conducted in English.

Lakoff (1973) proposes the idea that women have a register of appropriate words. In the Sinhala language words like *umba*, *bari*, *kāpari*, *bīpari* etc would not be considered ideal words for women to use. But women at UoK, through their exposure to the rag and subsequently their interactions with friends, possibly from different socio-economic and geographic backgrounds, seem to gradually appropriate these words into their register of acceptable language, thus pointing to some level of social transformation. Lakoff (1973) argues that it is becoming common for women to use language which was previously thought of as ‘men’s language’ in public but that a majority of the middle-classes may still disapprove of women using such language. While her work is dated and has been criticised by many (Dubois and Crouch 1975; Brown 1980; O’Barr and Atkins 1980), the concept of a register of appropriate words for women holds true in the context I describe above. Words like *umba* and *bari* are usually considered masculine and/or rough language in Sinhala. Still the women at Kelaniya appropriated these words into their daily speech despite being aware of the unacceptability of such language in certain settings and people.

The social licence given to women to use impolite words did not however extend beyond these terms of address and verbs. None of the women I knew would use *kuṇuharapa* words except when they were among intimate friends. Intimate friends would sometimes regale each other with sexual jokes but in nearly all these jokes the *kuṇuharapa* words were stated in inverted forms so that the actual word was never mentioned. Aruni and Samadhi shared a joke with me about a limestone merchant who was failing at his business until his wife took over it and decided to rename the store ‘Devil’s Limestone Shop’ (*Yakā Huṇu Kadē*).<sup>41</sup> Subsequent to this renaming, the sales started to rise exponentially and there would be long queues of men standing at the store door even before it opened. The wife would not divulge her secret to the limestone merchant and even though he racked his brains to understand the reason for this success he could not. So he decided to stand in line with the other men and discovered the secret

---

<sup>41</sup> The English translation is not effective in conveying the joke since it is the inversion of letters in the two Sinhala words which bring out the ‘filthiness’ of the joke.

to the success when he saw the ‘Devil’s Limestone’ (*Yakā Huṇu*) sign at the top of the shop door.

At this point both Aruni and Samadhi burst out laughing while I sat with a blank face because I did not see any humour in this story. They kept saying ‘Don’t you get it?’ and I had to admit that I did not. I was then told to reverse the order of the words which I did and said out loud *Kadē Huṇu Yakā* at which they laughed even more loudly and said that I should forget the *Kadē* but just focus on the name of the shop *Yakā Huṇu* and inverse the order of the letters in the words as opposed to the actual words. So needless to say I reversed the letters as I saw fit and said *Kāya Ṇuhu* out loud although these two words made no sense in Sinhala. Samadhi then gave an exasperated sigh, grabbed my notebook from me and wrote down *Yakā Huṇu* (in Sinhala) and drew two arrows; one joining the *hu* of the second word and the *kā* of the first word and the other joining the *ya* of the first word and the *ṇu* of the second word. This diagrammatic representation made the penny drop and I said ‘Ah! *Hukā Yanu*’ (fuck and leave), out loud and laughed feebly at their joke.

Almost immediately I realised that they were shocked I had said this out loud and were looking around to see if anyone was within a hearing range. They both shouted ‘Are you mad?’ and seeing my surprised face, they angrily explained, ‘A good girl would never say that word out loud, so please don’t do it again or tell anyone else that we told you this joke because that would ruin things for us as well.’ The forbidden word was *hukā* which translates into English as fuck but it carries stronger connotations than the English equivalent. So the new name for the shop, when inverted would read as ‘Fuck and leave’ shop, which then explains why business started booming. I found their refusal to mention the word *hukā* even in a whisper fascinating but apologised for my *faux pas* and enquired why a ‘good girl’ would not use *kuṇuharapa* words even when they are with close friends. However, apart from an adamant ‘They just don’t because it does not reflect well on their character’ I could not get a response from either of them.

The reluctance and the outright refusal to mention these *kuṇuharapa* words was common among all the women I knew at Kelaniya. With the exception of Aruni and Samadhi the others did not crack jokes with these words or even their inverted forms when I was around. Many of them referred to them as ‘bad words’ (*naraka vacana*) instead of the term *kuṇuharapa*. The men on the other hand were not similarly concerned about their reputation being tarnished because of language use. However, none of the men cracked jokes which were sexually laden in my presence either and Maneesh said this was an indication of the respect they had for me as a woman person (*gæhæṇu kenek*). Despite my efforts at trying to uncover the extreme taboos placed on the use of *kuṇuharapa* words by women, I only received a somewhat patronising ‘You will not be able to understand why these words cannot be used by us because, even though you are from here, you grew up speaking in English and so will never understand the *real* meaning of these words’ response from both my men and women friends.

### **Buttons and Hooks: Euphemisms or New Meanings for Old Words?**

#### *The university subculture of words and language*

Every first-year student is given a booklet entitled *The University Subculture* when they first enter university. The booklet addresses a range of topics from university regulations to the location of university buildings. It also includes a section on the language subculture of Kelaniya. Freshers are expected to learn the words which are used to refer to the different canteens, the names of previous student heroes, the terms for different kinds of studying and the names for different buildings and parts of the campus. Much of these are contained in the booklet and those which are not are communicated during the *vāta* rag to all students. One component of the rag involved quizzing students on how well they had learnt these new words and how often they were used in daily conversations. By the end of the ragging period and most certainly by the time students were in their second year at university it is these ‘new’ words that were used to refer to the everyday aspects of their life at Kelaniya.

A language subculture, or a speech community, is where ‘both the language variety and the norms for its use must be shared by all members of the community, though it is not necessary that they all speak the same in similar speech situations’ (Nichols 1980:141). The speech community at Kelaniya, which most students are familiar with, is not only linked to relationships, gender and sexuality but covers a range of other areas. The richness of this language subculture can only be understood by those who have access to and are familiar with other aspects of the university especially since words and phrases, which have one meaning in the larger societal context, have very different meanings at Kelaniya. Detailing the richness of all these words is beyond the scope of this study and so I will only focus on select words, which have a direct link to gender, sexuality and romantic relationships in the remainder of this chapter by starting with ‘hook’ (*kokka*) one of the more commonly used words.

The word *kokka* has two meanings in everyday language. One meaning is straightforward and would be the English equivalent of a clasp or a fastener. The other slightly more ambiguous meaning is used only in certain contexts, especially by the younger generation, to refer to a small-scale fight between two people. Both these meanings are fairly well known in the larger societal context but a *kokka* has an entirely different meaning when it is used in Kelaniya. In Kelaniya, a *kokka* means a romantic relationship or partner. Given this very different meaning, one evening when I was talking with Lakshman and Sumith at the gym canteen, I asked them why the word *kokka* was used to refer to a romantic relationship. They explained why a romantic relationship is called a *kokka* and how a *kokka* is linked to a ‘nail’ (*æṇaya*).

*Æṇaya* or *æṇayak* apart from its regular usage as a nail is also used to refer to a person who is considered a painful character, a person who one would not like to be in the company of for any length of time. It is also used to express getting into a difficult and uncomfortable situation (*æṇa vunā*) or when something goes terribly wrong (*æṇa venevā*). At Kelaniya, while *æṇaya* is used in this same way, Lakshman and Sumith explained that it is also used to refer to women and when I asked them why, they



explained the relationship between an *æṇaya* and a *kokka*. It was Lakshman who dominated the conversation while Sumith nodded in agreement to most things which were said.

You see, it's like this. All women are like nails [*æṇa*]. They are made of iron and can be very rigid when they want to be. Usually, when it comes to getting into a romantic relationship with them, they are always rigid and keep saying no. No matter how you ask them, they will say, "I can't". That is the first thing they will say. "No". Rigid, just like a real *æṇaya*. Now, it's up to us to change them and make them bend a little, like a *kokka* [shows the shape of a hook with his finger], and make them more malleable. And how can we do this? By applying some oil... Some 'love' oil on to the *æṇaya* which makes it easier to bend it. Anything rigid can be made pliable with the application of a suitable amount of oil, no? So, this is what we have to do to make the woman, who is like an *æṇaya*, to become our *kokka*.

The commonly used phrase on campus, 'got a hook' (*kokkak dāgatta*), then refers to a man who has managed to convince (bend) a woman, through his persuasive charms (love oil), to get into a romantic relationship with him.<sup>42</sup> A woman who has been made malleable is ideal because she can then be moulded to fit into the role of a 'good "girlfriend"'. If the *kokka* does not work out in the long run and it happens because the woman decides to end the relationship, then the woman is seen as becoming an *æṇaya* again. The ending of a romantic relationship is referred to as *æṇa venevā* which is similar to the use of this phrase in the larger societal context which expresses things going wrong or getting oneself into a difficult situation.

In Lakshman's mind referring to a woman as an *æṇaya* was unproblematic since it reflected 'the true nature of all women'. *Æṇaya*, given the hard connotations it has, was in my mind a strange term for objectifying women, since words which refer to the

---

<sup>42</sup> The phrase 'applying oil' or 'serving oil' is also used during the rag when the student groups try to convince the freshers to join their group. To 'oil' someone is to steer them in a particular direction and to convince them towards appropriate action. Lakshman pointed out that there are different kinds of 'oil' which can be applied depending on the context. When one is trying to get a *kokka* the oil that is used is referred to as "love" oil'.

softness of women are more commonly used. When I questioned Lakshman about this, he responded that all women are initially very hard and rigid and need to be made soft by a man to become a 'good woman'. In this pejoration of *æṇaya*, a neutral term, the woman is made into a tool which has to be manipulated by men in order for its functionality to reach its optimum level. The woman as an *æṇaya*, despite her rigidity is seen as the tool, a passive partner upon whom the application of a suitable dose of convincing can yield in the desired result of forming a romantic relationship. The man, in his desire to get a *kokka* must engage in the difficult task of convincing the woman of his suitability.

In their book *Language and Sexuality*, Cameron and Kulick discuss the cultural norms and expectations of gender, agency and consent which come into play in sexual relations (Cameron and Kulick 2003:36-38). They explain that women are usually given little sexual agency and should only agree to or refuse a proposition coming from a man. However, immediate agreement is disapproved by society and good women are expected to initially object to the proposal while the men, who should not be discouraged by this ritualistic refusal, have to play at breaking down the woman's resistance. The process which Lakshman talks of similarly signifies the limited agency given to women even when it comes to romantic/love relationships which may sometimes only have limited sexual leanings. It is the man who has the responsibility of 'applying the oil' so that he can eventually 'bend the nail'. And despite the woman's initial refusal there is the expectation that, if she is pursued appropriately, she will eventually give in and become the man's *kokka*, again pointing to the limitations of her agency. As Cameron and Kulick say, 'whereas in many contexts, saying "no" is a mark of the speaker's dominant status, in sexual contexts it is associated with a "submissive" or "feminine" role' (Cameron and Kulick 2003:39).

It is usually those women who perform the socially expected feminine role who are sought after when men decide to get themselves a *kokka*. There are at least four different kinds of relationships or *koku* (plural of *kokka*): the *sirā kokka* (literal

translation: serious relationship), the *bath kokka* (literal translation: rice relationship), the ‘note’ *kokka* (literal translation: note relationship) and the *ātal kokka* (literal translation: goodtime relationship). With the exception of the *sirā kokka* which refers to a committed, long-term relationship by both parties, the other three refer to opportunistic relationships, usually instigated by the man. The *bath kokka* refers to a relationship marked by one partner providing lunch and even dinner, usually rice and curry, to the other while the ‘note’ *kokka* refers to a relationship wherein the provision of lecture notes dominates the affiliation between the partners. The *ātal kokka* similarly implies one person being made use of but it has connotations which are specifically sexual and conveys the idea of a casual/sexual relationship.

The ideal of these, especially according to my women informants, is a *sirā kokka*. The word *sirā* is used in everyday speech, even in the larger societal context, as a shorter form of serious for which, like the English equivalent, the meaning varies according to its use in the sentence. A *sirā kokka* then is one in which both parties are sincere and committed to the relationship. The belief is that a *sirā kokka* will end in marriage when the two students leave university. Lakshman and Sumith said that they knew only a few *sirā koku* whereas the women said that all their friends who had ‘love affairs’ considered the relationship to be a *sirā kokka*.<sup>43</sup> They clarified that often women can ‘be led astray’ by their partner and suffer a ruined reputation when the partner ends the relationship thus pointing to the importance of being highly selective in choosing a partner. This difference in how men and women perceived romantic relationships also showed up during my formal interviews. In my formal interview with Sumith, he said that ‘you know, I know this personally, most people [men], even though they do a *sirā* “love”, they also engage in other small, small “items”[flings]’. He then went on to say that

---

<sup>43</sup> Sri Lankans commonly use the English term ‘love affair’ or ‘affair’ to refer to romantic relationships. The students at Kelaniya fluctuated between using these same terms and *kokka* to refer to their own romantic relationships.

Most men do not stick to what is conventionally expected of us when it comes to our sexuality. That is, most men are not satisfied just with the ‘girlfriend’ they have. That is what the culture says, no? The framework that our culture has given is that if we get into a romantic relationship, then it must end up in marriage. That is what the culture says, no? But that culture is often flouted when we come to university.

So, while a *sirā kokka* is the ideal, given the differences in the way romantic relationships are perceived by men and women, the likelihood is that all supposedly serious relationships will not end in marriage. An *ātal kokka* on the other hand was, according to the women, the worst type of *kokka* one could get into. *Ātal* is commonly used to refer to a ‘good time’ or ‘good fun’ and when it is applied to romantic relationships, *ātal* has strong sexual connotations which are absent from the other types of *koku*. I was told that even though some women get into relationships thinking that it is a *sirā kokka* they soon discover the fallacy of their belief. In an *ātal kokka* the man will have sexual relations with the partner, and ‘hang her on the gate/hedge of the “campus”’ when he leaves university. This phrase, with its connotations of being hung out to dry, captures both the lack of agency given to the woman in how she is treated by the man and the resultant negative exposure of being in a relationship which does not end in marriage. If a woman realises that she is in an *ātal kokka* the onus is on her to get out of it and suffer minimal criticism. Those who do not are complicit in having their reputation ruined, ‘without which a woman is nothing’ as Kumari pointed out.

Both the *bath kokka* and the ‘note’ *kokka* are relationships which people get into, wherein one party is made use of by the other to satisfy their personal needs for food and education. Women told me that it was only men who got into such opportunistic relationships whereas the men said that both men and women get into these relationships. A *bath kokka* is when the relationship is marked by one party, almost always the woman, bringing food for the partner on a daily basis. It has connotations of being made use of by the partner but does not carry with it the sexual connotations of an *ātal kokka*. Kumari explained that

The thing is it is natural for us to bring a *bath* 'packet' every day and share it with others. So if we have a 'boyfriend' then we will share it only with him. But sometimes boys take advantage of this; they get into relationships with us, have their lunch off us every day and then hang us on the university hedge when they finish their degree.

The 'natural' role of women as being caring and nurturing was the most important factor in this type of *kokka* and the understanding was that women only find out that they were a *bath kokka* when it is too late. Similar to the ideal woman created through nationalist projects the general perception was that 'no matter what the changes in the external conditions of life for women, they must not lose their essentially spiritual (that is feminine) virtues; they must not, in other words, become essentially Westernised' (Chatterjee 1993:126). Keeping in line with this thinking, most women at Kelaniya expressed genuine sympathy for a woman in a *bath kokka* because she was seen as fulfilling the role of an ideal woman and adhering to her feminine virtues but was being made use of by the man for his benefit.

A 'note' *kokka* is similar to a *bath kokka* except that the driving factor in a 'note' *kokka* is borrowing lecture notes and readings or even writing assignments for the partner. A 'note' *kokka* unlike a *bath kokka*, could be spread among both men and women even though the weights are still tipped towards men getting the notes from their *kokka*. Students do not attend lectures for a variety of reasons with one important reason being that some are in full-time employment which makes attending lectures impossible. So, in such cases, Lakshman happily informed me that it made most sense to get into a 'note' *kokka* where one's partner takes down the lecture notes and shares them. He explained that despite the show of unity and comradeship, which are believed to be the outcome of the rag, students were very reluctant to share their notes with others due to the competitiveness of the degree programme. Similar to the *bath kokka* there was both empathy and sympathy conveyed to women who realised that their romance had only been a 'note' *kokka*. The clear message was that it is usually the woman who is made

use of in a *bath* and ‘note’ *kokka* and she, as the innocent party, was not aware that she was being made use of until it was too late.

There was, however, no sympathy for women who had been in an *ātal kokka*. The women in the other types of relationships were seen as chaste and adhering to a social expectation in this phase of their life. It is the men who may take undue advantage of them and for this the women cannot be held responsible. However, women who are and continue to remain in an *ātal kokka* risk the danger of being known as a ‘bad woman’ (*naraka gæhæniyek*), ‘not good’ (*hoñda næhæ/narakayi*), or ‘her character is not good’ (*caritē* ‘upset’) by both men and women. Students also suggested that it is only Westernised women, women who had lost their feminine ways, who get into an *ātal kokka*, and so there was no need to show any sympathy to her.<sup>44</sup> Such labels have the power to cause shame and impact on their future prospects of both finding a partner and eventually marrying – a common goal of nearly all the women I knew at Kelaniya.

According to Sinhala kinship categories, a person can potentially have sexual relations and marry her/his cross cousin but not the parallel cousin (Yalman 1971). Yalman explains that cousins are distinguished from each other by the kinship terms used to refer to them where the use of *akkā* (older sister), *ayiyā* (older brother), *mali* (younger brother) and *naṅgi* (younger sister), used on parallel cousins, indicate a sibling relationship and therefore restrict the possibility of sexual/marital relations. Even though he writes that cross cousins are referred to as *nænā* (for woman) and *massinā* (for man), in present day parlance these terms may be used to introduce and/or indicate the relationship between cousins to an outsider, but are hardly ever used to directly refer to one’s cross cousin. It is instead the terms *akkā*, *ayiyā*, *mali* and *naṅgi* which are used in everyday speech to refer to both cross and parallel cousins.<sup>45</sup> In addition, these terms are now commonly used, according to the age hierarchy, to refer to persons who are

---

<sup>44</sup> For most students their notions of Western culture and therefore ‘being Westernised’ came from TV programmes, usually American soap-operas which depicted lifestyles unusual even for the average American.

<sup>45</sup> Personal communication with Jonathan Spencer, February 2011.

unrelated to you and it is in this sense that kinship terms were used by the students at Kelaniya. An important factor in determining the appropriateness of a cross-cousin liaison, to which Yalman (1971) does not pay specific attention, is the importance of age hierarchy. Even in the case of a *nānā* and *massinā* relationship the implicit understanding is that the *nānā* (woman) should be younger to the *massinā* (man).

It is this non-adherence to age hierarchy which made the *lambert kokka* a contested category because some students insist that *lambert* could not be considered a *kokka* because ‘it is not a normal situation’. They were referring to the lack of acceptance of romantic relationships between older women and younger men at university, since such relationships flouted age based norms of romantic relationships. Sumith quietly explained to me why *lambert* could not be considered a *kokka*. According to Sumith, one becomes *lambert* (*lambert velā*) and within that situation one could be in any one of the four *koku* that were discussed above. ‘It’s possible to become *lambert* and for that to be an *ātal kokka* if the relationship is to get some fun’, he explained to me. The crucial aspect of becoming *lambert* is that the woman should be from a senior year in the university system. Even if the man and woman are the same age, if she is in a senior year at university such a relationship would still be *lambert*. The term *lambert* is given because such relationships are in breach of existing norms where a ‘senior’ man is expected to approach a ‘junior’ woman to start a relationship. I asked Sumith if the two people were from the same batch but the woman was older by a year, if that would still be considered becoming *lambert* and he said that it would not be because no one would know the woman was older. The difference in year at university is the signifier of a *lambert kokka*.

Contravening the norm of an older man and a younger woman being the ideal for romantic relationships, even though the difference in age is only of one or two years, was not considered appropriate. The kinship terms one uses or in some cases is forced to use from the days of the rag make it difficult, if not impossible, to get into a

relationship with a woman from a senior batch since she has to be referred to as older sister (*akkā*) and she can choose to refer to him as younger brother (*malli*). This makes a *lambert kokka* all the more conspicuous because pursuing an *akkā* for a romantic relationship not only contravenes junior/senior norms but also kinship norms. Despite being a senior or because of this very fact, the *akkā* is given even less of a social licence to pursue the *malli* or even subtly encourage his advances. The *akkā* and *malli* relationship, provided it adheres to established kinship ties, is then given a special licence to form very close familial bonds but not anything more.

### *Playing on everyday words and their meanings*

Apart from words which have very different meanings to those used in larger society, there are a series of words and phrases which retain some aspect of the meaning from larger society but are changed slightly to convey gendered and sexualised meanings. Words like washing (*sōdanavā*), toy (*toyiyā*) and growing marijuana (*kansā vavanevā*) were used to indicate an interest in women, describe women and refer to aspects of romantic relationships respectively.

Ship (*næva*) and boat (*bōṭṭuva*) are the terms used to refer to the new batch of students, but specifically the women students who enter university every year. I frequently heard the phrase ‘goods in the new ship’ (*alut nævē baḍu*) during the rag season where men would say to each other, ‘*Macarī*, let’s go check out the goods in the new ship’ and walk towards the *Tel Bæmma* where the freshers were often ragged. Objectifying women by using inanimate terms is common in Sri Lanka and ‘item/thing’ (*baḍuva*) is the most commonly used of these words. Every year a significantly smaller, second batch of students is taken into university, almost immediately after the first batch of students. These are students who were wait-listed for university entrance and find out about their acceptance only if there are dropouts from the first batch. The women in this smaller group are referred to as the boat (*bōṭṭuva*). Some women refer to themselves using these terms. I remember asking one of the women how badly she was ragged and she said ‘I



managed to escape much of the rag because I was from the *bōṭṭuva*'. Women use this distinction because it is more prestigious to be from the first intake of students. While women use the term to distinguish themselves from each other, for men, all women were 'things' (*baḍu*) with just the instrument of transportation being different.

If men see an attractive woman (*toyiyā*: taken from the English term toy) in the new ship (*alut næva*), they then decide to wash (*sōdanna*) her. *Sōdanavā* in common parlance means to wash something or someone with water in order to clean it. At Kelaniya *sōdanavā* is used when a man is interested in a woman and tries to acquire information about her by 'washing away her surface' to discover her true self. This involves finding out about her family, social and class backgrounds, values, school, friends, getting to know her personality and most importantly, finding out if she has or ever has had a partner. Depending on the intensity of the attraction and the man's attitudes towards women who have previously been in romantic relationships, the status of her past and present relationships often determines if the 'washing' should continue or not. When I asked Lakshman why the term 'washing' was used for this, he said that it was because the man is trying to wash away the woman's surface to find out what sort of a person she is: the core of her being. He explained that the rag provides an ideal space to 'wash' a girl because she has no choice but to answer the questions which are posed to her.

The expectation is that a woman will hide her shortcomings underneath her veneer and so her surface needs to be washed away in order to assess her 'cleanliness': her suitability as a partner. The task of carrying out the 'washing' lies with the man even though women too try to get information about a man who indicates an interest in them. In larger society parents engage in a similar process of obtaining information about a woman, especially her character and respectability, when they assess her suitability as a potential partner for their son. Men's characters are similarly investigated but the focus of scrutiny for them is more their ability to provide for the woman and sobriety. It is this kind of scrutiny that parents fear for their daughters and what Samadhi's mother refers

to when she says ‘otherwise people will scold us as well’ in her admonishment to Samadhi (see page 122 above). A daughter of good character is also a reflection of the parents and the traditional values they instilled in her.

Some men, even after ‘washing’ the woman and getting into a relationship with her, decide to ‘grow marijuana’ (*kansā vavanevā*) which Kumari explained was the worst situation a woman could find herself in. Marijuana is illegal in Sri Lanka and growing it often results in a prison sentence. At Kelaniya ‘growing marijuana’ refers to the socially unacceptable act of two-timing. ‘It is when a man is growing ganja that he is most likely to have an *ātal kokka* at university and hang her on the university gates when he finishes his degree’ Kumari spelt out.<sup>46</sup> She said that it is usually men who ‘grow marijuana’ and that some women who have been cheated thus have even attempted suicide. Women attempting suicide when they find out their partners have been deceiving them and that more men are known to ‘grow marijuana’ than women, was corroborated during my interviews with other women and one University counsellor. ‘Growing marijuana’ was deplored equally by the men and women I knew at Kelaniya even though men often said so with the caveat of ‘but sometimes we temporarily wander away to other women’, which in their minds was not the same as ‘growing marijuana’.

### *Semiotic resources for women, by women*

Van Leeuwen defines semiotic resources as

the actions and artefacts we use to communicate, whether they are produced physiologically – with our vocal apparatus; with the muscles we use to create facial expressions, gestures, etc. – or by means of technologies. (Van Leeuwen 2005:3)

The use of semiotic resources will differ according to context and the rules which govern the context. These rules of use which allow for varying expressions of emotions,

---

<sup>46</sup> Students use the terms *kansā* and *ganjā* both, interchangeably, to refer to marijuana.

desires and ways of doing things can usually be understood only by those who are insiders to the given context thus leaving outsiders bemused as to the meanings of expressions. It is these expressions, albeit I limit myself to the verbal ones, which were uttered in the most confounding of ways, which I explore in this final section of the chapter.

The women at Kelaniya had a set of phrases and words which they used to communicate with each other when they wanted to convey a message which they did not want an outsider to understand. I realised, fairly soon into my fieldwork, that when we were in mixed sex groups, some women would utter expressions aimed at another woman which seemed incongruous in that particular context. However, I hardly ever perceived any confusion or lack of understanding on the part of the woman to whom this expression was directed at and the conversation would continue to flow as normal following a minor, almost imperceptible, adjustment in the posture of the woman who was addressed.

Kumari, Nilooshani, Samadhi, Maneesh, Sumith and I were sitting on the *Tel Bæmma* and talking about *Akśaraya* (Letter of Fire), a controversial film which, despite being cleared for local screening by Sri Lanka's censorship body, was banned in 2006. I was observing the exchanges between them, somewhat amused at the frequent reference to the differences between Colombo (*Akśaraya* was about an upper middle-class family in Colombo) and the rest of the country. Samadhi did not contribute to the conversation but I noticed her looking at Kumari several times as if trying to get her attention. However, she had no luck in distracting anyone's attention from the discussion and so after several frustrated glances in Kumari's direction she looked at her pointedly and softly said '*Su paṭi pannō paṭi pænnō*' and quickly looked away to say something to Maneesh about *Akśaraya*. To me this sudden interjection was most confusing and irrelevant to the discussion at hand, so I looked from Samadhi, to Kumari and then to Maneesh who had now turned his attention to Samadhi. I looked back again at Kumari

just in time to see her right hand grazing the left side of the neckline of her dress before she joined the ongoing discussion again.

The phrases *su paṭi pannō* and *paṭi pannō* are two phrases which would be known to every Buddhist person because they are from a prayer (*gātā*) which extols the virtues of the Buddha, the Buddhist philosophy and the clergy. *Su paṭi pannō* means ‘entered into the religious path’ with *paṭi pannō* meaning ‘entered into’ in Pali. Unlike in Samadhi’s pronunciation (*paṭi pænnō*), in the prayer, the second phrase would be written and pronounced as *paṭi pannō*. When we were alone, I asked Samadhi why she uttered those phrases from the prayer to Kumari. She explained that while Kumari was talking her brassiere strap had moved and was jutting out from her neckline but since she had been unable to get Kumari’s attention through her glances she had uttered those two phrases to warn her of this lapse. The accidental exposure of one’s bra strap, for it never was perceived as anything but accidental exposure, is considered highly inappropriate and a source of embarrassment for the wearer. Moreover, it also points to a lapse in the display of respectability. It therefore was the duty of friends around her to warn her of this lapse so that she could adjust her dress or blouse and conceal the straps.

When I enquired about the use of phrases from Buddhist prayer, she was surprised that I did not know and laughed at my ignorance. The words from these two phrases which are important are *paṭi* and *pænnō*. *Paṭi* is the Sinhala word for straps and *pænnō* is the exclamatory word for ‘jumped’. So by reciting these two phrases of a Buddhist prayer, where the word in one phrase has been modified from *pannō* to *pænnō*, Samadhi said that she was able to convey to Kumari that her brassiere strap was showing without bringing it to the notice of the two men. I asked her why she could not have told Kumari directly that her bra strap was showing and she responded ‘Are you mad? Do you know how embarrassed Kumari would have been if I had told her directly that her “bra strap” was showing in front of those two men?’

Discussion or even mention of any aspect related to the private sphere of a woman's life never took place in the presence of men. This was applicable even when the friendship between the man and woman was very close and even if the man was from a junior batch and so a *malli* wherein kinship ties gave special permission for women from senior batches to be less cautious of social decorum and expectations. Therefore, when in mixed groups, the use of phrases which seem completely incongruous with the situation, to communicate an important message which should be understood only by members of the sub-group, was the strategy used by these women to help each other avoid any embarrassment. In an all women's group, if one's bra strap was to show it was common for a friend to lean over and adjust the neckline to hide the bra strap or to be told directly that it can be seen. I recall being told off on many an occasion for not telling or indicating to them that their bra straps could be seen with a 'Fine friend you are! Could you not see that my "bra strap" was showing?'

Other circuitous phrases and words were used to convey messages about the importance of being circumspect of accidentally revealing one's cleavage or the outline of the nipple through a tight t-shirt. These words and phrases were always euphemisms for cleavage and the nipple. Neither of these two words was mentioned even if the topic came up in an all women's group. An easy explanation for this is that there is no word for cleavage in common Sinhala parlance. Similarly the words for nipple (*tan puḍu*) and breasts (*tana/tan deka*) in Sinhala are either very formal and therefore hardly ever used in colloquial language or border on being debasing for the woman and are by default reserved for use by men to make fun of or insult women. Therefore, often the English words 'breasts', and more commonly 'bust', were used instead of the local word *tana* or *tan deka* even when women spoke in the vernacular about their secondary sexual organs.

A second, more complex, reasoning for not using either of these words can be the cultural restrictions imposed, especially on women, to not discuss any aspect of their sexual feelings and body parts linked to it, as I showed in the previous chapter.

Therefore the lack of commonly used and acceptable colloquial words for breasts and nipples, coupled together with the socio-cultural constraints, is more likely to have played a role in the decision of these women to use euphemisms when discussing such topics. The availability of a myriad of words – some euphemistic and others less so – to refer to and describe sexual organs, when compared with other bodily organs, is not peculiar to the Sinhala language. For example, it is possible to find more than 100 colloquial and slang terms for breasts by English language speakers on the internet. Cameron (1992/2006) in her study of terms for the penis among American College students found that men and women had more than 150 metaphors for the penis. At UoK, the use and acceptability of these words varied according to the context, the people and their creativity in coining these terms.

The *Melar* festival was a few weeks away and a group of us, all women, were fervently carrying out the responsibilities assigned to us.<sup>47</sup> Ayoma rushed over to the common room one afternoon, dressed in a tight fitting silky t-shirt and a pair of dress pants. She was going to meet the Manager of the People’s Bank to get a sponsorship for *Melar* and enquired if she was appropriately dressed. Everyone gave their approval, except for her closest friend Nilmini who said ‘That t-shirt is very tight and the buttons can be seen, so if you are going to wear that, at least come with me to the toilet and I will give you my “vest”’. I was on the verge of asking what buttons could be seen since there were no buttons on the t-shirt when Ayoma lifted her t-shirt to show her white coloured vest and said,

I can’t *bari*. They [referring to her roommates] gave me a real hard time before I left the room. They told me that my buttons can be seen and got me to wear the thickest ‘vest’ that we had in the room and now you are saying this? Don’t talk nonsense *bari*.

---

<sup>47</sup> This is an annual festival, lasting three to four days, organized by third-year students of the Medieval Studies Department. The festival consists of events and trade stalls, some which pertain to education and others to entertainment.

Nilmini, however, insisted that it was not enough and went off with Ayoma so that she could wear a second vest and look respectable when she met the Manager. Seeing my confused look, Samadhi explained how sometimes the outline of one's nipples can be seen through tight t-shirts and so a vest or vests are worn to prevent the shape of the 'buttons' from being visible. The term 'buttons' was used to refer to nipples since they resembled an inverted form of shaft buttons – the slightly rounded surface representing the areola and the connector which protrudes symbolising the nipple.<sup>48</sup>

The term 'buttons' to represent nipples was fairly standard and used by all women. Cleavage and breasts, on the other hand, did not have just one word but rather several words and phrases with some being more ambiguous in meaning than others. The most common terms for breasts were different fruits, the selection of which varied according to the size of the bust. Women would often tease each with comments like 'Why are you trying to show off those raw limes?' or 'Do you think those mandarins are attractive?' and these would be met with rejoinders like 'I would rather have these limes than your huge pomegranates' or 'When we are old and your coconuts are hanging, my mandarins will be more attractive'.<sup>49</sup> This good natured teasing was always done only when women were with their very close women friends. The reference to breast size through fruits is not common only to these women. In many of the risqué tabloid magazines which students – both men and women – read, fruits are often used as a metaphor for breasts.

Line (*ira*) and coin box (*kæṭaya*) were the most commonly used words to refer to cleavage and women would say, 'Shall I put one rupee into your *kæṭaya*?' or 'Your *ira*

---

<sup>48</sup> A shaft button, unlike the flat or sew-through button, has a slightly rounded surface and an attached connector/shaft which protrudes from the back of the button.

<sup>49</sup> The fruit referred to as mandarins is a citrus fruit locally known as *jamanāran*. They are similar to mandarins in that the outer skin can be peeled easily and the fruit inside split into segments. These fruits are no larger than a lime, have a green outer skin with shades of yellow, yellowy orange flesh and are generally very sour.

can be seen' if the dress/blouse had a deep neckline.<sup>50</sup> Needless to say, when this was said, the woman in question would quickly adjust the neck of her blouse or dress to cover up any cleavage. The meaning attached to both *ira* and *kæṭaya* was also known to men. It was not uncommon to hear men shouting these terms at women who contravened norms of appropriate dress code and wore blouses/dresses with deep necklines. Thus with the exception of Samadhi and Aruni, none of the women ever said that showing cleavage was something which they desired to do or found unproblematic. And, similar to the bra strap, it was assumed that if one's cleavage was showing, it would be accidental. A more ambiguous reference to showing cleavage was used in the presence of men and this was linked to a well known *stūpa* in Sri Lanka called *Kirivehera*.<sup>51</sup> Women play on the name of this *stūpa* in two ways when they use it to allude to cleavage: they use the word *kiri* to imply milk even though the *kiri* in *Kirivehera* refers to the colour of its *stūpa*. They use the word *vehera*, which is a derivative of *vihāraya* and means temple, to suggest *stūpa*, the hemispherical structure, which is similar to the shape of a woman's breast. Thus students link the shape of women's breasts and its milk giving properties to *Kirivehera* and thereby insinuate cleavage.

I first heard this phrase used when Aruni's friends teased her one afternoon. Aruni felt she had small breasts and used to often lament about this. One day a group of us were having tea at the milk-bar and the top button of Aruni's blouse had come undone which none of us noticed until later when most of the group (which included men) had dispersed. Aruni was suitably embarrassed and worried that the men may have noticed and kept saying 'Do you think they would have seen anything?' and no amount of reassurance seemed to pacify her. She was especially worried that the men may have thought she had sat with her top button undone purposefully. Finally, Nilooshani teased

---

<sup>50</sup> The euphemism *kæṭaya* is used because the slot in the coin box is supposed to denote the cleavage between the breasts. The word *ira* (line) is used in the same manner.

<sup>51</sup> *Kirivehera* is the name of a *stūpa* located in the sacred city of Kataragama. The word *vehera* is sometime used to refer to *stūpa*, the large dome/hemispherical shaped masonry structure that can be found in most Buddhist temples in Sri Lanka. The word *kiri* usually means milk but also denotes white colour. Thus *Kirivehera* is a large, white *stūpa*.



her saying ‘You have nothing to worry about because you don’t have a *Kirivehera* to show with or without a button’ and told her to stop being overly concerned.

Students did not find the linking of breasts, a sexualised image, to a place of religious worship at all problematic and said it was ideal because the men would never understand the message it conveys. One reason why men may not understand the application of this phrase is because of the way it is used. Given the importance of being discreet in pointing out that a woman’s cleavage was showing without drawing any attention to the fact, her friends would only make statements like ‘We are going to offer flowers at *Kirivehera*’ or ‘Did you know that her parents went to *Kirivehera* last week?’ in the middle of a conversation. Even though such statements can be incongruous in the conversation, since visiting temples is commonplace among a majority of the students at Kelaniya, they were hardly ever too anomalous to cause any awkwardness or confusion. The subtlety with which the message was conveyed was crucial so that the woman could cover her cleavage without drawing any attention to her lapse and regain her respectability.

Unlike men who had a myriad of names to refer to women, the women had only one common name to refer to men and that too was reserved for a specific kind of man: one who was a *pæṇiyā*. *Pæṇiyā* is a coined term where the word for treacle (*pæṇi*) has been added *yā*. A *pæṇiyā* is a man who flirts with women but does not have the charisma to carry off the flirtations effectively. He could also be one who is attracted to just one woman and is trying to impress her by being very sugary but is unable to do so. Regardless of which type of man it refers to, its application is derisive. The word focuses on the man’s face but rather than on its physical appearance, the focus is on the lack of confidence which emanates from the face. So sometimes a man who is a *pæṇiyā* is also referred to as *pæṇi muhuṇa* (literal translation: treacle face) and his smile is termed a *pæṇi hināva* (literal translation: treacle smile).<sup>52</sup> A *pæṇi hināva* is one which

---

<sup>52</sup> The formal/written word for smile is *sinahava* or *sināwa* but in everyday speech it is used as *hinahava* or *hināva*.

is sickeningly sweet, dripping with honey, because it is trying to impress the woman, albeit unsuccessfully.

