

## Female Silence in K.S. Maniam's Play *The Sandpit: A Monologue*

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### Abstract

This paper explores the concept of female silence in K.S. Maniam's play *The Sandpit: A Monologue*. It is his portrayal of the mental conflict of his female protagonist as a result of a polygamous marriage in a working-class Indian family. Maniam uses the monologue to convey his protagonist's various emotions and thoughts which could not have been presented adequately if conveyed in dialogue form. The silence and passivity of Santha is seen as active when viewed using this paradigm of female silence (a feminist criticism) because the silences are strategies used by her to resist the oppressive social roles prescribed by her traditional Indian customs. The isolation of Santha from the beginning to the end of her monologue is, of course, in keeping with the traditional role and place of women in Indian society, which the playwright seems to view as the acceptable female condition in a patriarchal society. Maniam's conclusion seems to exalt the suffering, sacrificing, submissive wife, since it is through these qualities that she will not only survive, but finally triumph.

Silence is the space narration where culture and feminine consciousness do sometimes reveal themselves, if only we can learn to decipher the psychological and cultural meanings.  
(Patricia Laurence, 1994: 166)

### Introduction

This paper is an attempt to apply the concept of female silence to a Malaysian play. Feminist critics have deviated from the conventional interpretation that perceives female silence in both fiction and drama as a sign of weakness, as symptomatic of women's oppression. In *The Sandpit: A Monologue*, Maniam dramatizes various constructions and meanings of silence in Indian Malaysian culture through the words and actions of Santha, his female protagonist, an obscure and insignificant woman.

### Conceptual Theory

During the 1970s, women's silence was increasingly explored by feminist cultural critics and 1979 was a particularly rich year for such studies. Tillie Olsen's groundbreaking book *Silences* (1979) and Adrienne Rich's *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* (1979) were published that year. They explored silence with regard to the disabling circumstances which impede the creative processes of a woman writer:

demands such as motherhood and marriage, lack of education, economic struggle, censorship, and class, race, and sex discriminations.[1] In the same year the influence of Olsen's work is seen in Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert's study of nineteenth-century women authors, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), which drew attention to the centrality of silence[2] in women's culture.

By the mid-1980s feminist literary criticism had moved beyond and away from Olsen's discoveries and emphases: from a focus on external obstacles to the writing process of women, to a focus on silence that is intrinsic to texts written by women. This new critical perspective, gained by the examination of internal silences, led to the discovery and categorisation of many different forms of silence employed by women writers: for example, silence as a repressed form of ideology and as a form of resistance to the dominant discourse (Jones, 1985); or silence as reticence culturally imposed upon women (Stout, 1990).[3] In the 1990s further collections of essays have been compiled to shed light on the various manifestations of silence in literature; for example, Elaine Hedges and Shelley Fishkin's *Listening to Silences* (1994), [4] and Gudrun M. Grabher and Ulrike Jessner's *Semantic of Silences* (1994) .[5]

The subject of women's silence is also given great emphasis in feminist dramatic criticism; for example, in Lisa Jardine's *Still Harping on Daughters* (1989:106) , where she demonstrates the "case for silence as the domestic ideal in women" in a number of Renaissance dramas and other types of text from that period. Similarly, Catherine Belsey (1991:149) posits that Renaissance women are "discouraged from any form of speech which [is] not an act of submission to the authority of their fathers or husbands" and therefore they are "denied any single place from which to speak for themselves." For many feminist critics (including Olsen, 1979; Rich, 1979; Jardine, 1983; and Belsey, 1985), "breaking silence" has become their keyword because as suggested by Helene Cixous (1981:49), "silence is the mark of hysteria. The great hysterics have lost speech [...] They are decapitated, their tongues are cut off and what talks isn't heard because it's the body that talks, and man doesn't hear the body." [6]

However, feminist critics have also interpreted female silence in Renaissance drama not as a passive feminine trait, but as one of considerable power and danger that carries with it underlying complexity and instability. Christina Luckyj (1993:39), writing on women's silence in Renaissance texts in 'A Moving Rhetoric', argues that as well as being "a source of anxiety for misogynists, silence may have remained a source of power for women." Instead of viewing silence only as a form of submissiveness, Luckyj argues that in Renaissance drama silence can be viewed as both "prohibition and subversion"(42). Similarly, in her study of Shakespeare's *King Lear* , Jill Levenson (1972:215) suggests that silence in women is feared by the western mind because of its mysterious "voids and stillness, the indefinite and the immense."

