

The Female Body in K.S. Maniam's Play "The Sandpit: Womensis"

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ABSTRAK

Kajian ini menggunakan teori psikoanalisis 'male gaze' oleh Laura Mulvey untuk menganalisis drama K.S. Maniam bertajuk "The Sandpit: Womensis". Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa 'wanita' di atas pentas adalah satu objek (bukan subjek) kontruksi kaum lelaki, untuk ditonton oleh lelaki dan wanita. Karektor wanita Santha mengambil posisi sebagai protagonis lelaki di dalam ekspresi fetisy beliau terhadap Sumathi, sebagai satu objek seksual. Santha melambangkan seorang wanita tradisional dan tidak seksual, manakala Sumathi dilihat sebagai objek seksual yang berani dan provokatif. Karektor wanita di dalam drama ini memasuki wacana lelaki sebagai subjek yang 'jinak.' Dengan ini wanita hanya dapat mendedahkan perlambangan wanita sebagai objek seksual yang tertindas tetapi masih tidak dapat bersuara oleh sebab penindasan oleh hegemoni lelaki. Walaupun analisis psikoanalisis ini memberikan penerangan khusus mengenai kedudukan wanita di dalam situasi budaya, akan tetapi ia meletakkan wanita hanya sebagai subjek untuk dilihat, disebut, dan dianalisis sahaja.

ABSTRACT

This is a psychoanalytic reading of K.S. Maniam's play "The Sandpit: Womensis" through Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze. The findings point to the fact that 'woman' on stage has most often been constructed by men, to be viewed by other men and other women as an object, not a subject. The female character Santha may be seen as taking up the position of the masculine protagonist in expressing her fetishisation of another female character Sumathi as an object of sexual desire. While Santha is represented as older, traditional and asexual, Sumathi's behaviour and appearance are coded as sexually confident and provocative. In this play the female characters enter a discourse in the male subject position and they occupy this constructed space 'docilely'. Thus, the women are able to expose the oppressive representation of the female body as ideological, but are unable to affirm a more adequate one. As a consequence the women are still constructed by male hegemony, lacking a speaking voice. This psychoanalytic reading provides us with a sophisticated understanding of women's present cultural condition. However, it also seems to confine women forever to the status of one who is seen, spoken about, and analysed.

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the portrayal of the female body in K.S. Maniam's play "The Sandpit: Womensis" from the perspective of psychoanalytic interpretation. It will provide the reader with an understanding of women's present cultural condition through the lens of Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze which points to the fact that 'woman' on stage has most often been constructed by men, viewed by other men and women as an object, not a subject. Before I delve

into a detailed discussion, a brief background of the playwright and an overview of Mulvey's conceptual theory may be necessary to help the readers with some of the aspects as they are applied to the analysis of the play. In the discussion, characters from "The Cord" by Maniam are also mentioned briefly whenever applicable to show contrast or similarity to the chosen work.

As a writer, K.S. Maniam is best known for his plays and short stories which foreground

women as subject matter. Maniam's interest in writing about women started after the first stage production of his play "The Cord" in 1984 at the Old Town Hall in Kuala Lumpur where he observed the audience's fascination with his two female characters, Leela and Kali, in their scene together. Maniam claims that his attraction to the two women was compelled by his:

suppressed sympathy for those living in the shadow of people and peripheral situations.[...] The brief light that played on these two women's inner selves opened up, for me, larger areas of light and shade. I was motivated, then, in the stories and plays that followed, to bring into light what was hidden in the semi-darkness or the darkness itself.¹

Therefore, from 1987 to 1990, his short stories "Ratnamuni", "The Loved Flaw", "The Rock Melon" and "Mala"; and his plays "The Sandpit: A Monologue" and "The Sandpit: Womensis" all portray his preoccupation with various female characters as the victims, the displaced, the deprived, and the violated. When asked whether he saw himself as a dramatist or as a story writer, Maniam replied, "[...] I wouldn't call myself a playwright or a novelist or a short story writer or a poet [,] but all in one — I started out with poetry."² He began to contribute poems to a local newspaper in the 1960s and later some of his poems were also published in the semi-annual *Southeast Asian Review of English (SARE)*.³ His plays "The Cord", "The Sandpit: A Monologue", and "The Sandpit: Womensis" are published in *Sensuous Horizons* by a British publication company in London (1994).⁴ Maniam is not only a writer, but also an educationist: he was trained as a teacher at Brinsford Lodge, England, received a certificate in Education from the University of Birmingham in 1964, and taught in several local schools in Kedah before going to the University of Malaya to do his undergraduate degree. In 1973 he graduated and in 1979 he completed an M.A. degree in English. He worked at The Taylors College for five years and served as a lecturer in

the University of Malaya for several years before resigning to open his own business.

CONCEPTUAL THEORY

Briefly in the 1980s, feminist theorists' interest in the study of cultural representations of the female body brought about productive and illuminating feminist rereadings of culture. Among these theorists are Alison Jaggar and Susan Bordo (1992), who argue that "the body, notoriously and ubiquitously associated with the female" can be seen as a "locus of social praxis, as cultural context, as social construction [...]" whose changing forms and meanings reflect historical conflict and change and on which the politics of gender are inscribed with special clarity"⁽⁴⁾. Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, Bordo (1992) argues that the female body, as both a cultural text and a site of practical social control, is also "a text of femininity," of what it means to be a woman (13-20). Bordo justifies her claim by giving a detailed cultural reading of hysteria, agoraphobia, and anorexia nervosa as forms of female protest against and retreat from conflicting constructions of femininity.