With the exception of *pæṇiyā* the other semiotic resources are used as a means of safeguarding a woman's good name. They help prevent the woman from unwittingly embarrassing herself by communicating the lapse on her part in ways which an outsider will either find difficult to or not be able to understand. These words also give the women a means of alluding to aspects of their sexuality without using any direct words. Mostly, however, they indicate the decorum expected of women in their dress and the importance women attach to adhering to these cultural stipulations. Even though a range of terms were used to refer to parts of their upper body there were none which alluded to showing too much leg, yet another part of a woman's body which was not meant to be exposed. During my entire fieldwork period, I never saw a woman wearing a skirt which was above knee level and this could be why a special semiotic resource was not necessary to indicate the exposure of too much leg.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have highlighted the role of language use in challenging, shifting and ultimately reinforcing gender, sexuality and respectability norms at Kelaniya. I begin by showing how the language of the rag, the impolite pronouns and verbs used by seniors to address and abuse first-year students, are appropriated by the freshers themselves and used in friendship. The special permission given through the rag removes some of the constraints placed on women to perform the ideals of linguistic respectability and makes it possible for them to use what is generally considered 'impolite language' while at Kelaniya. They however have to be, and are, conscious of the need to adhere to culturally expected feminine manners of speech, age and gender hierarchies and so are strategic in the use of this language. Moreover unlike the impolite pronouns and verbs, when it came to using *kuṇuharapa* words, the women were clearly aware that they should not use *kuṇuharapa* in public or in private even with close friends.

I contend that these women, by appropriating certain words and using them relatively freely, at one level contribute to shifting the boundaries of respectability while at another level they reinforce norms of femininity by adhering to the age and gender hierarchies expected of them. Furthermore in their reluctance, for example, to crack sexual jokes or use *kuṇuharapa* words, the women again fall back on the scripted performance expected of them: it is not because they find sexual jokes to be sexist and degrading to women they do not relate them but because knowing such jokes would negatively affect their character. The greatest danger was that of an outsider, especially a man, finding out that the woman knew and/or enjoyed sexual jokes and it is this danger that she guards herself against by showing a reluctance to share or listen to sexual jokes. So even though the university setting and close friends provides a forum which emancipated women temporarily from the language restrictions imposed on them by society, this emancipation is limited to certain spheres.

In addition to the above, the idiolects of the speech community at Kelaniya referring to romantic relationships or an attractive woman also reinforce the importance of respectability and femininity. The objectification of women and the labelling of those who are not morally circumspect or do not fall in line with gender norms are effectively captured in many of these phrases. What is more, since women are aware of these phrases, the fear of being labelled as a woman who is willingly in an *ātal kokka*, for example, acts as a controlling mechanism to ensure that they do not behave in ways which are contrary to societal expectations. The women then become even more complicit in maintaining existing gender and respectability norms by developing a set of semiotic resources to communicate any lapses which could affect their respectability, without directly drawing attention to or making men aware of the lapse. By using these resources, and refraining from openly discussing their bodies or their sexuality, I show how women continue to adhere to norms of respectability – both in their language and behaviour.

Language use at and the speech community of Kelaniya, on its own, does not wholly reinforce all aspects of gender, respectability and sexuality norms. What it does is to allow some boundaries of respectability to be pushed while it reinforces other boundaries. I suggest this contradiction is similar to the rag at Kelaniya in that the speech communities also allow a space in which women can overcome certain cultural norms of propriety but on the whole expect, reinforce and reward conformity to hierarchical dynamics, societal expectations and values of chastity and respectability. Cameron argues that men and women ‘do not only learn and then mechanically reproduce, ways of speaking “appropriate” to their own sex; they learn a much broader set of gendered meanings that attach in rather complex ways to different ways of speaking, and they produce their own behaviour in the light of those meanings’ (Cameron 1997/2006:72). Similarly I show that the language and the speech community at Kelaniya does not only determine ways of speaking but also reinforce gendered relations and shape women’s behaviours, especially those which pertain to their sexuality and respectability.

The experiences of the rag and the language which emanates from it, including the distinct idiolects freshers have to become familiar with, I propose, conveys a very clear message to women students: within the social milieu of Kelaniya they are only allowed a limited space in which they can digress from gender and sexuality norms which are at play in larger society. It is with this awareness firmly entrenched in their minds that women students enact their everyday behaviour at Kelaniya. From the fashions they follow to their views on sexual behaviours, most women were keen to portray an image that was in accordance with gender, sexuality and respectability norms many of them had been exposed to as children and teenagers. In the next chapter I show how the context at Kelaniya, especially because of the role students themselves play in monitoring each other’s behaviour and the negative consequences those who deviated have to face, made it almost impossible for women to perform a role other than that of a ‘good woman’.

## CHAPTER 5

### Performing the Ideals of a Good Woman: Chaste and Sexually Ignorant

#### Introduction

To be perceived as a ‘good woman’, one who adhered to ‘traditional values’ but was at the same time educated and modern in their thinking, was what most women I spoke with at Kelaniya aspired to. When students invoked the phrase ‘traditional values’, they almost always were referring to the morality which emanated during the late 19th century, as a result of the nationalist project and the propagation of Protestant Buddhism by reformists like Anagarika Dharmapala and his contemporaries. Dharmapala’s influence on the social and cultural life of Sri Lanka is inescapable and Kelaniya was no exception. Similar to how he accommodated certain aspects of modernity and Western values in presenting his ideal of a Sinhala Buddhist society, the women at Kelaniya did the same in their presentation of a ‘good woman’. Dharmapala demanded of his fellow citizens, in his numerous orations and writings, to be ‘uncompromisingly moored within the moral and cultural frameworks of tradition’ (Seneviratne 1999:30). Similarly most women insisted on both themselves, and their peers, adhering to values which they claimed were integral to ‘Sri Lankan culture’.<sup>53</sup>

These ‘traditional values’ applied to different aspects of a woman’s life. I showed in the previous chapter how it affected the freedom with which women were able to use a particular kind of language. ‘Traditional values’ also determine the type of clothes women can wear, the parts of their body they can reveal, the behaviours they can engage in and the responses they can make to others. The double standards around sexuality, made even more significant by the emphasis placed on women’s conduct in the *Gihī Vinaya* penned by Dharmapala, was taken as inevitable by nearly all the women

---

<sup>53</sup> Kemper (2001) asserts that what is often spouted as Sri Lankan culture is synonymous with Sinhala-Buddhist culture, and does not include the cultural practices of other ethnic groups who live in the country.

I knew at Kelaniya. Even though one or two expressed indignation at the unfairness of these values, a majority either acknowledged the double standards as problematic but unavoidable, or subscribed to these values and denounced women who did not do the same. Sri Lankan women have to express their sexuality subtly and shyly (Jeganathan 2000) and at Kelaniya, those who were not subtle or shy were seen as aping the West which did not suit 'Sri Lankan culture'. To be a 'good woman' then, one had to embody 'traditional values': to be chaste, demure, obedient and, ideally, ignorant of any sexual knowledge.

In this chapter I look at how the women at Kelaniya express their sexuality. From their desire to be perceived as attractive to how they were shamed for transgressing norms of morality, I show how the experiences both within the context of Kelaniya and outside of campus affect how these women forge an identity for themselves as respectable 'good women'. I talked to them about their attitudes to different aspects of sexuality and write of the consequences faced by those who deviate from the dictates which govern the enactment of respectability at Kelaniya. The questions I asked them, to understand the different social factors which affect a woman's sexuality, were not easy questions to answer. However, after more than a year of spending time with these women and getting to know them, a few felt comfortable to talk about these very intimate aspects of their lives. It is these stories I detail in this chapter in an effort to understand how women are constrained by the context at Kelaniya, what strategies they use to overcome some of the limits placed on them, and how they negotiate for ways through which they can be seen as 'good women' who know how to manage the independence and privileges of a university education without losing touch with their 'traditional values'.

### **Living between Tradition and Fashion: Tsunami-skirts and Almond Facials**

#### *Striving for ideals of beauty*

Most women at Kelaniya considered Aishwarya Rai, an Indian beauty queen and actress, the ideal beauty. As a result no woman at Kelaniya made the mark of being

called 'beautiful' where the English word was used to describe the physical appearance of the person. Quite a number were, however, thought of as pretty (*lassana*) but the tone with which these proclamations were made lacked the fervour that was used to describe Aishwarya Rai. Most women thought Samadhi was *lassanayi* and she was aware of this perception which arose primarily from her pale skin colour. Aruni, on the other hand, who was as attractive as Samadhi, never drew attention to her looks but would point to others and pronounce them *lassanayi*. In Aruni's eyes, like in the eyes of many other women at Kelaniya, the primary characteristic for judging a woman's physical attractiveness was her skin colour: a fair skinned woman, often regardless of her features, was usually considered pretty. It is in this aspect Aruni 'failed' the test of beauty because her skin was sepia brown, which just was not pale enough.

Aruni told me 'I have tried every "cream" but none of them have worked and now I am using a herbal "fairness cream", which is better and I see some difference'. It was not only Aruni who desired fair skin. Every woman at Kelaniya either openly or secretly coveted fair skin, and those who were 'blessed' with it protected it at every turn: by wearing long sleeved blouses, carrying an umbrella in the sun and sitting only in shady areas. Once when Aruni and I were having lunch, she pointed out a group of three girls, all who had fair skin, who were sitting underneath the shade of a large tree having their lunch. Each one had their handkerchief placed on the lower-neck/upper-back area, exposed by the necklines of their dress, because the sun rays were penetrating through the branches on to their backs. They did not want even their upper back areas to get dark because we heard them say 'Let's eat fast and leave or we will get burnt by the sun'.

Fair and Lovely, advertised locally as the 'World's Number 1 Fairness Cream', was the most popular cosmetic used by women at Kelaniya. Nearly every woman I knew applied some version of a fairness cream. Kumari used it to get fairer while Nilooshani, who was thought of as *ta/elu*, a colour which was not too dark but not particularly fair,

used it to prevent herself getting any darker. Ayoma, who was particularly concerned about her looks, took me into her confidence and whispered

You know, Fair and Lovely is really not good for your skin. I use Oriflame and know the local agent for it. If you want, I can get you a tube of that 'fairness cream'. It is a little more expensive than the other brands but the 'quality' is really good. I will tell the agent that it is for me and get you the same 'discount' I get. And it is 'foreign' made, not Indian like Fair and Lovely.

None of the women questioned the politics behind their desire to get fairer or suggested a possible association between social class and ethnicity and light skin. The discussions always revolved around which product was most effective in their quest for lighter skin. Samadhi claimed not to use any fairness cream and her reason for doing so was not political, but rather because she felt that 'all those "creams" are bogus. None of them really work' and as Aruni often claimed, Samadhi did not have to worry about using a cream because she was already light skinned.

Equating beauty with fair skin is also common in other contexts (Thomas 2006) and was expressed by nearly every woman at Kelaniya. The preference for and the perception that light skin is an asset for women however is not limited to those at Kelaniya. Kemper (2001) explains how the virtue of a fair complexion in potential brides is repeatedly mentioned in classified advertisements for marriage proposals in Sri Lankan newspapers. He suggests that it is unlikely the idealisation of fair skin predates the colonial period and claims that people he spoke with often attributed it to colonialism. At Kelaniya the first words women used to describe another woman were about her skin colour. For men, on the other hand, skin colour did not play as prominent a role, and none of the men I spoke with mentioned skin colour when they detailed the physical characteristics of their 'ideal' woman. Thus despite the near obsession most women have with fair complexion, the lack of a corresponding fascination for same by men (which is contrary to the depictions in advertisements aired on local television), points to some difference in ideals of beauty which men desire and women strive for.



The few who did not subscribe to using artificial creams on their face resorted to the natural but more expensive home remedies. Srimani was describing the virtues of a home face-mask which had been aired on the Swarnavahini (local television station), ‘The Valley of Flowers’ (*Mal Miṭiyāvata*) programme, to reduce marks and dark spots to Muditha while I listened in fascination to their conversation. Srimani said that she had tried the face-mask and had noticed a visible difference in the softness of her skin immediately after and a reduction in dark spots after several applications. It was ‘an “almond” and milk “face-mask” where “the “almonds” have to be ground to a fine powder and mixed with a little warm milk till it becomes a thick paste which is then applied on your face and neck’. At this point Muditha interrupted with, ‘What are “almonds”?’ and Srimani responded by saying, ‘I really don’t know, they are some kind of seed I think but you can buy them at Keells [local supermarket chain] even though they are a little expensive. Some 25 grams cost a hundred rupees, so it’s a bit expensive but it is really worth it’.

Srimani spoke of the face-mask in such glowing terms that Muditha, who sucked her breath in sharply when she heard the price of almonds, ended up asking Srimani to buy her 50 grams of almonds so that she could try out the face pack herself. Programmes like *Mal Miṭiyāvata*, which cater to women, reinforce ideals of beauty and promise to transform women who follow these expensive beauty rituals into desirable creatures. They have the power of convincing women who exist on meagre scholarships of Rs. 2500.00 per month to spend nearly 10% of their money on an ingredient for a facial mask.<sup>54</sup> Swarnavahini is one of the more recent television channels which cater predominantly to the Sinhala speaking middle-class and produces local versions of daytime television programmes available in the West. *Mal Miṭiyāvata* is one such programme which gave tips for young women – from making home facials to applying make up for parties – and it was avidly watched by the women I knew at Kelaniya. This programme, along with others of similar content, plays on the impressionable minds of

---

<sup>54</sup> See footnote on conversion rate.

young women so that they experiment with various products in search of an ideal notion of beauty.

*Fashion conscious but tradition minded*

Women were aware that merely an attractive face did not make them appealing to the opposite sex and while a range of creams and beauty techniques were applied to improve their facial features, clothes were the other important means through which they expressed their selfhood. Clothes are a means of expressing individual identity and a marker of social class. Wickramasinghe (2003) argues that nationalists' interest in creating a notion of an ideal woman, during the latter part of the 19th and the turn of the 20th century focussed on getting women, especially of middle-class background, to shed their penchant for Western clothes and instead adopt the sari as their everyday dress. The sari or rather the *Osariya*, worn with a long blouse, was morally acceptable because it covered the entire body and was seen as the authentic dress of the Sinhala women. Young women no longer wear the sari or the *Osariya* as their everyday dress and the women at Kelaniya were similar to other young women. They wore dresses, skirts and trousers, and fashionable clothes, especially those which were modest, were a favoured topic of conversation. The 'tsunami-skirt', a long, tiered, ankle-length skirt, which came into fashion and was termed such after international aid workers wore them during the post-tsunami period in Sri Lanka, was still in vogue during my fieldwork period. Apart from its link to the West, the 'tsunami-skirt' was also popular because it suited 'Sri Lankan culture'. Its length and looseness meant that women could follow fashion without revealing body parts which are meant to remain covered. Moreover, these skirts were invariably lined, or worn with an under slip thus ensuring the silhouette of their legs was not revealed.

Women who were more daring and willing to push the boundaries of tradition found 'three-quarters' more fashionable than the 'tsunami-skirt'. Three-quarter trousers, simply called 'three-quarters', was Samadhi's favourite style of clothing. The length of

'three-quarters' ranged from just below the knee cap to mid-calf. The mid-calf length 'three-quarters' were more popular because they showed less leg. While showing leg above the knee was taboo even showing too much leg below the knee was something which women had to refrain from lest they be thought of as corrupt and Westernised. The longer 'three-quarters', like the 'tsunami-skirt' were ideal in that they were fashionable but not too revealing. To wear 'three-quarters', however, one had to have 'nice legs' (*lassana kakul*), Kumari and Ayoma explained to me while criticising Gayani for the latest acquisition to her wardrobe. Their definition of 'nice legs' was different to those advocated in most fashion magazines.

Not everyone should wear 'three-quarters' you know? It's a different story if you wear them to the house. I wear them at home... but do I wear them to 'campus'? No. Because I know I don't have nice legs. Look at Gayani. Doesn't she know that her legs are just too dark [*kalu væɟyi*] to wear 'three-quarters'? If she had nice fair [*sudu*] legs like Samadhi, then it is OK but it doesn't make any sense to show dark [*kalu*] legs like that. If your legs are fair [*sudu*] then you can wear 'three-quarters'.

It was neither the shape nor the size of the leg which determined if they were worthy of being shown off through 'three-quarters' but rather the colour of the skin. Similar to fair skin being equated with prettiness, 'good legs' were equated with light skin colour. On another occasion I heard a group of women discussing the new black moccasins one of them had just purchased in Kiribathgoda. Everyone duly admired the latest purchase when the owner, who was clad in a just-below-the-knee length flared skirt, wore them and one of the friends commented 'Wow, its great! You have a pair of nice white [*sudu*] legs no, so you should wear them with short dresses to show the contrast.' I was surprised that skin colour mattered above shape, size or even the depilation of hair from the legs – this latter being the least important. A majority of the women I observed had hair on their legs and when I enquired from Samadhi if this was the norm she said, 'Yes, there is no need to remove hair if you have only a little. Like I do, see? [shows her

legs] Now if you have hair like a devil [*yakek*], then of course it makes sense to remove it’.

While any form of fashion which revealed the thigh was forbidden, showing leg below the knee was hardly ever considered improper. Most school uniforms for girls in Sri Lanka consist of a white dress with pleats which invariably sit at knee length or just below knee length and as such exposed calves are hardly a novelty. Yet at Kelaniya women had to be extra careful. When I asked Dilini why she did not wear any knee length skirts she said ‘Are you mad “Miss”? Wear those to this place and be branded a prostitute? They will put up “posters” about me the next day again! It is better for me cover my legs in this place’. Women’s thighs, and even the inadvertent display of them which could happen if one wore a knee length skirt, given its links to interfemoral sex, was taboo. The only way in which women could reveal the shape of their thighs was when they wore tight-fitting trousers. The compromise most women made was to wear skirts (and dresses) which reached at least mid calf length or fitting trousers which revealed the shape of their thighs and legs but did not show any flesh.

The emphasis on ‘good legs’ found in most English-language fashion magazines in the West, however, was absent at Kelaniya. It was only if women with dark legs wore knee length skirts or ‘three-quarters’ some criticism may be cast in their direction but the shapes and sizes of legs never drew any comment. Similarly women with ‘fair legs’ who wore ‘three-quarters’ may be commented on positively for wearing clothes which suit them but this too happens regardless of the shape and the size of the leg. The perception, among women, is that calves are not sexualised whereas showing the thigh pointed to a perverse and vulgar sexuality. This contradiction in how the calves and thighs are perceived did not, however, apply to the upper bodies of the women. The exposure of too much skin on a woman’s upper body, with the exception of their arms, remains forbidden and none of the women I knew at Kelaniya dared to flout this expectation even though a few said to me that they would like to.

Really, it is very difficult for women from my society. You know ‘Miss’, if I came from a society like yours... from Colombo society, I would dress so differently. My God! I would dress to show my legs or midriff or ‘bust’ so that I could really show off my body in slightly ‘sexy’ ways and not have to worry about people saying things.<sup>55</sup>

This was how Samadhi expressed the frustrations she felt at how the context at Kelaniya controlled how women could clothe themselves. Aruni was slightly more guarded in her choice of words but expressed similar thoughts when she said

People from rural areas [referring to other students] think in very narrow ways. For them, they may sometimes like to do it [dress in revealing ways]. Now even I like, if I was not here, I would like to wear something very short. I like to wear clothes which show a little, show a little [whispers this and points to her cleavage]. I think that will look nice on me. But don’t you know people here... So I cover and dress.

Aruni always wore loose fitting, long or short-sleeved blouses and full-length trousers which did not outline the shape of her body while Samadhi did the reverse. Samadhi had a collection of sleeveless blouses which she wore regularly but if these had a low-cut neckline she wore a t-shirt underneath so that she did not show any cleavage. Even Samadhi, who questioned ‘traditional values’ and did not always adhere to cultural expectations, knew there was an invisible yet palpable line which she could not cross. Like the Keralan women Lukose (2005) speaks of, the women at Kelaniya had to navigate between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ in their desire for fashion and could only consume fashion with modesty, if they were to be perceived as respectable.

It was Dilini who in her first year decided to disregard the need to strike a balance who suffered most. Dilini explained how soon after the rag she had worn a skirt which fell on her knee and admitted that it was the biggest mistake she made because

About fifteen boys surrounded me and said bad things, dirty things to me, like dirty words [giggles] “You are good for an *ātal* [for a good

---

<sup>55</sup> She is referring to her cleavage, when she uses the word ‘bust’.

time/sex]”, things like that. Because I wore a knee length skirt. They said things about my legs [giggles]... they used the bad words. “Your thighs [*gala*] are fair. They will be good for ‘sex’ with us”. For about an hour [they did this]. I cried for about half of that hour.

The threats hurled at Dilini all pertained to her sexuality and the control men had over it. By referring to her thighs as ideal for sex, even though her thighs could not be seen, the men conveyed to her that she was flouting the permitted dress codes at Kelaniya. Women who flout convention suffer the consequences for doing so (Vance 1992) and Dilini ‘learnt her lesson’ and stopped wearing anything short to university. She was not only harassed by these men but also advised by her women batch-mates who, Dilini claims, eventually distanced themselves from her, to dress more appropriately. The forceful pressure exerted by men and the subtle, ‘well-meaning’ pressure exerted by women all contribute to ensuring that women adhere to norms of chastity in their clothing.

The pressure on women to maintain modesty in their clothing pertained specifically to not showing any skin. Short skirts, shorts, strappy tops, blouses with cut-away sleeves, and t-shirts with low-cut necklines, were prohibited while clothes which were tight-fitting and outlined the body shape were permitted. Most women wore long tight skirts, tight jeans and equally tight fitting t-shirts or blouses without much concern. Even the popular *salwār-kameez*, the usually loose-fitting long tunic-top and trousers donned by most women were fashioned so that they were tight fitting and revealing of their body shape. These clothes allowed women an opportunity to flaunt an aspect of sexuality but none of the men or women I spoke with commented negatively about women who wore such clothes: the message was that tight fitting is allowed but revealing and transparent was not.

Women went the extra mile to ensure that their clothes were not transparent: nearly every woman wore a camisole under their t-shirt/blouse and an underskirt with their skirts. Samitha, who usually upheld all ‘traditional values’, said she could not

understand why they had to wear a camisole under every blouse, t-shirt or *kurtā* top regardless of the thickness of the outer garment. She said, ‘I of course don’t always wear “vests”. I only wear them if my “blouse” is transparent and my body can be seen’ and explained that women wear vests ‘because they are worried their button (*bottama*) may be seen or because others will say things’. Wearing a vest/camisole was second nature to most because it was something they had got used to from their school days when they had to wear a petticoat under their uniform. This tradition which women brought from school days was continued while at university with the expectation that modesty in dress would convey modesty of character.

From experimenting with almond facials to wearing ‘three-quarters’, most women at Kelaniya were interested in the latest fashions which they accessed through popular media. Beauty and fashion were given high priority by all women. However, they were selective in which fashion they followed and which they deemed too Westernised and inappropriate for the Sri Lankan context. In following fashion these women emulated aspects which suited their context and discarded the rest. The discarded aspects were not always those which they felt did not suit them but those which they knew would be condemned by others and would brand them as women without *læjja-baya*. In the face of such uncertainty it served the women better to adhere to ‘traditional norms’ but give its boundaries a slight nudge so that while exposing too much skin remains prohibitive, revealing the silhouette of their bodies and thereby subtly exposing an aspect of their sexuality becomes permissive.

### **Striking a Balance: Portraying Sexual Ignorance, Behaving Independently**

#### *The key to a man’s heart*

‘Men do not like women who are sexually experienced’ was the rallying cry I got from every woman. This was the accepted norm and therefore did not require any questioning. The meaning of ‘sexually experienced’, however, varied among the women with some taking the stand that it meant being ignorant of all sexual knowledge

and others stating that it meant having 'done sex'. Since 'doing sex' meant anything from petting to penetrative sex it allowed a wide margin within which a woman could be considered sexually experienced. Regardless of how the term was understood there was a general reluctance among women to increase their awareness of sexual issues or to at least overtly admit any curiosity about their own sexuality. At the end of all my formal interviews I offered to answer any questions they may have on sexual health or sexuality and for them to ask me any questions about my personal life. With the exception of Aruni, who asked me questions on masturbation and virginity, none of the others took me up on my offer but instead giggled and said 'No, there is nothing'.

The values of chastity inculcated in them as children made the women I knew accurately perceive that men would look for women who have not had any sexual experience. There were no such expectations for men and these double standards were accepted as inevitable by both men and women. Maneesh clearly expressed this when I spoke with him about the differences in how men and women can express their sexuality: 'When you put it like that, in here [points to the head] I know that it is unfair but in here [points to the heart] I still believe in it'. Aruni was more resigned in her acceptance of these double standards and said 'Yes, it is unfair only but then what to do? This is what we have been dealt with by fate and so we have to accept it' while Kumari, who refused to question tradition on most counts, claimed that, 'A woman needs to know how to behave because if she did then none of these questions would arise.' So either willingly or unwillingly most women adhered to the sexual propriety expected of them by their culture.

The only exception to this was Nayana who came from a more urban, middle-class background. She was the only one who admitted to having sexual intercourse with her boyfriend. She explained that even though at first they had only done 'sweet things' like exchanging letters, making phone calls and holding hands, their relationship had gradually become more physical and after six years into the relationship she had decided to take it one step further and 'Let him penetrate me because we had done every



other thing by then'. The length of the relationship was the primary reason that made her consent to having sex and this length also gave her the confidence that her boyfriend would marry her when they were both financially more stable. The novelty of having a woman admit to being sexually active took me by surprise and her willingness to talk made me ask her detailed questions about how she reconciled between her right to decide on her sexuality and societal expectations of all women being virginal until marriage.

Nayana explained that her school had a special programme for all 14-year-old students and this was her first exposure to accurate information on sexual health. 'The programme covered everything except for actual sex' she said but she eventually learnt about penetrative sex from her friends. Her parents, she claimed, were quite strict and did not allow her to go out with her boyfriend but he was allowed to come home and spend time with her and even stay the night at her house sometimes. 'We go get some "ice-cream" and watch some "videos" together' and it is during these video watching sessions that they had first become physically intimate with each other. Initially they had restricted themselves to French kissing, heavy petting, 'finger fucking' and sex between the thighs. She said that both she and her partner watched 'International and Sri Lankan "blue movies" together' but thought of it as 'A waste of time' and the 'Focus on women too much'. She also had very clear likes and dislikes in this repertoire of sexual activities and claimed she had expressed these to her partner.

I'll take myself personally, OK? I find oral sex... the thought of oral sex and anal sex disgusting, OK? Someone else may think it is alright, so it depends... All my friends would also agree with me and say, when you have the normal way [vaginal sex] why [try other ways]? Doing it on the thighs would be understandable because may be you are at a moment where you don't have a condom, but you don't want to get pregnant, you don't want to get AIDS... so you do it at the moment of weakness and the woman could get sexually satisfied by what we call 'finger fucking'.<sup>56</sup>

---

<sup>56</sup> This interview was conducted in English and Sinhala.

This exceptional candidness and knowledge with which Nayana spoke revealed an almost cavalier attitude towards the societal expectations placed on women. She admitted to having taken the morning-after pill, visiting a sexual and reproductive health specialist and spoke of the importance of safe sex. I asked her if she thought her non-virginal status would affect future prospects of marriage if things with her current partner did not work out, and she explained how her father, to date, makes the life of her mother miserable because she had not been a virgin at the time of marriage. Nayana, therefore, had a very clear notion of the consequences of not being a virgin at marriage but she was confident that her current partner would marry her because he was ‘good and caring’ towards her and refused to think of the alternative scenario I presented. She also said ‘No matter how women behave, society would find some small issue to fault with and so I might as well as do what I want’. Other women voiced the first part of her sentiment but for the latter said ‘so we need to be extra careful’.

Having sex on the thighs, interfemoral sex, where the man rubs his penis between the tightly pressed thighs of a woman or man, is a common sexual activity in Sri Lanka (Obeyesekere 1984:486; Silva *et al* 1998). It is a way of protecting a woman’s virginity and most women had heard of ‘thigh sex’. None of them however thought it had the potential for transmitting infections or making a woman pregnant. Even Aruni who clearly felt that virginity at the time of marriage was crucial said she knew of a friend who has sex on the thighs ‘Because that *ayiyā* really loves that *akkā* and does not want to take her virginity before marriage.’ Thigh sex (*gal kapanavā*) was considered the ultimate level a woman could go to in being sexually active without endangering her reputation because her virginity would still be intact. The importance of a woman’s virginity at the time of marriage was conveyed by every woman and even Nayana who was not a virgin spoke of the difficulties experienced by her mother.

Aruni explained how the key to a man’s heart and the foundation of a happy marriage was perceived to be in the hands of a virginal bride.

I have heard that it's [the hymen] not there for some women but still... There may be people who do not have it but if it is there, any one will like it, no? I know what men in our society are like. According to Sri Lankan society, now after you get married if it [virginity] is not there, they will not get divorced but the marriage life will start with unhappiness. If it is there, he will like it. It will be a happy [marriage].

Aruni had asked her older sister if she had bled on her wedding night and was relieved that she had because to Aruni, this was an indication that she too will have a hymen and so would bleed on her wedding night. So despite the knowledge that some women do not have hymens or have hymens which are elastic and do not rupture there was still an anxiety among women that they needed to 'prove' their virginity on the wedding night. Even Samadhi, who claimed that all men were abusive, would never marry and criticised the double standards that applied to men's and women's sexuality, agreed that a woman who is not a virgin at marriage would have to face severe consequences. The societal emphasis on a woman maintaining her virginity was, according to one of the UoK student counsellors, the main reason why in her ten years of working as a counsellor only six couples had admitted to having had penetrative sex.

Vaginal sex was dangerous because it took away a woman's virginity. Thigh sex was acceptable because it allowed the man to satisfy his sexual desires and did not affect the woman's virginity. What of oral and anal sex? Not all women had heard of oral and anal sex and those who had heard of anal sex said it was something men did when they had sex with each other. Oral sex, either giving or getting it, was thought of as something perverse and dirty. Obeyesekere explains how in Sinhala culture the vagina, despite its sexual desirability, is also seen as a polluted object because of the excretion of menstrual blood (Obeyesekere 1984:486). This provides a partial explanation as to why 'Cīyā!' (an expression of disgust) was the commonest exclamation when I explained what I meant by oral sex.<sup>57</sup> 'Eeee, I find it really revolting [*appiriya*!]. If my

---

<sup>57</sup> I had to explain that oral sex was using one's mouth to stimulate the genitals of one's partner because French kissing, which one could see some couples on campus engaging in, was referred to as oral sex by some students at Kelaniya.

husband does it to me, I will ask him, “Are you an animal?” I am sure I will ask like that. “Are you a mad man? An animal to put your tongue like this?” was Samadhi’s reaction when I asked her to imagine a hypothetical situation of her husband wanting them to engage in oral sex with each other. She said that she would rather he went with another woman if he desired oral sex than her having to perform fellatio on him or him wanting to perform cunnilingus on her. The others said that they would try to explain to their husband that they ‘do not like it’ and expect him to understand their revulsion.

While vaginal sex was taboo because it damaged their hymen, all other forms of ‘doing sex’ were either disliked or frowned upon by women even though they had the ‘advantage’ of not leaving behind any ‘telltale’ signs. Very few women seem to have the inclination to venture into an exploration of their sexuality even through the extremely private act of masturbation. Nearly all women had heard of masturbation and ‘Yes, it is something that men do’ was their first response to my question. I had to tease it out from them if women too cannot do the same. With the exception of Nayana who said ‘Why not?’, Dilini who said ‘It is an innocent joy’ and Thilini who said ‘It is not wrong’, all the others explained in various ways why it was not suitable for women. Samadhi said that she had never felt the need to masturbate because when she is sexually aroused she satisfies herself by reading something which fulfilled that need. Priyanthi on the other hand said that even though she may get aroused by the stories in risqué tabloids, her education has enabled her to ‘Control my feelings and not try anything rash’.

Masturbating was seen as rash because the books and tabloids from which they got their information said that it could damage the hymen. Aruni explained this to me.

I read a book in the library and in that it said a lot of men are like that [masturbate]. It also said that women can do it. But more men are like that. According to that when women do it [masturbate] they can lose their virginity. Then when you do it, that... when you insert something

into the vagina you can lose your virginity... By inserting something you can lose it.

When I asked her if the book said that it was possible for a woman to masturbate without inserting anything into her vagina, she looked confused and said, 'No, it did not say anything like that'. Aruni's words were not very different to the thoughts expressed by other women. Thilini, who felt there was nothing wrong with masturbating, said that she would not masturbate because it requires making use of an animal, like a dog, to stimulate the woman 'By applying Astra [a local brand of margarine] on the... the thing [clitoris]'. For them, masturbation required inserting something into the vagina or making use of an animal and thus was potentially dangerous. When I enquired why women do not masturbate, Malithi said it leads to 'Unnecessary questions. What is the point in losing one's virginity and facing all these problems when you have not even been with a man?'

Contrary to the expectations of society and some men, women were not ignorant of all sexual knowledge. A majority had read educational material on sexuality, quite a number had read the same risqué tabloids as the men, some had watched "blue movies" out of curiosity, the few who had boyfriends had at least 'lip kissed' them and in Aruni's words 'Allowed him to feel me around here [points to her breasts]'. Kissing for most, however, was not considered sexual and so they did not see themselves as contravening any of the strongly established codes of chastity. Yet as university students who thought highly of their student status, the knowledge they had on sexuality was not only inaccurate but also restricted by fear: to know too much information on sexuality would mean they were 'bad' women. Aruni said during her interview, if it was not for my research, she would not have spoken so openly with me.

Now if anyone in my village asked me these questions, I would pretend that I do not know any of the things I told you. If I even indicated that I knew them, they would think that I have done them. That is how they would think. They all have different levels of intelligence, no? Now if a person in my village asked me these questions I would pretend that I

don't know anything and say, "Ah really?", "Is that so?", "I of course do not know". Otherwise that person will think [the things she knows!]... because we don't talk about things like this in the village... So I will feign ignorance.

It made more sense for her, and probably for other women as well, to feign ignorance and refrain from engaging in any discussions on sexuality – be it about their sexual preferences, fantasies or even the book knowledge they may have on the topic. This reluctance to discuss most aspects of sexuality meant they had limited opportunities through which they could enhance or correct their knowledge on the topic or debate over the double standards of sexuality they lived with, in their everyday lives. Thus their efforts to portray the image of a 'good woman', who is ignorant of sexual knowledge, indirectly contributed to the taboos surrounding women's sexuality being perpetuated.

### *Shaming and blaming transgressors*

Very few women thought that they should be ignorant of sexual knowledge. The majority, however, feigned ignorance of any knowledge to keep in line with societal norms. A 'like but scared' (*asayi bayayi*) attitude dominated their approach to obtaining information on sexuality or even experimenting with their own sexuality, but it did not apply to other aspects of their behaviour. As university students, the women were expected to be and were proud of being independent women who could do their own work without having to unnecessarily depend on their parents or boyfriends. As women from rural villages, who grew up in very cloistered environments, they soon learnt to be industrious and independent women: they travelled long distances alone by public transport, visited offices in Colombo to obtain information for their studies, attended seminars and presented their work and supported each other in their work.

An ideal woman was one who embodied the best of both 'tradition' and 'modernity'. As 'traditional women' they had to be chaste, demure, obedient, and have *læjja-baya*. As

modern and educated women, however, they also had to be strong, capable, resolve problems and face challenges without crumbling under pressure. These women had to strike the right balance between being ‘traditional’ minded and modern in their outlook; a balancing act which was carried out with seemingly little effort because they knew that ‘traditional values’ mattered most when it came to their sexuality. They adhered to these values so that they could not be faulted with by anyone apart from the most stringent of moral value bearers. These women knew their conduct – be it how they dressed or how they interacted with their lecturers – was watched and would be condemned if it was considered inappropriate. Both Dilini and Nilooshani spoke with me about their experiences of being ostracised.

Dilini recounted how during her first year at university she had told her friend about going dancing to a nightclub during the weekend with her brother and how she had a really good time. Her friend had been shocked that Dilini would go to such debauched places and so Dilini had explained to her that “‘Nightclubs” are not that bad and all I did was “dance” with my brother’. This explanation had not pacified her friend and Dilini said, ‘The next day when I came to “campus” everyone in my class was asking me if it is true that I have been to nightclubs and when I said I went once with my brother they advised me that patronising ‘places like that’ will ruin my reputation. That same night there had been posters about her just outside the department branding her an ‘easy woman’ who emulates the West and does not show respect for ‘Sri Lankan culture’. Dilini had stopped coming to university for several weeks after that and even when I was doing my fieldwork she would come for the lectures and leave soon after without talking to many people because she said ‘Most women don’t like to hang out with me after that “poster” incident’.

Kumari who noticed that I had struck up a friendship with Dilini, called me aside one day and said, ‘Dilini is a bit strange [*amutuyi*], people say that she does not have a good reputation [*caritē*]. I am telling you this only because I have seen you talking a lot with her, if I was you, I would be a little careful’. I was similarly warned about Nilooshani

who, until a poster went up about her during my fieldwork period, was considered a good woman albeit ‘a little too outspoken’. Nilooshani was the only woman, out of five students, who was offered an internship with a prestigious research institute in Colombo. The poster which was pasted near the department building, the morning after the announcement was made, claimed Nilooshani was selected for the internship because she was ‘servicing the “lecturer”’ who was responsible for the special internship programme. Nilooshani was distraught by these accusations, considered refusing the internship and sent me two text messages saying, ‘I have so many things to tell you. I want a little of your time after the exams. Some of the things are “unbelievable”!’<sup>58</sup> The university holidays after the exams unexpectedly lasted four months and when I approached Nilooshani after university reopened to talk about the posters, she avoided the subject saying, ‘It is best not to talk about these things’.

Putting up posters, on A4 size sheets, was a strategy used to police the behaviours, especially of women students. The two posters about Dilini and Nilooshani were no more than five in number, unsigned and pasted only near the department building of their respective discipline. The poster about Nilooshani was being hurriedly torn down by her friends when Kumari told me about it and I rushed to the department building to look at it. Hence I only saw the phrase about her ‘servicing the “lecturer”’ but both Kumari and Samadhi said that the poster had been defamatory. The ‘enough foolish ways now’ (*gon ‘part dæn æti*) poster, on the other hand, was pasted on notice boards in several buildings in the university, and signed off by the *Vimarśaka Paṛśadaya*, an independent and conservative student group which had the support of a University Professor.<sup>59</sup> It had a picture of the back of a Caucasian woman wearing jeans and a t-shirt, seated on the ground with her knees drawn up. Her t-shirt had ridden up and slightly exposed the edge of her knickers and the top of her intergluteal cleft (butt-

---

<sup>58</sup> Most text messages were sent by typing the Sinhala word using the English alphabet phonetically.