### **Female Silence and Feminine Consciousness**

It is clear from the summary that feminist critics have deviated from the conventional interpretation that perceives female silence in both fiction and drama as a sign of weakness, as symptomatic of women's oppression. In *The Sandpit: A Monologue* , Maniam dramatizes various constructions and meanings of silence in Indian Malaysian culture through the words and actions of Santha, his female protagonist, an

obscure and insignificant woman.[7] As Maniam moves from his earlier play called *The Cord* to *The Sandpit: A Monologue*, he shifts the conflict from the external realm, where it has been dramatized through actions and dialogue which take place outside the mind, into the mind itself. Through the dramatic technique of monologue Maniam is able to explore the psychic consciousness of a woman who is socially inarticulate and unrepresented in Malaysian society. My investigation of silence in this play seeks answers to the following questions: What is meant by Maniam's advocacy of silence as a vehicle for self-expression and cultural communication in his play, and what are the ramifications and consequences of the logic of silence for the female protagonist? In this light, I shall first discuss the Indian woman's position in the context of the Hindu family structure and the interaction of Hindus with other communities in Malaysia in order to clarify the cultural silencing of working-class Indian women in Malaysia.

According to Kalyani Mehta (1990:3), the value system by which the Indian women abide, the roles assigned to, and duties expected of them from their Indian family and Hindu community, are the main factors that differentiate them from women of other ethnic groups in Malaysia and Singapore. Indian women (regardless of their social position) are conditioned to honour their fathers, and to serve their husbands as a worshipper serves God. Devotion to one's husband is inculcated among Indian girls from childhood on. Suma Chitnis in *Feminism: Indian Ethos and Indian Convictions* (1988:90) notes "the term pativrata (literally translated as 'one who is vowed to her husband') connotes a wife who has accepted service and devotion to the husband, and his family, as her ultimate religion and duty". The ideal of 'pativrata' is romanticized through myths, folklore and folksong, and reinforced through various traditional ceremonies in the Indian society (Chitnis, 1988:90).

One of the most influential sets of rules governing an Indian woman's proper conduct are the *Laws of Manu*, which are frequently quoted in sociological and psychological research on Indian women.[8] Regarding the husband-wife relationship, the *Laws of Manu* prescribe self-abnegation by the wife: "Though destitute of virtue, or seeking pleasure elsewhere, or devoid of good qualities, a husband must be constantly worshipped as a god by a faithful wife" (quoted in Kinsley, 1989:97). Therefore, a good wife is one who will always remain loyal to her husband regardless of his character. Of all the Hindu deities, the one most cited as being the image of the ideal wife is Sita,[9] the wife of Rama; her self-effacing nature, steadfast loyalty to her husband, and chastity make her the ideal Hindu wife who has no independent existence, no independent destiny. However, in *Dharma's Daughters*, Sara Mitter (1991:87) argues that the *Laws of Manu* also exhibit the positive aspects of woman: woman "as man's best friend, safest refuge"; woman as "source of courage, comfort, and salvation." Similarly, Chitnis (1988:87) observes that Hindu religion carried a highly positive concept of the feminine principle. Unlike Christianity, Judaism or Islam, the image of God in Hinduism is not exclusively male. The female principle complements and completes the male. The polytheistic Hindu pantheon consists of divine couples such as Shiva and Shakti, Purusha and Prakriti, Rama and Sita. Together the male and the female represent the specific power for which they are venerated.

But tradition, adds Chitnis (1988:91), has emphasized only female self-effacement, ignoring or suppressing other qualities in the goddesses such as "sharp wit,

intelligence, resourcefulness, tenacity and affection.” To return to the Indian women in Malaysia; an Indian girl not only learns to bear without complaints of unpleasantness, injustice, and hardship, but she is also taught not to disobey, disapprove of, or have high expectations of men. She is silent not because she lacks the language to converse, but rather because she is silenced, prevented from speaking her mind due to the social taboos, restrictions, and tyrannies of traditional Indian custom and practice.