Other feminists such as Susan Suleiman (1986) and Jane Ussher (1997) observe that the fascination with the female body in its myriad representations in art, in literature (poetry, mythology, religious doctrine, prose narratives of all kinds), in cinema, in medical and psychological treatises on sexuality, and in pornography is ubiquitous in the Western cultural imagination. Just as the female body attracts, claim Suleiman (1992:1) and Ussher (1997:104-123), it also inspires fears and fantasies, desire and repulsion; hence, the body is "beautiful but unclean, alluring but dangerous"— "a source of pleasure and nurturance, but also of destruction and evil" (Suleiman, 1992:1). Such contradictions are acknowledged by most feminists (including Jaggar and Bordo) because "[t]he cultural significance of the female body is not [...] only that of flesh-and-blood entity, but that of a *symbolic*

¹ K.S. Maniam, 'Preface' in *Sensuous Horizons: The Stories and The Plays*, (1994: x).

² Annie Greet. 1991. 'An interview with K.S. Maniam at the Flinders University of South Australia, April, 1991', in *Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English (CRNLE) Reviews Journal* 1, (1991), p.2.

³ His short stories have been published and anthologised in *Malaysian Short Stories* Lloyd Fernando, ed. (1981); Bruce Bennet and Janaki Ram ed. *Encounters: Selected Indian and Australian Short Stories* (1988); and Trevor Carolan ed. *Rim of Fire: Stories from the Pacific Rim* (1992).

⁴ His other plays "Breakout" and "Skin Trilogy" have not been published.

construct" and everything that is known about the body, adds Suleiman, as regards the past and present, "exists for us in some form of discourse; and discourse, whether verbal or visual, fictive or historical or speculative, is never unmediated, never free of interpretation, never innocent. This is as true of our own discourse as of those we might seek to analyze or criticize"(Suleiman 2).

In order to investigate the representations of the female body (the analysis of femininity or female sexuality) in art and film, says Ussher, some understanding of the theory of the masculine gaze is necessary because feminist critics have persistently and effectively argued that "the masculine gaze has, historically, dominated the world of art and film"(105). Similar arguments have been made about theatre: feminists such as Gayle Austin(1990: 82-92) and Jill Dolan(1991: 41-58) have incorporated the theory of the masculine gaze in their analysis of drama and live performance. Feminist film critics have been among the first to incorporate the theory of the gaze to critique their genre. Austin, Dolan and Ussher all cite the theory of the gaze elaborated in Laura Mulvey's groundbreaking article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", which has become one of the most cited works in the field of feminist film criticism and theory, especially for those who favour the psychoanalytic approach. For Austin, the psychoanalytic explanation of the representation of woman that Mulvey's theory discusses is also applicable to theatre because the gaze is as actively at work in live performance as in film.

At this point a summary of Mulvey's theory is necessary because her paradigm is also applicable to my reading of Maniam's "The Sandpit: Womensis". Mulvey, who is both a theorist and a filmmaker, argues that the representation of the female form is constructed on the absence of female subjectivity because woman is the silent object of the male gaze whereas man can live out his unconscious fantasies and fears through linguistic command (Mulvey 1992: 32-24). In this sense, what constitutes woman's oppression here is her inability to be the subject, the 'maker' of meaning

within the dominant language. Using Freudian/Lacanian theories of subject-formation, Mulvey argues that the visual pleasures of Hollywood cinema are based on two oppositional processes. The first involves the objectification of the female form through "direct scopophilic contact" and the spectator's look here is active and generates a sense of power (Mulvey 1992:28).⁵ This form of pleasure, which requires a distancing between spectator and screen, contributes to the voyeuristic pleasure of looking in on a private world. According to Mulvey, the second form of pleasure depends upon the opposite process, a narcissistic identification with the glorified male image on the screen(26). Mulvey further argues that like the process of objectification, the process of identification in the cinema is structured by the narrative. It inspires the spectator to identify with the main male protagonist, and through him to indirectly objectify the female character on display for his pleasure. The gaze of the male character triggers the forward movement of the narrative and the spectator's identification with the protagonist thus implies a sense of sharing in the power of his active look.

Mulvey then suggests that the reason why women in traditional film are objectified is linked to male castration anxiety and its resolution (following Freud's model of the unconscious). She adds that in order to deal with the male spectator's unconscious wish to escape from castration anxiety (because the female figure connotes lack of penis), the female object is either devalued, punished, saved (or forgiven), or turned into a fetish. While voyeurism, says Mulvey, "has association with sadism: pleasure lies in ascertaining guilt[...], asserting control and subjecting the guilty person through punishment or forgiveness"(29), fetishistic scopophilia, on the other hand, "builds up the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself"(29). Mulvey's theory, which argues that the visual pleasures of Hollywood cinema are based on voyeuristic and fetishistic forms of looking which produce unified and masculinized spectators, is applicable to my reading of Maniam's "The Sandpit: Womensis"

⁵ This notion of the scopophilic drive in the spectator is derived from Freud's analysis of scopophilia or the "voyeuristic activities of children, their desire to see and make sure of the private and the forbidden (curiosity about other people's genital and bodily functions, about the presence and absence of the penis and, retrospectively, about the primal scene)". Mulvey, p.24.

because scopophilia, fetishism, and narcissism are as actively at work in this play as they are in traditional film.

Feminists such as Jackie Stacy, Naomi Schor and Mary Ann Doane maintain that Mulvey's film theory is inadequate because it excludes the pleasure of the female spectator and the place of the feminine subject in the scenario. They argue on the basis that the fetishistic model of Mulvey's theory fails to take into consideration that women's pleasures are not motivated by fetishistic and voyeuristic drives (following Freud's account of asymmetry in the development of masculinity and femininity).⁶ However, I would contend that Mulvey's paradigm is still applicable to the reading of "The Sandpit: Womensis" at the textual level (as opposed to the visual level) because of the fact that the play is written from a male perspective, and it might also be argued that the female protagonists on stage represent a male point of view. The masculine gaze present in "The Sandpit: Womensis" does not so much occur on stage; it is more of a glimpse through the medium of language, through the playwright's textual unconscious.