<sup>59</sup> The word *gon* (foolish/idiotic) comes from *gonā* which means bull. *Gonā* is at times used for prostitute, drawing from a derogatory connotation of being ridden like a bull. The poster title is therefore a double entendre also meaning ‘enough being a prostitute now’ a clear message linking women who ape the West with prostitution.



crack). The wording below the picture read ‘those of you [*topa*] who emulate the fashions of western prostitutes only show your [*topagē*] idiotic [*mugdha*], wretched [*dīna*], and dastardly [*nivaṭa*] ways! Be independent [*adīna*]! Show restraint [*sarīvara*]!’ (Figure 8). The erudite vocabulary in this poster and their powerfulness effectively captures the insult it intends to convey to women who ape or would consider aping the West. Moreover, it addresses the audience by demeaning them with reference to prostitutes and use of the word *topa* (a deprecating term for you).

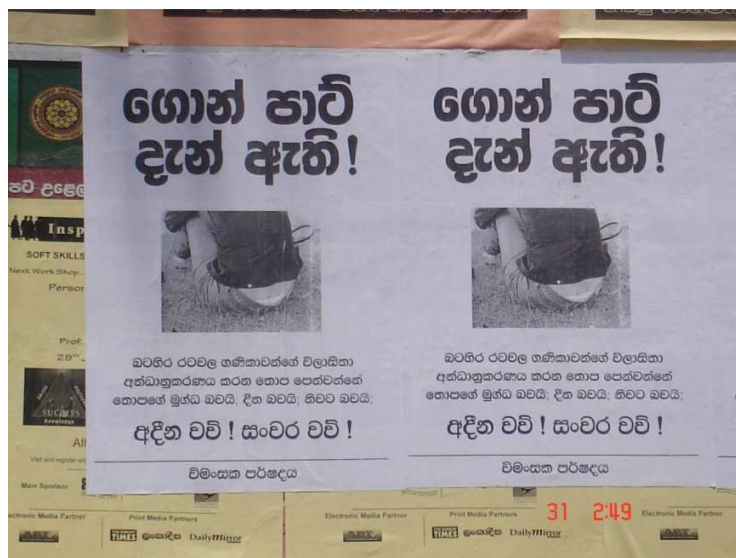


Figure 8: The ‘Enough foolish ways now!’ poster.

With the exception of Samadhi and Aruni who condemned the poster, the other women I spoke with thought this poster would be a good deterrent for women who wanted ‘to copy all aspects of Western fashion without any consideration for Sri Lankan culture’. The vitriolic attack against those who ape the West, unmistakable in this poster, is not very different to the criticisms Anagarika Dharmapala hurled at Sri Lankans in his writings during the colonial period. Unlike his writing which targeted the general public, however, the current criticisms focussed only on women. Moreover unlike the pamphlets and booklets used during the colonial period to communicate the importance of reviving and adhering to a Sinhala-Buddhist culture, the students at Kelaniya resorted

to approaches which would publicly shame those who contravened the ideals of ‘Sri Lankan culture’. The westernisation of women – in their dress, demeanour and the consequent loss of spirituality – which the nationalist project of the colonial period aimed to prevent (Chatterjee 1993) dominates current nationalist thinking in Sri Lanka. This thinking also had a stronghold at Kelaniya and the posters were then another means through which the morality of women students was kept in check so that the degeneration of ‘Sri Lankan culture’ could be prevented.

Anonymous smear campaigns, generally against those in public office or high profile positions, are a relatively common phenomenon in Sri Lanka. The circulation of *kæ/æ pattara* (literal translation: jungle papers), cheaply printed leaflets, distributed by hand, sent via facsimile and/or the post is a means through which those in the public eye who contravene social norms are defamed, shamed and blamed. At Kelaniya the structural support available to student groups made it possible for them to put up a poster vilifying women who aped the West. The message contained in this poster was at a conceptual level and in concordance with nationalist thinking dominant in larger society and their efforts to safeguard the virtues of ‘Sri Lankan culture and morality’. The posters which target particular individuals, however, in their very anonymity, limited number, geographic specificity and the speed and surreptitiousness with which they come up, allude to a slightly different dynamic. Similar to the *kæ/æ pattara*, their intention is to shame and blame particular individuals for their misdemeanour and use them as specific, concrete examples of the fate which awaits those who transgress boundaries of propriety. In other words, they teach the person a lesson and therefore act as a warning to others. These posters targeting individuals also point to how a small group of students, with or without structural support, take it upon themselves to be guardians of

‘Sri Lankan culture and morality’ because they recognise the tacit support their actions will receive.<sup>60</sup>

Amarasuriya (2010) shows how, despite the fact that their work confronted them with examples of how what they represented as ‘Sri Lankan culture and morality’ was repeatedly transgressed, the civil servants she worked with continued to spout the virtues and superiority of the country’s culture and its morality. Likewise most students saw Sri Lankan culture as unchanging and the pinnacle of all things moral. Women were assigned the responsibility of upholding this moral culture and it was a responsibility many women, despite the burden it placed on them, accepted with pride. Consequently when posters vilifying women who were perceived as contravening Sri Lankan culture appeared, no one spoke out against the posters in public, even though in private they claimed to abhor the act. Nilooshani was outspoken and often retorted when other students made sexist comments or insinuations. And yet, when a poster about her came up, she withdrew from university social life till the incident was ‘forgotten’ and like Dilini distanced herself from her friends. Samadhi expressed anger and indignation at the injustice meted out to Nilooshani but she did this only with me. When I asked her why she did not speak out against it to other students she said ‘And do you think I want to have a “poster” about me put up tomorrow?’ The fear of being negatively portrayed made women remain silent, when judgement was passed on others for flouting moral norms, and ensure their behaviours were above criticism.

#### *To speak or not to speak?*

The strategy of remaining silent did not only apply to posters which defamed friends. For some women it also applied in contexts outside of university, even when it affected their own wellbeing. Wolf-whistles, catcalls or verbal comments were not common at

---

<sup>60</sup> I was informed that sometimes students are also shamed through the circulation of *kæləə pattara*. Since none of the students I spoke with claimed they had been denigrated through *kæləə pattara* I do not discuss them further here.

Kelaniya. Men would comment or wolf whistle only if they deemed the woman was blatantly contravening established codes of conduct, especially those which pertained to dress. The women, for their part, took extra care to not deviate from these codes and so did not give men an opportunity to comment or make catcalls. However in the world external to the university, women could not be guaranteed freedom from comments and wolf-whistles, no matter how demurely they behaved or conventionally they were dressed. Remaining silent was the path most women chose when they were commented on or wolf whistled outside of university. In this section, I highlight how women's sexuality is affected by their experiences outside of campus, especially when they travel alone in public transport.

With the exception of Samadhi, Wimala and Thilini, none of the others found cat calls and wolf-whistles problematic. 'It is something which happens', 'I just ignore it', 'It's normal, there is no need to make a big deal out of it' or 'Men do it because of their laddish ways [*kolu kama*]' were what most women said when I asked what they thought of men who wolf-whistled them. They all however had boundaries because when I asked if any form of touching or '*jack*' *gahanavā* (rubbing) was equally unproblematic the answer was a resounding no.<sup>61</sup> Even though every woman I spoke with vehemently opposed '*jack*' *gahanavā* and disliked 'rub-men', not everyone spoke out against it in public. Most said they would glare at the man to make him know they disapproved of what he was doing. They would however not say anything to him because they feared how they would be perceived by others if they spoke out in public. It does not bode well for women to draw attention to themselves in public and so it was easier for them to move away from the man to avoid further contact. But they were able to move away only if there was some space within the crowded bus or train.

It was a very crowded train and I was surrounded by men. From the time I got into the train, even though we passed about 5 'stations', the crowds did not lessen. At about the sixth 'station', that is when I got to Ragama, a few people got off the train. I said there were men around me, no? One

---

<sup>61</sup> I engage in a detailed discussion of this phenomenon in the following chapter.

of those men [I think] had ejaculated on my leg and there was sperm on my 'three-quarters'. I did not know that he had done this to me. I felt something like a hand knocking against my leg. A little at a time. So I glared once and looked away. When I stared at the man who did this, he was pulling his t-shirt down. And the other thing is when he saw me staring at him he moved back a little. As soon as the crowds lessened, I moved away. It was only then I realised that the side of my trousers was a little wet, near my upper thigh. I touched that place and that felt something like 'gum'. I touched it again and again I felt something like 'gum'. And then I wondered if this could be sperm. At that 'station' a young married couple I knew got onto the train and the two of them saw it and gave me a strange look. With a little revulsion and as if to say, "What is this?" Then that *ayiyā* said, "It could be 'gum' but be more vigilant when you travel". But still I asked that *akkā* if it was sperm and she said, "Yes".

At the end of this entry in Samadhi's diary, she writes that even though she has experienced men wolf whistling, making nuisance calls and trying to grope her, she had never felt this repulsed in her life. Despite these other, equally distressing experiences, it was only after this incident that she called me from the train and sobbed for more than half an hour asking me the same question over and over again, 'Why did he do this to me "Miss"? Do I look like an easy [*va*] woman?' In her entry she explains the fear she felt after she discovered the "'gum"-like substance' and wonders at the audacity of the man which made him perform this act. Yet she did not once, even though she realised he was rubbing against her, speak out against him. I subsequently asked her why she did not say anything, and she said, 'What could I have said? The train was really crowded, there was no room to breathe, I was surrounded by men and he would have said I was imagining things. The others would have agreed with him'.

The need for support and fear of not getting it from the public or, worse still, being criticised by members of the public for speaking out, is what prevents most women from expressing their anger and annoyance against men who grope them. Another reason why women refrained from speaking out became clear when Kumari said 'Sometimes men say things and do things to women because there is some subtle encouragement (*anubalayak*) from the woman. Men don't just comment on everyone,

no?’ It then becomes not just the fear of not getting support from the public, but also the possibility that the public may perceive the woman as having encouraged the attention and thus deserving of the consequences, which hold women back from expressing their displeasure. For the majority of the women I spoke with at Kelaniya, public opinion, even of those who they did not know, mattered and they did not want to be perceived as women who did not have any *læjja-baya*. So, many of them remained silent.

Priyanthi and Thilini said they have spoken out when men tried to rub against (*æñgē gævenna*) them. Once when a man had leant against her, Thilini had said, ‘*Ayiyā*, we have now passed that steep bend on the road. We have passed the bend, so please straighten up now’, and made light of the situation. She felt this approach was easier than an outright confrontation and more importantly it allowed her to get away without any fear of censure from the others. Priyanthi on the other hand, took a more direct stand and spoke her mind because while she felt wolf-whistles and catcalls were normal she had a definite boundary when it came to physical contact.

If it is a person who rubs his leg against me then I immediately think this man is coming for something and so I either do something to let him know and move out... That is I glare at him so that he feels it and move out from there. Now, things like that have happened to me. At that time, I make sure that he feels it... and even for others to realise it, I either scold him or at least tell the nearest person “This man is like this”, and I move away from there.

Notwithstanding these experiences of sexual harassment, every woman travelled by public transport often because they could not afford private transport. Travelling by public transport did not take place only during daytime, when it was considered relatively safe and acceptable for women to be in public spaces. On three days of the week, during the last semester of my fieldwork, Samadhi took the 6.30pm train which reached her hometown at 8pm and she had to take a bus from the train station to near her house which took at least another 30 minutes. Kumari stayed in the hostel but at least once a month left Kelaniya after 6pm to go to her home in Galle, which she said

took her at least six hours. This trip included one change at the central bus station in Colombo and her father or boyfriend met her at the main bus station in Galle at midnight to escort her home. Kumari said that when she travels home she tries to ‘Sit next to a woman, take a book out and pretend to read. Then no one can say anything to me and I don’t see how they look at me.’

Travelling alone at night exposes these women to greater risks of harassment: repeated suggestive looks at a minimum or some form of touching at worst. Moreover, not having a chaperone and being in a public space after dark makes it easier for societal censure to be directed at them. Similar to how women with loose, untied hair are considered sexually permissive (Obeyesekere 1981), women who are alone at night, regardless of how they are dressed or they behave, risk a similar labelling. For women students who travel at night the fear of negative perception increases twofold because in their own eyes they are contravening norms of propriety by projecting an image of a woman who is independent, capable and not fearful. For those who travel alone at night, the decision to not speak out and instead take other precautions, even when their own sexuality and independence are threatened, becomes imperative since they are occupying a space and a time which is not meant for respectable women.

When women students use public transport, and are faced with suggestive looks or groping, the tendency is for them to remain silent or use more strategic ways of expressing their disapproval. None of them reacted outwardly to catcalls, wolf-whistles and comments – be it on campus or outside. They may have found the attention annoying but since they had internalised it as ‘something which happens’ they felt it was best left ignored. Remaining silent, ignoring or withdrawing, rather than directly confronting those who commented, wolf-whistled, catcalled or groped was the mode of action preferred by these women. Women who engaged in direct confrontation and brought attention to themselves were often perceived as lacking in respectability and this is something which the women I spoke with at Kelaniya wanted to avoid. It seems to me that experiences in campus as well as those outside of campus feed into each

other and reinforce the notion that a ‘good woman’ should adhere to her role of being chaste, obedient and contained – in her dress, behaviour and in how she responded to others or difficult situations.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter focuses on how the women I knew at Kelaniya created an image of themselves as modern and independent women, who were at the same time respectable and ‘traditional’ in their outlook. To them, striking the right balance between these disparate values marked them as ‘good women’, and it is this that drove their everyday behaviours. They all wanted to look pretty, be fashionable and act modern. However their foremost concern as ‘good women’ was to do all these things within the framework of ‘traditional values’. So the fashions they followed were only those which portrayed them as women with *læjja-baya*. The few who openly questioned these ‘traditional values’ but felt they lacked the wherewithal to make significant changes, deviated in subtle and almost imperceptible ways. They wore ‘three-quarters’, did not always wear a camisole, wore tight fitting clothes and revealed their body shapes. But rarely anything which showed too much skin or was transparent. In this way they used these new fashions to give the boundaries of respectability a slight nudge so that they could, while following fashion, still be considered ‘good women’.

Unlike fashion, however, when it came to their sexual behaviours, chastity was of foremost importance. Even though most women knew their ‘facts-of-life’, read risqué tabloids, watched blue-movies and thought kissing was not sexual, they often feigned ignorance and denied their behaviours because they feared the possibility of being branded as ‘loose women’ for knowing too much. It was easier for them to feign ignorance than challenge established norms. Their knowledge on sexuality, often obtained through secondary sources, was not matched by a similar desire to experiment with their own sexuality. The overriding importance of virginity and chastity influenced their every behaviour and attitude towards sexuality. A virginal bride was seen as the



key to a happy marriage and a happy marriage was something which all women coveted. Moreover, the watchful eye cast on women, by their peers and larger society, also served to keep women's sexuality in check. The appearance of posters and *kæ/æ pattara* denigrating women who transgressed boundaries of respectability and chastity served as a warning to others of the consequences faced by women who are not 'good women'.

In the final section of this chapter I showed that it is not only their life on campus which reinforces norms of gender and sexuality. Even when these women use public transport and face numerous forms of sexual harassment, a majority feel remaining silent and not drawing any attention to themselves is the best form of defence: for them the belief that women, in some way, invite the unwanted attention or that an outburst will not be approved by fellow passengers, is never far from the surface. The women at Kelaniya had a keen awareness that the slightest deviation on their part would result in criticisms against them and therefore most felt they had no option but to take heed and ensure their behaviours were beyond reproach. These criticisms were not only hurled by men but also other women who were their peers and so they had to be doubly careful. The context at Kelaniya did not allow women to openly challenge or question 'traditional norms' and so women opted to remain silent. A majority of the women, whether because of their family background, the context at Kelaniya or their experiences outside of campus which further reinforced 'traditional values', championed values of chastity as the ideal for all good Sri Lankan women.

A 'good woman' is a chaste woman. She is one who is sexually ignorant, is not too fashionable, does not draw undue attention to herself and, most importantly, respects 'traditional values'. Yet, she should also be educated, modern and independent. It is a difficult balancing act for any person to perform but it was one which most women at Kelaniya did magnificently. The desire to be perceived as a 'good woman' and the consequent behaviours they abided by was also motivated by what women at Kelaniya thought the men desired and looked for in a woman. I move away from the focus on

women and the subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which their sexuality is controlled by the milieu at Kelaniya to exploring how different types of masculinities are constructed, in the next chapter. I write about men's attitudes on and behaviours which pertain to sexuality and show how they are shaped by their experiences both at and outside of Kelaniya, the expectations women place on them and the societal pressures to perform the script assigned to them.

## CHAPTER 6

### Living the Script of Masculinity: Laddish Behaviours and Sensual Dancing

#### Introduction

Given my interest in women's sexuality and the significance of gender relations in shaping their sexuality, in this chapter and the next, I pay attention to the performance of masculinities at Kelaniya. I attempt to unpack how the social structures at Kelaniya affect the ways in which men can behave and contrast that with their behaviours outside of Kelaniya. In doing so I hope to reveal the complexity of gender relations at Kelaniya and how these relations contribute to the construction of women's sexuality.

The student population at Kelaniya is predominantly female. According to the University Grants Commission, women comprised 65% of the total student population at Kelaniya for the 2006/2007 academic year (UGC 2008). Despite this numerical dominance of women at Kelaniya, it is the male presence that is felt more strongly in the public arena, be it in the gym canteen or near the *Tel Bæmma*. Men may have been smaller in number but they were by no means insignificant when it came to representation in student organisations and activities: the year I did my fieldwork, the President as well as Secretary of the Student Council were men, the overall responsibility for the *Melar* festival was held by a man, and the President of the English Students Association was a man. Men also played a key role in organising the rag, in instigating campus fights and leading strikes against the university administration. At a more personal level they could be seen holding hands with their girlfriends, carrying brightly coloured umbrellas and enjoying a quiet talk with their friends.

Understanding the construction of masculinities at Kelaniya was important not only because of the ubiquity of men on campus but also because gender is always relational and therefore an exploration of men's behaviour, particularly in relation to women and other men, becomes imperative. My informal links to the men, unlike my links with

women, were limited. While I was able to strike up friendships with a few men during my time at Kelaniya and some of the findings documented in this chapter emanate from the casual conversations with those friends, a majority of the findings are either from formal interviews or observations. As such there are fewer instances in which I had access to and participated in the activities which these young men at Kelaniya engaged in, thus limiting my understanding of the complexities inherent in being young men from varied socialisations and diverse family backgrounds.

A hegemonic masculinity, the form of masculinity which is enacted by a few but dominates a culture and results in the subordination of women by men (Connell 1987) was evident at Kelaniya. Nevertheless male students were also aware that not all their practices would be tolerated within campus premises and, as I detail below, skilfully adapted to the context. Men expressed their masculinities in various ways and negotiated different roles for themselves vis-à-vis the other men and women at Kelaniya. In this chapter I explore the various masculinities enacted by the men at Kelaniya especially in relation to societal expectations of what ‘manly’ behaviour should entail. I look at the ways in which their behaviours change according to context and the contradictions inherent in their discourse and their reality. Men’s behaviour is not only influenced by other men but also by the expectations which women verbalise and imply. Therefore I look at how the different strands of thought and behaviour of the men at Kelaniya are influenced and in turn influence women’s behaviour, gender performances and sexualities.

***‘Kolu Kama’ or ‘Balu Kama’: Laddish Behaviours or Doggish Behaviours?***  
*Manly behaviour at all times*

The title for this section was inspired by a statement Kanishka made when I spoke with him about a fight which took place at Kelaniya which caused a temporary closure of the University. Some men suffered severe injuries and were hospitalised. For Kanishka, ‘The problem here is that we no longer know how to distinguish between laddish

behaviour (*kolu kama*) and doggish/perverse behaviour (*balu kama*) and so we think, no matter what we do, “We are the guys”!’ *Kolu kama* is an inevitable phase in the path to adulthood for all men and the show of most forms of violence during this phase is perceived as well intentioned and carried out in order to belong to the right group. This violence is, most importantly, not ruthless but it helps establish one’s manhood especially in contrast to those who are perceived as ‘unmanly’.

If you are a lad [*kolla*] then you are part of a ‘gang’ and we are the superior ones in the school and have connections with the ‘Rugger buggers’ and we are untouchable. Just like here. During a fight, invariably [we were untouchable]. Never for a fight really, but we used to go for the backup to resolve the fight. It was never more than to shove someone or hold them by their collar. “*Why macari* did you hit my friend?”, “Why did you scold him?” That was a big part of being a man. Women did not really play any role in our life. They were really thought of as the ‘weak sex’. When you are a lad, you must not have the nose in your book but instead do things outside. Extra stuff. Jumping from school... like that. Not like women. We had that belief.<sup>62</sup>

The pressure to be seen as a ‘lad’ is strong and it requires engaging in behaviours which differentiate men from women. Those who do not engage in these macho behaviours are then deemed effete and run the risk of being labelled a series of names which connote their passivity like the ‘ear’oles’ who conformed to schooling authorities in Willis’ study (Willis 1993). For Kanishka, being a lad was not synonymous with physical violence but it entailed ‘doing things’ which women would not do. His view is somewhat different to the thoughts expressed by Lakshman, but it captures the notion that masculinity is often thought of in opposition and superior to femininity (Segal 1990; Messner 2001; McDowell 2003). Lakshman who draws upon this binary even more clearly, felt that fighting, especially if provoked by another, was an integral part of being a man, not merely a lad. He told me that he threw stones during the fight because as a ‘real man’ he could not remain passive in the face of provocation.

---

<sup>62</sup> This interview was conducted in English and Sinhala.

But it's like this, if other people try to make us become thugs [*canḍiyō*] then we have to react to that. That means, if someone hits a person in our group... For no apparent reason if they attack someone, attack someone, then there is no point in just tying our hands and going to sleep. We also have arms and legs, no? We are also real men. We also have some ability. We will then, undoubtedly, have to show some reaction. We, we are not women, no? A man has his self-respect, has an ability to do something for another. A man is the strong one. In society. So, if someone wrongs him, it's OK if he reacts.

Kimmel argues that 'violence is often the single most evident marker of manhood' and is a way of showing that men are capable, strong and in power (Kimmel 2001:278). Lakshman's articulation of what a 'real man' should do, to fight back or support a fight, was shared by many other men I knew at Kelaniya. Men who did not fight were likened to women and derisive phrases like transgender/sexless (*ponnayek*) and a suckling baby (*kiri sappayek*) were used to describe them, thus feminising and infantilising them. There was, however, a caveat attached to how this violence should be displayed: violence towards women was not acceptable since every man, even the aggressive one, is still supposed to play the protective role as well. Gehan was very clear in expressing that 'Men who hit women, or even raise a hand to a woman, is not a man' and, with the exception of the rag, I never witnessed any acts of physical violence against women during my fieldwork at Kelaniya.

The notion of 'man as the protector of women' is common in contexts as varied as the Mediterranean and the Truk Island in the South Pacific (Gilmore 1990). Similarly at Kelaniya men had to play the role of protector by straddling the difficult position between showing aggression towards other men when provoked, and protecting women from the consequence of any violence. Even women said men should play that dual role and Aruni explained this to me when I asked her what she thought of the men who were involved in the fight at Kelaniya.

I like them. I don't like, imagine... I am sitting here with my 'boyfriend' and there is a fight and he sits here with me like *a woman*. I don't like

that. He should go and see, even for the heck of it, what is happening. That is when you can see the true personality of a man. If he tries to hide here with me and says “Let us run away from here” that is useless. He must also look into my safety and then go to where the fight is. If our people, are being hit, then he should go there. That is what I like. Not to just leave me and run there, then that is as if he did not care about my safety, no? He should first put me to a side [somewhere safe] and then go... I am scared that something will happen to him but if he does that [goes to the fight] then only is he a proper man.

The pressure placed on men to show certain levels of aggression came not only through these verbal articulations but also from the actions of women students. During major fights, and more than four took place during my time at Kelaniya, women provided men with sticks and stones to throw at the ‘opposing camp’ while the others stood ready with bottles of water to attend to minor wounds and quench the thirst of the ‘brave fighters’. Running away from violence or not partaking in it, especially when women themselves participated in fights at different levels, did not bode well for the pacific man. Maneesh claimed he left university accommodation because senior students expected him to ‘get involved in these fights and things’ which he did not like. The refusal to fight is taken not only as a sign of weakness but also as traitorous, thus doubly marking the person in a negative light. ‘Real men’ were not expected to start a fight, but if provoked in any way men had to react, for only women and effeminate men would opt to follow the path of non-violence.

Mahesh and Seth, however, expressed thoughts which were somewhat different to the norm. Seth denigrated all forms of violence: ‘I don’t think I need to fight someone to prove that I am a man’. And Mahesh saw himself ‘As a liberated man who does not need to show his bravado’. These two men, however, were from English-speaking, middle-class families who were private school educated and had links to feminist activists. Their socio-economic background, which differed from that of the majority at Kelaniya, gave them a special licence to take a stand which did not fall in line with the dominant view. They were different in more ways than one, and therefore holding dissimilar views was a luxury they could afford. Maneesh on the other hand, who came

from a working-class rural background, had to find alternate accommodation because his friends in the university hostel were less accepting of him for voicing sentiments which differed from the majority view and mocked him for expressing them.

One's socio-economic background proved to be significant in determining the ease with which men were able to oppose norms of hegemonic masculinity. According to Kimmel (2001) individuals have to prove their masculinity over and over again because different types of masculinity are valued differently in society. Maneesh had proved his masculinity in several ways: by displaying laddish behaviours, by winning the award for best audio presenter at Kelaniya for two successive years and by being a member of the university cricket team. Yet it was his refusal to engage in aggressive fights that marked his masculinity most, since he was deviating from one aspect of the normative definition of what 'real men' would do. The constant struggle men face in measuring up to the façade of this 'ideal masculinity' was however only conveyed by Mahesh when he said, 'Most guys have this *huge* pressure of being male' and reflected on the pressures some men may have in striking a balance between traditional expectations, changing perceptions and the lived realities of masculinity.

A majority were vocal in defining a 'real man' as one who is emotionally and physically strong, who has a strong personality, who can do anything he sets his mind to, who can cope with all pressures of life, who will fight if provoked, who can protect women, who has enough money to spend for his family and who has set goals which he will work determinedly towards during his life. These characteristics fall in line with expectations of masculinity which are expressed similarly in different contexts (Gilmore 1990; Jackson 1991; De Munck 1992; Osella and Osella 2000, 2006) and none of the men at Kelaniya, with the exception of Mahesh, questioned the difficulty or the impossibility of achieving all these ideals. None of them expressed any fear of failing at these ideals either. Men were not seen as emotional beings who need affection, support and caring. These qualities, typically used to describe women, were



not used to describe men. Most men however desired and sought women who had these qualities which they remained silent on for themselves.

Manly behaviour did not consist purely of violence and aggression. The men at Kelaniya saw themselves as ‘men who could cope with anything’ and this also involved doing their own cooking, cleaning and washing clothes. As hostel students they were compelled to do their own work but most were familiar with, if not the cooking, cleaning their room and washing their clothes. When Lakshman’s mother went to the Middle-East as a domestic worker, it was he who had looked after his younger sister and brother. ‘My mother taught me to cook, wash clothes, do household chores before she went and I did all that for two years’ Lakshman explained to me and said, ‘Even now, I cook for my hostel friends and feel no shame in it’. The ‘shame’ he refers to comes from the underlying belief that the kitchen is a woman’s domain and men who venture into it are contravening masculinity norms. Yet changes from traditional concepts of masculinity are taking place, albeit in slow motion (Segal 1990), and to use Lakshman’s words he is a ‘Real man because I can fight but I can also cook if needed’.

#### *Catcalls, furtive glances and “jack’ gahanavā’*

Catcalls, wolf-whistles and taunting were not common at Kelaniya. In public, the men showed restraint and the women ensured that neither their dress nor behaviour could incite any comments. The phrase ‘Hey little sister!’ (*Ah narigi!*) was the most frequent taunt to be heard and that too was not common. One lecturer, who had graduated from Kelaniya more than ten years ago, claimed that men were respectful of women during her time and ‘Would never pass comments on us’ whereas now she felt men were less restrained because she had heard them shout out ‘Hey beautiful!’ in English at passing women. Compared with the sexual harassment women have to face in wider society, as evidenced in the earlier chapter, Kelaniya was a safe haven. Kelaniya was not conducive to blatant sexual harassment, even though most men had made catcalls and

wolf-whistled girls in other places and spaces. Kanishka recalled how he used to shout out comments to girls when he was a school student.

When we used to go in the school 'bus', the whole school 'bus' shouts and so naturally we shout. We used to shout, "*Ah narigi!*" or "*Ah cuti!*" [small one]. We used to shout, "*Ah cuti!*", to a large girl to be sarcastic and then another one of us will shout back "Yeah, *real* small one!" [*Maru cuti!*]. Those are the things... We used to never say anything really personal. After I left school of course I never shouted. I couldn't. Why because I was left to myself, no? When you have the 'gang' in the school 'bus'... that is when you get the 'fit'. The other thing is if you don't shout in the school bus, then you get cornered. "Oh Baby! You wait in your corner", like that. If you don't shout they also say, "Do you feel sad when we shout at that *narigi!*?" That is not the only reason why I shouted but I used to get some relief and I also had a loud voice [laughs].

The repercussions for not falling in line with the hegemonic behaviours were strong: it involved being mocked at and thought of as a sulking baby. Others said that they would be asked, 'Are you [*umba*] a woman *bari?*' if they did not shout or tried to stop the others from doing the same. Given that being masculine is seen as the opposite of being feminine, to be called a woman or asked if one is a woman, is the worst form of insult that could be hurled at a man. The taunting Kanishka would have faced, had he not joined the 'gang' and commented on the girls, points to the ramifications faced by men who deviate or try to deviate from societal expectations of hegemonic masculinity. hooks (2004) claims that some men yield to social pressures and comply with these expectations even though they may not individually subscribe to these norms. In Kanishka's case it is not clear if he did or did not subscribe to the norms when he made these comments but it is evident that peer pressure played a role in it because he says the fear of being mocked was 'not the only reason' for his actions. He then points to his loud voice and the relief he got from making these comments as a justification for his actions.

Some women at Kelaniya claimed wolf-whistles and comments were not harassing but specified that they needed to be 'non sexual and come from decent men'. Those who

found catcalls irritating said it was easier to ignore them than to react to them thus pointing to how 'emphasised femininity' comes into play and overrides any dissenting voice or resistance (Connell 1987). Connell argues that there is cultural support for women who comply with their own subordination and accommodate men's interest. Similarly the women at Kelaniya who remained silent in the face of wolf-whistles, catcalls and comments, even though they did not appreciate them, did so because they were unsure how others would react to a woman who shouts out against a man or brings undue attention to herself. The men at Kelaniya were, however, aware that catcalls and comments were not always approved of within campus premises and so restricted themselves to furtive glances or soft comments when a woman passed by.

Furtive glances and the shared comments were seen as a natural tendency: something which all men, regardless of if they admit it or not, do when they see women passing by. When I was interviewing Dimuth he pointed to a woman who was passing by and said,

Now that woman is passing by, no? And I have these various thoughts going through my head... She does not know we are talking about her, no? She is wearing a pair of trousers and as she passed here, I looked and saw the edge of her undergarment [knickers] and, honestly I am saying this, if I am to be honest, I can just keep staring at something like that. In fact, if I could just go behind her all the way to her house, I would. Of course, then I would get tired of it... But I would look. I won't say no.

All women were aware of this gaze. Some responded, especially when they were in groups, by frequently looking back at the men and displaying a show of embarrassed giggling with each other. Others took extra precautions in their dress and walked by at a fast pace to avoid the uninvited attention. It is only during the former that a verbal exchange which leads to friendly banter and subsequent friendships or even romantic relationships may take place as I show in Chapter Eight. 'Girl watching', the phrase used by Quinn (2002) to describe the sexual evaluation of women by men who are in

the company of other men, was not always perceived as harassing by the women I spoke with at Kelaniya. 'If the staring seemed appreciative and is covert then it is a complement and I like it' was what Aruni said even though she was not able to clarify or provide any specific markers on how to distinguish between an appreciative stare and a damning one.

The men I knew at Kelaniya did not overtly reflect on or problematise the catcalls or the comments they made and instead accepted them as the norm. For example the general opinion on making wolf-whistling or commenting on women was that it was part of being a lad: 'we do it just because of our *kolu kama*' and it was not something to be unduly perturbed by. It also was not perceived as sexual harassment (*lirigika hirihæra*). The women on their part perceived these behaviours in different ways: for a few, comments and catcalls from unknown men were harassing, for a majority they were niggling but best ignored and for the other women, they were flattering if the comments and stares were appreciative. Most Sri Lankan women have been socialised into accepting and internalising catcalls and comments from unknown men as the inevitable norm. Thus women who shrugged and accepted or ignored the irritation caused by catcalls and those who found appreciative comments flattering did not reflect on the intentions of the harasser or the power differences inherent in these interactions, even though it was almost always the men who initiated the exchange or made the catcall. Moreover these women do not have a space in which they can question or problematise the appropriateness of these practices. What comes out in the views expressed by the women at Kelaniya is that they have different thresholds of tolerance when it comes to how comments and catcalls from unknown men are perceived. Therefore it is imperative that the varying voices of Thilini who found comments from unknown men harassing, Priyanthi who felt cat-calls are best ignored and Aruni who said an appreciative stare is flattering are given the credence they deserve. It is only then we can understand the power play and complexities of how interactions between unknown men and women take place, how they affect women and are perceived both during and after the interaction.

Women tolerated catcalls and found ‘appreciative’ furtive glances flattering. They all, however, condemned *‘jack’ gahanavā*. Combining the phrase for a car jack with hitting or fixing (*gahanavā/gahanna*), *‘jack’ gahanavā* is the local term for frotteurism or sexual rubbing and groping. To *‘jack’ gahanna* is when a man rubs his genitals against a woman, on any accessible part of her body, usually without her consent. It often happens in crowded public transport, with both the rush hour buses and trains providing an ideal space in which a man can rub himself against a woman and pretend that it was unintentional, should the woman dare to speak out.<sup>63</sup> The women I knew at Kelaniya had experienced some form of ‘sexual rubbing’ at least once in their life. Many of them adopt strategies like not getting into crowded buses or travelling with a friend in order to avoid any encounter with a ‘rub-man’ as they are sometimes referred to.

The men at Kelaniya, who had ‘sexually rubbed’ or had experienced the desire to do so, did not see their actions as problematic. When these men voiced their reservations about *‘jack’ gahanavā* it was couched around the fear of being discovered or embarrassed in public by an outspoken woman. A few denied ever desiring to or having engaged in *‘jack’ gahanavā*, but others either admitted to it with a sheepish nod of their head or provided me with details of what they had done. Dimuth gave me a detailed explanation of his endeavours and he was keen to point out that he is not speaking only of himself but also of other men his age and his friends. At this point Maneesh, his friend, interjected saying, ‘True, that is true... even I fall into this category’ but did not detail his experiences any further.

I have *‘jack’ gahalā* so many times, right? You know... ‘Miss’, I am telling you... I am being honest with you because you need to know about us, no? Then, there have been times that I have not got into empty buses and waited for a crowded ‘bus’. It is of course difficult to *‘jack’ gahanna* in the train. You know, there was a time when the buses were not crowded I used to get the devil into me. Seriously, these are not lies.

---

<sup>63</sup> This is a phenomenon also common in countries like Japan (McCurry 2009) and India (Osella and Osella 2006; BBC 2009).

What I am saying is this. Shall I tell you another thing? I am not talking of just myself here. Other men my age and my friends they are all like this... even my friends in the village. We are all in this same place because I have spoken with them about this, no?

According to Dimuth, rubbing against a woman is a normal inclination and it is only with great effort these tendencies can be controlled. For Gamini, a second-year student, the thrill of *'jack' gahanavā* is a given but he does not do it any more because he fears the consequences of being shamed if his actions are exposed to the public by a woman who decides to speak out. The feelings of the woman in such cases and her reluctance at having a man's genitals rubbed against her seem to be irrelevant since to *'jack' gahanna* is also a means of demonstrating the power of the man and weakness of the woman. Based on his research at an inner city college in Chennai, Rogers explains how 'Eve teasing' was especially legitimised when it targeted 'Westernised' women who were considered immodest and therefore deserving of harassment (Rogers 2008:82). Dimuth similarly places the onus on the woman's clothing and her demeanour when he justifies his actions.

Usually, if a woman who is wearing something tight fitting and has a big butt, is in the 'bus'... We look at her face and if she has a 'sex' face... when we see the face we can understand if she is a woman who has *læjja-baya* or not... we can come to a safe conclusion. Now if we think that she is a woman on whom we can *'jack' gahanna*... [we do]. Now, when there is a woman like that in the 'bus' and if the 'bus' is not crowded it is really upsetting. We used to think that it was better if the 'bus' was crowded.

Dimuth points to the characteristics of the woman, one who has a "sex" face' and does not show *læjja-baya*, as those who would be thought of as ideal to *'jack' gahanna*. According to his explanation, the onus for 'not being rubbed against' rests on the woman for if the woman is not dressed in provocative clothes, does not have a 'sex' face and shows enough *læjja-baya* then she will not be targeted. Obeyesekere (1984:504-508, 1997) has detailed the role that *læjja-baya* plays in a woman's character and the consequences women suffer for not having it. Similarly Vance (1992) speaks of

how in most cultures, the responsibility of not inciting a man's sexual urges by dressing appropriately, is placed on the woman. So when a woman neither shows any *læjja-baya* nor dresses modestly; in the face of such 'provocation', it is the man who suffers because he has to exert a great deal of control to manage his urges and not '*jack' gahanna*.

'*Jack' gahanavā* was seen as a *kolu kama* by Dimuth and Maneesh but for Kanishka, Mahesh and Seth it was a *balu kama*. Seth could not 'Understand how anyone can get a pleasure out of it. It is really weird and freaky'. He explained that he knows it really annoys his women friends and so does his best to avoid any contact with women when he is in the bus. He ruefully admitted that even though he respects women and does not want to cause them any distress he was once 'Elbowed in the chest by a woman because the bus was so crowded and I accidentally knocked against her' but did not fault her reaction since 'Some men randomly "*jack" gahanna* women'. Even the likes of Dimuth, however, did not randomly '*jack' gahanna*. They were conscious of the context and did not attempt anything on buses taking off from the university or with women who could potentially be university students. The fear of reprobation and being found out played a key role in the ways and places in which men felt they could '*jack' gahanna* thus indicating a keen awareness of the social unacceptability, the *balu kama*, of this unwillingness to engage in self-discipline.