In the context of Malaysian society at large, working-class Indian women are secluded from contact with others. They do not mingle with the other races and are seen as socially marginal:

[they] will not seek to create channels of release for their other socio-psychological needs. Personal ambition and achievement, developing from initiative and self-confidence, must be sacrificed at the altar of submissiveness. The individual is isolated and alienated from the broader social network. Women [...] will not seek to establish contact with other women in society, outside of their own social network. [...] These women will remain in a subordinate position, without trying to exploit any of their basic rights, especially that of equality, unless some concrete measures are taken to overcome this basic lack of awareness of their own rights in society.

(Oorjitham, 1984:125)

Being the minority group, working-class Indian women's lives are totally invisible, hidden from the public realm: they do not participate in union activities, social organizations or even cross-cultural interaction. They lead a life of isolation, alienated from the broader social reality.

At first glance, in *The Sandpit: A Monologue*, Maniam seems to be exposing the inner life of such a working-class Indian wife through the frank speech of a woman who, living in an oppressive patriarchal marriage, suffers physical and psychic trauma in silence. But a closer look at the play reveals that Santha's silence offers her a subject position (or an agent) from which her life can be effectively interrogated and re-evaluated. Rather than seeing silence as erasure, negation, or repression, Maniam associates silence with agency and subjectivity. Through monologue, a medium for narrative, descriptive or expressive of various emotions, Maniam portrays a female protagonist who observes those around her, copes with physical and emotional abuse, preserves but questions her sexual and wifely roles, and above all, possesses a will to survive. As the play moves, there are several developments that take place in Santha: from aloofness to sensuality, rigidity to flexibility, alienation to unification, and blind submissiveness to feminine consciousness.[10] I will consider this point more fully, later, towards the end of my discussion.

In the first part of her monologue Santha is seen addressing the audience, confiding her thoughts and feelings of anger and bitterness towards her husband Dass and his second wife Sumathi for ignoring her and shutting her out of their lives. In her reminiscences, she acts as a lucid narrator, turning back on memories of her past experience where the temporal sequence of her past events yields to the temporal sequence of her present remembrance of her relationship with Dass and Sumathi. Towards the second half of the play, the audience will notice that Santha is no longer

talking to the audience, but to her husband. She is now a changed person who has found voice and courage to confront her husband and Sumathi about her feelings. It is clear that Maniam's main concern in the play is to foreground his protagonist's feminine consciousness of her situation in relation to her husband and her rival, Sumathi.

In 'Women's Silence As A Ritual of Truth' (1994) Patricia Laurence has analyzed the form and content of female silences in fiction by nineteenth-century English women writers, and her paradigm is useful for evaluating *The Sandpit: A Monologue*. According to Laurence (1994:157), women's silence, if viewed from the outside, from the dominant patriarchal culture, "is a mark of absence and powerlessness" because of the reserved expression permitted to women in the public realm until the twentieth century. On the other hand, if women's silence is viewed from within women's minds and experience, silence can be seen "as a presence, and as a text, waiting to be read" (Laurence, 1994:157-158).

Laurence (1994) suggests the "overreading" of narrative signs and silences in fiction in order to uncover the hidden psychological, historical and cultural life of women. For Laurence, interpretation of women's silence as simply a metaphor of disempowerment is inadequate to describe a woman's personal development in both literature and society. By saying so she is not championing silence over speech, but she is suggesting the use of other value systems and literary codes to interpret women's silences according to varied psychological and cultural reading. Laurence discovers that the vocal silences of the various female characters in her study show active strategies of choice and resistance - whether they take the form of observing, listening, thinking, meditating, or dreaming - the silences become 'active presences.' Such silences also offer ways of conveying truths or inner consciousness; they are modes of expression available in particular historical and cultural circumstances.