THE FEMALE BODY ON STAGE

"The Sandpit: Womensis" is Maniam's second attempt to centre women on stage; it is a revised version of "The Sandpit: A Monologue" with the inclusion of a second character, Sumathi. It was written two years after "The Sandpit: A Monologue" and was initially staged in a workshop performance in Kuala Lumpur in 1988. Both female characters are present on stage throughout "The Sandpit: Womensis", and the conflict between a young rebellious woman and one who represents traditional morality clearly demonstrates Maniam's critique of the patriarchal

order. Unlike his earlier stereotypical female character (Laksmi) in "The Cord," Maniam's use of these two contrasting female characters (Santha and Sumathi) in "The Sandpit: Womensis" may be seen as an attempt to portray conflicting representations of the female body in Malaysian Indian society as a site of social control and also as one of resistance against the patriarchal norm. The play develops through a gradual process of revelation that may be associated with Freud's psychoanalysis, in which the secrets of the patients' past are slowly and painfully unveiled. In this sense, the gaze of the female protagonists goes back and forth in their reminiscences of past and present events.

Sumathi is a liberated woman who retaliates against the oppressive traditional beliefs and practices that her family forced upon her from childhood. While still a young girl she runs away from home in the hope of seeking a liberated life, but she never gains complete liberation. After leaving home she gets married to Dass and lives under the scrutinizing eyes of Dass' first wife, Santha. To Santha, everything that Sumathi does disgraces the customs and religion that she believes both of them should live by. Just like Lakshmi in "The Cord", Santha is pictured as a passive, chaste and obedient wife who guards her honour and virtue, and has accepted the values of a wife's inferiority and subordination to her husband. Hence, Santha and Laksmi are portrayed in the image of the Hindu Goddess Lakshmi, who represents the model Hindu wife:

she exemplifies the orderliness of human society and human relations.[...]She is typically shown as subservient to [her divine consort]Vishnu. [...]Reflecting her increasing association with social order, several texts locate Lakshmi's presence in righteous behav-

⁶ See Jackie Stacy, 'Desperately Seeking Difference', pp.244-257; Mary Ann Doane, 'Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator', pp.227-243; both available in *The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality*; and Naomi Schor, 'Female Fetishism: The Case of George Sand' in *The Female Body in Western Culture*, pp.363-372.

The argument that female fetishism does not exist stems from Freud's analysis of castration anxiety in the little boy: "The child's realisation that his mother does not possess a penis is translated as her having been castrated by the powerful father (whom, within the oedipal conflict he has wanted to eradicate from her desire, since it disrupts their dyadic union). The boy fears the father will also take revenge on him for his murderous wishes, and in rejection of the 'lacking' mother, he 'turns away' from her to identify with the potent father and takes up heterosexual orientation. The little boy's entry into 'normal' sexuality is thus the shock at the woman's lack of a penis. A fetishist's development is arrested at this stage and he tries to deny sexual difference by reasserting a penis-substitute onto the woman (the fetish). The fetish object stands in for the mother's phallus. [...]Because Freud's analysis is based on castration anxiety - the fear of losing the penis - it follows that fetishism must be a purely male phenomenon. Girls have no penis, so why should they need to disavow the horror of its possible loss?" See Gamman and Makinen, *Female Fetishism*, p.40.

our, orderly conduct, and correct social observance. [...] In association with Vishnu, Lakshmi provides a picture of marital contentment, domestic order, and satisfying cooperation and beneficial interdependence between male and female (Kinsley 1989:5).

However, Sumathi is able to obtain a certain degree of freedom from the traditional ways because she has the moral support of Dass, who is no longer anxious to exercise his superiority over his new wife. Physically strong and streetwise, Dass makes a living as a freelance 'street-keeper', ensuring that peace is preserved on the streets that he guards. One day Dass comes home in a battered condition, beaten by thugs at his workplace. Both wives, Sumathi and Santha, nurse Dass back to health. Once recovered, Dass goes back to work in the same streets, until one day he fails to come home at all for four days. It is at this point that the action of the play starts.

This play consists of forty monologues of unequal length delivered by the two female characters. Santha, Dass' first wife, is in her late thirties and Sumathi, his second wife, has just turned thirty. Both appear together on stage but the stage directions indicate that they are in different places: Santha is sitting in front of her house sewing a sari border, while Sumathi is sitting on a chair in a hotel room. They do not converse with each other but rather pour out their thoughts and emotions about their life in relation to their husband, who never appears. Although the audience sees only the two women, they are able to assess the absent character because the play revolves around him; the women's speeches give him an equal presence. Both women are waiting for their husband to come to them. This situation invites the audience to perceive the stage as representative of the two women's psyches and the battle for linguistic authority occurring there as reflective of the struggle taking place within the women's minds. At first glance, Maniam's purpose in presenting the women through monologues seems to be to give a space to the struggle of female subjectivity. However, when the text is read psychoanalytically (and using Mulvey's paradigm), there is evidence of an Oedipal struggle (which I will return to later) and the fetishisation of the female body.

Maniam dramatizes male scopophilia through the eyes of Santha, in her attempt to keep Sumathi within the frame she has constructed for her, one that she has internalized

in her espousal of traditional ways, but Sumathi does not fit in. In this play also, Maniam could be seen as a feminist critic through both the play itself and the character Sumathi, who rebels against the rigid nature of tradition (which I will discuss later). However, through his portrayal of Santha, a traditional Hindu wife who upholds a stereotypical image of Indian women (but learns to modify the image through the example of Sumathi), the patriarchal order or the Law of the Father is foregrounded. Santha might be seen as taking up the position of a masculine protagonist in expressing her fetishisation of parts of Sumathi's body, though her gaze is marked, not by desire, but by fear, hatred, and anger. Santha is at first a voyeur who then turns fetishist while keeping her distance and watching Sumathi continually. "The Sandpit: Womensis" can also be read as a play which centres around the theme of the construction and reproduction of feminine identities, and in which the activity of looking is highlighted as an important part of the process.