### **Ambiguous Pleasures: Receiving Awards and Finding Sexual Outlets**

#### *Sensual dancing at an award ceremony*

It was the night of the 'going down party' and I was in the gym hall with Kumari and her boyfriend gazing into the lives of the senior most students at Kelaniya. The 'going down party' is held every year as a send off to the graduating students and the one I attended was organised for graduating students from the Faculty of Humanities by their juniors (of the same faculty). It was a grand affair with most women wearing bright, heavily embroidered, gold filigree saris and a few in equally ornate *salwār-kameez*. All

men, with the exception of Mahesh, were either in full suit or long-sleeved shirt and tie. Mahesh wore jeans and a *kurtā* top, thus unintentionally marking his class difference from the rest of the batch. The gym hall where the ‘going down party’ was held was decorated with balloons and ribbons in shades of blue and white. An outsized wooden stage was placed in one corner and a large mirror ball hung from the ceiling at the centre of the hall. The stage was used for the formal speeches and the award giving ceremony.

The award giving ceremony at the ‘going down party’ was different from formal events at Kelaniya. It was an event to award titles to students by shaming them into categories which marked their predominant behaviour over their time at UoK. The category titles for men far outnumbered the ones for women. Starting with ‘leader of failed relationships’ (*ana pati*) and ending with ‘lavatory mouth’ (*læṭ kaṭa*) the winner of each ‘title’, voted for by members of the Student Council, was shamed into making an acceptance speech which was followed by a round of applause and advice from the compere on how to lead a better life as graduates. Men who had too many relationships, who spent too much time throwing up into the toilet bowl, who smoked too much (*pahan dælla*), and spent all their time studying and then regurgitated their knowledge to anyone who would listen to them (*potē gurā*), were all lampooned for their behaviours.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, the one who persevered after his romantic dreams and finally reached his goal just before graduating was satirised as ‘up-and-coming lover’ (*næḡḡ ena pemvatā*) and the person who entered into a relationship with a woman soon after her previous one had ended was titled ‘most gifted thief’ (*śūra caurayā*).

This public naming and shaming of men is done in jest and accepted in good humour. The ridiculing, however, was not limited to men like the *potē gurā* who did not meet the hegemonic notions of masculinity. It also applied to the hegemonic male prototype who went beyond the limits of cultural acceptability in how they enacted their masculinity. The penchant for alcohol shown by the *læṭ kaṭa* violated the appropriate levels of

---

<sup>64</sup> The literal translation for *pahan dælla* is lamp flame and for *potē gurā* is the narrator in a play.



imbibing set by university standards and so he too was shamed for his excessive behaviours. Therefore men had to strike the right balance in their display of masculinity because they too were 'watched' and excessive behaviours ridiculed, not only at the 'going down party', but also by senior students in the Student Council. The societal panopticon, which applied especially strongly to women, also watched men and their behaviours even though they were chastised less for deviating from expectations.

At the end of the award ceremony the DJ took up his post, stood behind his equipment gyrating to the music and inviting, through his body language and occasional verbal messages, the graduating students to come on the dance floor. This did not prove easy at first even though he played songs of varied genre – from pop to rap to love songs – in an attempt to lure the students on to the floor. It was after quite a bit of coaxing that a large group of men came on to the dance floor and started shuffling their feet about with very little enthusiasm. This group was soon joined by several smaller groups of men who formed loosely knit circles and members of these circles sometimes broke away into pairs or groups of three and danced on their own. Soon the dance floor was full, albeit mainly with men, and it was then that the raw sensuality became palpable.

The smouldering sensuality with which the men danced at the 'going down party' would have any person, unaccustomed to the intimacy Sri Lankan men display with each other, assuming that these men were homosexuals exhibiting camp behaviours. These were the same men who, in their conversations with me and during the formal interviews, vilified homosexuality. But that day on the dance floor, with the DJ playing modern Sinhala and Hindi pop music, these men danced with each other showing the ardour one sees between heterosexual couples on the silver screen. The men who danced in smaller groups, especially those in pairs, acted out the lyrics of the song as they danced. Since most songs, even those with a fast beat and hip-hop feel, revolved around romance, love or passion the crude dance moves oozed with emotion and fervour. Touching each other's face, giving each other lingering looks, feeling the other's torso, pulling the other close to oneself and pushing him away, hugging each

other, caressing the arms and twirling the partner around were all done to the rhythm of the music and without any sense of self-consciousness. Moreover, their dance was not to be taken as a parody of the lyrics or the song but rather as something which they were performing with much feeling and enthusiasm.

Hailing Tahiti as an example of an androgynous culture, Gilmore writes 'men have no fear of acting in ways Westerners would consider effeminate. During dances, for instance, adult men will dance together in close bodily contact, rubbing against each other without any anxiety, and most men visit the village homosexual frequently and without shame' (Gilmore 1990:203). Sri Lanka can by no means be considered an androgynous culture, nevertheless engaging in dance styles closely resembling those described by Gilmore was not in any way problematic or anxiety-producing to these men. This lack of anxiety and self-consciousness could be explained by the familiarity and acceptance of intimacy and affective behaviours between men which, Obeyesekere argues takes place because there is a virtual absence of opportunity for male-female relationships outside of marriage (Obeyesekere 1984:486). I asked Maneesh why he thought men danced with each other at the 'going down party' with so much sensuality.

This system has come because they cannot get a woman to 'dance' with them. This system has come from 'musical shows'... it is a case which came from outdoor 'dancing'. If it came from the 'nightclub' culture it would not have been like that. It is because it is not from 'nightclubs' this has happened. Where [at musical shows] boys-boys 'dance', they have some 'drinks', they get into 'cliques' and they form circles of batches and they 'dance' with each other and have a fun time.

The dancing between the men is understood as something which takes place because men do not have easy access to a woman (cf. Obeyesekere 1984): their truly desired outlet. The reluctance women showed in joining the men to dance when the DJ invited them, their coy rejections of men who asked them to dance and eventually getting onto the floor in large groups of women to merely shuffle their feet was keeping in line with their performance as respectable and chaste women. As respectable women they were

expected to show disdain at this decidedly unacceptable behaviour for women and quite a number of women silently shook their heads to express their feelings. All these point to the difficulties men have in convincing women, even their university friends, to engage in some social dancing with them.

Maneesh's explanation still does not account for the sensuality with which these men danced or the gleeful encouragement of the dance moves because, both men and women would deem it 'culturally inappropriate' if heterosexual couples exhibited similar dance moves. One possible explanation for the open acceptance of this behaviour can be found by applying the 'theme of sexual ambiguity and role ambivalence' prevalent in Hindu mythology into the Sri Lankan context (Gilmore 1990:179). Another is Obeyesekere's explanation of the pleasure men get in vicariously acting out scenes, albeit in specific spaces and rituals, where they can 'let themselves go' and express desires which they would not be permitted to do in everyday life (Obeyesekere 1984:483-487).

The overtures and the responses between men, have to be enacted on an appropriate stage for it to be acceptable. The 'going down party' with all its merriment, humour, euphoria and the music offered an ideal space in which to shift between the roles of ideal masculinity and ideal femininity. The shifting of roles also allows the men to express their repressed sexuality – be it a desire for women or men – in ways which are culturally not frowned upon. Homosexuality is illegal in Sri Lanka and outlets to express male heterosexual desires are limited. The dancing gives men a level of freedom to perform their desires in ways which have the potential of being perceived as sexual but will not be because there is an underlying assumption that all men are ultimately heterosexual, even if they may engage in interfemoral sex with each other prior to marriage. The men knew that their intimate dance behaviours – the touching, the feeling, the hugging – will not be questioned or even perceived as anything sexual or inappropriate and so had no inhibitions dancing in ways which, to an outsider like myself, was patently sensual if not considerably sexual.

None of the men saw any links between the sensual dancing and either covert or overt homosexuality. As far as they were concerned their dancing was not sexual and they still thought homosexuality was both immoral and unnatural. Dimuth was the only man who said he had experimented with homosexual behaviour in his younger days and therefore did not judge homosexuality as unnatural. He did not, however, see himself as either homosexual or bisexual and saw his experiences as a passing phase of his life which he engaged in because he did not have access to women. Transient homosexuality has been and still is common in several societies with it being used to fulfil sexual desires in the absence of an alternative outlet (Obeyesekere 1984:486) or as a part of male initiation rituals in some contexts (Gilmore 1990). The limited access men have to women in most Sri Lankan contexts allowed them a wider margin to engage in sexual behaviours with other men but still not be labelled as homosexual because there is a common perception that such behaviours are a passing phase which men will eventually get beyond.

Seth, Mahesh and Maneesh also claimed that homosexuality or the sexual preferences of other people were their prerogative and should not be condemned. Segal explains that irrational homophobic attitudes 'can be understood only in terms of men's fear of what they see as the "feminine" in themselves – the enemy within. It also relates to fear, envy and anxiety about sex – an activity which seems so blatantly flaunted in male gay culture' (Segal 1990:158). The attitude of most men towards homosexuality was indeed based on fear: not only did some men at Kelaniya say that homosexuality was a 'perverted sexual desire' but also one which could 'potentially affect the mere existence of humankind if every man decides they prefer homosexuality to heterosexuality'. Despite these fears, however, intimate behaviours between men which were not overtly sexual were accepted without any disquiet. Hence men walking close together, holding hands when walking down the street or sleeping on the same bed with their arms around each other were not viewed as sexual. It is the openness with which same sex intimate behaviours are accepted that made the sensual dance performances at the 'going down party' easily acceptable.

### *Avenues for fulfilling sexual desires*

Pornographic magazines and newspapers were the primary outlet which allowed most men into the world of fantasy and masturbation during their early teen years. The magazines were 'hand me downs' from the older students who had, since reading the magazines, progressed on to other avenues for fulfilling their sexual desires. Mohan, a third-year student whose family is a beneficiary of Samurdhi, the state welfare scheme, explained how pornographic tabloids were the most popular source of information when they were young. These were easier to access compared with 'deck pieces' (video cassettes) which very few families in the village could afford.

In our village, when we did our O/Levels, there was only one boy in the entire village who had a 'deck' [video cassette recorder] and that is where I saw my first 'piece' [video] when his parents were not there. It was a 'foreign' one. But the most popular [*tadinma*] thing during that time was papers. Our school was a small school in the village and next to it was a huge forest, behind a massive rock and several small rocks. In these rocks... older students, hide these papers in between these rocks and when we come across them, we look. Sometimes these papers may have even been hidden by other villagers and not older students but these were really popular during our time.

Most took these papers or magazines home and hid them under their mattress for bedtime reading. Kanishka, however, could not take the magazines home because according to him, 'My parents were very strict and went through all my things and I did not want to get caught'. Mahesh and Seth admitted to watching or reading pornography but commented on the objectification of women and the unrealistic expectations created by pornography. For the others pornography was something which they did with their male friends because it was good fun (*ātal*). As Seidler (2006) argues, pornography provided most men with a way of exploring their sexuality and was a source of accessing sexual information in a context which did not have a space to discuss their sexual desires.

Men also got their *ātal* by watching short clips of couples engaging in a range of sexual behaviours from kissing to having oral sex in some secluded spot, filmed without the knowledge of these couples, and passing these clips to others via their phones. Both Maneesh and Gehan showed me several such clips they had in their phones which they thought was good fun. Some of these clips were of couples at UoK and the picture quality was poor because either phone or personal video cameras had been used for recording purposes. In one clip, even though the couple could hardly be made out because it was filmed at night, the fear in their voices when they discovered they were not alone came out quite strongly with the man saying ‘There is someone here, let’s go, let’s go!’. A number of students, both men and women, claimed that a full length video of couples making out in different parts of the campus, captured by video cameras placed in these secluded places, had been in circulation several years before I embarked on my field work.

Couples go to secluded spots because they have limited access to places which offer total privacy: rooms even in places which are let by the hour can be expensive and could be raided by the police. For women there is the further risk of losing their negotiating powers when they are in an enclosed space. The *al fresco* setting offers women protection at one level but poses a danger at another level. ‘If such a clip got out that would be the end of the girl’s future,’ Maneesh said, whereas Kumari and Ayoma felt that if a woman was ‘Bold enough to behave like that, then she should be willing to shoulder the consequences’. Even though the men did not think that such recordings were an invasion of privacy, it was the women who judged the couples, and especially the woman, more harshly for their behaviours which were deemed culturally inappropriate. The popularity of video technology made available through the camera phone and the fear of what it could capture placed further restrictions on the sexual behaviours, especially of women students.

Mobile phone technology opened another avenue through which men could realise their sexual desires. Phone sex and SMS sex, often with unknown women, was a popular

sexual outlet and both Gehan and Mohan gave details of their phone sex experiences. They felt that this outlet was as good as or better than reading pornographic material because the woman played an active role in the sexual act. Mohan had experience using both SMS and phone conversations with unknown women.

I honestly have done this. I have not even seen the woman. We get the numbers from here and there and we get set. First from a message... from messages, now if you take the papers, the blue-papers [pornographic], from messages... you can get the same satisfaction which you get from a paper [pornographic]. That is, it actually comes to the level of doing it [having sex]. Once when I was in Trincomalee I got set with this woman and we did everything over the phone... she did not like SMS. I called and she said now do this thing, do it like this, do that and we did everything. I have also done it with SMS. You keep sending suggestive SMS and then at the last minute you call, for the ending [climax].

The voice of the woman and her taking the lead role is similar to the 'fantasy makers' (Hall 1995, cited in Cameron 2003/2006) who, in their role as telephone sex workers, perform feminine heterosexuality and arouse male sexual desires through language. The women Mohan and Gehan refer to do not get paid for their words but they play a similar role to the 'fantasy makers' because they reverse the roles traditionally expected of a 'good woman' by taking charge of the sexual experience and telling the man what to do. This role reversal is approved because these women were not considered 'marriage material' and so did not have to fall in line with the role of the passive and chaste sexual partner that most men expected of their partners.

Gehan was the lone figure who said that he preferred women who took the initiative and controlled his sexual experiences. His thoughts echo the argument Segal (1990) makes about the sexual fantasy most men have of the woman taking control of sexual situations. The men McLeod (1982, cited in Segal 1990) referred to go to sex workers when they want to escape the conventional male heterosexual role of dominance in the sexual encounter and similarly for Gehan, these women who take the initiative allow

him to deviate from established norms of sexual performance which call for the man to play a lead role. Gehan had not discussed and did not wish his preference for playing a passive role to be divulged to others because they would ‘Look at me strangely if they knew’ he explained. To deviate from traditional expectations, even in the private world of one’s sexual predilection, provoked enough anxiety that it made men maintain a façade to avoid ridicule.

The desire for sexual gratification, however, did not override men’s understanding of cultural mores. They understood the importance of a woman’s virginity and so most men did not want to ‘ruin the futures of their girlfriend by having penetrative sex with her’. Men also protected a woman’s virginity through fear: the fear that if they ‘broke the box’ the woman could come behind them and force them to marry because Sri Lankan culture permitted that. It was this desire to ‘protect the girlfriend’s reputation’ which made men seek ‘part-time lovers’, an English term they used to describe women who fulfilled their desires for penetrative sex which their girlfriends were not expected to engage in until marriage. Gehan said, “‘Part-time love’ is a love that is not serious’ because these women provide them with sexual gratification without expecting a commitment. Older married women, widows and women of ‘loose character’ fall into the category of ‘part-time lovers’ and they give themselves freely or advertise their desires in Sandamini and Seedeve, two local risqué tabloids which both men and women at Kelaniya read with much curiosity and enthusiasm.”<sup>65</sup>

The advertisements which appear in the *Altar of Love* and *Romantic Paradise* columns of Seedeve and Sandamini respectively range from requests for potential marriage partners to casual but clandestine sex partners and some men follow up on these advertisements. These ‘part-time lovers’ provide an ideal outlet for their sexual needs without the inconvenience of having to worry about ‘breaking the box’, pregnancy or a forced marriage. The value attached to a woman’s virginity made some women encourage their partners to seek out these ‘part-time lovers’ to fulfil their sexual desires

---

<sup>65</sup> See Appendix E for some pages from these tabloids.



till marriage. Sumith and Lakshman said they knew of ‘women who gave themselves freely’ at Kelaniya but admitted that having such relationships within the campus could become complicated. The complications they spoke of pertained to the risk they faced by associating with these ‘amoral women’ who could make demands of them which they were not willing to grant or spread stories about them. It was therefore much safer for them to go outside in search of ‘part-time lovers’ to fulfil their sexual needs.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I show, through examples of the men I knew at Kelaniya, how the subtle, yet omnipresent, pressures on men to display socially accepted notions of masculinity are context dependant. These men expressed their masculinity in very different ways, depending on whether they were on campus or outside campus. This was primarily because they had a keen sense of the behaviours which would be frowned upon at campus. Similar to women, though to a much lesser scale, they knew their behaviours were watched and so they reigned in some of the more obnoxious expressions of masculinity while on campus. Many of their behaviours – from fighting when provoked to staring at women – which they engaged in even at Kelaniya point to the pervasiveness of hegemonic masculinity. These behaviours did not only reinforce what it meant to be a real man but also played a role in shaping the behaviours of women.

Men who did not subscribe to behaviours which marked them ‘masculine’ or ‘real men’ ran the risk of being ridiculed and feminized. The ridicule and feminisation did not only come from other men but also from women who expected men to adhere to the pre-written script of masculinity. The men who did not want to succumb to the pressures exerted on them had to make changes in their lives which would hide their lack of interest in abiding by the script. More than any other aspect, it was the fear of being feminised which made men conceal their disinterest in following all expected norms of masculinity. Even for men who did not concur with all norms of masculinity, to be thought of as a woman was too great an insult. Kimmel argues that men are ‘wounded

victims of oppressive male socialisation' who feel they have to perform in certain ways (Kimmel 2001:284). Most men at Kelaniya similarly performed the expectations of that socialisation – be it because they felt the pressure to do so or because these expectations had been instilled in them and so they believed in them.

The men who rejected norms of masculinity were, however, selective in which aspects they rejected. Some looked down on fighting but found making catcalls unproblematic, others abhorred *'jack' gahanavā* but did not fault commenting on women and still others approved of fighting when provoked but criticised catcalls. In this process of choosing to question certain expectations and fully imbibe others, men had to ensure that the context in which they enacted their masculinity was kept in mind. They knew that students at Kelaniya would condemn certain forms of sexual harassment. So they engaged in furtive glances or soft comments which no one could fault them with. Moreover the women at Kelaniya, by adhering to norms of chastity, ensured their behaviours would not arouse undue comments from men. With the exception of a few men, however, the others admitted that their behaviours outside campus and with friends was different to that at campus thus indicating an awareness of the unacceptability of some behaviours which they may not overtly question.

What the stories in the second section of this chapter reveal is that even the men at Kelaniya did not have a free reign in their behaviour. They had to strike the right balance between their performances of masculinity and cultural values because those whose behaviours exceeded the limits of cultural acceptance are ridiculed in public for their untoward behaviour. The shaming which men have to experience, however, does not contain the same sexual connotations which apply to women. Thus even though men have to be circumspect of their behaviours they do not have to fear the label of sexual promiscuity. The pressures placed on the women at Kelaniya to be sexually chaste made it difficult for men to find sexual outlets on campus. So they engaged in sensual dancing with other men while on campus and looked to sources outside of

Kelaniya to satisfy their sexual needs. Meeting their sexual needs was important and this could be done without fear provided they acted within accepted boundaries.

This chapter points to the importance of context in how these men enact their masculinity. The public scrutiny which women are exposed to on a daily basis at Kelaniya also applies to men but the resulting consequences for deviating from the cultural values does not weigh as heavily on men as it does on women. By and large, these pressures and restrictions men have to contend with in relation to their sexuality are not as stringent as those placed on women. I also show that men have greater avenues, outside of the campus, for digressing from the cultural values of sexuality which apply to them. In this chapter I focussed on men who fight, who comment on women and who dance sensually with each other as a means on fulfilling their sexual desires. These are but a few aspects of masculinity I encountered at Kelaniya. In the next chapter I relate stories of men who are concerned with fashion, who look for a 'good woman' to begin a romantic relationship with and how once they find this woman, they perform a far gentler version of masculinity.

## CHAPTER 7

### Courting Behaviours: Men Seeking Love and Men in Love

#### Introduction

Did you know that Harendra *goda giyā* [came ashore] with Krishani? Yes, all thanks to the *Melar*.<sup>66</sup> We are the ones who are still hanging around and drying up waiting for some woman to like us, to *goda yanna*. I mean, if Harendra was able to get together with Krishani, I cannot understand why can't we? Are we black?

Sumith bemoaned his single status one evening soon after the *Melar* festival (see Chapter Four for footnote on this festival), and pointed to Harendra and his *kokka* holding hands and walking by the *Tel Bæmma*. Having a *kokka*, be it one from within the university or elsewhere, was an important ingredient of being a 'mod' university student.<sup>67</sup> The pressure to meet this requirement was greater on the men. Sumith's inability to understand why he had not been able to get himself a *kokka* when Harendra, who neither exuded a strong sense of presence nor was considered good looking, had succeeded in 'overcoming' the problem of being single, stemmed from the pressures placed upon men to perform in the realm of romance. He went on to say that he even participated in the rag in his second year to get himself a *kokka* with no success. When I asked him why it was so important to have a *kokka*, he said, 'Everyone has one, that is... everyone who is someone has a *kokka*'. Similar sentiments were voiced by Lakshman, who like Sumith, had not succeeded in finding himself a *kokka* during his years at university.

---

<sup>66</sup> The phrases *goda yanna*, *goda yanavā* or *goda āvā/giyā* are all used to convey the idea of coming ashore without drowning after flailing in the water for some time. It is usually used to describe overcoming or resolving a problem that is integral to the person's wellbeing. At Kelaniya, these phrases are often used to denote the change in status of a person from being single to getting into a relationship, which indicates one has overcome the challenging situation of being single.

<sup>67</sup> Students use the word 'mod' to refer to those who are fashionable. They contrast being 'mod' with being *godē*, which denotes rural, village-like and unfashionable. To be perceived as 'mod' is usually a compliment but it can also have negative connotations when it is used on a woman who is seen as being 'too "mod"'.

The pressures placed on men to have a *kokka* did not translate equally to women who, while desiring to be in romantic relationships, did not lament their single status in such expressive ways. Ironically though, more women I knew, compared with men, were in romantic relationships, albeit generally their partners were not students from Kelaniya and it was always their first relationship. The only exception to this was Dilini who said that she had been in two relationships – both with men from outside of university – which had not worked out for various reasons but none of her friends at campus knew about these ‘affairs’. The women who did not have a *kokka* were those who claimed they have never been in a romantic relationship before, or in the case of Samadhi, did not want the inconvenience of a *kokka*. Unlike men, women also used the English word ‘affair’ to refer to romantic relationships and on several occasions I was given a piece of chocolate to celebrate the anniversary of their ‘affair’ which for nearly all of them was seen as a step in the direction of eventual marriage. The men who had a *kokka* did not similarly celebrate anniversaries and, unlike the women, this *kokka* was often not their first.

In this chapter, I explore the different roles men at Kelaniya played when courting women and as partners in romantic relationships. The efforts extended by them to make themselves attractive to the opposite sex and the lengths they go through to woo the woman who meets the ideals of a ‘good woman’ will be the primary focus. However I will also look at how men have to adapt their behaviours during the courting period, as well as at the start of the blossoming romance, to meet the expectations set by society, and put into practice by women, of how steady and sensitive a partner should be. The various stories on love and romance, related by the men I knew at Kelaniya, or I was privy to because of my close friendships with women, form the bedrock of this chapter which details the gentle masculinity performed by men in their quest to *goda yanna*: to overcome the hurdle of being single while at Kelaniya.

## **The Courting Man: Following Fashion and Developing a Personality**

### *Preening and priming for romance*

During my first months at Kelaniya, I surreptitiously observed the interactions of couples sitting on benches or underneath the various large, shady trees dotted all over campus. I never sat too close to them and so could not hear the nature of their conversations. Yet from the sweet smiles, the carefree pats and the tender caresses it was clear they were enjoying each other's company and oblivious to the gaze I was casting in their direction. With time it became easier to distinguish between couples who were basking in the warmth of a young romance and those who had progressed beyond to another level: one which may have been more substantial as far as romantic relationships go, but was far less overt in tender affection and therefore less engaging for the observer. The behaviour of the man and the physical proximity between the man and the woman were often the key markers which indicated the 'phase' of the romantic relationship they were in as they engaged in their interactions for all to see.

During this early phase of the relationship the woman, who was expected to act the role of being chaste, shy and difficult-to-get, constantly moved around, to keep a respectable distance between herself and the man. The man, in his role as the pursuer, gently fought for the privileges of being allowed to whisper sweet nothings in the woman's ear and gingerly touch her. It was common to see the man reaching out to caress the woman's face or brush away a rogue tendril of hair from the face. Interactions I observed between couples, often steered by the men, showed a side not common in their everyday practices. 'Gentle', 'tender', 'soft' were the words which sprung into my mind every time I observed these men and the comment 'like a pair of birds' laughingly thrown in their direction by my women friends aptly described these couples. The men, especially the more cynical ones, would condemn these gentle gestures with 'We are finished! When men behave like this, our reputation is shot!' Even these men, who claimed the importance of maintaining their macho reputation, epitomised gentleness in their own courting behaviour.

In romantic relationships and courting practices the man played out his role in varying ways. Men had to play the dominant role in pursuing the woman but it was precisely this role as the pursuer which made it impossible for them to display any of the macho qualities freely because they feared the possibility of being rejected by the woman they desired. The hard work of chasing the woman and going behind her fell into the sphere of male responsibility and the woman, if she desired the man, played the role of subtly encouraging him. 'Sometimes you can feel it [that they are trying for a *kokka*], then they also ask [if you have a *kokka*] and joke but I laugh only at the jokes of the men I think I will like' Aruni explained to me after saying that she prefers having the man chase her for her affections. Therefore for men, courting behaviour was the arduous task of striking the right balance between exhibiting their macho and gentle masculinities in the hope that the woman they desired would view them favourably and give them some subtle encouragement to continue with their courtship practices.

The preparation for courting behaviours included not only presenting themselves as gentle and considerate persons who were sensitive to the needs of the woman but also doing their best in the realm of fashion. Men's concern with improving their physical appearance was not very different to women. The inexpensive and transient nature of fashion provides young men who have limited financial resources an opportunity to express their engagement with modernity (Osella and Osella 1999:996). Osella and Osella (1999) speak of young Keralan men who adapted modern fashions from various films to suit their context and the men at Kelaniya were not very different. With the exception of Kanishka, who claimed that he does not care about fashion or matching clothes, the others expressed views contrary to this. To them, clothing fashions, building a good body by going to the gym, having good looks and other such physical attributes were important not just in their own right but as tools which could be used to attract women. Nalin, who comes from a fishing village, pointed out that financial constraints were stopping him from being better groomed.

Currently, my financial status does not make it possible for me to show much interest in clothes. I last bought a new 'shirt' last year in September... September last year is when I bought a kit. So right now shoes to go somewhere... to go to a wedding, I don't have a pair of shoes, a good pair of trousers, a decent 'shirt'. I only have the clothes I wear every day. I can remember when I was between 14 and 16, during the tender youth years, the things I used to do. Cut clothes... I used to cut long trousers to make them short, extend short trousers to make them longer, cut long sleeved 'shirts' to make them short sleeves, real crazy stuff. That was another period. To catch the eye of some girl, to stand apart from the others, I used my dress and hair. I was very concerned about my looks. I used to try to get fair, apply 'creams', wear chains, rings.

The women, like the men, had in their minds the image of an ideal man. Being well-built, tall, not too fair, having short hair and not being too flamboyant in their dress were features most commonly mentioned. The women I knew at Kelaniya did not think highly of men who wore jewellery, had long hair, tinted their hair or were too flashy with their clothes. So the diverse ways in which Nalin used fashion to impress girls at the age of 14 years, would not have the same appeal to university women who were looking for men with a more sedate sense of fashion. Nonetheless, his concern with hair and jewellery points to how aspects of fashion, generally linked to women had now become very much a part of how men express their modernity and fashion consciousness at Kelaniya. Although very little jewellery was conspicuously donned, the varying hairstyles stood testimony to the importance these men attached to their physical appearance. They managed to 'do "fashion"' despite the financial constraints arising from their socio-economic and student status. The consumption of fashion was adapted not only to fit their financial boundaries but also to suit cultural precincts.

The *Melar* festival offered an unusual opportunity for men and women to interact closely with each other for longer periods of time than otherwise would have been possible. Rehearsals started at 6pm after all lectures had ended and lasted till midnight on some days, with a 9pm ending being more common. During these hours, men and women from different batches and departments would, while waiting for their turn on



stage, socialise with each other, thus providing fertile ground for a budding romance. It was during one of these rehearsals I overheard two second-year men, Prishan and Dilhan, discussing their hairstyles with each other. The conversation concerned the return of longer hairstyles for men and how these new styles were not easy to manage. Prishan claimed that he uses gel to keep his hair in place and had got his tub of gel, which was not too expensive, from the Nimali superstore in Kiribathgoda. Dilhan responded to this by saying that he too used gel at one point but then realised his hair was falling and so now uses Janet's herbal hair oil which was cheaper and could be bought in any supermarket.

Traditionally coconut oil, or any kind of herbal oil, was used, especially by women to massage their scalp and apply on the hair. A head massage is not only supposed to improve blood circulation of the scalp but also contribute to the growth of a thick head of jet black hair. Dilhan sang the virtues of Janet's herbal hair oil, not because it prevents hair fall or contributes to hair growth, but because it does not have a bad smell like regular coconut oil, which is a real 'turnoff for women'. The conversation thus followed with each of them saying how important it was for them to 'do "fashion"' in ways which attracted women but were also within their budget. It is the innovation of transforming traditional remedies to suit modern needs that made the appropriation of fashion more accessible to these students: the cheaper and healthier alternative to hair gel, herbal hair oil, was not only fashionable but also healthy and culturally acceptable. My women friends used to point out men who were overly conscious about their looks and say 'He does more "fashion" than a woman' but how could any of them fault men who applied oil on their hair to be fashionable? The application of oil was after all a traditional practice held in high regard by both men and women.

Most men had a keen sense that being physically attractive, dressing well and having a good body was important, if they were to attract women. They said that 'women liked these things' and so strove to attain them. Having a good body was valued and they expressed that having the physique of 'Hrithik Roshan and his bulging "muscles"' (a

well built *Bollywood* actor) was necessary if they were to wear clothes which revealed their body shape. None of them, however, had the money or the time to go to the gym and build up these muscles. The facilities at the university gym were scoffed at and meagre in comparison to what was available in private gyms, on the Colombo-Kandy main road near Kelaniya, which cater mostly to men. Only a few said they would like muscular bodies but did not have the inclination to go to the gym and parade around. In this sense the men were different to women because their desire for a ‘good body’ was not confined to being ‘well-built’ as expressed by the women. Men used the jargon of body builders to reflect the ways in which they coveted ‘having a good “cut”’, ‘bulging “muscles”’ and ‘good “physique”’ but at the same time they saw these ideal bodies as a luxury available to those with money and therefore out of their immediate reach.

The financial constraints which precluded men from engaging with fashion and modernity drove them to develop personalities which would brand them as dependable and steady: foremost qualities mentioned by women when I asked them what an ‘ideal man’ should be like. Even Nalin who experimented with various forms of fashion agreed that even though physical characteristics played a role, a man first and foremost needs a good personality (*pauruśatvayā*) if he is to be appealing to the opposite sex. According to Gehan, with a good personality it is possible to get the woman you want.

Often, building a good body is not really important... not a factor. The reason for that is, if I tell you really, when you consider me, I don’t think I am a good looking person. That is, when you compare me to others, I don’t have a good body. But if I decide that I want a particular person I first build a sense of trust. I develop in her, a sense of trust towards me. And then through that, I know that I can get her to come towards my goal. That is attachment, awareness and trust... is what all this [attraction] is dependent on. There is no point in building our bodies. Some men have pumped up their bodies and think “I am the man” but often women do not find men like this attractive. The reason for that is there has to be trust. Often there are things which women look for in a man. Protection... then, does he care about my needs? Does he... Actually, offering protection is the greatest thing, often. Physical attractiveness usually comes only four or five places down the line.

Having a good *pauruśatvaya* was the key to a woman's heart and since this cost neither time nor money it was something which most men strived towards. A good *pauruśatvaya* also enabled a man who 'Looks like a devil to find himself a girl who looks like an angel' explained Sumith while struggling to understand what women looked for when choosing their partners. It was, however, not simply one or the other that women looked for when they chose partners, Samadhi explained to me. Men too were aware of this complexity and in the interim, till they achieved the marker of socio-economic success, they felt that developing a good personality was the most feasible option available to them as university students. However, none of them could deny the fashion vanguard which media threw in their face every day and so looking good, dressing fashionably, applying cream and even getting fairer were things which men hankered after. The one thing which stopped them from doing more than what they were doing now was the lack of finances. As Nalin said, his innate sense of fashion would resurface when his situation in life changed and make him stand out.

Like me, I have five friends who are at different levels, I am at university, one is a 'manager' in a bank and another is in the Engineering Faculty, like that they are all at a good level now. If you take those five, they dress better than me now. They dress much better than I do. I cannot even imagine how I have come down to this level, compared to how I used to dress those days. I just don't understand why I don't dress now. Number one is the financial problem... But there is a thing like this, I have not forgotten my sense of 'fashion'. Even though I am like this because of my current problem, in a year or two when I have some freedom, that way of thinking about clothes will come back to me. The 'fashion' that men my age, my friends do, their 'denims', the shoes... as soon as I am able to, I will follow these. That is there in a part of my body.

Armed with a good *pauruśatvaya* and a semblance of fashion, if not a 'well defined body', these men were ready for romance and had to play an active role in pursuing that elusive woman. A *kokka* with this ideal woman would not only improve their university lives as *goda giya* (come ashore) men but also bode well for their future. Romantic relationships were entered into, even by men, at least on the surface of it, with marriage

as the end goal. Thus having an educated woman imbued with the right balance of tradition as well as modernity, and whose life at university away from the protective eyes of elders could be watched over by the man, met the necessary criteria of an ideal marriage partner.

### *Finding a good woman*

Each man had, in their mind, a picture of the ideal woman they desired. Many gave me lengthy descriptions of the qualities they would look for in a woman while others provided details of the physical aspects. The broad brushstroke used to describe the ideal woman was that she should have feminine ways (*gæhæṇu gati*) and it was only with further prompting that *gæhæṇu gati* were specified as being gentle, nurturing, modest, honest, chaste, forgiving, innocent, accommodating and obedient. These qualities are similar to those Lynch (2007) suggests would be offered by most Sri Lankans when describing a ‘good girl’. A few men like Gehan and Nalin, however, preferred women who also took the initiative, had a strong mind, were supportive and who could cope well with the pressures of life. For them the demure village lass, who was now following a university education, was expected to exhibit the right levels of ‘modern values’ to be thought of as an ideal woman.

While the ideal qualities of the woman they desired differed from man to man, there was more uniformity when it came to the physical characteristics. Long hair, a full-bodied voluptuous figure, medium height and a conventional dress sense topped the list of nearly every man. Seth and Mahesh were the only exception to this who said they did not have specific physical characteristics they looked for in women. The other men spoke scathingly of women who were too thin and wore their hair short as ‘stick men’ (*kōṭu kitaiyō*) and ‘girls like boys’ (*kollō vagē kellō*) respectively. A woman with hair shorter than shoulder length at Kelaniya was a rarity. Of the two women with very short hair, one was considered eccentric but excused because she was ‘an “English language” student’. The other who was from Sociology, and so did not have the advantage of

being thought of as ‘Westernised’ and thus excused, was thought of as nonsensical (*vikāra*) and best avoided. These critical remarks came not only from the men but also from the women I knew who wore their hair to at least below shoulder length. Short hair was associated with the West and, as a ‘Westernised’ student from Colombo studying English, Draupadhi was excused for her deviation whereas Pradeepa who was from Anuradhapura and in Sociology was not.

Unlike hair length, the figure of a woman did not draw any critical comments from other women. Women were simply too fat or too thin. The ways in which most women dressed, covering much of their body, further prevented the possibility of negative comments. A full-bodied figure, however, was appreciated by the men and they did not shy away from expressing their opinions. ‘Ah there, Samadhi is calling for you. “Miss”, why don’t you tell her that she needs to pad herself up a little to show off that pretty face?’, were Sumith’s words when he saw Samadhi waving at me from a distance. Samadhi’s slender figure was not to his liking whereas Kumari’s fuller figure was. The more cosmopolitan views of toned bodies, flat stomachs and shapely legs did not apply to women at Kelaniya. Weight loss, dieting and exercise were never topics of conversation which, given that very few women were overweight, was not surprising. Women with well defined bodies were referred to with distaste by both men and women and local women athletes were pitied for their muscular bodies which were seen as inevitable in their chosen profession.

A woman with a fuller body was ideal but not essential. This did not apply, however, when it came to the virginal status of a woman. What each of them, with the exception of Seth and Mahesh, emphasised was that the woman should ‘not have her box broken’. The importance attached to a woman’s virginity is stressed by Lynch (2007) and Hewamanne (2008) who show how women workers in the garment industry went out of their way to convey to people in their villages the chastity of their character, and the young men I spoke with at Kelaniya provided a perspective which further affirmed these findings. A few said they prefer women who have never been in a romantic

relationship before, while a majority were less particular as long as the woman had 'not gone too far' in her previous relationship. The definition of 'too far' varied from it being that the woman should not have done 'more than a "lip-kiss"' to 'more than "sex" on top' (*uda* 'sex'). "'Sex" on top' is the phrase used for petting and it is important to understand that 'I have done sex' does not mean that penetration has taken place but rather that all aspects of the sexual act except for penetration have been engaged in. 'Without breaking the box, I have done everything else with her' was how Dimuth explained his sexual experiences with his serious girlfriend. A woman who admits to having 'done "sex"', may be accepted by some but a woman who has 'had "sex"' and admits to it, would find it difficult to find herself a partner.

