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Diaspora and Women: A Gaze on K.S. Maniam's Female Characters

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The wailing of women
Rent the air: mother India's daughters
Trapped, caged like birds, wings clipped
Mourning.
I thought of Sati Savitri, Anusuiya,
Sita abducted to another island. (Nandan, 1997: 13)

The diasporic debates on alienation, integration, nostalgia, etc. would be incomplete without our discussions on the plights of women characters in indentured Diaspora. Women constitute a significant part of Indian diaspora now, but the meager presence of women amongst the indentured diasporic community had many issues to discourse upon. Any discussion on indentured diaspora would be incomplete if we ignored the experience of the female characters or women members who constituted an important part of the diasporic community. It would be appropriate here therefore to look at the female perspective, or the women question of the Indian diaspora in Malaysia. In this exercise, we might consider a set of questions:

- (a) What role is played by the women of Indian origin in the diasporic experience? In performing their conjugal and societal role, do they replicate the behavior of their counterparts in their mother country or do they show pronounced differences in their approach?

- (b) What evidence, if any, of the female agency are we able to see in such literature? How does such agency impact on the formation of the Indian diasporic identity?
- (c) And finally, in what significant ways do the women characters here contribute to the overall vision of the ‘Indian’ consciousness?

When we look at indentured diasporic literature from the female point of view, we notice a complex set of patterns. At the first instance, we see that among a set of predominantly male plantation workers, women are conspicuous by their absence. However, this sociological fact has not prevented many of the writers from creating a narrative imagination populated by strong women characters. They also explore in varied ways the question of the female agency. My effort here is to look at some of representative examples and show their interconnectedness. The thrust of the paper is to discuss some of the roles played by various women characters in the short stories of K. S. Maniam.

K.S. Maniam has depicted several female characters in his book *Sensuous Horizons: The Stories and The Plays* (1994). In fact, Maniam is one of the diasporic writers to provide female perspectives into understanding diaspora in Malaysia. Female characters like Malini, Viji, Sumathi and Mala provide a wide spectrum of issues such as domestic responsibility, female psyche, human relationship, diasporic anxiety, cultural continuity, etc. As a diasporic author, Maniam has delved into the macrocosmic world of Indian diaspora, particularly the indentured diaspora of Tamil origin. His choice of short story as a genre seems to have facilitated his artistic gaze both as a writer and as a third generation Indian diaspora. What is also remarkable is how Maniam has filled up the gap in studying into the female perspective of diaspora by depicting women in several diasporic situation. For our convenience, we will concentrate on his short story collection *Sensuous Horizons: The Stories and The Plays* (1994) and analyse the issues pertaining to female diasporic experiences.

The two female characters, Malini in the story “Ratnamuni” and the wife of the narrator in the story “The Rock Melon” are the most prominent one amongst rest of his female characters in this collection of stories. Both these women are portrayed as sincere and faithful Hindu housewives. Malini is the wife of Muniandy who plays *uduku* to forecast

and predict. Ravi, their son, is suspected to be the fruit of Malini and Muthaiah's illicit relationship. Muniandy who is told of this by Govindan and he develops suspicion about Malini and Malini is seen as apologetic and remorseful. Muniandy defends his wife's chastity and sincerity. He has never put his wife through difficulty and hard work. Rather he treats Malini as a queen within his own capacity. Therefore he says; "I made my wife a queen. No cooking, no sweeping of the hose, no washing of clothes."(Maniam, 1994: 5) He tries to refute all allegations and suspicion about her wife's illicit relationship. "Malini" according to Muniandy is "a name without caste". Though the name appears to be above the caste, Malini's actions and attitudes are seen operating under the influence of domination. While Muthaiah is not suspected and admonished, it is Malini who suffers more from the guilt attendant on her extramarital relationship. She is never able to overcome this adultery. Malini becomes elaborately dutiful and respectful towards her husband and appears to be the paragon of the Hindu housewife. Muniandy describes his wife's daily obeisance to him. He says: "Every morning now Malini touches my feet with her hands more than three times. Sometimes she is saying happy words. I don't listen because the sound of her voice first in the day is enough. Sometimes she is crying and washing my feet with tears."(Maniam, 1994: 5) In another context, Muniandy also testifies to Malini's character who according to him possess the name "Malini—name without a caste"(Maniam, 1994: 2) Muniandy describes Malini's behavior and attitudes, that would make the latter out to be a devoted and sincere Hindu wife. He says: "She does not sit on the chair. Always crossing legs on the floor, near the door. Knocking her head on my toes every morning, *thoornoru* on her forehead."(Maniam, 1994: 2)

From all these descriptions, we find a typical patriarchal domestic conduct code of the Hindu family. Malini's subordination to her husband shows his patriarchal ideology and male chauvinistic expectations. Muniandy also confesses this when he says: "When my wife bent over me in the mornings I didn't listen to her words. The voice charmed magic over my ears. I was too happy to see the custom from the Big country still used in my house."(Maniam, 1994: 17) This kind of attitude of Muniandy reflects his dominating nature and his satisfaction over the continuation of Indian domestic culture in an alien country like Malaysia.