"The Sandpit: Womensis" seems to begin with Santha as the protagonist, but as soon as Sumathi speaks, she also appears to be a protagonist. Sumathi is the one responsible for 'making things happen' in the play while Santha is the one who undergoes change. The double-protagonist structure (the traditional wife and the modern wife) gives a female spectator two active subjects on the stage with whom to identify, if she wishes to do so. Although no male protagonist appears on stage, a male spectator or reader may identify with Santha as the 'male' voyeur of the patriarchal tradition, who seeks to objectify Sumathi and renders her a non-subject. She may also be seen as the mother figure who carries the Law of the Father through her alliance with the patriarchal order, whose gaze is 'castrating' and who seeks to enforce the Law on the transgressing Sumathi. Failing to do so, she resorts to punishing the deviant woman with her look of resentment, disgust and fear.

In accordance with Mulvey's ideas, the object of fetishisation in "The Sandpit: Womensis" is a woman - Sumathi. It would be useful here to cite Mulvey's definition of fetishism from her *Fetishism and Curiosity* (1996) to further clarify my analysis:

Fetishism is born out of a refusal to see, a refusal to accept the difference the female body represents for the male. These complex

series of turnings away, of covering over, not of the eyes but of understanding, of fixating on a substitute object to hold the gaze, leave the female body as an enigma and threat, condemned to return as a symbol of anxiety while simultaneously being transformed into its own screen in representation (64).

Analogously, as a modern wife, Sumathi's image is saturated in sexuality. In many ways, she represents the 'assertive style' of the heterosexual woman, inviting masculine consumption. Sumathi is represented as puzzling and enigmatic to Santha. The desire or drive propelling the narrative is partly a fear of her sexually dangerous nature, which cannot be contained and hence is a threat; but there is also a desire to know about her and to solve the riddle of her femininity. Santha begins to fulfill this desire by observing Sumathi's behaviour, gathering clues about her identity and her past life, and questioning her role as a wife to Dass. The construction of Sumathi's femininity as a riddle is emphasized by a series of misunderstandings surrounding her identity just like the character Kali in "The Cord" who is referred to as 'a gossip' and is openly humiliated as a woman without moral values.

As soon as Sumathi becomes entangled in Santha's world her sexual respectability is called into question. First, she is assumed to be having an affair with Dass' friend Arumugam in the hotel, then she is suspected of prostituting herself, and finally she is accused of using her body to seduce Dass. These misplaced accusations about Sumathi's sexuality work in relation to Santha, who is represented as the epitome of acceptable Indian feminine sexuality. Santha's voyeurism is exemplary of the symbolic order or the Law of the Father. She places herself on the right side of the law, and Sumathi on the wrong. Her power to subject Sumathi to the voyeuristic gaze makes Sumathi an object of denigration. Maniam's creative use of the identification process from the point of view of the female protagonist draws the audience deeply into Santha's position, making them share her uneasy gaze, which places them in a voyeuristic situation:

[...]Athana told me. 'The girl had to be saved. Ran away from home. Couldn't take the punishment her parents gave her.' [...] Punishment? Didn't know how to behave properly. 'Teach

her how to be a good housewife,' Athan told me. Just to give power to the first wife. If I told her to sit like this, walk like this, he interfered. Don't look at men when you talk to them, I said. No need for that, he said. She deserves to be punished. A woman who can't be a woman. The way she sits! (*Comes down to the steps and sits with her legs spread out, her breasts thrust forward.*) Like this. All the winds in the world blowing between her legs. All the men in the world touching her breasts with their eyes. Tcha! That a woman? Hotel-room woman. What else went between her legs? Always going with that Arumugam. [...] All that body not properly covered up. When you see flies sitting on [a] lot of flesh, you lose your appetite for meat (190-1).⁷

Sumathi is seen as overtly sexual, dangerously seductive, and does not give the appearance of an acquiescent femininity which will be easily satisfied. Sumathi is accused of being "a woman who can't be a woman" when she refuses to follow the social etiquette taught to her by Santha; called a "wind-rubbed woman" because she sits with her legs far apart with the wind blowing in between her legs (also signifying the female orificial body); and called a "hotel-room woman", a negative connotation of one equivalent to a 'prostitute', because she was found in a hotel room before marrying Dass, is seen in the company of other men besides her husband, and frequents places customarily forbidden to women ("There are many places where women still can't go. Athan took me to places women couldn't go.": 186). She is also criticized for the way she sleeps ("Sleeping with her legs east and west.": 196), and for wearing short dresses that expose parts of her body which should be covered. In short, Maniam is suggesting that the female body is always subjected to the commanding gaze of the male. Santha herself, who stands in for a 'male' voyeur, perceives Sumathi as a series of body parts; a body that represents a 'consumer delight' with the attention paid to her "breasts" and "in between her legs." By doing so, Santha tames her fear of Sumathi, tames her threat. She is an object to be dissected, not a person to be feared.

Punishment for one who transgresses is serious and is reflected through the ritual cleansing of Sumathi's body, as narrated by Santha:

⁷ This page number and all the subsequent page numbers for Maniam's text refer to "The Sandpit: Womensis" in K.S. Maniam, *Sensuous Horizons: The Stories and the Plays* (1994).

One day I[Sumathi] came back tired and sat down in the doorway. My mother was taking down the clothes from the lines. A wind was blowing. It lifted my skirt to my thighs. Before I could bring down my mother saw. Didn't say anything. Heard my mother and father whispering that night. You know what they did that week? Conducted a puja. A strange puja. My mother made me wear a sarung up to my chest, then took me to the bathroom. There she poured water over my head and body. Poured and poured until the body was cold. Poured and poured until I couldn't breathe. Then she took me to the family shrine. Made me kneel down in front of all those pictures of gods and goddesses, dead grandfathers and uncles. She said some prayers. My father said some prayers and held me down by the hair. The[n] he sat nearby on a stool, watching me. I was not to lift my head and body until the sarong dried. The wet cloth sucked my blood away, sucked my nerves away. You call that living? (193-4)