During my informal chats with men, every one of them, either directly or circuitously, said that they would like to marry a virgin. Seth and Mahesh, keeping in line with their more liberal views, took a different stance and said that they would not care if their partner was not a virgin – even though they both said they did not believe in pre-marital sex for themselves. Maneesh, on the other hand, who very openly said that he has 'had "sex"', thought long and hard before admitting to the double standards of Sri Lankan culture and said 'I suppose it is not fair for me to expect a virgin, when I am not one!' His sexual experiences, however, were not with any of his previous girlfriends, because he cared about them and did not want to ruin their futures, thus pointing to the role men play in determining the sexual aspect of the romantic relationship. Older married women were his preferred outlet for sexual intercourse, so that he did not have to concern himself with either virginity or pregnancy. He claimed that when he married 'That [her virginity] of course, I don't think will be a question for me, if I love the woman' and went on to give me scientific reasons as to why virginity should not be made an issue because not all women are born with a hymen. As we progressed into the conversation, however, he said,

But when you get friendly with a girl the questions, "How many 'boyfriends' have you had? Who are they? What did you do? Did you do

‘sex’?’ will be asked. Even I, even though I said that I do not care about that [virginity], I will ask how many boyfriends she has had and also try to find out about it [through other means].

If questions about the number of partners his girlfriend has had are going to be asked, her virginal status too will undoubtedly become an issue. Similarly Gehan who said that a woman’s virginity did not matter to him, ended saying ‘If she did not have her virginity, it could have an effect on me’. Nalin, the other man who said that a woman’s virginity would not matter said so because one of his previous girlfriends, who was from his village, was not a virgin. He had found out her non-virginal status a few months into their relationship and the woman had explained that she had been raped by her uncle at the age of sixteen and abused subsequently by her first boyfriend when she was seventeen. When she told him this story, he had wondered what course of action he should follow and then thought of his younger sister to whom a similar thing could happen. Since he did not want his younger sister to suffer the fate of being rejected for something for which she was not to blame, he decided to continue with the relationship. According to him, his girlfriend had revealed the truth to him because he was too good to her.

You don’t suit me, something like this has happened to me... She said all this while crying. This has happened to me. You are too good for me; let us stop this [relationship]... My uncle did this to me and then my first ‘boyfriend’ did this to me. When I got to know you I realised that you are too good [for me], I realise that you actually love me and so let us stop this... she said.

Because she was honest with him, another important virtue for women to have, he decided to ‘forgive her’ especially since she did not lose her virginity ‘through any fault of hers’. He however enforced some rules to restrict her behaviour, change her dress sense and curtail her movements because he felt that she needed reigning in if he was to overcome the notion of being with a “damaged” good/item’ (‘damage’ *bađuvak*). He claimed that even after this revelation, he had continued with the relationship for about four months but this question had been playing on his mind and he had thought, ‘Devil

what is this, this is a girl to whom this has happened, no?’ So eventually, because of various disagreements and his disapproval of the way she exhibited her sexuality with no care for his rules, he decided to end the relationship. As a man, he not only had the power to forgive the woman for her ‘mistake’ but also was able to forgive her only because her virginity was lost not out of choice. It is then not surprising that most women I spoke with had internalised the value of female virginity and predicted gloom and doom for those who contravened cultural norms and had sex before marriage.

Many of these men, who desired a virgin, either claimed or insinuated they have had sex, and admitted to the double standards by shrugging nonchalantly. Dimuth captured the pervasiveness of these double standards best when he compared himself to a common fly and said ‘I am a fly. I have lain in this hole, that pit and the other garbage heap. But I want a girl on whom not even a fly has landed’. Gamini said he has had sex with his current girlfriend but knew that she had been a virgin when they had sex and so marrying her would not be a problem. If she had not been a virgin at the time then that would have been ‘a problem’, he said. He also went on to say that if his current relationship does not end in marriage and he marries another, he would expect the new woman to be ‘pure’.

If I marry my current ‘girlfriend’, then this will not be a problem. Right? But we are raw selfish untrustworthy buggers [*amu dasayō*], no? We have a real perverted [*kæri kama*] way, no? If the ‘girlfriend’ I have now had broken it before, then it would have been a problem for life.<sup>68</sup> Because we have a perverted way [*kæri kama*], no? I mean, we can do any crap [*onē huttak*], but women cannot do that, no?<sup>69</sup> There is a thing like that, no? All men have this feeling in their hearts. Not only me, no matter what big [*pol*] talk they give, any man would want purity [in the woman]. It is not really a cunning [*dasa kama*] which men have; it is just something in all men.

---

<sup>68</sup> *Kæri* is the derogatory word for sperm and is used to refer to men who behave in obnoxious and perverted ways.

<sup>69</sup> The direct translation for *hutta*, from which the word *huttak* is derived, is cunt. However, when it is used in this context, the direct translation does not work effectively. The word ‘crap’ or ‘garbage’ is too mild but is the closest English equivalent.



Only two men, however, claimed that they had sex with their current girlfriends. The one thing which prevented men from having sexual intercourse with their girlfriends, especially if they were unsure of marrying her, was fear: the fear that if they ‘broke the box’ the woman could come behind them and force them to marry because Sri Lankan culture permitted that. This fear, however, was couched in terms of respect for the woman and the concern with not ruining her future prospects should the relationship with the man not reach its desired end goal of marriage. A good woman, a feminine woman, a woman like their mother was what men wanted when they looked for a romantic partner. Getting such a woman was not easy and so men had to perform their best, be it through fashion, personality or physical appearance, to lure the ideal woman into a relationship. Despite the financial constraints which hindered their preening efforts men managed to follow fashion and strike a balance between being trendy and yet nonchalant about their conduct in the hope that these efforts would help them *goda yanna* with a good woman.

It was important for a woman to have *gæhæñu gati* for her to be considered as a potential romantic partner. The culmination of these virtues, nevertheless, rests on her virginal status. The essence of a good woman was her sexual purity and ideally her sexual ignorance. As university educated women, however, they were also expected to be different from the rural village lass and so some level of sexual knowledge was considered acceptable. A woman who has ‘had “sex”’ before on the other hand, regardless of other virtues she may possess, would find it difficult to fall into the list of ‘most wanted’ of most men I spoke with at Kelaniya. It then served the women well to protect their virginity and keep in line with cultural expectations of chastity and virginal purity until marriage. A university education may give women the license to experiment with modernity but the boundaries in relation to their sexuality remain tightly controlled by men and other women.

## **Romantic Men: Poetic Declarations and Gentle Behaviours**

### *Text messages, phone calls and a night time rendezvous*

The men at Kelaniya were not different to other university students in their desire for romance and romantic relationships. Being in romantic relationships was considered natural in this phase of their lives and the men expressed greater discontent with their single status than did the women. Both Sumith and Lakshman, who had not been successful in getting themselves a *kokka* while at university, spoke of the pressures they felt when family and friends questioned them about their single status. The incongruous societal expectations where a man's single status is questioned in terms of a lack and women are told to protect their character (*caritē*) by refraining from forming romantic attachments leave these men in an awkward situation of pursuing women who may never return their affections. Therefore a man had to straddle a difficult position during the early phase of romantic relationships. He had to declare his feelings to woo the woman but not too effusively for fear of damaging his self esteem and risking ridicule from others.

Stearns and Knapp argue that the pressure on men to be calm and collected in their public life makes them seek a 'richly expressive private counterpart' (Stearns and Knapp 1993:771). In this section of the chapter I focus on the experiences of one man who showed this duality in his life. There were three men I knew who wanted Samadhi to be their *kokka*, and of them Shanil was the most ardent of pursuers. He had graduated in January 2008 but made several visits to Kelaniya during my time there. I first met Shanil at the university car park at 2am on the first day of the *Melar* festival. The auditorium had been a frenzy of activity the entire day and was continuing at the same pace with last minute preparations to finalise the morning ceremony. I had just put my head down to catch a few winks of sleep when Samadhi woke me up with a frantic 'Wake up and come downstairs with me for a minute!' She sounded so desperate that I did not even think of questioning the urgency of her request and followed her downstairs in a state of semi-sleep. As we were walking, she informed me that Shanil was on his way to see her but she did not want either to see him alone, or for him to

come to the auditorium and talk with her in the presence of others. Since he had insisted on coming and said that he was near the university, she had asked him to come to the car park and give her a 'ring-cut', so that she could come down.

He had given her the 'ring-cut' and as we approached the car park we saw him getting out of the passenger seat of a flashy red car which he had told Samadhi belonged to his friend from work. He grinned broadly and waved at Samadhi and she responded with a wan smile which may not have even been visible since the car park was poorly lit. The entire scene felt like it was out of a Hindi movie with Shanil speedily walking towards us and Samadhi strolling like she was at the beach while I walked a step behind as the chaperone who was there to ruin the emergence of a romantic interlude. Shanil walked up to us and said, 'Ah *narigi*, how are you this warm night?' and Samadhi responded with a curt 'Good' and promptly introduced me as a "Miss" who is doing research at the university' with which I saw Shanil's enthusiasm and smile wither away. Not wanting to intrude any more on their rendezvous, I mumbled some excuse and moved towards the only other vehicle in the car park to rest against it while Samadhi and Shanil sat on the concrete ledge which surrounded the mango tree and spoke in hushed tones with each other.

After about 20 minutes, they got up and Shanil waved in my direction saying, 'I'll see you later "Miss"'. Samadhi then ran towards me and he walked towards his friend who had by this time got out of the car and was star-gazing. As I expected Samadhi berated me for leaving her alone with 'that demon' (*būtayā*) and said that she might as well as have come alone because I had been of no help in this awkward situation. She then accused him of being 'a little drunk', criticised him for his lack of sensitivity in coming to the university to see her at such an hour and lampooned his attempts at trying to impress her with 'a borrowed red car'. Samadhi clearly did not reciprocate Shanil's feelings and used to laugh at the persistence with which he pursued her. She however could not explain why asking him not to come to university at this late hour was not an option open to her and said, 'You don't understand these things but I cannot be rude to a

man who everyone here thinks highly of’ when I asked her why she agreed to meet him. Samadhi’s explanation for not wanting him to come to the auditorium because tongues would start wagging with various insinuations rang a familiar tune because other women had made similar remarks to me.

This story is, however, not about Samadhi. It is about Shanil and the lengths he went to in trying to win Samadhi’s heart. Even though Samadhi referred to him as a ‘great pain’ when she was with me, she never indicated her absolute lack of interest in him during the various phone calls he made to her. She said that even at the car park, he had spoken to her in ‘wonderfully poetic language’ which she cynically said was great rubbish (*maru vikāra*). I was often privy to her side of the conversation and even the most perceptive person would have been hard pressed to unravel her true feelings for Shanil. He had not directly declared his feelings for her even though they were made obvious in various ways. He would call her to enquire after her well-being, give ‘ring-cuts’ at least thrice a day, bring her little gifts when he came to university and send her a copious number of text messages. Samadhi answered his calls and returned his ‘ring-cuts’ but she refused most of his gifts unless they were edible and responded only to some of his text messages. Shanil’s reluctance to declare his feelings therefore may have stemmed from the ambiguous encouragement shown by Samadhi and thus a desire to protect his self-esteem.

Cameron and Kulick write that societal expectations require women to play ‘hard-to-get’ and refuse initial proposals for sex ‘in order to demonstrate they are not sluts or nymphomaniacs’ (Cameron and Kulick 2003:36). At Kelaniya women were expected to show disinterest and demur coyly, even when a man initially declared his love to her with the expectation that he would persevere with his interest in her. Aware of these societal expectations, and in the hope that Samadhi was acting the role of a coy young woman, Shanil decided to risk his self-esteem, declare his love for her and implore her to be his girlfriend. However his long, intimate and passionate declaration of love and promises of a wonderful future together, the kind that one reads in romantic novels, did

not bear the fruits he desired because Samadhi rejected his avowals with a gentle yet firm ‘But *ayiyē*, I have not thought of you like that and I really don’t want to start an “affair” now’. Samadhi mocked the promises he made and laughed at his lack of manliness in pleading with her like a *pæṇiyā* (unsuccessful Casanova). ‘When you are a man, need you say such laughable things to get a woman?’ she asked me.

For several months after his declaration of love he continued to call her, give ‘ring-cuts’ and send text messages. Samadhi showed these messages to me and laughed at their insincerity because in her eyes they were all skilful fabrications to charm her and would not hold long into the relationship. To me, however, they conveyed not only the depth of his feelings but also his creativity and sensitivity. One particularly revealing message, written long after his many implorations and Samadhi’s continuous rejections, read

I couldn’t help looking at the sky and thought you would be in a star because it had your brightness. I couldn’t help looking at the flowers and thought you would be there as a rose because it had your fragrance. I couldn’t help looking at angels and I thought you would be there because they had your look. I found you everywhere. But... you are not here!

Shanil’s recognition of his inability to make Samadhi his *kokka* was not a passive acceptance limited to similar texts. It also included regular requests, both verbal and textual, to keep his declarations of love to herself and not let anyone in the department know of his feelings for her. The concern for his reputation and the manliness which he portrayed to others, given how highly others in the department thought of him, was at stake because of Samadhi’s refusal to return his affection. The vulnerability he had exposed himself to in expressing his emotions now had to be dealt with by ensuring that a minimal number of people became aware of his shame and embarrassment.

Shanil and several others expressed their feelings using their artistic creativity and lyrical words, but in Dimuth’s world these were exactly what Samadhi referred to:

skilful fabrications to win over a woman for the mere purpose of having sex. Dimuth, who despite having had several girlfriends, was extremely cynical of love and the initial charade which men play out in their quest to get a woman to like them. For him the initial romance and love of a relationship was all about sex, and sex was the driving force behind the tender gestures and the sweet talk. Dimuth, Maneesh and I were talking about these ‘new romances’ when Dimuth expressed his thoughts on love.

It’s like this, no? ‘Love’ has nothing else, no? There is only ‘sex’ in ‘love’. Is there anything else? No. [laughs] The rest of it is all lies, no? We go near a girl [we like] and tell them, “I love you. I will bring you the moon, I will collect some stars for you and I will pluck you flowers OK? If you ask me to, I will drink water from the Kelani River!” We tell these things no *macari?* All those are lies, no? What are we really trying to tell them? “*Narigi*, I like to... that is if we say it in our language... I like to screw you [*hæminenna*]. Would you like that?” This is what we are asking, no? If she likes it, then we more than like it, is what we are saying, no? There is nothing more than that. But men have made this a huge... Men have, with their development, with their artistic creativity used pretty words and covered these desires. Right? Anyhow, this is clearly what men want. They keep it covered and then make it pretty and say it in beautiful ways to lure the woman and feel good about themselves.

This explanation from Dimuth, Samadhi’s cynicism at Shanil’s declaration and his fear of being revealed as unmanly, all point to the complexity within which the men at Kelaniya forge or try to forge romantic relationships. At one level men are expected to have a *kokka* and so have to work towards it. At another level, women are warned against forming romantic relationships lest the man is insincere, only desires a sexual relationship and leaves her for a virginal bride through an arranged marriage. Despite this seemingly insurmountable challenge, many succeeded in winning over the woman they desired and as the relationship progressed, it was possible to see greater intimacy and a reduction in the physical distance between the couple as they sat on the bench or underneath a tree. Thus it was common to see couples holding hands and walking down the main university road, sitting close to each other, resting one’s head on the other’s

shoulder, placing one's legs over the other's thighs or lying across the bench with the head on the other's lap (Figures 9 and 10 for places couples frequent).



*Figure 9:* A corner, behind the pillar, which couples use to get some privacy from inquisitive eyes.



*Figure 10:* Garden with benches where students have lunch, couples romance and friends meet.

The effort which men exert at the very onset of the relationship – to woo the woman and win her over – allowed them a respite from contributing greatly to the sustenance of the relationship if they succeeded in their initial endeavour. While the man now took a backseat the woman was expected to play a significant role in sustaining the relationship. The contributions expected from women were both emotional and material and a frequent complaint of my women friends was that ‘He just does not care anymore and I am the one who is always giving him “ring-cuts” and trying to meet’. Many men I knew dismissed these complaints as insignificant, most likely safe in the knowledge that a woman has more to lose by ending a romantic relationship, no matter what level of physical intimacy they had engaged in, and so would not directly complain. Nonetheless women found other ways of expressing their disapproval and did not hesitate to use these as will be detailed in the next chapter. Even though these complaints were not taken seriously men were still active players in the exhibition of

gentle behaviours and expressions of intimacy within the relationship. It is this that we turn to in the final section of this chapter when we explore the passivity which men display as they get fed by their girlfriends or lie in supine positions on the garden benches while the girlfriends ruffle their hair.

### *Being fed and carrying umbrellas*

I was told that couples who show physical intimacy in public have been in their relationship for a considerable length of time. What was striking is that it was rare to see the woman in the relaxing position of these intimate postures. That is, it was usually the man who rested his head on the woman's shoulder and the man who laid across the bench and placed his head on the woman's thigh. The woman was invariably seated upright but indulged in gestures which indicated intimacy like ruffling the man's hair, feeling his cheek or moving over to whisper something in his ear. The men, playing the role of the protector, seem to adopt these relaxed, yet submissive, postures because for the women being seen in a position which may be thought of as compromising could affect their reputation. The active role which a man plays in starting the relationship is continued in the demonstration of affections while the woman plays the nurturing role of gently ruffling his hair and feeling his face very much akin to the role she would be expected to play with her children some day in the future.

By adopting these relaxed positions men were also giving women an opportunity to fulfil their role as loving girlfriends and creating a notion of submission or the renunciation of their power in the relationship. This submission then allows the woman to play the mothering role, a role which she would have been exposed to from her younger days. These positions adopted by the men, to the outsider, looked submissive and were not in line with the expected norms of masculinity men exhibited on a regular basis: at least ostensibly they were no longer the dominant partner. Analysing the relationship between Radha and Krishna in Hindu mythology, O'Flaherty (1980) reveals how Krishna, an omnipotent god, acts as both a child and a consort in his



interactions with Radha: he pretends to place himself in a situation of ultimate impotence, in his role as an infant. Using this as an analogy it is possible to suggest that the men at Kelaniya similarly feigned an abandonment of their masculinity and identified with the maternal figure of their girlfriend and thus engaged in behaviours which belied their power in the relationship.

Submitting to a maternal figure and the desire to engage in infantilised behaviour was never more obvious than during lunchtime, which extended from around 11.30am to after 2.30pm at Kelaniya. This lunchtime ritual also vividly portrayed the performance of the ideal feminine role of the woman as a nurturer (Chodorow 1974). Couples would sit under shady trees or on the garden benches to have their midday meal. This was always a packet of rice and curry, invariably taken from her bag by the woman. Most men did not carry bags or even backpacks and so their notebooks were often handheld, while their pens jutted out of either their shirt or trouser pocket. After the *bath* packet is taken out, the woman leaves it on the ground or gives it to the man who usually sits opposite her and takes a bottle of water from her bag with which she washes her hands. She then places the packet in the middle, unwraps it and mixes the rice and curry with her right hand, makes a small ball of the mixed rice and curry and feeds to the man who, leans forward to take the food into his mouth. She then feeds herself a mouth and this alternative feeding pattern is followed through till the *bath* packet is finished. Occasionally, the man may dip his fingers into the packet and pick out a piece of fried fish or *papadam* and put it in his mouth but more often than not he can have his lunch and finish it off with a swig of water from the bottle without having to dirty his fingers.

In this shared lunch ritual, the most frequent sighting was of the woman feeding the man. The practice of each person feeding him/herself, with an occasional mouth being fed to the other was, however, not uncommon. In both these contexts, the unspoken understanding seemed to be that lunch was the woman's responsibility because it was always out of the woman's bag that the *bath* packet or two was taken. Homemade lunch packets were usually large and contained enough food to feed two or even three people,

and so sometimes a friend passing by may be fed a mouth or two as well. Such feeding was always done by the woman, thus typically only women friends were offered a mouthful of food (*kaṭak*). During my time at Kelaniya I never saw a man feeding a woman her lunch while the woman sat with her hands on her lap. I asked my friends at Kelaniya why men never fed women and, with the exception of one woman who said she had a male friend who used to feed his girlfriend, the only explanation I got was that, 'Men are not supposed to do that!'

Why do men allow and seemingly enjoy being fed by their girlfriend? This regression into a behaviour pattern which is reflective of the nurturing relationship between a mother and a young child can be understood in various ways. Feeding, be it rice and curry or any other local fare, is an integral part of childrearing practices in Sri Lanka and it is not uncommon for children as old as twelve years to be fed by their mother or a relevant caregiver. This not only signifies the nurturing role of the caregiver but also ensures that children 'get their greens' since the child has little say over what goes into the mouthful (*kaṭa*) of rice and curry. By allowing themselves to be fed by their girlfriends, the men give up control over what goes into their mouth and allow for a seemingly clear authority role to be played by the woman. This illusion of submissiveness, of being an acquiescent person, is ideal in winning over the affections of a woman, who has been socialised into desiring a mothering role. So, through this regressive behaviour of being fed, which at the same time is non-threatening, the man contributes to the sense of security the woman feels in the relationship which further cements her affections for him.

Another explanation for this behaviour is that the man, knowing that Sri Lankan women are expected to and often fulfil the mothering role without question, allows the feeding practice to take place because it is in line with cultural expectations. Feeding and being fed are very much a part of Sri Lankan culture: from the symbolic feeding of milk-rice (*kiribath*) to each other on the wedding throne (*pōruva*) at modern day wedding ceremonies, to feeding children in their teen years, feeding signifies sharing and the

exchange of love between two people. This position of being fed, especially at home by one's mother, conveys a sense of wellbeing and security which now their girlfriends provided at university. Hence the men I knew neither expressed any concern over this practice nor considered the behaviour effeminate or regressive. However none of them fed their girlfriends and stated 'That is not the way it usually happens, no?' when I asked them why feeding lunch was often uni-directional, thus pointing to how cultural expectations get played out with very little contemplation.

Men did not feed lunch to their girlfriends but, as was expected of them, they continued to play the role of the protector. They accompanied their partner to the bus stop, walked her to the library and made sure that she did not travel alone after dark. When a couple walked together after dusk, it was common to see the man putting his arms around the woman's shoulder or the small of her waist and pulling her towards him in seemingly a loving gesture. During the day such displays of affection were rare. Night time and the dearth of people at University after dark gave men the much needed courage to demonstrate their affection without fear of ridicule. The near-deserted premises and the privacy night-time offers provided a safe haven for the woman as well - from prying eyes and wagging tongues. Gestures like putting a man's arm around the woman's shoulder or the small of her waist and pulling her towards him also denoted a sense of ownership and sent out a clear message to those around that the woman was being protected. With the exception of these late evening gestures which indicated to the public that the man was playing an active role in protecting his woman, the woman who belongs to him, there was one other time during the day in which the man showed his role as protector.

With the exception of Seth, the men I knew at Kelaniya did not own an umbrella. The women, on the other hand, all had an umbrella which they carried with them in both the rain and the sun. To women, the umbrella offered more than protection from the rain and sun. It was also a fashion statement and many of them went through painstaking lengths when buying an umbrella, to ensure that it matched most of their clothes. I

realised the importance of having a ‘matching’ umbrella during a shopping trip to Kiribathgoda with Kumari and Nilooshani where we went into nine shops before we were able to buy the two umbrellas which suited each of their needs and sense of fashion. The umbrellas women carried were therefore hardly ever a simple single colour but rather had floral, tartan, leopard skin or abstract designs on them. With the exception of the tartan designs, a good majority of them were designs and colours which would be considered feminine. A man, given that they consider it unmanly to own an umbrella, would never consider carrying one of the more brightly coloured feminine ones – except of course if they were in a romantic relationship and it was raining.

One indication that a man and a woman walking under an umbrella in the rain were in a romantic relationship was if the umbrella was held by the man. I was told by my women friends that if the two people were just good friends, the woman would carry the umbrella or that the man would run for cover to the nearest shelter and let the woman continue under her umbrella. So while it was uncommon to see a man feeding lunch to a woman, during the rainy season, men carrying small floral umbrellas and walking their partner to a shelter, could be easily seen. No one thought it strange that a man who would otherwise refuse to carry an umbrella would now carry a floral one in order to protect his partner and himself from the rain. Similar to being fed there was no shame in carrying a floral umbrella because both behaviours were acceptable at Kelaniya: one provided an opportunity for the woman to play her maternal role and the other allowed the man to play his protector role. Men made the switch between being fed as a child by the maternal woman and protecting this maternal woman who was also seen as vulnerable, with very little effort and thus displayed a gentleness which was not evident in the other spheres of their life.

Once they found their ideal woman, men were capable not only of speaking in poetic language but also of exhibiting gentle behaviour. Despite his failure to romance Samadhi, Shanil continued with poetic messages and calls to enquire after her health. A

few men, however, pointed to the inseparability of lust and love though none communicated it as candidly as Dimuth did. Men equalled love and lust when they spoke of the two as abstract concepts and never in relation to their girlfriends or love interest. The woman they desired for a *kokka* or their current girlfriends were not discussed in detail in my interviews and they were only referred to in passing during our casual conversations. The desired women were pursued with indefatigable fervour even in the face of likely disappointment. At the end of every successful pursuit, at least during the initial stages of the romance, men's behaviour changed from the active pursuer to the childlike male who would lie on the woman's lap, be fed by the woman, tended to by her: a gentle masculinity which an outsider may view as unmanly.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have tried to highlight how men perform a set of different masculinities when they are attempting to *goda yanna* (come ashore) as well as after they have succeeded in getting themselves a *kokka*. The pressure on men to get into a relationship with a 'good woman', much greater than on women, makes them turn their focus away from throwing stones during campus fights, wolf whistling women and reading pornographic magazines, to following fashion and developing their personalities. In the process of trying to *goda yanna*, and even after that, men exhibit behaviours which stand strongly in contrast to their everyday being but are consistent with the performances expected of a man who is pursuing a woman. From sending heartfelt text messages to carrying brightly coloured umbrellas, their dominant behavioural repertoire during the period of courtship cannot be described as anything other than gentle. Nevertheless, men performed these gentle behaviours with as much deftness as they did their more violent behaviours.

The ultimate goal of these gentle behaviours was, however, the same for nearly all men: to find a 'good woman'. And what these men meant by a good woman was that ideally she had to be sexually inexperienced but if not, most definitely have her virginity intact.

This was the one criterion on which nearly all men agreed. The sexual purity of a woman, the hallmark of 'Sri Lankan culture', was something most men hankered after regardless of their own experiences with sex. The double standards inherent in this thinking, similar to the views expressed by women in Chapter Five, were taken as a given; as an inevitable part of 'Sri Lankan culture'. Once a woman who had adhered to these cultural values and maintained her chastity was found, men pursued her with a perseverance which conveyed a level of utmost sincerity. They were ardent, tender, kind-hearted and considerate. And if they succeeded in convincing the woman to become their *kokka* then these behaviours became more than merely gentle. They became regressive and evocative of child like behaviours: of little boys who are submissive to and under the control of their mothers.

Through this submissiveness the men create, at least initially, an illusion of passivity which helped in their romantic efforts. Certainly, often it was only the caring, protective and tender side of the man which could be observed in these romantic relationships. While the fantasy of being enveloped by the maternal partner may be alluring initially, there is a difference between the maternal figure and the romantic partner. She, the romantic partner, does not indulge him the way the mother does her little son. The romantic partner too has her needs and he has to play the role of meeting these needs, protecting her and providing for her. The pampering is no longer one way and it is in this expected reciprocity, or because of the lack of it and the girlfriends reacting to that, that men soon tire of the cloak of submissiveness they wear. They then lose the gentleness they perform to adopt yet again the masculinities which mark their every day. Yet ostensibly, the role of man as the protector and the woman as the protected, as well as the woman as the carer and the man as the cared for continued to colour romantic relationships at Kelaniya.

From throwing stones during a campus fight to being fed by a woman, Kelaniya was a space within which men could perform a range of masculinities. These two chapters stand in contrast to each other and point to the delicate balance with which men at

Kelaniya negotiated a position for themselves as ‘real men’ who adroitly adapted to the situation at hand. In the previous chapter I focussed on men who played an active role in campus fights, wolf-whistled women, engaged in sensual dancing with each other and watched pornographic movies to fulfil their sexual needs. I show that even the men who engaged in these behaviours were circumspect of the context, in that they had a keen awareness of the behaviours which would be approved of on campus, and so reigned in on some of the more questionable behaviours they performed outside of the campus setting with their friends. The context at Kelaniya did not only shame women but also men who transgressed the boundaries of propriety though, as I show in this thesis, the consequences for doing so were far greater for women than men.

In this chapter I show how conversely, Kelaniya also provided men with a space to engage in behaviours which they would have to be more circumspect of in an external setting. The demonstration of affection and the show of intimacy between heterosexual couples in public are often frowned upon and therefore not common in Sri Lanka. Thus a man lying supine on a woman’s lap, or kissing a woman, are almost nonexistent sights in public spaces, whereas in Kelaniya they were not so rare. Men were allowed to engage in these practices without having to fear the usually discomforting hooting or commenting which they would have experienced if they tried to express similar levels of intimacy in another place. Moreover being fed by a woman or having a woman ruffle their hair, commonplace in Kelaniya, were practices men would hesitate to display in other public spaces because these would be perceived as particularly unmanly.

These two chapters illustrate how Kelaniya proved to be a space wherein men performed a range of masculinities: some which had currency in larger Sri Lankan society and others less so. At the same time there were certain behaviours these men performed in larger society but felt they could not at Kelaniya. The specificity of the campus which permitted certain behaviours and condemned others shaped the performance of masculinities at Kelaniya. Despite this range of masculinities there was one commonality and that was in how these men perceived women. With a few

exceptions, the desire for a 'good woman', one who epitomised 'Sri Lankan cultural values' and was virginal, was expressed by the men I knew at Kelaniya. As I show throughout this thesis, these articulations were not new to women and the masculinities enacted at Kelaniya further reinforced the need for women to maintain their virginity. In the next chapter I return my focus on to women and show how they, whether performing the role of 'girlfriend' or 'good friend', remain inhibited by cultural expectations, far more than men. And yet I show how even their behaviours are not constant and are strongly influenced by the context.



## CHAPTER 8

### Women in Relationships: Falling in Love with Men, Loving Women Friends

#### Introduction

In the previous two chapters I focussed on the performance of masculinities at Kelaniya and showed how they shape and are shaped by performances of femininity. The interface between the performances of masculinities and femininities, that I observed, became most obvious in the realm of courtship practices and romantic relationships. I highlighted the extent to which men go when they find a ‘good woman’, to impress her and get into a romantic relationship with her. They perform the role of a pursuer who is at the same time sensitive and dependable while the woman, in return, had to, through her femininity and everyday behaviour, convince the man she was worthy of being pursued. For the men and women at Kelaniya, the performance of the gender core that Butler (1990) speaks of, especially in the realm of romance and courtship, was enacted with anxiety and pleasure as they pursued or were pursued by a suitable partner.

In this penultimate chapter, I focus on the women at Kelaniya and their diverse relationships. I draw on the stories of three women, Kumari, Aruni and Samadhi, to discuss the different ways in which they entered into romantic relationships with men, fantasised about men and supported their women friends in times of trouble. In the first section of this chapter I look at different relationships women have with men – from close friendships between the *akkalā* (older sisters) and *mallilā* (younger brothers) at university, to romantic relationships which should ideally end in marriage. Most women were aware of the societal precepts that delineate how interactions between men and women should take place and so were wary in their friendships with men as well as in forming romantic alliances. Their caution applied especially in romantic relationships and it made some women deliberate endlessly over the positives and negatives of being in a relationship before they took a path which offered them some protection from a ruined reputation, if the relationship did not end in marriage.

I show, with the story of one woman, that not all women are so circumspect. A few, despite their awareness of the need to be prudent in entering into romantic alliances and articulating the need for caution, formed opinions about and became infatuated with men after the very first meeting with them. First impressions were crucial in deciding the 'goodness' or the 'badness' of any person – be it man or woman. Women who enter romantic relationships based on first impressions took time to mull over making the 'correct' decision: they neither wanted to seem too eager nor lose out on the suitable man by vacillating on the decision. Once the 'correct' decision was made, the underlying assumption expressed by nearly every woman, similar to those who were more prudent in selecting their partner, was that this relationship would end in marriage because he suited all the criteria of an ideal husband.

There were also women who said they did not want to start a romantic relationship because they wanted to get married through a proposal or because they did not have time for romance. They instead became infatuated with men who were in many ways unattainable and fantasised about them and their wonderful qualities as 'very good' human beings. These infatuations and fantasies were seen as harmless and provided an outlet for releasing romantic desires. Moreover, they were safer than actually being in a romantic relationship because individual fantasies could not be seen or watched by others. The prying gaze of peers, which keep women's general behaviour in check, becomes even more focussed on women in romantic relationships. It is this gaze and the subsequent judgement women who resort to romantic fantasies could avoid.

In the second section of this chapter, I concentrate on the intimate bonds women at Kelaniya form with one or two other women. In contexts which do not allow women easy entry into and exit out of romantic relationships with men, women find other ways of fulfilling their romantic emotional needs (Faderman 1985; Marcus 2007). Faderman (1985) argues that in 18th century Britain, romantic friendships between women and declarations of lifelong commitment were common and socially permissible. The social acceptance of these friendships, she contends, was primarily because they were

considered non-sexual. Similarly, at Kelaniya these extremely close bonds with their women friends, while they were not sexual, were undoubtedly intimate and to an outsider even sensual. The bonds between women friends were extremely close and even within a group of friends there invariably were pairs of women who had a tighter bond with each other than with the rest and so spent more time with each other by eating together, sleeping together and going shopping together.

Using Kumari, Aruni and Samadhi as examples I show below how, even though a woman's gender core dominates her performances in the sphere of romance, these women are not mere lifeless entities who are always restricted by convention. Social directives may guide their behaviours but, as and when the context changes or the directives allow a flexible interpretation, their performance of ideal femininity also change, albeit somewhat guardedly. It is these contradictory behaviours which get highlighted in the next pages of this thesis.

### **In Search of a Suitable Man: Friendships, Romance and Fantasies**

#### *Younger men as friends and older men as boyfriends*

In Chapter Four I explained how the use of kinship terminology at Kelaniya precludes a romantic alliance forming between two students when the woman is older (*akkā*) and the man is younger (*mali*): the terms very clearly refer to the age hierarchy which restricts the possibility of a romantic alliance. Thus this invented sibling relationship gave the *akkalā* and the *maliilā* at Kelaniya a special licence to form close familial ties which are at the same time rather sensual. Such intimate bonds were not obvious between men and women from the same batch or between men from senior batches and women from junior batches. Intimacy between men and women of the same age or older men and younger women, even though they too may use kinship categories to refer to each other, could be perceived as romantically or even sexually motivated and so women had to guard themselves against the possibility of an erroneous interpretation of such friendships.

I first noticed the difference in these *akkā* and *malli* relations a couple of months after I started my fieldwork. I was seated with a group of third-year students at a long table in the corridor leading to the Medieval Studies Department and stamping the raffle books for the *Melar* festival when some second-year male students came over and offered their help. The offer of extra hands was welcome by everyone and so we moved around to make space for them and continued stamping the raffle books. It was during the three hours or so it took us to finish stamping the raffle books that I realised the difference in interactions between the senior women and the junior men.

Aside from the *akkā malli* terminology and the use of *umba*, *barī*, *karapañi*, *yamañi* etc to address the junior men, which conveyed a sense of closeness and also authority, there was also physical proximity between the *akkā* and the *malli* which was not customary among opposite-sex friends of the same batch or between senior men and junior women. No one commented when Nilooshani moved in her chair to make room for Maneesh and the two of them continued to sit on one chair, even after another became vacant. Similarly, Ayoma and Sumith not only shared a chair and private jokes with one another but also gently nudged each other in jest and still no one so much as gave them a second glance. Gayani ruffling Lakshman's hair and saying, "Thank you", my fair little brother' when he finished the batch of raffle books assigned to him was met with comparable appreciation from others. At the end of the three hours, all the *akkalā* took out their lunch packets and fed rice and curry to the *mallilā* to thank them for their hard work.

Such physical proximity between people of the opposite sex could generally be observed only if two people were in a romantic relationship and this too would be on the benches and areas unofficially designated for couples. But the guise of the kinship relations gave men and women of very close age group a licence to engage in seemingly familial and yet somewhat sensual behaviours without any restriction. These supposedly familial and platonic behaviours were, nevertheless, a close replica of the behaviours couples engaged in when they were alone and students have pointed out to me as

'romantic behaviours' which would be useful for my research. I asked Nilooshani, after the others had left the table, if no one questioned the appropriateness of such close behaviours between the senior women and the junior men and she looked at me blankly and said 'What is there to question? We were just being nice to those *mallilā* for helping us out with the tickets'. She did however say that if a group of older brothers (*ayiyalā*), men from the senior batch, had offered similar help, they would not have behaved so freely because 'People can say things then', thus indicating her awareness of the differences in behavioural norms applicable when women interact with men of different age groups.

The friendships these women had with younger men, which were simultaneously familial and sensual, were a means through which they could show intimacy towards men without fear of being judged. As 'older sisters' they were allowed to be loving and tender with their 'younger brothers' and for many women, the kinship categories, even though they were not based on actual kin relations, justified the intimacy they showed towards these men. Yet it cannot be denied that this was a space in which women, despite being aware their behaviours with younger men could be interpreted as not falling within the boundaries of propriety, could boldly disregard these perceptions and not worry about it affecting their reputation as 'good women'. They had a foolproof and culturally acceptable explanation for their behaviours which they knew they could fall back on, should anyone question them.

Unlike the intimacy they showed with these younger men, the women were guarded in their interactions with older men, especially when they were on campus. As an *ayiyā*, older men could be potential partners, hence interactions with them had to be more controlled. Therefore when women described an ideal man or gave an example of one who would make a good partner, they always pointed to an *ayiyā*, a man from a senior batch. Just as men described real men as those who had strong personalities, would fight when provoked and were not effeminate, when women described an ideal man, they mentioned qualities similar to those valorised by the men. Laddishness (*kolu kama*) was

as *de rigueur* as manliness provided it was outgrown at a particular age. Consequently the ideal partners these women looked for had to display manly qualities, qualities which made them dependable and, to a great extent, similar to those exhibited by men during the courting period.

A suitable partner was unquestionably of the same ethno-religious group as the woman. The most liberal response I got when I enquired why this was so important came from Samadhi: 'A man's ethnicity and religion would not matter to me but it would matter to my parents and since I don't want to upset them, I will not marry a man who is not Sinhalese and Buddhist'. For a majority though this criterion was sacrosanct and non-negotiable even for themselves and the boyfriend of every woman I knew, except for Nayana, was from the same ethno-religious group as the woman. Since only 2.8% of the total student population admitted to Kelaniya in 2006/2007 belonged to the ethnic minorities (UGC 2008) and there was very little socialising between ethnic groups, finding a partner from the majority ethno-religious background was not difficult. Even those who had boyfriends from outside of Kelaniya had adhered to their own ethno-religious group when selecting a partner. While every woman agreed with this criterion in partner selection their views differed when it came to personality traits and physical attributes.