Using the paradigm suggested by Laurence, Maniam's various forms of feminine reticence will be interpreted with sensitivity towards the psychological, sociological, historical, and cultural values associated with working-class Indian women in Malaysia. Like women in nineteenth-century Britain, Santha is denied the means to be openly articulate in her society and family-centred life. Maniam's sympathy for the voiceless woman leads him to portray the mental conflict which results from a polygamous marriage. In the opening scene Maniam sets the stage with the image of silence invoked by Santha's quiet, absorbed sewing: she is embroidering gold thread into her sari border in front of her house on the verge of midnight. Then the audience is informed of Santha's present situation: she is waiting for Dass, who has not come home for the past four days. Sumathi, Dass' younger wife, has gone to look for him in town while Santha sits in their house, patiently waiting for his return.

Maniam's setting the monologue during the night is deliberate: for those who are alone it may be a time when their solitude is felt most keenly and thoughts are most free. Here, Santha quietly anticipates Dass' return. The act of sewing, the solitariness of the midnight time, and her state of calmness combine to present an image of silence, of abandonment and isolation; this imagery sets the mood for the entire play. *The Sandpit: A Monologue* begins with the image of silent, patient work: I've always made my own sari border, putting in the silver or gold thread, carefully, patiently. (*Holds up the sari border.*) This one I started a month ago but the work was so slow.

Only during the last four days has the work gone forward. (*Looks at the sari border.*) Almost a yard finished. (*She puts the sari border on the chair back so that it hangs down almost to the floor.*) If he doesn't come the whole border will be finished. (153)[11] and ends similarly: "It's going to be the fifth day. A good number. I'll sit and wait and work on this border. Maybe before I finish it you'll come"(168).

As the monologue advances, the world of Santha and the two other characters, Dass and Sumathi, is unfolded, reflected through her words. Through Santha's narration of her experiences and her graphic descriptions of Sumathi's and Dass' characters, Maniam's exposure of different forms of silence and their meanings becomes apparent. In the first half of the play, silence is given meaning by the tradition of domination and submission abide by Santha the traditional wife, who serves her husband with full devotion. It is an Indian tradition that has been passed down from generation to generation: both husband and wife know their function in life; they have known it since childhood. Few or no words are exchanged and everything is 'understood' between the two of them. The absence of conversation, the physical gestures, the looking - or not looking - at each other, can demonstrate an intimacy between a husband and a wife which purely verbal communication could never sufficiently encode and symbolize. Although this form of silence can be seen as limiting a woman's self-expression and life, Maniam presents silence as a social means that represents intimacy, mutual understanding, and spiritual or emotional correspondence:

This chair was always his. He sat there when important matters had to be talked about. I sat there. (*Indicates a spot at the foot of and a pace away from the chair.*) Never too near. When people passed by they saw husband and wife in their correct places. They respected us.

(156-57)

Everything in Santha's world is prescribed by tradition - even where and how she and Dass sit (in public view). Her initial silence here signifies Santha's positive support for patriarchal authority. Santha cooks for her husband; when he does not come home she does not cook. Her activities are confined within the four walls of their home but she carries out her tasks with serene obedience, without compulsion. She lives solely for her husband, annihilating her own needs even when Dass is not home for four consecutive days: "No cooking for the last four days. Just waiting" (153). She does not answer him back; she does not even talk to him often. Hers is the venerative silence of tradition; she appears content to remain loyal to her traditional upbringing.

Yet silence and passivity may be seen as active. Santha, as a female observer, outwardly conforms to the social roles prescribed by her traditional Indian customs, but she has developed strategies of silence to resist these roles and to fulfill her inner needs; she learns much through silent observation rather than by using speech. Santha blesses Sumathi when she is brought home by her husband Dass to be the second wife, concealing her true feelings of intense resentment and anger towards Sumathi and her husband. Since Sumathi becomes part of her life, Santha observes that Dass has stopped listening to her:

Athan wouldn't listen to my silence. He listened to Sumathi, the chatterer. He gave her that name. He called me the Silencer. 'Don't open your mouth,' he said. 'You'll ask me to stop doing what I'm doing.' So I kept quiet. But I didn't stop watching him.

(160)

It is at this point that Santha feels the oppressiveness of her life and ceases to talk to Dass and Sumathi; but she talks to the neighbours, and to Makchik, an older woman in whom she confides. To her husband and his second wife, however, Santha pretends that she has "lost her tongue"(158). With Sumathi's presence in the household, Makchik and the neighbours cease to visit Santha: she is not only alienated from her own husband and his new wife, but also from her own circle of friends.