The use of this ritual act to cleanse the exposed female body, to re-establish the body in its 'innocence' and 'purity' may also be read as a traditional means of eliminating resistance in the 'corrupted' female flesh. This is initiated by Sumathi's own mother, who then sees it as her duty to inform Sumathi's father, who punishes her accordingly. The dominant culture has imposed its oppressive ideology on the female body: she is punished for having been caught with her thighs exposed. As Dorothy Dinnerstein says in 'The Dirty Goddess', patriarchal culture treats the female body as something mysterious, eliciting feelings of "awe and fear, sometimes disgust" or "destructive rage" in men, and its "alien, dangerous nature [...] can be controlled through ritual segregation, confinement, and avoidance; it can be subdued through conventionalized humiliation and punishment [...] through formalised gestures of respect and protectiveness"(1987:125). Sumathi's mother, who initiates her punishment, is not merely the purveyor of cultural knowledge to herself, her community and her children. She is herself the recipient and guardian of patriarchal tradition to the extent that she has internalized notions about the proper behaviour of women, and especially of her own daughter, Sumathi. Her world is reflected in her unquestioning adherence to the norms and her decision to administer punishment to Sumathi to safeguard her from carnal corruption. Here, the mother may also be seen as the tool of patriarchy by

socializing the daughter into a life of subordination, into the restrictive codes of femininity.

Similarly, Santha believes that Sumathi deserves to be punished as she says: "Even I, [...] felt like beating her. [...] For not seeing things in the right place"(205). Santha believes Sumathi's dangerous sexuality has aroused Dass' passive desire, lured him into bodily pleasures, and caused his decline in strength: "When Sumathi came the going began."(189), and her evil presence has caused the death of her only child that she could conceive: "I lost the only child I could have that year. [...] Only four months old. Just dropped out of my womb one morning. Why didn't Sumathi see?" (200). In short, in Santha's eyes, Sumathi has become the source of danger, contamination, and carnal corruption.

Santha, the 'male' purveyor of tradition, privileges mind or soul over the body, in contrast to Sumathi, who declares: "The body's the only thing you have."(191). Here, Maniam apparently associates tradition (Santha) with soul and modernity (Sumathi) with body, suggesting that the disembodied soul is privileged to rule, to govern the body and not vice versa. In this way, and in accordance with religious tradition, the soul is contrasted with the body and is seen as better, nobler, cleaner, and ultimately that which Santha possesses, in contrast to Sumathi. In other words, Santha views the body as unimportant, as something related to the merely physical, to flesh, and hence to carnal, as opposed to religious, knowledge. The body is also associated with decay, as a site of deterioration: "Sumathi is some cheap cloth and sour perfume which won't last for long."(212). Santha as a devout Hindu, treats the body only as a medium for something higher beyond the soul: "I put on different things, enter different smells and bodies. [...] Sumathi sees only the outside of you, your body. I go inside you and can become you"(212-3). This suggests that tradition encourages the control of mind over body, which it sees as a site of mortality, decay, carnal desires; it requires the regulation of sexual drives. Seen in this way, the body is marked as inferior to soul. Santha's tradition criticises the physical nature of Sumathi's modernity and urges a return to the spiritual, that is, to the norms of the traditional culture.

As mentioned earlier, Maniam dramatizes his critique of the patriarchal norm through his

character, Sumathi. There is perhaps no more condensed statement of Maniam's understanding of a woman's annihilation by an oppressive culture than that expressed through his character Sumathi in her description of her parents' house, where she lived prior to her marriage to Dass:

SUMATHI: [...]But I come from a house of silence. From the house of the dead. I'm not bluffing. You just visit my family. Better go on Friday. The incense will choke you. After the smoke goes away, you'll see what I'm talking about. The little box and the rows of photographs on the wall. Gods and goddesses live in the little box. Around the box are the dead. Dead great-grandfathers, grandfathers, great-grandmothers, grandmothers, nephews, cousins and the little ones, the nieces, only dead a few years ago. Every time I passed that wall, I passed a graveyard. My body wanted to live. I waited for my family to go away to a wedding. Waited for them to go away to a funeral. Then I let my body dance. I don't know from where the voice found the words. There was the dance and there was the song(189-90).

The "house of silence/the dead" gives the audience the image of the suffocation, oppression, inhibition, confinement, and hopelessness that Sumathi faces living in a restricted Indian culture. Even the incense is described to give the effect of suffocating smoke and odour lingering in the house of silence/the dead where the "gods and goddesses live in the little box". Around the little box are the pictures of ancestors and the more recently dead. This image depicts the constriction of Sumathi's life; she is forced to live "under the wisdom of the dead"(206) and to worship the "authority of the dead" (198). The description of the wall as a graveyard further suggests to the audience the feeling of eeriness and sadness which Sumathi experiences. Her body is fighting for some form of life, of freedom from a living death. She wishes her family to go away, to leave her alone so that she will be released if only temporarily, from the confinement of her surroundings, of her rigid family customs and traditions. With her family gone, her body comes alive and finds a voice. Her body dances and she sings a song. A song to celebrate life. This outburst of energy signifies the resistance to patriarchal power and authority that the young body of Sumathi has been waiting to express. It is the release of strength and energy pent up in the oppressed body. This element of struggle, of rebellion, which is

instinctual to the repressed body of Sumathi and will liberate her from the oppressive family praxis, is foregrounded here by Maniam.

As a playwright, Maniam rewrites the ideological assumptions regarding the female body in traditional Indian culture by bringing the oppressed woman out of the privacy of the family and giving her a voice in the theatre, allowing that voice to speak publicly. He presents her as a woman who is silenced by the phallogocentric construction of female identity. Clearly, to Maniam, the above description of Sumathi's past life represents a grim picture of a life so hemmed in by constraints, so laden with impositions, that it could not come naturally to a rebellious young woman who lives in a strict community where the female body is to be concealed; socially through proper demeanour, and physically through modesty in dress. The rules and regulations of the house and the wider tradition must be strictly observed and on no account may she refuse or demonstrate any disagreement. There must be restraint and a 'proper' distancing between men and women, which is achieved through bodily concealment, avoidance of eye contact, and restricted conversation. From childhood on great emphasis is placed on the importance of modest behavior, of sitting decently, of covering the female body, of learning to keep silence at the appropriate time, and of addressing the elders in a respectful manner. This social etiquette is referred to throughout the play.