From protecting women to being industrious, the list of attributes assigned to a suitable man was as diverse as it was contradictory. Men were expected to fight when provoked but not show cruelty towards women. They had to be sociable but not loquacious. Having a strong mind, being unemotional, not being too sensitive, having an industrious work ethic, being educated, not imbibing alcohol and the ability to make difficult decisions were all listed as qualities a 'suitable man' should have. Physically, he needed to be strong, tall, well built, dark skinned and not too fashion conscious. The man's family background and status were also important and in the absence of them, as Aruni said of her boyfriend,

I will also look for money. Right now of course he is a person from an ordinary family but he has the potential to make money. He is doing 'Business Administration'. He works hard and is doing his chartered as well [accountancy exams]. He has an aim that if he passes his chartered, he can go up to [a salary of] one *lækh* [Rs. 100,000.00].

The women were well aware of the near impossibility of any one man fitting into many, let alone all, of these criteria and so before they committed to a romantic relationship with a man, they deliberated on his suitability as a husband for it was firmly believed that their relationship would end in marriage. Unlike men, for whom a woman's virginity tipped the balance in her favour, the women did not point to one particular quality in men which stood out in favour over others. From having a good personality to being rich, or having the potential to become rich, the desirable qualities of a suitable man varied. The virginal status of a man, unlike that of a woman, was the one quality that never got mentioned in conversation when women presented their extensive list of qualities they looked for in a man. A man's virginity hardly ever came up in discussions of morality and so for these women it was not a criteria worth mentioning.

### *Falling in love on the train or following 'tradition'?*

Most women wanted to find their own partner, to fall in love with a man their parents would approve of and marry him at a 'simple but charm(ing)' wedding ceremony. And like women, men too had to prove their eligibility in the marriage market, albeit the units of measurement were somewhat different. Dimuth expressed this succinctly when he said 'No matter what my character [*caritē*] is, if I have enough money, a good house and a bit of land I can get almost any woman who is out there'. It was status and family background, as opposed to individual character, which played a key role when women selected their partners. Kumari already had a boyfriend from her village, when she entered university. Kumari's boyfriend had not passed his Advanced Level examination but was from a relatively well-established family in their village, worked in the family business and had a van he drove for hire. He was short, portly, light skinned and four

years older than Kumari. Kumari was the oldest in a family of three siblings, her father was a carpenter who struggled to make a decent living and her mother a housewife.

Obtaining admission to university was a feather in Kumari's cap because she was the first woman from her village to achieve this accolade. It was soon after the news of this achievement spread that Lalith had accosted her and indicated a romantic interest. Kumari was extremely flattered but did not want to start an 'affair' without the blessings of both their parents and so insisted on following the traditional path of getting parental approval. Her parents were delighted at the prospect of Lalith being a son-in-law, especially since he had declined the need for a dowry, lifting a burden off Kumari's father who now only had to worry about his two younger daughters. Lalith's father was dead and, even though his mother was not overjoyed with his choice of a woman, she agreed to the match because Kumari would be an educated, if not well connected or rich, daughter-in-law. It was on the fourth year anniversary of their 'affair' that I first met Lalith when he came to see Kumari with a slab of Kandos chocolate and two packets of Chinese Fried Rice from Linza, the Chinese take-away near Kelaniya.

Lalith was reserved but did not seem unfriendly and seemed content to take a back seat while Kumari flitted from one group of friends to another offering them each a piece of chocolate to celebrate this special day. I sat in a corner with Lalith and made small talk with him while watching the celebratory laughter and good humoured teasing which took place in the room. Lalith told me about his work, his desire to expand the business, build a small house on the ancestral family land and marry Kumari within the next three years. Kumari kept darting back and forth to enquire what we were discussing and when only four of us were left in the room she invited us to share the Chinese fried rice with them. Lalith not only provided for Kumari by buying her books and clothes, topping up her phone and giving her some 'pocket money' but also looked into the needs of her family when he was in the village. He was an ideal partner in many respects.



'*Aiyiā* is very good to me and my family. He helps us a lot' was Kumari's response to my question 'Why did you agree to be his "girlfriend"?' She then went on to say that 'I am also good to him. I always listen to him and never do anything to upset him because he is very good to us' as a way of further explaining why they were still together and the symbiotic aspect to their relationship. Indeed, Kumari made every effort to please her *aiyiā* and never complained about him. Her *aiyiā*, similarly, hardly seemed to demand much from her and since his business took him away for long periods of time, the times when they met at university, often for no more than a few hours, always seemed pleasurable. It is difficult to describe Lalith as good looking or as having an arresting personality but he fitted into the mould of a 'good husband'. Kumari, however, did not rely solely on his 'goodness' to protect her *caritē*. She ensured that her behaviour, especially that which could be observed when she was with him at Kelaniya, was beyond reproach: they hardly ever spent time alone together, did not hold hands when walking down the road and never stayed out after it got dark. Moreover, by following traditional norms and obtaining parental approval, she ensured her 'good name' should the relationship not, despite the intentions, end in marriage.

Aruni, on the other hand, threw all caution to the wind, counting on her instincts and first impressions, when she decided to start an 'affair' with Gayesh who she met on a train ride to Colombo.

In the train. One day when I was in the train... It was very crowded and as I got on he was the first person I saw and he smiled. So I gave him my 'bag'. The 'bag' was heavy and I could not put it on the rack above. It was an old train and the racks were very high. He looked as if he was waiting to receive my 'bag', so I gave it to him. He was smiling a lot and when I gave it to him his smile became even wider and he accepted my 'bag' with great pleasure [giggles]. After that now [pauses] from that look I could say that he was interested. He was with two friends. Sometimes I look at boys. When you are in the train it is very boring and so I look. If it is someone who I like and he looks at me then I look. And that is it, no? I get off [at the next station] and go, no? Now he had two

friends, no? So I could not look because then I become *cāṭer*, no?<sup>70</sup> *Cāṭer* meaning then I become a joke, no? So even though I could see him looking at me I didn't even look that side. I kept looking the other way and I could feel his friends joking. I was standing in the middle of all these people and being swayed from one side to another. Then he got up and gave me his 'seat'. He was saying out loud, "Don't know if I will have to give my 'seat'?" I still pretended that I could not hear. If not it will seem as if I was waiting to get his 'seat', no? He is good looking. On that first day I thought he was very good looking. Now for them this was a joke. He is saying, "I wonder if I will have to make space?" and his friend goes, "No *macañ*, there she is looking the other way, she must be happy to stand". He got up and gave me his 'seat' and said, "Sit," and so I smiled with him. I went a long distance like that and I could feel him looking at me but I kept looking out the window. He seemed really good. I just felt it at that time.

Lukose (2009:116) suggests that when unknown men make pointed comments, women's reaction to them depend on many factors, of which one is how they perceive the man. Aruni's feeling that Gayesh was a 'good person' and her inability to resist the allure of his good looks made her react positively and give him her phone number when he asked her for it, just before she got off the train. Before giving the number, however, she had listened to the conversation between the three friends and knew that he was studying Business Administration at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura and played several sports. She admitted that he may have mentioned all those things for her to hear but said, 'He asked for my number and at that time I felt like giving it, so I gave it'. He had sent her a text message that night, called her every day for the next several weeks and asked if he could visit her at Kelaniya one day. At this point Aruni decided to play hard-to-get and discouraged him from visiting but gave into his persuasive powers within two weeks. On his first visit to Kelaniya, Aruni had Samadhi escort her for their meeting. This she felt was adequate precaution to protect her *caritē* from the penetrating gaze of her peers. After he went back to his university he had called her and asked 'For a word because he needed to study for his upcoming exams' and she agreed to be his girlfriend.

---

<sup>70</sup> *Cāṭer* is a slang word used by Sinhala-speaking youth in general to denote the shame and loss of face one feels when s/he is made the laughing stock or is humiliated in a public setting.

Aruni said that they got to know each other mainly through their phone conversations and that she came to have a good feeling (*pæhædɪmak*) about him. She claimed that even though he seems wicked to others he was kind to her and therefore was a good person. Her first impressions had served her well in this instance and she introduced me to Gayesh on one of his rare visits to Kelaniya so that I too could ‘Realise what a good person he is and her good judgement’. It was not difficult to understand why Aruni was fascinated with him: he was tall, dark skinned, well built, good looking and sociable. Despite this fascination, it was only several months into the relationship that she agreed to meet with him outside of the university and show any kind of intimacy which included ‘holding hands and a little “kissing”’. The exciting romance at the start of Aruni’s ‘affair’ did not last long and all too soon it reached the plateau of a mature relationship. The enthusiasm with which Aruni spoke of Gayesh, his ways and his looks, as expected, diminished over time and latterly he was mentioned only when I specifically asked her how he was and if their relationship was working out well which she answered with a lackadaisical ‘Yes, it is going along’.

#### *Of unattainable men and éclairs*

Similar to Aruni, Samadhi ‘fell in love’ with Mr George after meeting him for the first time in Colombo. Mr George had a 15-machine workshop which undertook special limited quantity orders of t-shirts, caps and bags. Samadhi was responsible for sourcing the *Melar* t-shirts and caps and had found his contact details in the yellow pages. Since he sounded ‘so “polite”’ over the phone she decided to meet with him in Colombo, became enamoured with the way he spoke and commissioned him to make the t-shirts and the caps. She claimed that she negotiated a good price for both items and that the *Melar* planning committee were happy with Mr George’s quotation and samples of his previous work. Samadhi could not stop talking about Mr George and clearly Mr George too was taken up with Samadhi because his calls to discuss ‘business’ lasted for more than 30 or 40 minutes each time and it involved a lot of shy giggling from Samadhi and her walking away to have the conversation in private. He had also told her not to waste

her money calling him but to give him a ‘ring-cut’ or send him a text and he would call her: furthering Samadhi’s ideas of his ‘goodness’.

Two weeks before the *Melar* festival, Samadhi, Aruni and I had just started eating our lunch underneath the shade of a large *Æhæla* tree (Cassia Fistula), when Mr George called Samadhi to tell her that the t-shirt samples and the first batch of caps were ready for collection. Samadhi stopped eating, washed her hands and ran to the department to ask for a vehicle to travel to Colombo. Just before she went, she said, ‘The two of you can come with me and you will then know what I mean about Mr George’ but Aruni and I just teased her want of restraint and watched as she walked away. She soon came back looking crestfallen because there were no vehicles and even the three-wheeler hired especially for the *Melar* had gone on a long errand. She looked so dejected that I offered to go with her and pick up the caps expecting her to refuse my offer of help because she almost always rejected assistance from people with haughty sounding “‘No thank you”, I can manage without your help’. But to both Aruni’s and my surprise she said ‘OK, hurry up and finish eating so that we can go to Colombo now’.

The trip to Colombo was uneventful except for several calls from Mr George inquiring to our whereabouts and Samadhi’s ceaseless praise of his virtues for being so concerned. It was only once we got to Colombo that we ran into the problem of finding the place because Samadhi did not have the address to his office and she did not know specific directions. I answered Mr George’s next phone call so that I could ask for directions and spoke with him in English because his first question ‘Samadhi, where are you now?’ was asked in English. I explained our exact location and listened carefully to his instructions before hanging up and giving Samadhi her phone. We drove in the right direction and just as Samadhi shouted ‘Ah there it is’ upon seeing the building, we saw Mr George on the balcony looking out on to the road. I parked the car and watched Samadhi smartening up by arranging her t-shirt and re-knotting her hair at the base of her neck and she asked, ‘How do I look?’ before warning us to ‘Be on your best

behaviour OK? And Miss, make sure that you do not speak with him again in that “hosh posh” accent of yours because he will then not look at me but at you’.

Mr George was a Sri Lankan Burgher in his late twenties or early thirties, who was of a small build and had a light complexion. He had a bright smile which showed off his badly formed teeth but was friendly and courteous. His subtly flirtatious remarks were not lost on Samadhi and she giggled appreciatively every time he flattered her. Aruni and I both watched this performance with amusement but hid our interest and pretended to look around the dingy little office at other samples of his work until Samadhi and Mr George finished their business transaction and the caps were brought out in boxes. Just before we left Mr George generously gave three sample t-shirts, one to each of us, as a gift from him in appreciation of Samadhi’s custom. As soon as we walked out of the building, Samadhi burst into a fit of happy laughter and exclaimed ‘See, I told you he was very “polite”, it was so good of him to give us these “t-shirts”!’. Aruni and I both quipped almost in unison, much to the chagrin of Samadhi, that he gave these t-shirts only because he was a good businessman who knew his marketing tactics.

Samadhi took our comments in good humour but said wistfully ‘I know nothing will come out of this but I can dream about Mr George and imagine he is my “husband” because I know that I will never get to marry a man like him’. Mr George was the unattainable fantasy, not only because he was from a different social class to Samadhi but also because he was Burgher and Christian and even though she claimed it would not bother her, she knew that it would upset her parents. He was to her, the ideal man she could only dream about. We travelled in companionable silence for a while and Samadhi who hurriedly stopped her lunch when Mr George called said she was hungry and wanted to stop at a way-side eatery to get a fish bun or Chinese roll. No sooner had she finished speaking than a Perera & Sons baker loomed in front of us where we stopped and I went inside to buy Samadhi something savoury and got three éclairs for us as a special treat. Neither Aruni nor Samadhi had ever eaten or heard of éclairs

before and Aruni especially enjoyed their sweetness. Samadhi found it too sweet but nevertheless finished it and kept repeating the name over and over again.

We soon got to Kelaniya and as we walked towards the department with the caps Samadhi said to us, 'We will call Mr George "éclair" after this. He is also sweet like that, is something which I will most probably not have again but I will always know its sweetness'. Then she laughed at her own analogy and whispered, 'But most importantly no one in the department will know what I am talking about so I can go on and on about how great and wonderfully sweet an "éclair" is!' By drawing a close analogy between a food she was unlikely to eat often and a man she could not have but could safely fantasise about, Samadhi created a space within which she could still discuss her ardent admiration for Mr George without any of her other peers ever realising her true desires. Her refusal to admit her fantasies to any one apart from Aruni and I arose from the fear of censure she would receive for such a wanton display of emotion towards an unattainable man. Mr George continued to call Samadhi long after the *Melar* festival ended and have long conversations with her while she continued to fantasise about him from a distance.

It was during one of these phone conversations that Samadhi had asked Mr George if he was married and he had laughed at her question and replied 'I will tell you later'. She asked me what I thought that response meant and said,

Mr George, he is not married, no? Will you tell me that he is not married? I wish I could, if I could just meet him again! He told me to come. To Colombo, to just talk in his office. I have been alone with him in that small room, no? If he wanted to, he could have done anything to me [sighs]. The thing is I don't have the time to go and see him now. I am scared that he will do something to me but then if he was to do something he had so many opportunities, no? How often have I been alone with him in that room? He could have been sexual with me [whispers this very softly]. He could have held my hand. At least, *at least...* he could have held me by my hand. At least he could have looked at me in that way [says this wistfully]. If he tried to hold my hand

that would not have been a problem at that time because I also really liked him, no? And this would not have been a problem to either one of us, no? I would take over his hand and squeeze it [laughs]. No honestly, if he touched my hand I would let him hold it and not shake his hand off. 'Sure'. 'Sure'.

She continued to fantasise about Mr George at a distance but never went back to his office even though they continued to speak with and send text messages to each other. An entry in Samadhi's diary detailed how she fantasises about him being sexual with her and imagines her kissing him back; something which she did not do when she fantasised about her other unattainable figure Umesh Sir, who was her high school Sinhala literature tuition teacher.

Three women, each with a different approach to love and romance, spoke of experiences widely different from each other but all stand testimony to the small advances made by women in selecting their romantic partners. By obtaining parental permission prior to starting an 'affair' with Lalith, Kumari took refuge in their support to enjoy her romance. By finding her own partner and yet securing parental approval from both sides she epitomised the modern woman who is still strongly rooted in her culture and thus values parental opinion. Taking this course of action also provided her with a safety net to fall back on and prevented the censure of villagers and relatives, should the ultimate goal of the romance not materialise. She will not be faulted for being too modern or for forgetting her cultural roots and condemned to the fate which befalls on women who disregard 'Sri Lankan values'. More importantly, she ensured that she did not spend too much time alone with her *ayiyā* while at Kelaniya which could lead to 'unnecessary talk'. She always had her friends or her sister accompany them even though contradictorily, he would sometimes meet her at the bus stand in Galle at midnight and drive her home.

Aruni on the other hand, who pushed the boundaries more than Kumari in her quest for romance, not only contravened tradition by starting an 'affair' without parental approval

and keeping it from her parents but also showed complete disregard for norms of good behaviour which a morally upright woman should exhibit, by giving her phone number to a man she met on the train. Even though Aruni did not see her behaviour as ignominious, only Samadhi and I were privy to how she actually met Gayesh. To her other friends at Kelaniya, he was the friend of a cousin who she had met at a family function: the story which Gayesh too was expected to parrot if any university friend enquired about their initial meeting. So while Aruni was comfortable transgressing norms of good behaviour, she was aware that others would reprove her for not showing adequate *læjja-baya* in her actions and so concocted a culturally acceptable story to protect her image as a respectable woman. Thus pointing to the power of cultural norms in shaping the freedom with which women can express themselves in romantic relationships.

Both Kumari and Aruni searched for and found suitable men who had most, if not all, the qualities which fitted into their notion of an ideal man. Aruni's approach to romance, though more daring than Kumari's, also fell in line with the ethno-religious expectations of society because like her, Gayesh too was a Sinhala Buddhist. Moreover his education was in a potentially lucrative field which made him suitable in many aspects and Aruni had no qualms about getting parental approval at the right time. Samadhi was different to both Kumari and Aruni because she claimed that men could not be trusted and she would never get married for this reason. Even though she had several men interested in her, in their absence, she spoke of them with disdain and mocked their attentions. Yet she too desired love and romance, even if one-sided, and so resorted to fantasising about men who were in many ways unattainable either because of age, social class, ethno-religious background or a combination of these. From a tutor to a businessman she loved these men from afar, spoke of their wondrous qualities, verbally flirted with them and sexualised her interactions with them in her fantasies.



Regardless of the approach, all three women enjoyed a semblance of romance in their life even though they were all guarded in how they expressed their feelings to the man. Kumari and Aruni were especially guarded in their behaviours when they were at Kelaniya because they knew they were watched by others and that they could be criticised if they displayed any behaviours which were considered culturally inappropriate. With the exception of Kumari, however, the other two had to shroud aspects of their romance from friends and family lest their behaviours were frowned upon. In spite of the societal restrictions they grappled with every day, both Aruni and Samadhi found means, albeit covert, to experience and enjoy love and romance in their daily lives. Another kind of love, ostensibly romantic but in actuality not, which neither had to be expressed covertly nor was socially frowned upon was the love between women friends and it is this we turn to in the next section.

### **Intimate Friendships: Affording Love and Support to Women Friends**

#### *The end of a romance*

Aruni and Samadhi were best friends. So it was not surprising that Aruni called Samadhi late at night to seek a solution to her predicament concerning Gayesh. Less than six months into the relationship, he was not being as attentive as he used to be, no longer gave frequent 'ring-cuts' and did not send loving text messages. His defence was that he was studying for his Chartered Accountancy exams and did not have the time. Aruni had taken over as the primary provider of emotional support to maintain the relationship and help Gayesh pass his exams. Her efforts did not bear fruit and Gayesh's interest kept waning while his demands on her kept waxing. Samadhi listened to Aruni's woes on a daily, sometimes hourly, basis and supported her in every possible way a friend could during this uncertain period. Aruni finally decided to end the relationship because Gayesh was no longer the kind and caring person he had been and, more importantly, he was asking for the 'impossible'. She spoke with me about the break-up several weeks later and was still affected by it but suggested I record the conversation if it would be useful for my research.

Aruni explained that tolerating the lack of calls and his moodiness was not a problem. She was also willing to continue investing emotionally in the relationship but was worried that he did not show any love towards her. Comparing the 'love' between her friends and their boyfriends, Aruni felt she was unloved. Still she was willing to overlook these shortcomings but what she could not excuse was the incessant pressure he was putting on her to 'Go somewhere quiet to talk'. She went on to say 'He also tried several times to feel and caress a lot [*goḍak ata pata gānna*] here - this part of my body [shyly points to her groin area] after "kissing" me' and Aruni was unsure where that would lead to. 'Somewhere quiet to talk' meant going to a room in a small hotel which rented rooms by the hour and Aruni felt that was a danger sign.

At first, when he called me at night, he used to say, "It's very cold here", or "Can't you come near me?" and things like that. "Cold in Kurunegala?" I used to say and laugh. "I feel it would be good if you were here", he used to say but I did not take any notice. I forget exactly... but then one day he said, when he came to meet me, "We need to talk with some freedom, shall we go?" and I said, "Go where?" Then another day he said that he cannot come to see me at 'campus' and asked me to come to the Town Hall [in Colombo] and when I agreed, he said, "When you come to Town Hall, we will stay that night". Now I said that I would only come for the day, no? But he wanted us to stay the night in Colombo because "No one will know" and I said, "Are you mad? I can't" and he got angry with me for that. Now this became a real problem, he asks me to come and I say I can't. He wanted me to stay the night with him or go to a room for an afternoon. "Even though it is a big thing for you, this is a normal thing", that is what he said. "I cannot understand why you are refusing me", he used to say, like it was some small thing.

Aruni's refusal to go into a room was because she feared that her family would get to know she went into a room with a boy 'which would be my ruination'. She was also convinced that if she went into a room she would be compelled to have sex with him because

Unless you have something very serious to talk then it is OK but if it is just to talk then there is no need to go into a room, no? So if you go to a

room, then it is definitely to have 'sex'... In our culture, people don't spend so much money just to talk.

I asked if she could not have gone to a room and engaged in a little foreplay but told him to stop at a particular point but she did not think that would have been possible. According to her, 'definitely if I went, and said, "Now enough, now enough" he would not listen to me. If I said, "Now enough", he would not listen.' She however did not think, if he forced her to have sex despite her refusal, this would constitute of rape because by going to the room she had given him implicit permission for sex. Rape is often difficult to prove, both legally and socially, even in contexts which have stringent laws against rape. In Sri Lanka where there is very little structural support available to women who have reported their experiences of rape, the women are also sometimes made to feel shame or even blamed for the rape. Moreover going into a hotel room – for both Aruni and most other women at Kelaniya – would be synonymous with giving permission to have sex and so a discussion of force would not apply.

It was not only the possibility of Gayesh's refusal to listen to her 'now enough' which worried Aruni. She also worried about her ability to control her desires and cry 'now enough' before things went 'too far' and she lost her virginity.

And the other thing is I may also keep quiet. Now I also know there is no one there, no? So I might think it is OK. What if I also feel that it is OK? I am also scared. What if at the last moment I feel the desire and think that it is OK to be with him [have sex]? I may just end up being silent.

Given Gayesh's insistence on them going to a room and her fears of him not stopping at the right time and her inability to control her desires, she decided to end the relationship. This decision was not easy because she 'loved Gayesh' and in a bid to save the relationship she had even suggested that he visit a sex worker to fulfil his sexual desires till they got married. It was Samadhi who helped her during this difficult period and 'wiped every tear that fell from her eyes' and was her pillar of strength. As a way of getting Aruni's mind off Gayesh, Samadhi said we should do a short 'fun-trip'; I

jumped at the idea and suggested a weekend trip to Kandy which was enthusiastically accepted.

*Flirting with men and meeting friends at the botanical gardens*

Aruni, Samadhi and I took off to Kandy for the weekend on a Saturday morning in August, just before University reopened for 2008 when Aruni and Samadhi were to start their final year at Kelaniya. Aruni and Samadhi, who were seated next to each other, softly sang songs, chatted away excitedly about where we would go to in Kandy, what they would wear and what they would buy during the trip. We finally reached Kandy just before mid-day and walked from the train station to the small hotel we had booked for the night. The triple bedroom was spacious with high ceilings, had three separate single beds and gave us a view of the well tended gardens. We all took turns freshening up and sat down to finalise our plans before heading off into town. After much exchange and because Samadhi wanted to wear her new sleeveless t-shirt, visiting the Temple of the Tooth had to be kept for the next day when we all agreed to wear blouses with sleeves required by the temple dress code. Visiting the Peradeniya Botanical Gardens was first on the agenda and so we headed towards the bus station. Buses from Kandy to Peradeniya were frequent and we got on the first bus which came by which, given the time of day, was relatively empty.

We sat in one of the long seats at the back, Samadhi next to the window, me in the middle, Aruni next to me and as the bus took off Samadhi declared, 'Today I am going to drive these men mad, just watch me!' Aruni and I looked quizzically at her and saw her winking at a young man at the bus stand and gesture with a slight movement of her head and her eyes that he should hop on the bus. The look of disbelief on the man's face was tangible but Samadhi's timing was perfect. The bus had started moving and by the time the man recovered from his shock, it was too late for him to get on the bus even if he started running behind it. Samadhi laughed gleefully and said 'He must have thought Christmas has arrived early' and Aruni reprimanded her with 'Are you mad to do that?'

No token reprimands were going to stop Samadhi that day. She did this at every bus stand and when there were no young men, she did it to middle-aged, balding men saying ‘*Pau* [an expression of pity], let them also get a little “thrill”’

Aruni soon got annoyed with Samadhi’s behaviour and pointed to the danger Samadhi was placing us in, if one of the men she winked at got on the bus. But Samadhi was confident of her timing and took refuge in there being three of us and said ‘I would never do this if I was alone or only with one other person but with three of us here, we will be fine.’ To Samadhi this was a ‘little research’ to observe how men would react to women making a pass at them and she was amazed that unlike women who are expected to and normally would either turn away or glare at the man, some of these men smiled back or even waved at her. Osella and Osella (2006) write that young Indian women, in the privacy of close friends talk dirty and flirt with men. Samadhi similarly flirted with men, confident that neither Aruni nor I would reprimand her or, more importantly, tell others about it. However her flirtation with the men at bus stands was more a performance in which she intentionally deviated from her gender core to challenge gendered expectations, than to indicate a genuine interest in them.

Samadhi wanted to take a jab at the moral values inculcated in women and show that women too can transgress norms if they desire. But unmistakably, she got the mettle to engage in such transgressions only because she was in the presence of two other people who she knew would not judge her or talk about her. She was also in a context where she did not have to fear the watchful eyes of her peers or their wagging tongues which kept her everyday behaviour at Kelaniya in check. So while some women do indeed transgress norms of propriety which have been instilled in them, they only do so if they are confident they will not have to suffer the consequences of getting a reputation as being morally corrupt. Others like Aruni, even though she gave her phone number to a man she met on the train and so was not abiding by the role of a woman with *læjja-baya*, were more guarded when it came to deliberately mocking the moral values she had been socialised into accepting as essential for all respectable women.

We got to the botanical gardens without an incident, bought three entrance tickets and wandered in to enjoy the lush surroundings of the beautifully laid out gardens. We walked around for several hours, my left hand clasped by Samadhi and right hand clasped by Aruni, laughing at silly jokes, taking photographs with our mobile phones, admiring the range of foliage and the care with which the smaller shrubs had been manicured. Soon it was time for lunch and we chose a scenic spot overlooking the Mahavali River which provided us with enough shade from the hot afternoon sun. We were eating in a friendly silence when we heard someone calling out Aruni's name, first with some uncertainty and then with more confidence. We all looked up at the same time and Aruni said 'Oh no, it's Chathuri. What a pain! "Miss", you don't say anything OK? We will do all the talking' and Samadhi grimaced her face. Chathuri was an acquaintance from Kelaniya who neither of them liked. I could not recall seeing her but when she came bounding up to us and was introduced to me she said 'Yes, I have seen you on "campus"'. I continued to eat, paying scant attention to the conversation between them until I heard my name mentioned.

I looked up and smiled in agreement and listened to Aruni saying,

We are staying at my aunt's [*nændā*] place but mother [*ammā*] did not want to come to the botanical gardens. We were allowed to come alone because of this 'Miss'. My *nændā* and *ammā* went to visit some relative but we will be going home soon because *nændā* said that we had to come back home before it got dark.

This story was concocted by Aruni and neither Samadhi nor I said anything, but soon after Chathuri left, I enquired why she lied about where we were staying and who we were with. Then both Aruni and Samadhi, taking turns, explained that three unmarried women going on a trip which included an overnight stay would be frowned upon in their community. This disapproval would be further compounded if it became known we stayed in a hotel because, 'Only couples go to hotels for their honeymoon or if you are a... bad woman'. The idea that single women who frequented hotels were 'bad'

women, sex workers, did not surprise me but since we were in a group I did not think that either Aruni or Samadhi would have such concerns. They assured me that they did not but could not vouch for what others at Kelaniya would think and so played it safe.

Visiting the Temple of the Tooth, a common pilgrimage for most Buddhists, and staying with a relative was the norm and this was the picture painted to Chathuri. Aruni explained that she had never stayed in a hotel before and Samadhi said she had stayed one night in a hotel in Colombo because she attended a residential conference organised by her department at the university but a junior lecturer of the same sex was assigned to each room. Their mothers had given them permission for this trip only because a 'Miss' was accompanying them and it was to visit the Temple of the Tooth. Both had however, lied to their parents about where we would be staying, safe in the knowledge that none of their family members or friends would frequent a hotel for accommodation. To their parents we were staying with my aunt, who lived in Kandy. Ironically they both claimed that a larger mixed-sex group of students going on a 'fun-trip' and staying overnight in a temple hall would raise no concerns and be less taboo than three women staying on their own in a hotel.

The need for women, especially unmarried women regardless of age, to be protected and it being the responsibility of a man or a married woman to do so was evident in their explanations. An unchaperoned woman is not only a danger to herself but also to society because by being single she is a temptation to other men who cannot then be held responsible for their actions, especially if the woman deviates even slightly from the norms of morality. The presence of a man or an older married woman would also curb the potentially wanton behaviour of women: Samadhi would not have winked at those men in the bus stop had a male friend or a married woman been with us. In a larger group of men and women, even those of similar age, concern over what others would think about behaviours that did not fall in line with female propriety will contribute to women policing their own behaviours and conforming.

They both assured me that I need not worry about the white lie they had said to their parents and that we should continue to enjoy the trip. The meeting with Chathuri and the blatant lies dampened all our spirits for a while, so we walked around the gardens for a little longer but left the gardens soon after and caught the next bus to Kandy lest we bump into Chathuri again. Samadhi no longer made suggestive gestures to men at bus stands because it was too dangerous. 'Just imagine if Chathuri had been at one of the 'bus stands' and seen what I did before, I would have been finished' she said pointing, not to the possible danger of the man getting into the bus 'to take her up on the offer', but to the effect it could have on her *caritē* if a known person had seen her improper behaviour. Suddenly the fear of being observed and the uncertainty of the direction of the gaze (Foucault 1977), which was absent in Samadhi's thinking before we met Chathuri loomed large, making her revert to behaving modestly on our trip back to Kandy. We got off at the bus stand and since the sun was setting Aruni did not want to stay outside for much longer, so we called it a day and walked towards the hotel.

Kelaniya was in many ways a veritable panopticon and so when women were on campus there was an almost continuous monitoring of one's behaviour as well as that of close friends. Aruni's behaviour with Gayesh when she first met him, and Samadhi's flirtation with men at the bus stops, suggest that when the gaze is perceived as being less intense, or comes from unknown sources, women are less concerned with upholding the moral values they have imbibed. The accidental meeting with Chathuri however showed that even within this window of opportunity women have to transgress moral boundaries, they have to be conscious of the prospect that a familiar entity, in an unfamiliar context, may be gazing in their direction. It is this possibility and fear of the resulting consequences which made these women adhere to norms of respectability at most times.



### *Watching Hindi films and cuddling next to each other*

It had been a long day; we were all tired and quiet when we got back to our hotel. As soon as I closed the room door though, the mood changed and both Aruni and Samadhi were back in the exuberant mood of the morning. They laughed and joked, jumped on their beds, switched on the television, selected their favourite station and started singing along with the local singer who was performing at a talk show, while I watched their transformation in amazement. Soon it was time for dinner but they both balked at the idea of going out again. Staying overnight at a hotel was one thing but having dinner at a restaurant at night was not something they wished to do. They also claimed that they were not hungry and so I offered to go to the hotel restaurant and pick up some *roti* and curry which they happily agreed to.

When I came back with the food both had changed into their night clothes, t-shirts and soft cotton long-shorts which reached just below their knee, were lying on the single bed directly in front of the television set and laughing at something they had seen. As I walked in, they turned to me and exclaimed '*Mujhse Dosti Karoge!* [Will you be my friend?] is on Rupavahini tonight at nine o'clock, in just half an hour, let's eat quickly and get ready to watch it'. I did not know what *Mujhse Dosti Karoge!* was, so Aruni said it was a Hindi movie with Hrithik Roshan and Rani Mukherjee in it. She claimed it was a brilliant movie which I would enjoy and, even though it did not have subtitles, understand the essence of the love story. Both she and Samadhi offered to translate for me: they were avid fans of Hindi movies and had a basic knowledge of the language because they had watched so many *Bollywood* movies. We had dinner and they went back to the single bed they were occupying to watch TV and I sat on mine. Aruni and Samadhi moved around and made themselves comfortable lying on the bed with their feet against the bed head and arms resting on the pillows which were placed at the foot of the bed.

I was doing the same on my bed when Aruni said "'Miss", why don't you come onto this bed? We can all watch it from here, the view is much better' but I politely declined

her offer because I thought three people on a single bed would be too crowded. The movie started and given the predictability of most *Bollywood* films, it was not difficult to follow the storyline and guess the ending. Samadhi or Aruni intermittently translated conversations for me and they sang all the songs in the film out loud. It was while we were watching the movie that I first observed the physical proximity between Samadhi and Aruni. Their shoulders were against one another and Aruni had one hand on Samadhi's middle back. With this same hand, she also kept running her fingers through Samadhi's long hair every now and then. Samadhi, while she was resting her chin on both hands, kept moving her head to rest it on Aruni's shoulder or would brush away Aruni's hair from her face. To me this show of affection between two women friends was more fascinating than watching *Mujhse Dosti Karoge!*, and I had to force myself not to stare at them.

The film finished at around 1am and I was turning out the duvet on my bed when Samadhi said 'No, no "Miss", there is no need to do that. One bed is enough for Aruni and me, so we can put these two beds together and all three of us can sleep together in one large bed'. Again I refused, this time pleading a headache and the need to write down some notes before going to bed but suggested that they should sleep as they wished. With the exception of its pillow, one single bed in that triple room was not made use of at all. Both Aruni and Samadhi slept on the single bed they had watched TV from, with them cuddling next to each other and Aruni's arm over Samadhi's waist. When I woke up in the morning, they were still sleeping close to each other: Samadhi's long plait had loosened and strands of her hair were all over Aruni's face but Aruni still had her arm over Samadhi which Samadhi was holding onto and both were blissfully asleep. I watched them for a while and quietly tip-toed to the bathroom to change for the day.

Expressions of love, affection and intimacy between women, often more intense than those between husband and wife, were both allowed for and approved of during the 18th and 19th centuries of America and Britain (Smith-Rosenberg 1975; Faderman

1985; Marcus 2007). Smith-Rosenberg (1975) argues that women then had a greater freedom to express their feelings to other women without being labelled into categories or having to choose one identity over another. Similar to the women Smith-Rosenberg write of, women at Kelaniya were not restrained in expressing levels of intimacy with each other which would be considered unusual in most Western contexts. Holding hands while walking, running one's fingers through another woman's hair, impulsive pecks on the cheek and extremely romantic sounding text messages were very much a part of the everyday at Kelaniya. Thus the proximity and intimacy with which Aruni and Samadhi slept that night should not have surprised me but it did, and this made it difficult for me to ask any questions about what their behaviour meant.

On our way back to Colombo Aruni explained how people at Kelaniya 'talk a lot' and 'make up all sorts of stories from nothing' thus compelling her to lie sometimes to protect her *caritē*. Speaking of her break-up, she said,

I am not going to tell anyone in 'campus' about it because it will be, for me it is a small thing... but it is a big thing for them. So if anyone asks, I will pretend that we are still together.

A woman's character is often judged by the number of relationships she has had and how she behaved in them. Aruni feared that by admitting to a break-up she was leaving herself vulnerable to criticism and judgement for starting an 'affair' without giving it enough thought or being cautious in the selection of a partner. This was something which she wished to avoid. She was convinced that, by saying Gayesh was busy with exams and so could not come to Kelaniya often, she could avoid having to answer any awkward questions or listening to various bits of advice on how ending a relationship could impact on the woman. It was again the fear of being watched, being policed and the consequences of not conforming which came to the forefront of our discussion.

## Conclusion

From friendships with younger men where women boldly show a level of physical intimacy not otherwise observed easily, to 'love affairs' where women do their best to demonstrate their chastity, in this chapter I have attempted to highlight how women occupy the world of relationships differently. There are two spaces in which women can publicly show both physical and emotional intimacy without fear of censure: in their friendships with younger men and with other women. In the former it is the physical gestures women make that suggest a level not only of familiarity but also of authority. The kinship terms they use on each other provide an excellent basis to show intimacy and affection to those who are not siblings and could in principle be romantic partners. In friendships with women, especially when the bonds of friendship are extremely close, the intimacy is both physical and emotional. They not only listen to each other's woes and lend a shoulder to cry on but also hold hands when walking on the road and indulge in gentle caressing.

In other relationships, be they friendships with men of similar or older age or romantic relationships, women showed more caution in their display of intimacy. Every woman I knew, with the exception of Nayana, understood the importance of being a virgin at marriage thus their romantic relationships were marked by clear boundaries. Holding hands, kissing and even a little petting was acceptable. Venturing into a private and secluded space, especially one which bars public view, was believed could lead to either consensual or non-consensual sex and this was not acceptable. The consequences of such a visit would be to lose one's respectability. Therefore those who had found suitable men entered into and stayed in the romantic relationship in ways which compromised their *caritē* only minimally by either getting parental approval or establishing strict boundaries of sexual conduct. A woman's moral character and her virginity continued to be valued above all else and the watchful eye of their peers ensured that women adhered to these norms of chastity at most times.