At intervals during her long monologue the audience hears Santha's recurring recollection of the story of how her husband built his strength in order to be able to walk. She recounts the memory with admiration and pride in her husband's strength and determination. Makchik, the old lady who has known Dass since his birth, has confided in Santha about Dass' being born with damaged legs. Santha, the silent listener and observer, knows about Dass' traumatic childhood and looks upon him with respect and even awe: He's a man who doesn't like to be helped. Told me a story about how he got his strong body. When I saw him the first time I couldn't believe there was such a man in the world. Shoulders wide as the brow of the copper pot used for festival cooking. Waist as narrow as a woman's. His hands and legs thick only like a betel nut tree trunk. (154)

But in Santha's eyes, when Sumathi comes everything seems to become worse: Dass' strength decreases; Santha loses the only child that she could conceive. Dass also prefers Sumathi's company to hers. Santha resents both Dass and Sumathi for driving her into a state of reticence: she sees Sumathi as a rival and her silence becomes a form of aggression against Dass. She becomes "the ice that wouldn't melt"(168), which signifies cold-heartedness and impenetrability. Beneath her passivity is the strong woman who chooses to remain mute as a form of retaliation against the injustice done to her by her husband.

Throughout the monologue, Maniam causes the sympathies of the audience to fluctuate between Santha and Dass. As Santha is forced into silence, the sympathy of the audience goes out to her; then, as the audience learns Dass' misfortunes as a handicapped boy, he gains their sympathy, which he forfeits again by bringing Sumathi into the house. Since the audience sees Sumathi entirely through Santha's eyes she is apparently without redeeming features, but this simple picture is transformed when Maniam brings her on stage in his revised play *The Sandpit: A Womensis*. [12]

Towards the end of her monologue the audience hears Santha's description of her husband's recent sufferings and sees her taking on his moods and movements (166-67). By this time Santha observes that Dass has grown weak and now usually comes home from his work with bad cuts and bruises on his face and body. Just before his disappearance, Santha, unnoticed, observes and listens to her husband's rambling to himself as he speaks to his legs, now grown weak again. Here Santha enters the character of Dass and speaks for him. The audience can see that Dass' words to

himself, voiced by Santha on stage, reflect his most intense experience of pain and insight:

I didn't want to be born. But I was born with you as useless sticks. The bidan, Makchik, brought me into the world. As a human being? No, as a worm, an insect, that crawled on the floor. My father didn't look at me, my mother didn't want me. So, don't talk about being born...I'll suffer pain? That's nothing new. I knew pain even as a child. The pain of being humiliated, of being treated like an insect.

(167)

In this part of the monologue Santha reveals how Dass acutely suffers, remembering his disability and having to prove to his society that he could be stronger than 'normal' men to overcome his humiliation. Dass strikes his legs repeatedly with "The Stinger" to make them move again. Thinking himself unobserved, he breaks his silence: his authority had come from his ability to hide his inner and physical sufferings. In this he is like Santha; she is an abandoned wife, he was an abandoned child: when he got married to Santha, Dass had to bring his "substitute mother, father, and uncle"(154) for the marriage ceremony because he had no relatives; it is clear that his biological family must have rejected him. His desperate determination arouses Santha's, and hence the audience's sympathy.

While the image of silence invoked by the act of sewing in the initial part of the play draws attention to the roles played by Santha, who then looks back upon her life; the recurrent image of the sandpit has a variety of meanings. At a literal level it is the hole Dass dug for himself to stand in to strengthen his legs; it is also his workplace, the street full of "filth", where he has "got to be strong to be respected" (158). At another level, as Santha says at the end of the play, the sandpit is the place she has entered while waiting for her husband to come home and she has gained inner strength from its silence. Whatever form, real or symbolic, the sandpit takes, it is clear that one is able to gain strength there: Dass' form of strength is one that gives him physical mobility and enforces respect from the people he protects; Santha's form of strength is one which permits her stubborn, patient survival:

The silence buried me all these years. Like you I've entered the sandpit waiting for you these last few days. But the fear of your not coming back is not going to make me bend my knees. I'm your right leg, stubborn, and working only with half understanding all this time. I'm the Stinger that will tear you to pieces as you tore my sari to shreds. I'm waiting without fear, filled only with that hard rock of patience that's my life.