In "The Sandpit: Womensis" Maniam also criticizes the repressive religious ideologies, superstitious beliefs, and rigid rules imposed on women by the conservative people of his society. He channels his attack on oppressive practices through Sumathi's rebellious attitude towards the blind obedience imposed on her and on all women by Indian tradition:

SUMATHI. [...]My father too had his chair. Sat on it like a king. Called my mother. She went in obedience, wearing her sari and the pottu on her forehead. The pottu, the kum-kum mark of slavery. [...]Do you know, akka, how much beating she took? Not just with the stick and slippers. But the other kind of beating. When she couldn't answer back. Couldn't defend herself. Put a wrong suspicion right. The kind of beating that killed her mind. When the pottu wasn't there the forehead was as smooth as a baby's. Empty (203-204).

Sumathi believes that Santha's tradition teaches only "blindness" and "stupidity" (206), that enjoins wives to be pious and superstitious: "go to the shrine, pray, and put on the pottu. Then go and look upon the husband's face. That way you won't bring misfortune to the family and yourself" (206). The sign of the "pottu" is binding and oppressive because it connotes that a wife lives only for her husband, annihilating her own needs. Sumathi questions the oppressive tradition that confines a woman to the house, slaving and submitting solely to her husband's needs:

'Wash the pots, mugs and plates with ash and assam,' you said, 'before the husband gets up. Don't sit down with the husband at breakfast. Don't sit with him at lunch. Serve him first and eat last. Don't look at any man who talks to you. Keep your head covered with your sari border.' What were you trying to do, akka? That was the kind of life I was putting behind me(206).

Sumathi, who has run away from her family's house is not about to be imprisoned in another life similar to the one she has left. She is determined to have a better life, free from social inhibitions, superstitions, and oppressive tradition. To her, Santha is too conservative and restrictive: "Akka is full of ceremonies. Like my family. One for every day of the week. One to choke you, one to tie your feet to the house door, one to tie up your mind"(185).

Maniam's view of the female body as an 'erotic subject' is expressed through Sumathi. She is no traditional, sari-clad, pottu-dotted wife who is passive and submissive; she is a woman who acknowledges her needs and desires. Here, on stage through Sumathi, Maniam breaks the taboo of revealing female sexual experience in public, thus opening up the discussion of women's sexual desire and control over their bodies: sex does not have to be a passive experience for women or just for procreation, but rather a sensuous one, with women playing an active role in sexual communion. Maniam communicates his view of the sexuality of the female body through his foregrounding of Sumathi not as the passive object of the male gaze, but rather as a subject who expresses her own pleasure:

SUMATHI. [...]Yes, we also slept together, Athan and I. But like a man and a woman who knew what their bodies needed. Who knew what their bodies couldn't do. We never forced the bodies into anything unnatural (204).

Sumathi therefore represents that which is suppressed in woman, an erotic 'otherness', more real than the male projection of woman as a passive object. Maniam contrasts this view with the traditional conception of sex as recalled by Santha. Dass complains to her when they are about to make love:

SANTHA. 'You're like ice,' he told me. 'Don't know how to play. Sometimes I'm afraid to breathe in front of you.' He didn't know how to play with me. I don't play with my clothes all taken off (204).

Here the traditional wife is seen as passive and sexually inhibited. Santha does not allow Dass to see her without clothes for the Indian tradition dictates that "the husband shall not see her when she is adorning herself. Likewise he must not see her in her confinement. She must not be seen naked or half naked"(Malladi Subbamma 17). Maniam's construction of Santha's sexuality is analogous to the Freudian principle which equates passivity with the female and activity with the male. According to Freud, a woman's pleasure is located in the 'passive' vagina rather than in 'active', 'phallic' sexuality; he considered the vagina the true seat of female genital sexuality (1905).⁸ Dass thinks Santha is devoid of all passion: "You can't make my body burn like Sumathi." (207); and he prefers to have Sumathi:

SANTHA: [...]After Sumathi came into the household, he touched me only a few times. And not like a husband and a wife. Like a man in a hurry doing his duty. But he and Sumathi! The things they did! No, no, no need to think about that now. Did she go after him because of that? The modern woman(203).

Here Maniam is foregrounding the idea that 'modern' women are no longer required to be modest or to restrict their sphere of activity to the home, or even to realize their properly feminine destiny in maternity: normative femininity is coming more and more to be centred on a woman's body — not its duties and

⁸ See also Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (1990: 70).

obligations or even its capacity to bear children, but its presumed heterosexuality and its appearance (attractiveness), thus replacing the religiously oriented tracts of Santha's tradition.

In contrast to Santha, Sumathi is aware of her body, its sensuality, and its value as a commodity:

I was young then. Didn't know. Now a lot of mangoes in the city. Sold at all kinds of prices. Akka doesn't know. Doesn't understand. The body's the only thing you have. Tell her that, she'll wrap herself some more in her sari(191).

Sumathi's knowledge of the world includes her discovery that young girls or women ("mangoes in the city") can be corrupted or lured by money into prostitution ("Sold at all kinds of prices"), but she is not about to be seduced or exploited by men because she knows that she possesses a good moral character. She is not like Santha, who hides under the protective folds of tradition. However, Sumathi's sensuousness is reflected in her masochistic enjoyment of flagellation as sexual foreplay, as recalled by the jealous Santha:

Why do you call it The Firemaker? You used it only on Sumathi. I was there all the time. Why didn't you use it on me? I remember what you said as you beat her. 'There! This will make your body burn. Little knots of flame all over.'(207)

Then, again Sumathi describes her participation in the masochistic act:

The Firemaker isn't new or strange to me. The many times athan beat me with The Firemaker you just stood there and watched. I didn't care. I was becoming lazy. Letting my body go to sleep. Athan was doing with The Firemaker what I did a long time ago with the vepalai leaves. [...]I wriggled my body this way and that. There was no shame. But when he beat you with The Stinger what did you do? Just stood there like a block of stone. Let the sari fall in shreds around you (200-2).