Despite women parroting the maxim that all women should adhere to conventions of propriety, for many, romance was important and they fulfilled this desire in different ways. They found romance by deviating from societal expectations in subtle and not-so subtle ways: they got parental approval for romantic relationships with suitable men or gave their phone number to unknown men and kept their romance hidden from their parents. Others fantasised about unattainable men and wished they could have had romantic relationships with them. They all, however, despite these deviations, ensured the protection of their reputation and character, so that they could remain respectable in the eyes of their peers. Women were especially particular about their performance of respectability when they were on campus and among their peers. When they were away from this penetrating gaze they instigated the passions of unsuspecting men by flirting with them, stayed in hotels when only 'bad' women do so and lied to their parents.

These transgressions point to a discrepancy in the discourse and practice of the everyday lives of these women. Yet even while women transgressed certain boundaries of propriety, they maintained those which pertained to their sexual conduct and virginity to almost stringent levels. Women were thus circumspect in how they showed physical intimacy and engaged in sexual relations with their boyfriends. The cultural constraints which prevented women from showing love and affection to their partners did not apply to persons of their own sex, so when they were in the company of other women, their gestures of physical intimacy were unrestricted and without any fear of societal censure. I eventually asked Samadhi about her and Aruni sleeping in such close proximity during our trip to Kandy and she replied,

But that is the way we *always* sleep. What is wrong with that? Sometimes when it gets too hot I push her away but we sleep like that because we love each other... Not in these 'lesbian' ways, I know you are now thinking of. It's just love.

And indeed, maybe it was 'just love' between two friends who spent more time with each other and in closer proximity than society would allow them to be with their

boyfriends. The intimacy and tenderness through which women expressed their love and affection to their closest women friends was, for them, the one outlet which was not watched or criticised.

In a context where women have to show restraint and adhere to strict behavioural standards I highlight how the three women who spoke in this chapter found love and romance in ways which worked best for them. For all of them the fear of being watched, not only by societal elders but also by their peers of both sexes, was a powerful controller. While this fear shaped their behaviours and they almost always remained within societal expectations, they deviated from the boundaries expected of them when they felt it was safe to do so or when the observers were unknown. Thus in these subtle ways women made advances, even if small, in expressing their selfhood and, through that, aspects of their sexuality. Being a university student at Kelaniya and the independence it afforded, in contradictory ways, allowed women the opportunity to transgress certain norms expected of them while at the same time it reinforced, even more firmly, norms which pertained to their sexuality and respectability.

As I showed in the different chapters of this thesis, from the language subculture of the campus to the way in which women are allowed to clothe their bodies, the context at Kelaniya plays a strong role in reinforcing norms of sexuality which are at play in larger society. The women I spoke with, especially when they are on campus, adhere to these norms so that they can present themselves as respectable and chaste women. I conclude this thesis with the next chapter where I weave together the ethnography that has been presented so far, to discuss how the numerous experiences faced by these women – despite them having reached the pinnacle of education – give them a very small margin to deviate from boundaries of propriety and norms of sexuality.

## CONCLUSION

At the outset of this thesis I stated that my intention was to explore how young Sri Lankan women attending university construct their sexuality. I chose a university site to carry out this research because I believed that, as university students, women would express ideas and engage in practices which stand in contrast to those espoused in the larger societal context as the 'Sri Lankan norm'. As young people exposed to a university education, living away from their natal homes, I expected they would challenge or at least question notions of respectability, *læjja-baya* and propriety expected of them. Moreover, I expected that young men attending university would support or at least agree that a more liberal understanding of women's sexuality was inevitable given the changing societal context in which they live. As detailed in the introduction, I embarked on this research because I suspected that development interventions which promoted virginity and chastity in women, but which remained silent on how men expressed their sexuality, were not grounded in the realities of young people in present day Sri Lanka.

This recurring message, common to all the development interventions I was privy to, was a reiteration of the double standards that apply to female and male sexuality in most cultural contexts. It places the onus on women to manage their sexuality in ways that do not elicit the unwanted attention of men (Vance 1992). In Sri Lanka these double standards are maintained through the inculcation of *læjja-baya* in the girl child (Obeyesekere 1984:504-508) and the public discourse on respectability (de Alwis 1995, 1997) both of which are strongly linked to a woman's sexuality. Values of *læjja-baya* and respectability are ingrained in women through everyday practice, public discourse, institutional regulations and religious bodies so that notions of respectability not only determine their general behaviour but also their sexuality. Yet outside of the acknowledgement that respectability governs how women's sexuality is portrayed in Sri

Lanka, there is limited exploration of how women themselves live up to these values in their everyday lives or monitor the behaviour of their peers to ensure similar behaviour. It is this which emerged through my research and is highlighted in this thesis.

The link between respectability and sexuality informs the ways in which we interact with others, the ways in which others respond to these interactions, how we perceive others and how we perceive ourselves in relation to these others (Mosse 1985). In this thesis, I showed how for these women, their experiences at Kelaniya, in relation to their respectability and sexuality, were in many ways a continuation of what they had lived through when they were in their parental home. Starting from when they first entered university and through their years at Kelaniya, the distinction between appropriate and inappropriate interactions was drilled into women. Using both subtle and not-so-subtle means women were induced to adhere to practices which fell in line with norms of respectability, especially in their expressions of sexuality. Thus they interacted with each other, and with their men friends, in socially approved ways while watching those who deviated from these standards and labelling them as amoral and lacking in respectability.

The surveillance which took place at Kelaniya made it a veritable panopticon. Foucault's (1977) explanation of how the panopticon brings about voluntary compliance, where people govern themselves due to fear of societal observation, was especially evident at Kelaniya. Students had a keen awareness of the gaze of their peers and this was adequate to prevent them from engaging in behaviours or even expressing thoughts which would lead to censure. Foucault (1980) captures the power of this gaze when he writes 'An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorising to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against himself' (Foucault 1980a:155, cited in Lukes 2005:100). This gaze not only succeeded in guaranteeing appropriate behaviour at Kelaniya but also determined the language women used in the presence of others and what jokes they cracked.



This sense of being watched by the student community and reacting to this belief by monitoring one's own performance (and that of good friends) was a recurrent theme as I have highlighted in the chapters of this thesis. It applied to both men and women but since the consequences for women who did not show suitable amounts of *læjja-baya* were more severe, they monitored themselves more stringently. Women who transgressed boundaries not only have to worry about idle gossip but also acerbic verbal abuse, attacks on their sexuality and the public shaming through posters which sprung up on campus. However, while self-monitoring and notions of respectability played a fundamental role in guiding and shaping the behaviour of the women who inform this research, it did not always preclude them from pushing the boundaries of respectability or from engaging in behaviours they knew were outside of these limits. They however engaged in these transgressions discreetly, when they were away from Kelaniya, often safe in the knowledge that they were not being watched by their peers.

The findings from my research provides a basis for me to demonstrate that notions of respectability are not merely part of discourse, imposed on women by the society they live in, but that they are endorsed and rigorously reproduced by young women themselves through their everyday practices. It is the reinforcement of the importance of respectability for women who are aspiring to contend with oscillating class boundaries (Bourdieu 1987) that made it almost impossible for them to deviate from or question the middle-class markers which tie respectability to sexuality. These women were keenly aware that the possibility of social mobility was contingent not only upon their education but also their adherence to 'traditional norms' and notions of respectability. The women I spoke with desired to be perceived as respectable much more than they wished to be seen as independent and autonomous young women. Thus in the context of Kelaniya, the advantages which education professes to especially provide women with did not always materialise according to expectation or in a linear fashion. It seems that the benefits of education for women, even when it is tertiary education, can be best appreciated if the social and cultural restrictions placed on them are taken into

consideration in how women are allowed to perceive themselves and express their autonomy.

### **The Strongest Link? Respectability and Sexuality**

The surveillance of students at Kelaniya began on their first day at university, through the rag. The codes of conduct enforced during the rag provided the foundation for behavioural standards expected of men and women during their time at university and senior students watched – from unknown directions – if the freshers were adhering to the prescribed behaviours and dress codes. Those who did not, as I showed in Chapter Three, were identified, called up and ‘punished’ or, at least, put back in their place. Women soon learnt that open confrontation did not reap any benefits and so performed their gender core ‘daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure’ (Butler 1990:282). They used tears to gain the sympathy of others or imitated the ideal of a shy village lass, very much aware of the value of this performance and the reassurance it provided. Even though the stringency with which these codes were followed during the rag waned over time and eventually got interpreted more flexibly, there were other controls in place to ensure that women, especially, did not deviate too widely from the parameters of respectability and chastity expected of them by larger society.

Language use at Kelaniya was, at first glance, a means which allowed women to deviate from the constraints imposed on them to use ‘polite language’ at all times. Contradictorily, it was the rag that gave women the licence to use impolite pronouns and verbs without fear of censure and women did use impolite language on each other. However this was not with complete lack of restraint. Cameron (2006) argues that language shapes the relations between men and women and is indicative of the power dynamics which exist in the larger societal context. Similarly, at Kelaniya, gender and age based norms came into play so that most women did not use impolite language on men or older students or in the presence of unknown others. A woman’s respectability is tied to several factors, of which one is her language use: how she speaks and the

words she uses. In the *Gihī Vinaya* women are counselled not to use pejorative words on their servants and the women at Kelaniya maintained their respectability by being conscious of the context in which they used impolite language or with whom they cracked sexual jokes. Moreover, the language subculture at Kelaniya was not only about the freedom with which women could use impolite language. I illustrated in Chapter Four that it was also about the special words which objectified women, words which referred to different kinds of relationships or words women used with each other to warn each other of any lapses in their comportment. The use of semiotic resources to inform friends of any lapse was a way of monitoring each other but it was seen as a benign form of monitoring: it made sure that a friend did not fall from respectability and that a friend would not let you fall from respectability.

The consequences of falling from respectability, highlighted in Chapter Five, can be especially dire for women. The shaming of deviant behaviour, which Obeyesekere (1984:504-508) argues is an important component of instilling *læjja-baya*, was used at Kelaniya to punish those who were seen to not have *læjja-baya*. I showed how the appearance of posters, almost overnight, about two women who were seen to not have *læjja-baya* did not only publicly humiliate them but also made them withdraw from the social context at Kelaniya. The weight of the gaze which Foucault (1980a) refers to, because the shaming which took place in this instance was too humiliating, led to a level of self-surveillance which made these women not want to mingle with their peers subsequently. It is the awareness that women who are labelled as lacking in respectability will be stigmatised that makes women portray an image of themselves as morally upright and chaste. A majority of these women however, did not merely portray respectability but rather saw it as a fundamental aspect to their character which they incontrovertibly believed was justified and appropriate. They had internalised values of chastity and respectability and thus did not question their origins, their applicability or why they applied differentially to men and women. Internalised values become the best form of control (Raychaudhuri 2000) and, as women who had internalised them, the students at Kelaniya ensured their perpetuation.

In this same chapter I also revealed how the vigour with which women reproduced norms of respectability was reflected in their everyday practices, their dress and their expression of values. The belief that clothes not only reveal the character of the person but also express their social status (Wickramasinghe 2003) made these women conscious that their interest in fashion and the selection of clothes should be modest: it should not show too much skin or be gossamer. Moreover the near compulsory under-slip further guaranteed a way of showing their modesty. From following fashion to interacting with men, from feigning ignorance on sexual matters to not speaking out against men who rubbed against them, women ensured that respectability dominated their thinking and their interactions. They did so, not only by watching their own behaviours but also by critiquing the behaviours of others who deviated from their understanding of respectability. Just as much as students watched others, they were aware they too were watched. It is for this reason that even women who questioned the norms they had to live up to chose to abide by them rather than directly transgress them. They however did secretly covet a more liberal and open attitude towards sexuality and, as I revealed in Chapter Eight, when women were away from the panoptical gaze, their behaviours were much less constrained.

A recurring theme in every chapter, the importance of *læjja-baya* or respectability, not only applied to women, even though women, more than men, were expected to have *læjja-baya*, especially in relation to their sexuality. When it came to the men at Kelaniya and *læjja-baya*, they played a dual role: they were expected to show *læjja-baya* and they played a role in shaping *læjja-baya* in women. In Chapter Six I highlighted the different ways in which men are expected to display their manliness: by getting involved in campus fights, protecting women, making catcalls to unknown women and accessing different outlets to satisfy their sexual needs. Some of the pressures to express their manliness in particular ways, by getting involved in fights and protecting women for example, came not only from other men but also women. Men who did not display these ideals of manliness were made to feel shame: by infantilising and feminising them. Like the women at Kelaniya, these men were aware of the gaze of their peers and

the judgements awaiting them; so their behaviours differed markedly when they were on campus and off-campus. Men too were publicly shamed but their negative portrayal did not carry with it the same sense of sexual innuendo or the humiliation as that assigned to women. Moreover the leeway allowed to men to transgress boundaries of appropriate behaviour was greater than for women even though they too could not wholly escape being painted in a negative light if they overstepped the boundaries of propriety.

The importance of portraying a masculine image, in the efforts men extended at seeking love and romance, was the focus of Chapter Seven. From buying hair gel to developing a good personality, men were just as concerned with following appropriate fashion as were the women. It is in their description of the ideal woman, and their behaviours with her, that men could affect how women expressed their *læjja-baya*. For nearly every man, a woman's virginity was crucial and, once they found a virginal woman, if they had intentions of marrying her, they strove to protect her virginity. I detailed in that chapter how finding a woman who fitted all their criteria was not always easy and, since the men realised that the onus of pursuing a woman fell on them, some men were single minded in their pursuit of the ideal woman. As potential suitors men performed their masculinity in a variety of ways. We saw in their performances how romance placed men 'at opposite ends of two different hierarchical dyads, with respect to girls: aggressive pursuer and supplicant admirer' (Osella and Osella 2006:114). And similar to the argument Osella and Osella (2006) make, once the men at Kelaniya had successfully persuaded the woman to start a relationship, the roles changed and fluctuated overtime. Even in their role as the aggressive pursuer, men were conscious of their respectability, of not being shamed, of not losing face. Their respectability however did not always seem tied to their sexuality.

Of special significance are the women who chose to openly push the boundaries of respectability. In Chapters Three and Five I wrote about two women who chose to deviate from the prescribed norms of clothing – one during the rag and the other soon

after the rag – and the consequences they had to face for this transgression. By wearing knee length skirts these women were not only flouting university regulations but also showing scant regard for notions of *læjja-baya* and respectability. They were both sexualised and threatened thus compelling them to conform to standards of respectability or withdraw from the university social context. Chapter Eight revealed the stories of women who were more strategic in how they negotiated with and transgressed the boundaries of respectability. These negotiations involved a great deal of surreptitiousness and falsity, which points at one level to the undeniable power of social norms in guaranteeing conformity, and at another level to the lack of power women have to express their beliefs openly. For these women it was quiet resistance, rather than open confrontation, that was more effective in pushing boundaries of propriety and showing their agency.

I illustrated in Chapter Eight how women who chose to transgress boundaries did so only when they were away from the campus setting and when they were in the company of intimate friends. In the absence of the persistent surveillance which took place at Kelaniya, women's behaviour, similar to the men's, was very different. From giving their phone number to unknown men in the train to winking at unsuspecting men at bus stands, these women transgressed boundaries of respectability safe in the knowledge they were neither watched nor would be judged by their peers. The self-monitoring and the kindly monitoring of friends which took place at Kelaniya was no longer as obvious albeit not completely absent. Even these women who transgressed boundaries had internalised boundaries they would not cross: that of losing their virginity. More so than the men, or most likely because women were aware of how men thought, women emphasised the importance of virginity. So much so that ending romantic relationships or even suggesting the partner visit a sex worker to satisfy his needs were preferable alternatives to having the hymen broken.

In each of the chapters the link between women's sexuality and their respectability – be it through language use or the opinions expressed by men – came to the fore. I suggest

this desire to portray themselves as respectable women arise not only from their concern with sexuality but also from the aspirations and future plans these women have to achieve middle-class status. As one of the most ubiquitous signifiers of class, respectability becomes a primary concern for women who are trying to overcome class boundaries (Skeggs 1997). For the women at Kelaniya, respectability was important not only because they were merely trying to overcome class boundaries but also because they were trying to not lose the limited respectability they had achieved by gaining university entrance. The fear of losing something which was only barely in their hands made women's struggle for respectability even more zealous and important. Thus for these women, respectability was not merely that which they aspired to but something which they had marginally achieved and so needed to concretise by engaging in behaviours which would reaffirm their suitability to be perceived as educated and respectable.

Of the many markers of being middle-class, respectability is one of the most enduring and accessible indicators and I argue that for these women it is this which was easiest to strive towards, given that notions of respectability, in the form of *læjja-baya*, had already been inculcated in them from their childhood. Notions of *læjja-baya* are fundamental to the socialisation of the girl child and so, for many of them, the importance of showing *læjja-baya* was not alien. Moreover, coming from a village setting, many were used to the constant surveillance which took place and did not find the experience at Kelaniya particularly different. The difference between Kelaniya and their home environment is that at home it was primarily older people – parents, grandparents, relatives, neighbours – who did the surveillance while at Kelaniya it was primarily their peers and friends. Peers monitored each other, sometimes kindly to support friends and at other times harshly to pass judgement on a fellow student, because for each of them the social mobility proffered through a university education could be better realised only if they were also perceived as respectable women.

### **University Education and Women's Autonomy?**

In his treatise on achieving human development in the global south, Sen (1989, 1990, 1992) argues for the expansion of educational opportunities which he sees as particularly beneficial to women. He writes that education especially benefits women by increasing their autonomy, and others have supported his claim by showing that education increases access to public space, delays age at marriage and encourages greater labour force participation, thus giving women greater autonomy. Feminist critiques, however, point to the complexities inherent in determining levels of female autonomy and argue that the link between education and autonomy is far from straightforward and is much more complex than envisioned in theory or literature (Basu 1996; Jeffery and Jeffery 1997; Beutelspacher *et al* 2003; Iverson 2006). Much of the literature on both sides of the argument has focussed on access to primary or secondary education among married women and how or if education leads to higher levels of autonomy in them. This literature does not explore how tertiary education contributes to increased autonomy or if it can help unmarried women increase their autonomy and take control their sexuality.

The findings from my research, even though not specifically focussing on the role of education and women's autonomy, adds to the body of literature which argues for a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between education and increased autonomy for women. The women who informed my research had reached the pinnacle of education and, indeed, being university students provided them with certain levels of independence and autonomy. However at Kelaniya, the autonomy they obtained as university students was restricted to certain aspects of their lives. The women I spoke with continued to remain strongly controlled by other factors thus limiting their ability to challenge culturally bound notions of respectability and expressions of sexuality. As single women, their autonomy in relation to sexuality was dependent not only on their education but also on how notions of class, nationalism and gender relations interacted with each other. In that respect, class and gender relations played an especially important role in how notions of respectability are enacted and maintained (Skeggs



1997) and became further compounded by the nationalistic sentiments which were at the forefront in Kelaniya.

Young Indian men perceive that higher education defines them as modern, civilised and moral beings (Jeffrey *et al* 2008). The women at Kelaniya similarly perceived that university education would make them modern but, for them, the need to be seen as moral beings prevailed over all other advantages of education: an ideal also reinforced by most academic staff. The motivation to be perceived as moral beings was also furthered by the explicit and implicit institutional codes at Kelaniya which held a woman's morality and chastity in high regard. Thus at both the institutional and the individual level women were encouraged to and rewarded for complying with values of propriety and respectability. It was the women who chose to be the guardians of respectability who were protected and able to integrate well into the university sub-culture. This meant that the options open to women, to express their preferences, were limited. The active perpetuation of these values at Kelaniya gave women students little opportunity to question societal norms or express any dissent. In this instance, higher education did not necessarily provide the women at Kelaniya with greater autonomy in relation to their sexuality. It instead ingeniously nudged them in the direction of upholding traditional values that were socially approved.

Hailing from predominantly working-class or impoverished backgrounds, entering university and attaining higher education was an achievement worthy of celebration for most young women. University education comes with many promises one of which, as mentioned earlier, is to overcome class boundaries. The women who informed this research had a keen sense that class boundaries cannot be surmounted through education alone but rather by the avenues which open up subsequent to a university degree: employment in the public sector and better marriage prospects. However, they were aware that employment opportunities or suitable marriage partners that may come their way depended on happenstance. They were also aware that both employment opportunities and especially marriage prospects could be greatly aided with the display

of appropriate levels of respectability. Thus in their endeavour to shed the working-class label attached to them they actively sought to enact ways in which notions of respectability could be achieved.

The focus on women and their respectability, pushed through the nationalist agenda of the colonial period, focussed on middle-class women adhering to these norms (Jayawardena 1986). These values have permeated to other classes and women from working-class backgrounds are aware that others perceive them as not being respectable (Hewamanne 2008). For the women I spoke with at Kelaniya, a majority who came from working-class backgrounds, gaining university entrance and emulating chaste behaviours seemed ideal ways of marking their respectability. In doing so they not only reinforced women's role as moral guardians of a country's cultural capital but also did away with the opportunity they had, as educated young women, to express their autonomy and challenge the norms which afforded them secondary status in their social milieu. For women at Kelaniya the primary benefit of education was tied to their desire to be seen as respectable rather than to challenge the gender inequalities prevalent in larger society, which they accepted as the norm. Thus it seems best to read the proclamation that education leads to higher autonomy with some caution.

In this thesis I showed that women's construction of their sexuality remains controlled by many social and cultural factors. Holland and Eisenhart (1990) found in their study that university education, rather than radicalising women's thinking on sexuality or making them aspire to higher ambitions, made them fall back on the norms valued by larger society. Similarly, at Kelaniya, women wanted their behaviours to be in line with the standard trope of respectability and chastity which dominated the cultural milieu in the larger societal context, rather than exert their independence or sexual autonomy. Education came with the promise of upward class mobility but contradictorily compelled these women to maintain norms of chastity expected of them in larger society. This makes it necessary to better interrogate the factors which affect women's autonomy. We need to acknowledge that increased education does not directly or

always lead to women's autonomy and, even if it does, it only does so in spheres which are more open to change than in areas which are strongly bound to cultural values.

### **Unanswered Questions, Limitations and Possibilities for Further Research**

The assumptions with which I started this research collapsed fairly early on during my fieldwork. Starting with the very first day when the taboo of speaking openly about sexuality was brought home to me, within a few months I realised that it was not only public discourse on sexuality or behaviours which were perceived as sexual that was frowned upon. Except in the intimacy of their closest friends and the privacy of their thoughts women, more often than not, continued to self-monitor expressions of sexuality. Peers played an especially important role in ensuring that women did not deviate from the norms of respectability and chastity. However, given that this research was carried out with a small group of young men and women at Kelaniya, nearly all from working-class backgrounds and the first in their family history to enter university, it is not possible to generalise from these findings into larger contexts or even other universities in Sri Lanka. For the women whose ideas I have used in this thesis, performing 'respectability', adhering to societal norms and maintaining their chastity was fundamental, it was something very much within their control and it is this that women executed best.

The women who informed this research were very much embedded in the university context. It is not clear how these women would construct their sexuality upon leaving university, upon finding their ideal job and upon exposure to contexts wherein interactions between men and women are less constrained. The few women with whom I spoke again, more than a year after I left the field, who were now working in less than ideal jobs, laughed at the naiveté of their thoughts on sexuality during the time I interviewed them. Some shared their experiences of working life with me and laughingly enquired if they could be re-interviewed because their thoughts on sexuality were very different now. Following the work of Holland and Eisenhart (1990),

obtaining an in-depth understanding of how experiences of university life shape women's expectations and how women realise these expectations in their working and married lives would provide more insight into how constructs of sexuality shift with age and marital status.

It is clear that the findings from this research underpin the argument that link respectability with femininity and class. While providing support for an area that has been explored before, my findings raise questions about the relationship between masculinity and respectability. Obeyesekere (1984:504-508) makes it very clear that while notions of *læjja-baya* undoubtedly apply to both men and women, the inculcation of *læjja-baya* makes the male child fear the ridiculing or the shaming more because it is he who has a public role and therefore has to be sensitive to the reaction of others. Obeyesekere, however, does not detail what aspects of men's behaviour could be ridiculed. The men at Kelaniya were clearly worried about being shamed but for them they could be shamed for a variety of reasons: for not engaging in violence, for being reluctant to strip naked during the rag, for drinking too much or for being known as a failure in romantic relationships. It is also not clear if all or any of these shaming experiences would lead to a loss of respectability for men or how important respectability is for men. Moreover there is no historical depth of how Sri Lankan masculinities are constructed or how the relationship between masculinity and respectability gets played out in everyday behaviours. This is an area which begs further research especially since the focus on masculinities in Sri Lanka has primarily been through the lens of violence.

This research showed that the ability for young women to make decisions in relation to their sexuality is strongly affected by the cultural context in which they live. For the women at Kelaniya, the context did not promote the expression of sexual independence or any challenges to 'traditional values'. Moreover, the primary interest these women had was not to contest existing gender inequalities, which they saw as inevitable and often unproblematic, but to be seen as respectable and educated young women within

the prevailing societal framework. The decisions which women made were based on concerns that were of foremost importance to them and the gender inequalities which controlled the expression of their sexuality was not a priority for them. It was the more tangible and immediately beneficial class aspirations which drove their behaviour and resulted in the importance of a woman's respectability, as her defining feature, being reinforced.

**APPENDIX A**  
**Details of Participants**

<b>Name and Sex of Participant</b>	<b>Year at University</b>	<b>Ethnicity &amp; Religion</b>	<b>Accommodation</b>
Aruni (F)	Third Year	Sinhala, Buddhist	Private Boarding
Ayoma (F)	Third Year	Sinhala, Buddhist	University Hostel
Dilhan (M)	Second Year	Sinhala, Buddhist	University Hostel
Dilini (F)	Second Year	Sinhala, Buddhist	Private Boarding
Dimuth (M)	Second Year	Sinhala, Buddhist	Private Boarding
Fatima (F)	First Year	Muslim, Islam	Natal Home
Gamini (M)	Second Year	Sinhala, Buddhist	University Hostel
Gayani (F)	Third Year	Sinhala, Buddhist	Private Boarding
Gehan (M)	Second Year	Sinhala, Buddhist	University Hostel
Inushi (F)	First Year	Sinhala, Buddhist	Private Boarding
Kanishka (M)	Fourth Year	Sinhala Buddhist	Natal Home
Kumari (F)	Third Year	Sinhala, Buddhist	University Hostel
Lakshman (M)	Second Year	Sinhala, Buddhist	University Hostel
Mahesh (M)	Third Year	Sinhala, Christian	Natal Home
Malithi (F)	Second Year	Sinhala, Buddhist	University Hostel
Maneesh (M)	Second Year	Sinhala, Buddhist	Private Boarding
Mihiri (F)	Fourth Year	Sinhala, Buddhist	Private Boarding
Mohan (M)	Third Year	Sinhala, Buddhist	University Hostel
Muditha (F)	Second Year	Sinhala, Buddhist	University Hostel
Nalin (M)	Third Year	Sinhala, Buddhist	University Hostel
Nayana (F)	Third Year	Sinhala, Buddhist	Natal Home
Nilmini (F)	Fourth Year	Sinhala, Buddhist	University Hostel
Nilooshani (F)	Third Year	Sinhala, Buddhist	Private Boarding
Prishan (M)	Second Year	Sinhala, Buddhist	Private Boarding
Priyanthi (F)	Fourth Year	Sinhala, Buddhist	University Hostel
Ramesh (M)	First Year	Sinhala, Buddhist	Natal Home
Sakuntala (F)	Third Year	Sinhala, Buddhist	Private Boarding
Samadhi (F)	Third Year	Sinhala, Buddhist	Natal Home
Samitha (F)	Second Year	Sinhala, Buddhist	University Hostel
Sashini (F, Lecturer)	Recent Graduate	Sinhala, Buddhist	Natal Home
Seth (M)	Third Year	Burgher, Christian	Natal Home
Srimani (F)	Second Year	Sinhala, Christian	Private Boarding
Sumith (M)	Second Year	Sinhala, Buddhist	University Hostel
Thilini (F)	Fourth Year	Sinhala, Buddhist	University Hostel
Thushari (F)	First Year	Sinhala, Buddhist	Private Boarding
Wimala (F)	Fourth Year	Sinhala, Buddhist	University Hostel

*N.B.* This list includes details only of the participants who are mentioned in this thesis and whose voices I use as evidence for the arguments I make. Others who were interviewed for this research or with whom I had conversations but do not directly contribute to this thesis are not included in this list. Finally, the year at university I have mentioned here, is the year the student was in, when I first met her/him. During my fieldwork students passed that year and moved on to the next year at university or graduated.

**APPENDIX B**  
**Sketch of the Osariya**



**Front**

**Back**

*Source:* <http://www.srilankaolympic.org/2009/07/an-attire-for-athletes-representing-sri-lanka/>

## APPENDIX C

Map of Sri Lanka with an inset of Colombo and Gampaha Districts





APPENDIX D

Map of the University of Kelaniya

**UNIVERSITY OF KELANIYA - SRI LANKA**  
**(Site Map)**



- Buddha Statue
- Medical Centre
- Main Roads
- Minor Roads
- Boundary
- Play Grounds
- Gardens
- Buildings
- Block A
- Block B
- Block C
- Block D
- Block E
- Block F
- Block G
- Block H
- Block I
- Block J
- Block K
- Block L
- Block M
- Block N



© NISHAN SAKALASOORIYA, DEPT. OF GEOGRAPHY, UNIVERSITY OF KELANIYA, SRI LANKA (15.05.2007)

Visual Management Project  
 Advisory Board: Professor N.K. Dangalle, Mr. U.A. Chandrasena  
 Project Team: Dr. Hemantha Sirisena, Dr. Upul Ranjith Hewawitanagamage  
 Mr. Jayantha Munasinghe, Mr. Nishan Sakalasoori, Mr. Jayantha Kalasooriya  
 A Voluntary Project

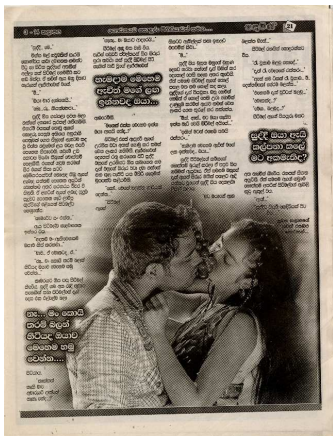
# APPENDIX E

## Pages from the Tabloids

Sample pages from Sandamini



Sample pages from Seedevi



## REFERENCE LIST

- Adrião, K., Lyra, J., Medrado, B. and Nascimento, P. (2002). Working with Men on Health and Sexual and Reproductive Rights from a Gender Perspective: Experiences from Northeast Brazil. In A. Cornwall and A. Welbourn (Eds.), *Realizing Rights: Transforming Approaches to Sexual and Reproductive Wellbeing*. London: Zed Books.
- Ahearn, L. (2001a). *Invitations to Love: Literacy, Love Letter, and Social Change in Nepal*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
- Ahearn, L. (2001b). Language and Agency. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, **30**, (109-137).
- Ahlberg, B.M. (1994). Is there a Distinct African Sexuality? A Critical Response to Caldwell. *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, **64:2**, (220-242)
- Amarasuriya, H. (2009). Re-thinking the Nexus between Youth, Unemployment and Conflict. *Conflict and Development Studies*, **7**, (15-32).
- Amarasuriya, H. (2010). *Guardians of Childhood: State, Class and Morality in a Sri Lankan Bureaucracy*. Ph.D. thesis, The University of Edinburgh.
- Ambert, A., Adler, P.A., Adler, P. and Detzner, D. (1995). Understanding and Evaluating Qualitative Research. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, **57:4**, (879-893).
- Amit-Talai, V. (1995). Conclusion: The 'Multi' Cultural of Youth. In V. Amit-Talai and H. Wulff (Eds.), *Youth Cultures: A Cross-cultural Perspective*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Archer, J. and Lloyd, B. (2002). *Sex and Gender*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ardener, S. (1987). A Note of Gender Iconography: The Vagina. In P. Caplan (Ed.), *The Cultural Construction of Sexuality*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Ayella, M. (1993). "They Must Be Crazy:" Some of the Difficulties in Researching "Cults". In C.M. Renzetti and R.M. Lee (Eds.), *Researching Sensitive Topics*. Newbury Park: SAGE Publications.
- Bannerji, H. (1994). Textile Prison: Discourse on Shame (*lajja*) in the Attire of Gentlewoman (*bhadramahila*) in Colonial Bengal. *The Canadian Journal of Sociology*, **19:2**, (169-193).

- Bastiampillai, B. (2000). Torture: "Ragging in Centres of Tertiary Education – Why?" Issues and Answers as I see it. *Daily Mirror*. (Colombo), 29 November: 9.
- Basu, A.M. (1996). Girls' Schooling, Autonomy and Fertility Change: What Do These Words mean in South Asia? In R. Jeffery and A.M. Basu (Eds.), *Girls' Schooling, Women's Autonomy and Fertility Change in South Asia*. New Delhi: SAGE Publications.
- Benei, V. (2001). Teaching Nationalism in Maharashtra Schools. In C.J. Fuller and V. Benei (Eds.), *The Everyday State and Society in Modern India*. London: C. Hurst and Company Ltd.
- Benei, V. (2008). *Schooling Passions: Nation, History, and Language in Contemporary Western India*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Beutelspacher, A.N., Martelo, E.Z. and Garcia, V.V. (2003). "Does Contraception Benefit Women? Structure, Agency, and Well-Being in Rural Mexico." *Feminist Economics*, **9:2/3**, (213-239).
- Bhatty, Z. (1988). Socialising of the Female Muslim Child in Uttar Pradesh. In K. Chanana (Ed.), *Socialisation, Education and Women: Explorations in Gender Identity*. New Delhi: Orient Longman Ltd.
- Bhavnani, K. (1993). Tracing the Contours: Feminist Research and Feminist Objectivity. *Women's Studies International Forum*, **16:2**, (93-104).
- Billig, M. (1995). *Banal Nationalism*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Bly, R. (1990). *Iron John: A Book about Men*. Dorset: Element Books Ltd.
- Bongaarts, J. (2003). Completing the Fertility Transition in the Developing World: The Role of Educational Differences and Fertility Preferences. *Population Studies*, **57:3**, (321-336).
- Bourdieu, P. (1977) *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Bourdieu, P. (1987). What Makes a Social Class? On the Theoretical and Practical Existence of Groups. *The Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, **32:1**, (1-17).



- Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The Logic of Practice*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Brettell, C. (1993). *When They Read What We Write: The Politics of Ethnography*. London: Bergin and Garvey.
- British Broadcasting Corporation. (2009). *Woman's Hour* of 28.09.2009. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00mvczr> [Accessed 30<sup>th</sup> September 2009].
- Brittan, A. (2001). Masculinities and Masculinism. In S.M. Whitehead and F.J. Barrett (Eds.), *The Masculinities Reader*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Brown, P. (1980). How and Why are Women More Polite: Some Evidence from a Mayan Community. In S. McConnell-Ginet, R. Borker and N. Furman (Eds.), *Women and Language in Literature and Society*. New York: Praeger Publishers.
- Bucholtz, M. (2002). Youth and cultural Practice. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, **31**, (525-552).
- Buckingham, D. (2008). Introducing Identity. In D. Buckingham (Ed.), *Youth, Identity, and Digital Media*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.
- Burbank, V. (1995). Gender Hierarchy and Adolescent Sexuality: The Control of Female Reproduction in an Australian Aboriginal Community. *Ethos*, **23:1**, (33-46).
- Busby, C. (2000). *The Performance of Gender: An Anthropology of Everyday Life in a South Indian Fishing Village*. London: The Athlone Press.
- Butler, J. (1990). Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory. In S. Case (Ed.), *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*. Baltimore and London: John's Hopkins University Press.
- Butler, J. (2006). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Caldwell, B. (1996). Female Education, Autonomy and Fertility in Sri Lanka. In R. Jeffery and A.M. Basu (Eds.), *Girls' Schooling, Women's Autonomy and Fertility Change in South Asia*. New Delhi: SAGE Publications.
- Caldwell, B. (1999). *Marriage in Sri Lanka: A Century of Change*. New Delhi: Hindustan Publishing Corporation.
- Caldwell, J., Caldwell, P., Caldwell, B. and Pieris, I. (1998). The Construction of

Adolescence in a Changing World: Implications for Sexuality, Reproduction, and Marriage. *Studies in Family Planning*, **29:2**, (137-153).

Caldwell, J.C., Caldwell, P. and Quiggin, P. (1989). The Social Context of AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa. *Population and Development Review*, **15:2**, (185-234).

Cameron, D. (1992/2006). 'Naming of Parts': Gender, Culture and Terms for the Penis Among American College Students. In D. Cameron (Ed.), *On Language and Sexual Politics*. London and New York: Routledge.

Cameron, D. (1997/2006). Performing Gender Identity: Young Men's Talk and the Construction of Heterosexual Masculinity. In D. Cameron (Ed.), *On Language and Sexual Politics*. London and New York: Routledge.

Cameron, D. (2003/2006). Straight Talking: The Sociolinguistics of Heterosexuality. In D. Cameron (Ed.), *On Language and Sexual Politics*. London and New York: Routledge.

Cameron, D. (2006). Introduction: On Language and Sexual Politics. In D. Cameron (Ed.), *On Language and Sexual Politics*. London and New York: Routledge.

Cameron, D. and Kulick, D. (2003). *Language and Sexuality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Chatterjee, P. (1993). *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Chodrow, N. (1974). Family Structure and Feminine Personality. In M.Z. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere (Eds.), *Woman, Culture and Society*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

Chopra, R. (2004). Encountering Masculinity: An Ethnographer's Dilemma. In R. Chopra, C. Osella and F. Osella (Eds.), *South Asian Masculinities: Context of Change, Sites of Continuity*. New Delhi: Kali for Women and Women Unlimited.

Chopra, R. (2007). Introduction: Reframing Masculinities. In R. Chopra (Ed.), *Reframing Masculinities: Narrating the Supportive Practices of Men*. New Delhi: Orient Longman.

Cleland, J., Kamal, N. and Slogget, A. (1996). Links Between Fertility Regulation and the Schooling and Autonomy of Women in Bangladesh. In R. Jeffery and A.M. Basu (Eds.), *Girls' Schooling, Women's Autonomy and Fertility Change in South Asia*. New Delhi: SAGE Publications.