(168)

The sandpit itself is also Dass' and Santha's own silences; drawing on its resources, they have gained the strength to carry on with their lives. The symbol of the sandpit therefore acts not only as a recurring reminder of mental and physical suffering, but also of the characters' strength, illuminating the hidden selves that Santha and Dass, in their different ways, regain.



Other symbolic meanings are explicit in Maniam's series of images connected with and used by Santha, conveying her suffering in isolation, and building a vivid and powerful impression of her character and of her deep connection to her husband. Santha sees herself as the "hard top skin"(165) of a rayfish or the "hard wood"(165) of her husband's chair which is lifeless and cannot be hurt: "Its back was covered with a layer of hard sea things, almost like rock. Its underside was white and soft"(164); and again "Soft cloth and hard wood. Just like the rayfish you talked about. Soft underbelly and hard top skin. We're like that - you and I"(165). As Una Ellis-Fermor (1961:85) stresses:

In the opening scenes of a play in which events are to move swiftly we often find a kind of anticipation, not only of the mood of the subsequent action, but of the very events themselves; some hint, in the subject of an image, of the course of the action, which, though we may not notice consciously, sinks into the mind and prepares us to accept more rapidly some series of events which is to follow.

Similarly, Maniam prepares the audience from the first image presented on stage by his use of symbolism that functions as a medium for the expression of reflection, of moods, and of states of mind. The underlying mood of this play is thus inevitably related to both the theme and subject of the play, that is, silence.

During the course of her reflections on her husband and Sumathi, Santha seems to become a different person from the typical submissive Indian wife the audience sees at the beginning of the play. Santha becomes a moral judge: she compares herself to and criticises Sumathi; she analyzes her attributes as a virtuous wife and questions the roles she plays in her marriage to Dass. One of the roles she repeatedly considers is that of the dutiful nurse who restores him to health after he was attacked by young thugs:

I've never seen athan like that. His face was swollen. There was blood on his mouth. He was trembling like a child who had seen a ghost. Who looked after him? Who boiled the water and washed his face? This woman in the sari did. The woman in the dress [Sumathi] was dead to the world.

(159)

Santha laments that her loyalty as a dutiful wife is not recognized by Dass, who is blinded by Sumathi's charms. She, who has done everything to bring back Dass' health and strength, is not appreciated. As a result, Santha sees Sumathi as her enemy, as the person responsible for her husband's loss of interest and respect. Santha disapproves of Sumathi's not wearing the customary sari during her wedding ceremony and condemns her for wearing a revealing dress which allows any passing man to ogle at her body. Similarly, she criticises Sumathi's way of sitting with her feet apart and looking up at men when talking to them, and of her mingling and talking freely with Dass' male friends. She censures Sumathi for using perfumed oils to seduce Dass into making love and yet refusing to bear children for the family. In short, Santha believes Sumathi should be punished for being "a woman who can't be a woman"(156).

Marriage, to Santha, is ultimately based on the reproductive role of women: “I lost the only child I could have that year”(160); and thus entails the denial of sexual passion and desire:

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. (161)

Santha views herself as a moral subject, while Sumathi is a temptress, a source of binding sexual lust which is responsible for Dass’ physical deterioration: “ ‘That man can lift a bus,’ my father said, proudly. Now all that’s gone. When Sumathi came the going began”.

(155)

Santha’s most obvious retaliation against the rigidity of her tradition can be seen when she finally sits on her husband’s chair and enters the personality of Sumathi and discovers that she too can be sensual and seductive like Sumathi:

You think I can’t be like her? It’s easy to be like her, even when wearing a sari. (*Goes and sits in the chair .*) Just this one time let me sit in this chair and show how she behaves when you’re not at home. Maybe like she’s doing now in some hotel room. (*As she talks she loosens her hair and arranges it round her shoulders and face .*) That’s how she puts her hair down. (*Next she unwraps her sari border which has been tucked tightly round her waist and brings the upper section of the sari over her shoulder and designs it like a skirt around her hips .*) That’s how she wears her dresses. (*Spread her legs out and sits back slatternly.*) There, I can do it too. Let all the winds in the world blow between my legs!