In another story “The Rock Melon”, the author explores the realm of extramarital relationship and domestic life. The sister-on-law comes to her sister’s house to learn some domestic management before her marriage. Introducing Viji, the sister-in-law, the narrator says: “She had dropped out of school; she has dropped out of work. The reason she came to stay with us was to get some kind of practical training: secretarial or manual.”(Maniam, 1994: 142) But Viji moves forward to find a sweet corner in her brother-in-law’s heart. Her intention to be a member of the family is correctly sensed by the brother-in-law who says: “She only managed, or manage it in such a way as to take over the chores a servant or a dutiful wife needed to do around the house, or for a family.”(Maniam, 1994: 142)

And consequently, we find Viji having an illicit relationship with her sister’s husband. The narrator admits to this relationship rather openly when he says; “Viji was my dawn and early mornings; my wife was my afternoons, evenings and nights.”(Maniam, 1994: 147) The practice to be a grown up woman, a housewife, before a girl got married, is presented as a typical Hindu household affair. Therefore, Viji’s sister, unnamed, tries to teach her to manage and learn to work in a domestic sphere. The narrator sees this as a typical Hindu tradition when he says: “If anything, she did everything to make her, a grown woman, comfortable in a Hindu household.”(Maniam, 1994: 145) He further goes on to describe the Hindu mentality when he describes: “Hindu society is such that even if nothing went on between husband and sister-in-law, it suspects something is going on just because she is present in the family for too long.”(Maniam, 1994: 145)

All these show how women are positioned in Hindu domestic life in Indian diaspora. It also reflects the continuation of the indelible mark of Hindu family culture on these diasporic characters, or at least on the author who himself is a descendant of Hindu diaspora in Malaysia. We do also find instances of domestic violence such as wife beating among the diasporic people. In this story we find Viji being beaten up and thrown out by her husband’s family. The brother-in-law describes this as follows:

I remember when she returned to me after her first marriage. Those people didn’t even have the courtesy to send her to our doorstep. They just dumped her a few houses away and drove

off. Her face was swollen from their beating; she had on nothing except a house sari and a blouse. She looked like a servant who had been brutally assaulted for bad service and then chucked out. (Maniam, 1994: 145)

In fact, with the progress of the relationship between Viji and her brother-in-law, there seems to be a rise of suspicion, jealousy and hatred between the three of them. This has led to the outbreak of a domestic scuffle among them when Viji drops some utensils in the kitchen. As the writer presents this:

“They’re not your things,” my wife said, “that’s why you break them.”

They just fell, “Viji said.

...

“We allow no carelessness in this house,” I said.

...

“You always side your wife!” she shouted and stamped out of the kitchen. (Maniam, 1994: 146)

Similarly, through the character of Mala in another story “Mala” the author depicts the growth of an Indian girl, her migration from a rural Malaysia to a town and the consequent problem and finally her adjustment to urban culture. The most striking aspect of the story has been Mala’s learning. She also reads the punishment received at the time of her violation of the moral code. Mala, who failed in her final school examination, becomes confined within the four walls of her house. She is now closely watched by her parents, not because of her failure but because she is a grown up girl. She is forbidden from moving at her will. On one occasion, when her parents find her going to her friend Susi’s house, Mala’s mother threatens her; “I’ll burn your legs!” She screamed. “Who heard of a young girl wandering wherever her feelings took her? Haven’t you brought the family enough shame?” (Maniam, 1994: 225) Thus Mala is gradually trained to be a typical domestic girl. It is not only her mother, but also other women who criticize Mala’s movement. She is also warned by one of her neighbor women; “Mangoes are ripening,” (Maniam, 1994: 225) she said, referring to Mala’s breasts. “Keep them covered with sacking. Hands may reach out.” (Maniam, 1994: 225) Thus we find Mala’s youthfulness or growth becoming a curse on her. As a young girl she does not feel free in society. Rather her helplessness and

insecurity is narrated to her by the neighbor woman. Her young body thus makes her insecure. She becomes an object of scrutiny in her society. Therefore, when she visits Susi's house she is told of the liberal atmosphere in the town. Susi enlightens Mala about the urban set up in Kuala Lumpur. "Nobody knows you there," Susi said. "Here everyone knows the color of your shit!" (Maniam, 1994: 225) This shows the conservative and rural environment of which Susi and Mala are fed up. It is not only the girls but also their parents who often become the subject of criticism for not marrying off their grown up girls. This is probably the reason why Mala's mother tells her husband: "Better put an end to it all." (Maniam, 1994: 228) What she means by 'put an end to it all' is to be freed from public criticism for keeping a grown-up girl in one's house. And subsequently we find various proposals and negotiations on dowry for Mala's marriage. After the breakdown of two marriage proposals Mala marries Sanker, Susi's brother. Thereafter we see Mala in Kuala Lumpur going through domestic isolation as Sanker is seen busy with his job. To acquire more money Mala also joins her husband to work in his office and earns more money. We find Mala thus trapped in a materialistic world. She gets fed up with a working life and therefore decides to have a child who can at least give her company. Therefore she insists before Sanker; 'All I want is a child,' Mala said sobbing. "Not to wait on anyone who comes to that office." (Maniam, 1994: 240) Even more than her male counterpart the Indian woman immigrant sees few days out of the isolation imposed in her by patriarchy carried forward to an alien or urban setting.

In all these positions and roles, the female members remain subordinated to their male counterparts. Their subordination is not only seen in the economic sphere, but also in their social and cultural contexts. Though away from their motherland, the 'mother' culture has not relaxed male dominance over their female counterparts. As a descendant of old indentured laborers, Maniam has probably experienced and observed many of these issues and events among the older generation women members in his diasporic community. Therefore, all his female characters are seen within the domestic sphere. They generally center around family, husband, children and family profession. Gender, which is basically a social creation, still resides and continues in the socio-cultural principles and practices of the Indian diasporic community in

Malaysia. As observed from the above discussions, it can be inferred that the patriarchal Indian sensibility or Indian consciousness, as far as the Indian women are concerned, has never been forsaken by the female members who believe, practice and maintain the age-old patriarchal culture in the diasporic community living abroad.

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