- Connell, R.W. (1985). Theorising Gender. *Sociology*, **19:2**, (260-272).
- Connell, R.W. (1987). *Gender and Power*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Connell, R.W. (1995). *Masculinities*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Connell, R.W. (2001a). The Social Organisation of Masculinity. In S.M. Whitehead and F.J. Barrett (Eds.), *The Masculinities Reader*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Connell, R.W. (2001b). Masculinity Politics on a World Scale. In S.M. Whitehead and F.J. Barrett (Eds.), *The Masculinities Reader*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Cook, J.A. and Fonow, M.M. (1986). Knowledge and Women's Interests: Issues of Epistemology and Methodology in Feminist Sociological Research. *Sociological Inquiry*, **56:1**, (2-29).
- Coomaraswamy, R. and Perera-Rajasingham, N. (2008) (Eds.), *Constellations of Violence: Feminist Interventions in South Asia*. New Delhi: Women Unlimited.
- Cornwall, A. and Lindisfarne, N. (1994). Dislocating Masculinity: Gender, Power and Anthropology. In A. Cornwall and N. Lindisfarne (Eds.), *Dislocating Masculinity: Comparative Ethnographies*. London: Routledge.
- Crotty, M. (1998). *The Foundation of Social Research: Meaning and Perspective in the Research Process*. London: SAGE Publications
- Das, V. (1988). Femininity and the Orientation to the Body. In K. Chanana (Ed.), *Socialisation, Education and Women: Explorations in Gender Identity*. New Delhi: Orient Longman Ltd.
- Davis, D.L. (1993). Unintended Consequences: The Myth of "the Return" in Anthropological Fieldwork. In C. Brettell (Ed.) *When They Read What We Write: The Politics of Ethnography*. London: Bergin and Garvey.
- Davis, D.A. (1995). Modernizing and Sexes: Changing Gender Relations in a Moroccan Town. *Ethos*, **23:1**, (69-78).
- Davy, J. (1821/1983). *An Account of the Interior of Ceylon and of its Inhabitants with Travels in that Island, Ceylon Historical Journal, Volume XVI*. Dehiwala, Sri Lanka: Tisara Prakasakayo Ltd..

de Alwis, M. (1995). Gender, Politics and the 'Respectable Lady'. In P. Jeganathan and Q. Ismail (Eds.), *Unmaking the Nation: The Politics of Identity and History in Modern Sri Lanka*. Colombo: Social Scientists' Association.

de Alwis, M. (1997). The Production and Embodiment of Respectability: Gendered Demeanours in Colonial Ceylon. In M. Roberts (Ed.), *Sri Lanka: Collective Identities Revisited - Volume I*. Colombo: Marga Institute.

de Beauvoir, S. (1953/1988). *The Second Sex*. London: Picador.

De Mel, N. (2001). *Women and the Nation's Narrative: Gender and Nationalism in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Sri Lanka*. New Delhi: Kali for Women.

De Munck, V. (1992). The Fallacy of the Misplaced Self: Gender Relations and the Construction of Multiple Selves among Sri Lankan Muslims. *Ethos*, **20:2**, (167-190).

De Neve, G. (2004). The Workplace and the Neighbourhood: Locating Masculinities in the South Indian Textile Industry. In R. Chopra, C. Osella and F. Osella (Eds.), *South Asian Masculinities: Context of Change, Sites of Continuity*. New Delhi: Kali for Women and Women Unlimited.

de Silva, J. (2005). *Globalisation, Terror and the Shaming of the Nation: Constructing Local Masculinities in a Sri Lankan Village*. Cheshire: Trafford Publishing.

de Silva, K.M. (1981). *A History of Sri Lanka*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

De Silva, W., Somanathan, A. and Eriyagama, V. (2003). Adolescent Reproductive Health in Sri Lanka: Status, Policies, Programmes and Issues. Colombo: Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka.

Dehne, K.L. and Riedner, G. (2001). Adolescence - A Dynamic Concept. *Reproductive Health Matters*, **9:17**, (11-15).

Department of Census and Statistics (2002). Sri Lanka Demographic and Health Survey 2000 – Final Report. Colombo: Department of Census and Statistics.

Dharmapala, A. (1994). *Gihī Dīna Caryā*. Polonnaruwa: Lake View Ltd.

Drèze, J. and Murthi, M. (2001). Fertility, Education, and Development: Evidence from India. *Population and Development Review*, **27:1**, (33-63).



- Dubois, B.L. and Crouch, I. (1975). The Question of Tag Questions in Women's Speech: They Don't Really Use More of Them, Do They? *Language in Society*, **4:3**, (289-294).
- Dunham, D. and Jayasuriya, S. (2000). Equity, Growth and Insurrection: Liberalization and the Welfare Debate in Contemporary Sri Lanka. *Oxford Development Studies*, **28:1**, (97-110).
- Durham, D. (2000). Youth and the Social Imagination in Africa: Introduction to Parts 1 and 2. *Anthropological Quarterly*, **73:3**, (113-120).
- Dyson, T. and Moore, M. (1983). On Kinship Structure, Female Autonomy, and Demographic Behaviour in India. *Population and Development Review*, **9:1**, (35-60).
- Emerson, R.M., Fretz, R.I. and Shaw, L.L. (2001). Participant-observation and Fieldnotes. In P. Atkinson, A. Coffey, S. Delamont, J. Lofland and L. Lofland (Eds.), *Handbook of Ethnography*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Enloe, C. (2004). Wielding Masculinity inside Abu Ghraib: Making Feminist Sense of an American Military Scandal. *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, **10:3**, (89-102).
- Faderman, L. (1985). *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from Renaissance to the Present*. London: The Women's Press Ltd.
- Few, A., Stephens, D. and Rouse-Arnett, M. (2003). Sister-to-Sister Talk: Transcending Boundaries and Challenges in Qualitative Research with Black Women. *Family Relations*, **52:3**, (205-215).
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage.
- Foucault, M. (1978). *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1, An Introduction*. London: Penguin Books.
- Foxhall, L. (1994). Pandora Unbound: A Feminist Critique of Foucault's History of Sexuality. In A. Cornwall and N. Lindisfarne (Eds.), *Dislocating Masculinity: Comparative Ethnographies*. London: Routledge.
- Freud, S. (1905/1977). *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works*. London: Penguin Books.

Gamburd, M. (2000). *The Kitchen Spoon's Handle: Transnationalism and Sri Lanka's Migrant Housemaids*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Ganguly-Scrase, R. (2003). Paradoxes of Globalisation, Liberalisation, and Gender Equality: The Worldviews of the Lower Middle Class in West Bengal, India. *Gender and Society*, **17:4**, (544-566).

Gilmore, D. (1990). *Manhood in the Making – Cultural Concepts of Masculinity*. London: Yale University Press.

Glazier, S. (1993). Responding to the Anthropologist: When the Spiritual Baptists of Trinidad Read What I Wrote about Them. In C. Brettell (Ed.) *When They Read What We Write: The Politics of Ethnography*. London: Bergin and Garvey.

Goddard, V. (1987). Honour and Shame: The Control of Women's Sexuality and Group Identity in Naples. In P. Caplan (Ed.), *The Cultural Construction of Sexuality*. London and New York: Routledge.

Gombrich, R. and Obeyesekere, G. (1988). *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Gunatilake, R., Mayer, M., and Vodopivec, M. (2010). Introduction: The Problem of Youth Unemployment. In R. Gunatilake, M. Mayer and M. Vodopivec (Eds.), *The Challenge of Youth Employment in Sri Lanka*. Washington DC: The World Bank.

Gunawardena, C. (2002). Youth and Education. In S. Hettige and M. Mayer (Eds.), *Sri Lankan Youth: Challenges and Responses*. Colombo: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung in collaboration with South Asia Institute, University of Heidelberg and Development Studies Institute, University of Colombo.

Hall, S. and Jefferson, T. (1976). Introduction. In S. Hall and T. Jefferson (Eds.), *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-war Britain*. London: Hutchinson and Company Ltd. with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies of the University of Birmingham.

Hans, N. (1958). Nationalism and Education in Asia. *Comparative Education Review*, **2:2**, (4-12).

Haraway, D. (1988). Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective. *Feminist Studies*, **14:3**, (575-599).

Harding, S. (1986). The Instability of the Analytical Categories of Feminist Theory. *Signs*, **11:4**, (645-664).

Harding, S. (1987). Introduction: Is there a Feminist Method? *In S. Harding (Ed.), Feminism and Methodology: Social Science Issues*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Harding, S. (1997). Comment on Heckman's "Truth and Method: Feminist Standpoint Theory Revisited": Whose Standpoint Needs the Regimes of Truth and Reality? *Signs*, **22:2**, (382-391).

Hartsock, N. (1987). The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism. *In S. Harding (Ed.), Feminism and Methodology: Social Science Issues*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Hartsock, N. (1997). Comment on Heckman's "Truth and Method: Feminist Standpoint Theory Revisited": Truth or Justice? *Signs*, **22:2**, (367-374).

Hawkesworth, M.E. (1989). Knowers, Knowing, Known: Feminist Theory and Claims of Truth. *Signs*, **14:3**, (533-557).

Hawkesworth, M.E. (1999). Analyzing Backlash: Feminist Standpoint Theory as Analytical Tool. *Women's Studies International Forum*, **22:2**, (135-155).

Heckman, S. (1997). Truth and Method: Feminist Standpoint Theory Revisited. *Signs*, **22:2**, (341-365).

Hemantha, S.W.K. (2006). "Vishwavidyala Upasanscruthiya: Sampradayaya, Yatharthaya Saha Wenasweema". (*University Subculture: Tradition, Reality and Change*). Colombo: Ariya Prakasakayo.

Hettige, S. (2009). Engaging Youth for Development and Peace in Sri Lanka. *Conflict and Development Studies*, **7**, (15-32).

Hettige, S. and Mayer, M. (2002). Youth and Youth Research in Sri Lanka. *In S. Hettige and M. Mayer (Eds.), Sri Lankan Youth: Challenges and Responses*. Colombo: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung in collaboration with South Asia Institute, University of Heidelberg and Development Studies Institute, University of Colombo.

Hewamanne, S. (2003). Performing Dis-Respectability: New Tastes, Cultural Practices and Identity Performances by Sri Lanka's Free Trade Zone Garment-Factory Workers. *Cultural Dynamics*, **15:1**, (71-101).

Hewamanne, S. (2008). *Stitching Identities in a Free Trade Zone: Gender and Politics in Sri Lanka*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

- Hirsch, J.S. (2007). "Love Makes a Family": Globalization, Companionate Marriage, and the Modernization of Gender Inequality. In M.B. Padilla, J.S. Hirsch, M. Munoz-Laboy, R.E. Sember and R.G. Parker (Eds.), *Love and Globalization: Transformations of Intimacy in the Contemporary World*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Holland, D.C. and Eisenhart, M.A. (1990). *Educated in Romance: Women, Achievement, and College Culture*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- hooks, b. (2004). *The Will to Change – Men, Masculinity, and Love*. New York: ATRIA Books.
- Hopkins, M. (1993). Is anonymity Possible? Writing about Refugees in the United States. In C. Brettell (Ed.) *When They Read What We Write: The Politics of Ethnography*. London: Bergin and Garvey.
- International Monetary Fund (2010). *Sri Lanka: Letter of Intent and Technical Memorandum of Understanding*. Available at: <http://www.imf.org/external/np/loi/2010/lka/061910.pdf> [Accessed 12<sup>th</sup> February 2011].
- Iverson, V. (2006). Intra-household Inequality: A Challenge for the Capability Approach? In B. Agarwal, J. Humphries and I. Robeyns (Eds.), *Capabilities, Freedom and Equality: Amartya Sen's Work from a Gender Perspective*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Jackson, P. (1991). The Cultural Politics of Masculinity: Towards a Social Geography. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, New Series*, **16:2**, (199-213).
- Jackson, S. and Scott, S. (2001). Putting the Body's Feet on the Ground: Towards a Sociological Reconceptualization of Gendered and Sexual Embodiment. In K. Backett-Milburn and L. McKie (Eds.), *Constructing Gendered Bodies*. Hamshire and New York: Palgrave.
- Jacobs-Huey, L. (2002). The Natives are Gazing and Talking Back: Reviewing the Problematics of Positionality, Voice, and Accountability among "Native" Anthropologists. *American Anthropologist, New Series*, **104:3**, (791-804).
- Jarvie, I.C. (1969). The Problem of Ethical Integrity in Participant Observation. *Current Anthropology*, **10:5**, (505-508).

Jayasena, A. (2002). *Ragging and the Female Students in the Universities*. Paper Presented at the Eighth National Convention on Women's Studies, 23<sup>rd</sup>- 26<sup>th</sup> March. Colombo, Sri Lanka: CENWOR.

Jayawardena, K. (1986). *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*. London: Zed Books Ltd.

Jayawardena, K. (1995). *The White Woman's Other Burden: Western Women and South Asia During British Rule*. New York and London: Routledge.

Jayawardena, K. (2000). *Nobodies to Somebodies: The Rise of the Colonial Bourgeoisie in Sri Lanka*. London: Zed Books.

Jayaweera, S. (1999). Gender, Education, Development: Sri Lanka. In C. Heward and S.S. Bunwaree (Eds.), *Gender, Education and Development: Beyond Access to Empowerment*. London: Zed Books.

Jayaweera, S. (2002). Women in Education and Employment. In S. Jayaweera (Ed.), *Women in Post-Independence Sri Lanka*. New Delhi: SAGE Publications.

Jeffery, P. (1979). *Frogs in a Well: Indian Women in Purdah*. London: Zed Press.

Jeffery, P. and Jeffery, R. (1996). What's the Benefit of Being Educated?: Girls' Schooling, Women's Autonomy and Fertility Outcomes in Bijnor. In R. Jeffery and A.M. Basu (Eds.), *Girls' Schooling, Women's Autonomy and Fertility Change in South Asia*. New Delhi: SAGE Publications.

Jeffery, P. and Jeffery, R. (1998). Silver Bullet or Passing Fancy? Girls' Schooling and Population Policy. In C. Jackson and R. Pearson (Eds.), *Feminist Visions of Development: Gender Analysis and Policy*. London and New York: Routledge.

Jeffery, R. and Jeffery, P. (1997). *Population, Gender and Politics: Demographic Change in Rural India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Jeffrey, C., Jeffery, P. and Jeffery R. (2008). *Degrees Without Freedom? Education, Masculinities and Unemployment in North India*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

Jeffrey, C., Jeffery, P. and Jeffery, R. (2004). "A Useless Thing!" or "Nectar of the Gods?" The Cultural Production of Education and Young Men's Struggles for Respect in Liberalising North India. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, **94:1**, (961-981).

- Jeganathan, P. (1998). All the Lord's Men? Ethnicity and Inequality in the Space of a Riot. In M. Roberts (Ed.), *Sri Lanka: Collective Identities Revisited - Volume II*. Colombo: Marga Institute.
- Jeganathan, P. (2000). A Space for Violence: Anthropology, Politics and the Location of a Sinhala Practice of Masculinity. In P. Chatterjee and P. Jeganathan (Eds.), *Community, Gender and Violence*. New Delhi: Permanent Black.
- Jejeebhoy, S. (1995). *Women's Education, Autonomy, and Reproductive Behaviour*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kandiyoti, D. (1994). The Paradoxes of Masculinity: Some Thoughts on Segregated Societies. In A. Cornwall and N. Lindisfarne (Eds.), *Dislocating Masculinity: Comparative Ethnographies*. London: Routledge.
- Kannabiran, K. (1996). Rape and the Construction of Communal Identity. In K. Jayawardena and M. De Alwis (Eds.), *Embodied Violence: Communalising Women's Sexuality in South Asia*. London and New Jersey: ZED Books.
- Karlekar, M. (1988). Woman's Nature and the Access to Education. In K. Chanana (Ed.), *Socialisation, Education and Women: Explorations in Gender Identity*. New Delhi: Orient Longman Ltd.
- Kehily, M.J. (2007). A Cultural Perspective. In M.J. Kehily (Ed.), *Understanding Youth: Perspectives, Identities and Practices*. London: SAGE Publications in Association with the Open University.
- Kelman, H.C. (1980). Indigenous Anthropology in Non-Western Countries: A Further Elaboration. *Current Anthropology*, **21:5**, (655–661).
- Kemper, S. (2001). *Buying and Believing: Sri Lankan Advertising and Consumers in a Transnational World*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Kimmel, M.S. (2001). Masculinities as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity. In S.M. Whitehead and F.J. Barrett (Eds.), *The Masculinities Reader*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Kipp, R. (1986). Terms of Endearment: Karo Batak Lovers as Siblings. *American Ethnologist*, **13:4**, (632-645).
- Knox, R. (1817/2004). *An Historical Relation of the Island of Ceylon in the East Indies*. New Delhi and Chennai: Asian Educational Services.
- Koggel, C.M. (2006). Globalization and Women's Paid Work: Expanding

- Freedom? In B. Agarwal, J. Humphries and I. Robeyns (Eds.), *Capabilities, Freedom and Equality: Amartya Sen's Work from a Gender Perspective*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Kritz, M. and Gurak, D. (1989). Women's Status, Education and Family Formulation in Sub-Saharan Africa. *International Family Planning Perspectives*, **15:3**, (100-105).
- Kumar, N. (2007). *The Politics of Gender, Community and Modernity: Essays on Education in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Kunreuther, L. (2009). Between Love and Property: Voice, Sentiment, and Subjectivity in the Reform of Daughter's Inheritance in Nepal. *American Ethnologist*, **36:3**, 545-562.
- Lakoff, R. (1973). Language and Woman's Place. *Language in Society*, **2:1**, (45-80).
- Lakshman, W. (2002). A Holistic View of Youth Unemployment in Sri Lanka. In S. Hettige and M. Mayer (Eds.), *Sri Lankan Youth: Challenges and Responses*. Colombo: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung in collaboration with South Asia Institute, University of Heidelberg and Development Studies Institute, University of Colombo.
- Lebra, T. (1995). Skipped and Postponed Adolescence of Aristocratic Women in Japan: Resurrecting the Culture/Nature Issue. *Ethos*, **23:1**, (79-102).
- Lee, R. (1993). *Doing Research on Sensitive Topics*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Lees, S. (1986). *Losing Out: Sexuality and Adolescent Girls*. London: Hutchinson.
- Lerner, G. (1986). *The Creation of Patriarchy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Liechty, M. (2003). *Suitably Modern: Making Middle-class Culture in a New Consumer Society*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Liechty, M. (1995). Media, Markets and Modernization: Youth Identities and the Experience of Modernity in Kathmandu. In V. Amit-Talai and H. Wulff (Eds.), *Youth Cultures: A Cross-cultural Perspective*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Lukes, S. (2005). *Power: A Radical View*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lukose, R. (2005). Consuming Globalization: Youth and Gender in Kerala, India.

*Journal of Social History*, **38:4**, (915-935).

Lukose, R. (2009). *Liberalization's Children: Gender, Youth, and Consumer Citizenship in Globalizing India*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Lynch, C. (2002). The Politics of White Women's Underwear in Sri Lanka's Open Economy. *Social Politics*, **Spring 2002**, (87-125).

Lynch, C. (2007). *Juki Girls, Good Girls: Gender and Cultural Politics in Sri Lanka's Global Garment Industry*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

Malhotra, A. and Tsui, A.O. (1996). Marriage Timing in Sri Lanka: The Role of Modern Norms and Ideas. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, **58:2**, (476-490).

Marcus, S. (2007). *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Martin, E. (1993). *The Woman in the Body: A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Maton, K. (2003). Reflexivity, Relationism & Research: Pierre Bourdieu and the Epistemic Conditions and Social Scientific Knowledge. *Space and Culture*, **6:1** (52-65).

Matthews, B. (1995). University Education in Sri Lanka in Context: Consequences of Deteriorating Standards. *Pacific Affairs*, **68:1**, (77-94).

McCallum, C. (1999). Restraining Women: Gender, Sexuality and Modernity in Salvador da Bahia. *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, **18:3**, (275-293).

McConnell-Ginet, S. (1980). Linguistics and the Feminist Challenge. In S. McConnell-Ginet, R. Borker and N. Furman (Eds.), *Women and Language in Literature and Society*. New York: Praeger Publishers.

McCurry, J. (2009). *Japanese Police Launch Crackdown on Commuter Gropers: Undercover Operation to Target Nine Railway Lines*. Guardian Newspaper, 17<sup>th</sup> September 2009. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/sep/17/japan-tokyo-police-commuter-gropers> [Accessed 10<sup>th</sup> October 2010].

McDowell, L. (2003). *Redundant Masculinities: Employment Change and White Working Class Youth*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

McRobbie, A. and Garber J. (1976). Girls and Subcultures. In S. Hall and T. Jefferson (Eds.), *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-war*



*Britain*. London: Hutchison and Company Ltd. with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies of the University of Birmingham.

McRobbie, A. (1991). *Feminism and Youth Culture: From Jackie to Just Seventeen*. London: The Macmillan Press Ltd.

Messner, M.A. (2001). Friendship, Intimacy, and Sexuality. In S.M. Whitehead and F.J. Barrett (Eds.). *The Masculinities Reader*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Miller, J. (2002). Violence and Coercion in Sri Lanka's Commercial Sex Industry: Intersections of Gender, Sexuality, Culture and the Law. *Violence Against Women*, **8**, (1044-1073).

Miller, S.M. (1952). The participant Observer and "Over-Report". *American Sociological Review*, **17:1**, (97-99).

Montgomery, H. (2007). A Comparative Perspective. In M.J. Kehily (Ed.), *Understanding Youth: Perspectives, Identities and Practices*. London: SAGE Publications in Association with the Open University.

Mookherjee, N. (2004). My *man* (honour) is lost but I still have me *iman* (principle): Sexual Violence and Articulations of Masculinity. In R. Chopra, C. Osella and F. Osella (Eds.), *South Asian Masculinities: Context of Change, Sites of Continuity*. New Delhi: Kali for Women and Women Unlimited.

Mosse, G.L. (1985). *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe*. New York: Howard Fertig Inc.

Müller, M. (2006). What's in a Word? Problematizing Translation between Languages. *Area*, **39:2**, (206-213).

Murphy, E. and Dingwall, R. (2001). The Ethics of Ethnography. In P. Atkinson, A. Coffey, S. Delamont, J. Lofland and L. Lofland (Eds.), *Handbook of Ethnography*. London: SAGE Publications.

Narayan, K. (1993). How Native is a "Native" Anthropologist? *American Anthropologist*, **95:3**, (671-686).

Nelson, N. (1987). 'Selling Her Kiosk': Kikuyu Notions of Sexuality and Sex for Sale in Mathare Valley, Kenya. In P. Caplan (Ed.), *The Cultural Construction of Sexuality*. London and New York: Routledge.

- Nichols, P.C. (1980). Women in their Speech Communities. In S. McConnell-Ginet, R. Borker and N. Furman (Eds.), *Women and Language in Literature and Society*. New York: Praeger Publishers.
- O'Barr, W.M. and Atkins, B.K. (1980). "Women's Language" or "Powerless Language"? In S. McConnell-Ginet, R. Borker and N. Furman (Eds.), *Women and Language in Literature and Society*. New York: Praeger Publishers.
- O'Flaherty, W. (1980). *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Oakley, A. (1981). Interviewing Women: A Contradiction in Terms. In H. Roberts (Ed.), *Doing Feminist Research*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Obeyesekere, G. (1981). *Medusa's Hair: An Essay on Personal Symbols and Religious Experience*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Obeyesekere, G. (1984). *The Cult of Goddess Pattini*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Obeyesekere, G. (1997). The Vicissitudes of the Sinhala-Buddhist Identity through Time and Change. In M. Roberts (Ed.), *Sri Lanka: Collective Identities Revisited - Volume 1*. Colombo: Marga Institute.
- Ohnuki-Tierney, E. (1984). "Native Anthropologists". *American Ethnologist*, **11:3**, (584-586).
- Ortner, S. (1981). Gender and Sexuality in Hierarchical Societies: The Case of Polynesia and Some Comparative Implications. In S. Ortner and H. Whitehead (Eds.), *Sexual Meanings: The Cultural Construction of Gender and Sexuality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ortner, S. (1996). *Making Gender: The Politics and Erotics of Culture*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Osella, C. and Osella, F. (2004). Young Malayali Men and their Movie Heroes. In R. Chopra, C. Osella and F. Osella (Eds.), *South Asian Masculinities: Context of Change, Sites of Continuity*. New Delhi: Kali for Women and Women Unlimited.
- Osella, C. and Osella, F. (2006). *Men and Masculinities in South India*. London: Anthem Press.

- Osella, F. and Osella, C. (1999). From Transience to Immanence: Consumption, Life-Cycle and Social Mobility in Kerala, South India. *Modern Asian Studies*, **33:4**, (989-1020).
- Osella, F. and Osella, C. (2000). Migration, Money and Masculinity in Kerala. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, **6:1**, (117-133).
- Page, H.E. (1988). Dialogic Principles of Interactive Learning in the Ethnographic Literature. *Journal of Anthropological Research*, **44:2**, (163-181).
- Panjabi, S. (2007). Contesting Female Foeticide: Gender and the Law. In R. Chopra (Ed.), *Reframing Masculinities: Narrating the Supportive Practices of Men*. New Delhi: Orient Longman.
- Parikh, S.A. (2005). From Auntie to Disco: The Bifurcation of Risk and Pleasure in Sex Education in Uganda. In V. Adams and S.L. Pigg (Eds.), *Sex in Development: Science, Sexuality, and Morality in Global Perspective*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Peacock, J. (2001). *The Anthropological Lens: Harsh Light, Soft Focus*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pollner, M. (1991). Left of Ethnomethodology: The Rise and Decline of Radical Reflexivity. *American Sociological Review*, **56:3**, (370-380).
- Quinn, B. A. (2002). Sexual Harassment and Masculinity: The Power and Meaning of 'Girl Watching'. *Gender and Society*, **16:3**, (386-402).
- Rajapakse, L. and De Silva, W.I. (2000). Profile of Women Seeking Abortion. Colombo: University of Colombo.
- Rathnapala, N. (1999). Male Sex Work in Sri Lanka. In P. Aggleton (Ed.), *Men who Sell Sex: International Perspectives on Male Prostitution and AIDS*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Rathnapala, N. (2006). "Samaaja Sameekshana Nimnaya" (Social Survey Valley). *Irida Divayina Sangrahaaya* (The Sunday Island Supplement). (Colombo), 23 July: 9.
- Raychaudhuri, T. (2000). Love in a Colonial Climate: Marriage, Sex and Romance in Nineteenth-Century Bengal. *Modern Asian Studies*, **34:2**, (349-378).
- Reay, D. (1996). Insider Perspectives or Stealing the Words out of Women's Mouths: Interpretation in the Research Process. *Feminist Review*, **53**, (57-73).

- Reed, S.A. (2002). Performing Respectability: The Beravā, Middle-Class Nationalism, and the Classicization of Kandyan Dance in Sri Lanka. *Cultural Anthropology*, **17:2**, (246-277).
- Rich, A. (1980). Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence. *Signs*, **5:4**, (631-660).
- Richter-Montpetit, M. (2007). Empire, Desire and Violence: A Queer Transnational Feminist Reading of the Prisoner 'Abuse' in Abu Ghraib and the Question of 'Gender Equality'. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, **9:1**, (38-59).
- Risseuw, C. (1992). Gender, Kinship and State Formation: Case of Sri Lanka under Colonial Rule. *Economic and Political Weekly*, **27:43/44**, (WS46-WS54).
- Risch, B. (1987). Women's Derogatory Terms for Men: That's Right, "Dirty" Words. *Language in Society*, **16:3**, (353-358).
- Rogers, M. (2008). Modernity, 'Authenticity', and Ambivalence: Subaltern Masculinities on a South Indian College Campus. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, (N.S.)*, **14**, (79-95).
- Rosaldo, M.Z. (1974). Woman, Culture and Society: A Theoretical Overview. In M.Z. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere (Eds.), *Woman, Culture and Society*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Rosaldo, M.Z. and Lamphere, L. (1974). Introduction. In M.Z. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere (Eds.), *Woman, Culture and Society*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Ruwanpura, K.N. (2008). Separating Spaces? Ethno-gendering Social Networks. *Contemporary South Asia*, **16:4**, (413-426).
- Sa'ar, A. (2004). Many Ways of Becoming a Woman: the case of Unmarried Israeli-Palestinian "Girls". *Ethnology*, **43:1**, (1-18).
- Salzman, P.C. (2002). On Reflexivity. *American Anthropologist, New Series*, **104:3**, (805-813).
- Sathar, Z.A. (1996). Women's Schooling and Autonomy as Factors in Fertility Change in Pakistan: Some Empirical Evidence. In R. Jeffery and A.M. Basu (Eds.), *Girls' Schooling, Women's Autonomy and Fertility Change in South Asia*. New Delhi: SAGE Publications.

- Sayers, J. (1997). Adolescent Bodies: Boy Crazy Memories and Dreams. In J. Ussher (Ed.), *Body Talk: The Material and Discursive Regulation of Sexuality, Madness and Reproduction*. London: Routledge.
- Schelegel, A. (1995a). Introduction. *Ethos*, **23:1**, (3-14).
- Schelegel, A. (1995b). A Cross Cultural Approach to Adolescence. *Ethos*, **23:1**, (15-32).
- Schulz, M. (1975/1990). The Semantic Derogation of Woman. In D. Cameron (Ed.), *The Feminist Critique of Language: A Reader*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Segal, L. (1990). *Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities, Changing Men*. London: Virago Press Ltd.
- Seidler, V.J. (2006). *Young Men and Masculinities: Global Cultures and Intimate Lives*. London and New York: ZED Books.
- Sen, A. (1989). Development as Capability Expansion. *Journal of Development Planning*, **19**, (41-58).
- Sen, A. (1992). *Inequality Re-examined*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sen, A. (1999). *Development as Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Seneviratne, H. (1999). *The Work of Kings: The New Buddhism in Sri Lanka*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Seymour, S. (1994). College Women's Aspirations: A Challenge to the Patrifocal Family System? In C.C. Mukhopadhyay and S. Seymour (Eds.), *Women, Education, and Family Structure in India*. Oxford: Westview Press Inc.
- Sharma, S.L. (1979). *Modernizing Effects of University Education*. New Delhi: Allied Publishers Pvt. Ltd.
- Shefer, T. and Foster, D. (2001). Discourses on Women's (Hetero)Sexuality in a South African Local Context. *Culture, Health and Sexuality*, **3:4**, (375-390).
- Silva, K. and Schensul, S. (2003). Attitude Towards Premarital Sex in a Sample of Sri Lankan Youth: Differences in Male and Female Responses. In S. Boot, S. Jejeebhoy, I. Shah and C. Puri (Eds.), *Towards Adulthood: Exploring the Sexual and Reproductive Health of Adolescents in South Asia*. Geneva: World Health Organisation.

- Silva, K., Sivayoganathan, C. and Schensul, S. (1998). Peer Culture and the Social Context of Love and Sex in a Sample of University Students in Sri Lanka. *Sri Lanka Journal of Social Sciences*, **21:1**, (59-82).
- Simpson, B. (2004). Gays, Paternity and Polyandry: Making Sense of New family Forms in Contemporary Sri Lanka. In R. Chopra, C. Osella and F. Osella (Eds.), *South Asian Masculinities: Context of Change, Sites of Continuity*. New Delhi: Kali for Women and Women Unlimited.
- Skeggs, B. (1997). *Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Skeggs, B. (2001). Feminist Ethnography. In P. Atkinson, A. Coffey, S. Delamont, J. Lofland and L. Lofland (Eds.), *Handbook of Ethnography*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Smith, A.D. (2001). *Nationalism: Theory, Ideology, History*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Smith-Rosenberg, C. (1975). The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America. *Signs*, **1:1**, (1-29).
- Spencer, J. (1990). *A Sinhala Village in a Time of Trouble: Politics and Change in Rural Sri Lanka*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Spencer, J. (2001). Ethnography after Post-modernism. In P. Atkinson, A. Coffey, S. Delamont, J. Lofland and L. Lofland (Eds.), *Handbook of Ethnography*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Spencer, J. (2007). *Anthropology, Politics and the State: Democracy and Violence in South Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Srivastava, S. (2004). The Masculinity of Dis-location: Commodities, the Metropolis and the Sex-Clinics of Delhi and Mumbai. In R. Chopra, C. Osella and F. Osella (Eds.), *South Asian Masculinities: Context of Change, Sites of Continuity*. New Delhi: Kali for Women and Women Unlimited.
- Stearns, P.N. and Knapp, M. (1993). Men and Romantic Love: Pinpointing a 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Change. *Journal of Social History*, **26:4**, (769-795).
- Stoetzler, M. and Yuval-Davis, N. (2002). Standpoint Theory, Situated Knowledge and the Situated Imagination. *Feminist Theory*, **3:3**, (315-333).
- Sumathipala, K. (1968). *History of Education in Ceylon 1796-1965*. Dehiwala, Ceylon: Tisara Prakasakayo.

- Sundar, P. (1988). Education and Socialisation of Professional Women Entrepreneurs. In K. Chanana (Ed.), *Socialisation, Education and Women: Explorations in Gender Identity*. New Delhi: Orient Longman Ltd.
- Tambiah, Y. (2004). Sexuality and Women's Rights in Armed Conflict in Sri Lanka. *Reproductive Health Matters*, **12:23**, (78-87).
- Tambiah, Y. (2005). Turncoat Bodies: Sexuality and Sex Work under Militarization in Sri Lanka. *Gender and Society*, **19:2**, (243-261).
- Tarlo, E. (2003). *Unsettling Memories: Narratives of the Emergency in Delhi*. London: C. Hurst and Company.
- Tedlock, B. (1991). From participant Observation to the Observation of Participation: The Emergence of Narrative Ethnography. *Journal of Anthropological Research*, **47:1**, (69-94).
- Thomas, L.M. (2006). The Modern Girl and Racial Respectability in 1930s South Africa. *Journal of African History*, **47**, (461-490).
- Thorne, B. (1980). "You Still Takin' Notes?" Fieldwork and Problems of Informed Consent. *Social Problems*, **27:3**, (284-297).
- Trudgill, P. (1972). Sex, Covert Prestige and Linguistic Change in the Urban British English of Norwich. *Language in Society*, **1:2**, (179-195).
- Turner, V. (1974). *Dramas, Field and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Turner, V. (1978). Comments and Conclusions. In B. A. Babcock (Ed.), *The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
- Udry, J.R. (2000). Biological Limits of Gender Constructions. *American Sociological Review*, **65:3**, (443-457).
- UNFPA (2008). *State of the World Population: Reaching Common Ground – Culture, Gender and Human Rights*. New York: UNFPA.
- UNICEF (2004). *National Survey on Emerging Issues Among Adolescents in Sri Lanka*. Colombo: UNICEF.
- University Grants Commission. (2008). *Sri Lanka University Statistics 2007*. Colombo: UGC.

- University of Kælaṇiya. (2009). Available at: [www.kln.ac.lk](http://www.kln.ac.lk) [Accessed 10<sup>th</sup> May 2009].
- van Gennep, A. (1960). *The Rites of Passage*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- van Leeuwen, T. (2005). *Introducing Social Semiotics*. Oxford: Routledge.
- Vance, C. (1992). Pleasure and Danger: Toward a Politics of Sexuality. In C. Vance (Ed.) *Pleasure and Danger. Exploring Female Sexuality*. London: Pandora Press.
- Venugopal, R. (2010). Sectarian Socialism: The Politics of Sri Lanka's Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). *Modern Asian Studies*, **44:3**, (567-602).
- Visaria, L. (1996). Regional Variations in Female Autonomy and Fertility and Contraception in India. In R. Jeffery and A.M. Basu (Eds.), *Girls' Schooling, Women's Autonomy and Fertility Change in South Asia*. New Delhi: SAGE Publications.
- Walby, S. (1990). *Theorizing Patriarchy*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd.
- Walle, T.M. (2004). Virginity vs. Decency: Continuity and Change in Pakistani Men's Perception of Sexuality and Women. In R. Chopra, C. Osella and F. Osella (Eds.), *South Asian Masculinities: Context of Change, Sites of Continuity*. New Delhi: Kali for Women and Women Unlimited.
- Walters, J. (1996). *The History of Kelaniya*. Colombo: Social Scientists' Association.
- Watson, G. (1987). Make Me Reflexive, but Not Yet: Strategies for Managing Essential Reflexivity in Ethnographic Discourse. *Journal of Anthropological Research*, **43:1**, (29-41).
- Wax, M.L. (1980). Paradoxes of "Consent" to the Practice of Fieldwork. *Social Problems*, **27:3**, (272-283).
- Weber, S. and Mitchell, C. (2008). Imaging, Keyboarding, and Posting Identities: Young People and New Media Technology. In D. Buckingham (Ed.), *Youth, Identity, and Digital Media*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.
- Weeks, J. (1986). *Sexuality*. Sussex: Ellis Horwood Ltd.
- West, C. and Zimmerman, D. (1987). Doing Gender. *Gender and Society*, **1:2**, (125-151).



- Whitehead, S.M. and Barrett, F.J. (2001). The Sociology of Masculinity. In S.M. Whitehead and F.J. Barrett (Eds.), *The Masculinities Reader*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Wickramasinghe, N. (2003). *Dressing the Colonized Body: Politics, Clothing and Identity in Colonial Sri Lanka*. Hyderabad: Orient Longman Private Ltd.
- Wickramasinghe, N. (2006). *Sri Lanka in the Modern Age: A History of Contested Identities*. London: C. Hurst and Company.
- Willis, P.E. (1993). *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids get Working Class Jobs*. Ashgate: Ashgate Publishing Limited.
- Wilson, D. (1978). Sexual Codes and Conduct: A Study of Teenage Girls. In C. Smart and B. Smart (Eds.), *Women, Sexuality and Social Control*. London, Henley and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Winslow, D. (1980). Rituals of First Menstruation in Sri Lanka. *Man*, **15: 4**, (603-625).
- Wolfson, N. and Manes, J. (1980). "Don't 'Dear' Me!". In S. McConnell-Ginet, R. Borker and N. Furman (Eds.), *Women and Language in Literature and Society*. New York: Praeger Publishers.
- Wolf, L. (1913/2008). *The Village in the Jungle*. New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press.
- Wulff, H. (1995). Introducing Youth Culture in its Own Right: The State of the Art and New Possibilities. In V. Amit-Talai and H. Wulff (Eds.), *Youth Cultures: A Cross-cultural Perspective*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Yalman, N. (1971). *Under the Bo Tree: Studies in caste, Kinship, and Marriage in the Interior of Ceylon*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press.
- Yuval-Davis, N. (1997). *Gender and Nation*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Zavella, P. (1997). "Playing with Fire": The Gendered Construction of Chicana/Mexican Sexuality. In R. Lancaster and M. di Leonardo (Eds.), *The Gender/Sexuality Reader: Culture, History, Political Economy*. London: Routledge.