For Sumathi, "The Firemaker" is not only an instrument for erotic foreplay, but also a tool "to wake up the blood"(200), to combat laziness and ignorance: "Beats you for sleeping. Beats you for not knowing. Beats you into wakefulness" (215). "The Stinger" which Dass uses to beat Santha, on the other hand, is "[a] set of rules.

Rules that have come through time. Rules that have come through people. Rules that beat you down. Rules you use to beat down others"(215). The masochism of these two women may be explained using Freud's categorisation of drives: sadism as active, and masochism as passive forms of (scopic or aggressive) drives(Grosz 77). In this sense, both women are passive receivers of Dass' sexual aggression. However, Sumathi is able to enjoy apparent passivity by willingly accepting the refined pleasure to be derived from Dass' aggressive behaviour. Santha, on the other hand, with her natural shyness, modesty and rigidity, treats Dass' sadism as an attack on her body, as a form of punishment. For Freud, the aggressive impulse in men is normal: "The sexuality of most men shows an admixture of aggression, of a desire to subdue(Freud, 1938: 569)."⁹

Sumathi breaks away from the traditional upbringing of her family, that tradition which almost broke her. She is the "chatterer" for she will not be silenced, because to her "Silence isn't strength. Silence is weakness. Silence is fear"(203). The silence of her family almost destroyed her and she vows never to be silent again. Also, Sumathi does not treat her husband in the same way that Santha treats him. She does not wait for him to come home, she goes out to look for him if he fails to return. She is not shackled in the home doing household chores; she is taken to places where wives are not usually taken: the bars, the nightclubs, the discos. In fact, Sumathi knows what she wants in life, which is not to be like her sister in marriage: "No, no, I'm not going to be just a shadow. I started living with Athan. Not living for him. You've lived so much for him, you can't do anything by yourself"(206-7).

As mentioned earlier there is evidence of an Oedipal struggle in "The Sandpit: Womensis". Santha's object of desire, whom she refers to constantly, is Dass, and the presence of the younger wife who completes the Oedipal triangle, threatens the stability of her relationship. However, this threat does not affect Dass in any way. He continues to keep the two wives under the same roof. Dass' desire to have two wives of contrasting character may be explained using Freud's theory regarding the male's splitting of

⁹ Quoted in Pamela Gibson, ed. *Dirty Looks: Women, Pornography, Power* (1993: 210).

his relations with women. In his 'Contributions to the Psychology of Love', Freud outlines some of the effects of the boy's resolution of the Oedipus complex on his later love relations:

The requirements of symbolic functioning are contradictory: on the one hand, the boy's sexuality is virile, active, predatory; yet, on the other hand, it must be controlled, repressed, sublimated, and redirected. This split attitude may affect the man's choice of love-object. For example, [...]men may feel split between feelings of tenderness, respect, affection, and sexual 'purity'; and feelings of a highly sexual yet debasing kind. Affection and sexual desire seem to inhabit different spheres, often being resolved only by splitting his relations between two kinds of women - one noble, honorable, and pure (the virgin figure), the other a sexual profligate (the prostitute figure). He treats the first with asexual admiration, while he is sexually attracted to, yet morally or socially contemptuous of, the second. Here the male lover attempts to preserve the contradictory role of the mother (as pure and as seducer), while removing its contradictions by embodying its elements in separate 'types' of women, either virgin or whore, subject or object, asexual or only sexual, with no possible mediation (Freud, 1905: 185).¹⁰

It is possible to interpret Dass' conflicting desire for the two wives as representative of his feelings of ambivalence (of hostility and contempt) in his pre-Oedipal relation to his mother. Santha, who takes on the virginal role, noble and asexual, represents Dass' incestuous desire for the absent mother. He exalts and respects Santha in the same way that he treats his own mother: "You respected me too much, let me live within my silence"(210). Sumathi, who takes on the 'prostitute figure' role, represents the unfaithful mother who has betrayed Dass (by being with his father). Therefore, the figure of Sumathi ("Hotel-room woman", 191), signifies Dass' incestuous fantasy of the 'prostitute' mother, the sexual being who is actively desired by other men. With Sumathi, Dass can fully indulge his

socially forbidden sexual desires and impulses (which seem inappropriate with the virginal figure of Santha) because he is not afraid of being judged by her. Marrying two women of contrasting character and behaviour in a way resolves and fulfils Dass' pre-Oedipal fixation on the two contradictory mother figures.

Santha's desire to become more like her rival — a more modern, sexually assertive, and attractive feminine image — is offered temporary narrative fulfilment (209). However, by her refusal to become a sensuous feminine other she rejects the complete transformation, insisting upon her differences from Sumathi ("That's what you're doing, akka. Always separating. Yourself from Athan. Yourself from me. Your life from ours" (202)). Santha has only vaguely sought freedom and has not attempted to shake off orthodox conventions and moribund tradition. That women embrace the very system that oppresses them is, of course, the supreme irony. Sumathi, who avoids motherhood and its inevitable consequence, dependency in her marital relationship, ventures out of the home into the public space where 'women are prohibited', transgressing conventional forms of feminine behaviour. She goes to the hotel room as if it is her own, waiting for Dass to come. In the streets, Sumathi challenges Arumugam's patronizing invitation to prostitute herself, aggressively turning down the offer: "Nobody can buy me.[...]Money can't always buy women"(212). In contrast to Sumathi's public confidence, Santha is only capable in the privacy of her own home, in her familiar domestic environment.

Maniam, while forceful in his rejection of the old patriarchal morality, shows the elusive nature of his views on women's status in contemporary Indian Malaysian society by putting his protagonists in a polygamous situation.¹¹ Sumathi, a young girl who runs away from home to avoid its oppressive environment, comes face to face with another form of oppression by

¹⁰ Quoted in Grosz, p.129.

¹¹ According to a research done by Kalyani Mehta in Malaysia, an Indian wife would rather die than leave or divorce her husband. Such is the shame or taboo of being a divorced woman in Indian culture. See Kalyani Mehta, *Giving Up Hope: A Study of Attempted Suicide Amongst Indian Women*, (1990: 41). Under the Chinese and Indian customary laws, the men were permitted to practice polygamy and there was no limit to the number of wives they could marry until the year 1982 when the Law Reform for Marriage and Divorce Act 1976 was implemented and polygamous marriages were abolished for the non-Muslims in Malaysia. However, limited polygamy is still permitted for the Muslim men in Malaysia until today. See Raja Rohana Raja Mamat, 'The Legal Status of Women in Malaysia' in *The Role and Status of Malay Women in Malaysia: Social and Legal Perspectives*.

marrying Dass, who is already married. It appears, however, that the highest end of Sumathi's existence must be marriage:

SUMATHI. When Athan married me he told my father, 'I saved your daughter. I saved you from a lot of shame. I don't want the comedy of a temple wedding. The registration office is enough. Then a puja at the temple. After that a dinner for anyone you want to invite' (185).

Dass is convinced that he is doing a favour to Sumathi and her family because women's alleged need for marriage rests on the assumption that they have no satisfying alternative to devoting their lives to a man. Women must depend on men for their significant relationships because women are incapable of being by themselves. This shows that the protection of female virtue is for the benefit of the male ego. Sumathi's running away reveals the irony surrounding the concepts of 'honour' and 'virtue' on which patriarchy is built, because she is still subjected to the myths of the system.

Sumathi's active rebellion and yet compliance may be explained clearly using Freud's female Oedipal scenario. Sumathi, who runs away from home, rejects her mother who carries the Law of the Father and who punishes her for her transgressions, but allies with Dass, a paternal figure ("Another king in that small, noisy town": 186) in place of her mother. Sumathi rejects her mother who is 'castrated' and 'insufficient' to identify with Dass, who represents a potent, paternal substitute for her mother. Her dismissal of motherhood reflects her rejection of the usual Oedipal imperatives. However, by centering her desires around the father figure in Dass, she agrees with the Oedipal scenario; thus she becomes once more impotent and dependent. Sumathi also seems to condone the fetishisation of the female body into an object - here, fruit delicious to the taste - as shown by the song that she sings:

Don't cover young mangoes with ash,
they will ripen before their time.
Don't cover young mangoes with lime,
they will die before their time.
Let the mangoes hang on the branch,
glow with sun, swell with rain.
Let the mangoes catch the mist,
catch the sea, catch the sky.
Let the mangoes fill with life,
sway with life, dance with life,
dance with life...(190)

Here, the "young mangoes" clearly represent the female body; this is suggested in another related passage from Sumathi's monologue: "Now a lot of mangoes in the city. Sold at all kinds of prices[...]The body's the only thing you have"(191). This more negative connotation signifies the passive acceptance of female fetishisation at the Symbolic level (via language), suggesting a complicity with the patriarchal order and women's social subordination.

If Sumathi represents the female body as the site of decay ("some cheap cloth and sour perfume which won't last long." 212) and sexual danger ("hotel-room woman", image of promiscuity), and must suffer for her transgression, Santha represents the body's entrapment ("wraps herself some more in her sari. Deep inside." 191) and subordination ("I'll sit and wait and work on this border. Maybe before I finish it you'll come" 216). At the end of the play, Santha emerges stronger and wiser through her sexual knowledge, but seems reduced rather than expanded because she is not able to incorporate her sexuality as an intrinsic part of her identity. Maniam presents both women as tortured by the lack of positive alternatives; both are relegated to the private, domestic sphere of marriage. Unlike Lakshmi in "The Cord", death is the only way out of misery as she was driven to commit suicide to free herself from her oppressive spouse and society. However, Maniam focuses on Santha, who carries forward the values of the dominant culture, the self-controlled and self-disciplined woman, exemplar of the traditional traits that are deemed admirable. Looking at this play through the lens of Mulvey's ideas points up the fact that 'woman' on stage has most often been constructed by men, to be viewed by other men and by women as an object, not a subject.

Santha may be seen as taking up the position of the masculine protagonist in expressing her fetishisation of Sumathi as an object of sexual desire. Through her gaze, she can also be seen as identifying with Maniam's position as the narrator: that of active, desiring masculinity. While Santha is represented as older, traditional and asexual, Sumathi's behaviour and appearance are coded as sexually confident and provocative: she is one who indulges in 'phallic' (masculine) activities. Both women, however, represent the male's (Dass') pre-Oedipal fantasy of the phallic mother who is both "virginal, pure, noble, sexless (as a consequence of his repression of his own sexual wishes about her),

and a whore, the result of his realization that, long before his birth, the mother has already been unfaithful to him (with his father)"(Grosz 129).

CONCLUSION

In "The Sandpit: Womensis" the female characters enter a discourse in the male subject position because that is all there is. They occupy this constructed space 'docilely'. Thus, the women are able to expose the oppressive representation of the female body as ideological, but are unable to affirm a more adequate one. As a consequence, the women are still constructed by male hegemony, lacking a speaking voice. Although the two women appear on stage, they do not speak for themselves — their knowledge comes only from Maniam and through his male perspective. They (Santha and Sumathi, or Leela, Lakshmi and Kali) are not on the stage, but male representations of and conjectures about them are, and they as subjects do not take the stage, do not occupy their place. A psychoanalytic reading of Maniam's play provides us with a sophisticated understanding of woman's present cultural condition, but it also seems to confine her forever to the status of one who is seen, spoken about, and analysed. In order for this theory to be of any use to the female subject, she must somehow interrupt its present state of existence; she must find ways of using it that allow her to look beyond the conditions of her present history: beyond the fate of Lakshmi, who lacks a speaking voice because Maniam has chosen to make her obscure by reducing her to a victim of suicide, or the fate of Leela who is still trapped in her domestic domain, or the fate of Santha and Sumathi entangled in their polygamous marriage.

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