(164)

Maniam seems to be suggesting here that Santha may be capable of changing herself, of rebelling against Dass’ insensitivity towards her feelings and well-being. Although it has been ‘many years’ since Sumathi came into the house, Santha can only ‘be like’ her in a mocking, caricatured way. She has never got to know Sumathi, because she is too jealous and resentful, as she has cause to be. Her childlessness is also a source of bitterness because Sumathi hates the idea and role of motherhood and refuses to conceive Dass’ offspring.

In this play Maniam reveals that silence may be a tool to combat patriarchal injustice. Santha’s use of silence is the only weapon she can use to rebel against the oppression she is facing. When she chooses to be silent, her listener, Dass, finds the silence oppressive:

You respected me too much, let me live within my silence. Where did the silence come from? From all the hundreds of years women lived in the shadow of their husbands. That made you angry, made you rage. You didn’t raise The Firemaker on me. You raised The Stinger.

(164)

Santha is trapped by her silence, although she draws strength from it, because her patience, which is expressed by her silence, is in fact suppressed anger, as she admits at the end of the play. She has become like a rock, like ice, and her tradition has extinguished any capacity for spontaneity and playfulness, which is what Dass, who never had a childhood, values in Sumathi. Love between Santha and Dass has been reduced to a matter of duty.

Maniam uses female silence, the sign of male power, paradoxically in order to empower female consciousness. By employing female silences to characterize tradition-minded, apparently submissive women, Maniam is emphasising the potency of silence, which such women may use as a form of empowerment rather than subordination. Silence in *The Sandpit: A Monologue* is not a sign of weakness or defeat. Santha's refusal to be articulate is a form of feminine silence which is indicative of female strength.

Towards the end of her monologue, the audience sees Santha gradually emerging as a stronger woman as a result of her endurance, living with another woman, a rival, who is the opposite of her in character. Instead of continuing to be a prisoner of her resentment of Dass and Sumathi, Santha has moved a step forward to improve herself. She has grown beyond silence to find a voice, beyond pain to find healing, beyond fear to find courage. She is a new woman, a woman strengthened by the tradition she was raised in, although it has limited her potential. She will be both "man and woman"(168), drawing on the strengths of her traditions and becoming unafraid to face new challenges. She recognises that Dass is only a 'man' by virtue of his physical strength. In a psychological sense he is now her child (the child she miscarried will return in the form of her husband). The period of his absence has been a space where a measure of self-discovery can take place. Even if Dass does not return Santha is strong enough to survive.

What Maniam seems to be saying here is that one can be empowered by drawing on the strengths of one's own cultural roots and traditions. He creates in his female protagonist Santha one who is able to sustain her identity through twenty years of living 'in the shadow of' her husband:

No, I wouldn't turn this sari border into some smelling, dried up rayfish tail. Even if you call it The Stinger. I started this border the day you ripped my sari with The Stinger. I've put twenty years of our life together into its golden threads. I've put the years of suffering in silence into it. Now I'll place it on the chair where you always sit.

(165)

She stitches "golden threads" and textures of silence into her sari border, showing the complex interaction of words and silence in its construction. Silence here marks more than passive exclusion or lack of authority, it also signifies hurt, anger, and the responses of Santha as a silent observer, listener, thinker and moral judge.

In *The Sandpit: A Monologue*, then, Maniam shows how one can be empowered by drawing on the strengths of one's own cultural roots and traditions. One does not have to reject one's own culture to be liberated. Instead one must seek the strengths of the

culture, highlight the positive elements therein and find sustenance there. These cultural and traditional roots incorporate both male and female power, and individual empowerment comes from knowing and using the strengths of both, not eliminating one or the other, for such a synthesis can surely lead to still more empowerment. Maniam's resolution to Santha's predicament gives resonance to the more positive aspects of the Hindu tradition, whose concept of godhead includes both male and female orientations. As Susan Wadley repeatedly urges in her paper on 'Women and the Hindu Tradition', Indian women should incorporate the positive aspects of the duality inherent in Hindu ideology where male and female forces share their power and energy.[13]

In contrast to Western feminism, which in its more radical manifestations prefers confrontation to the resolution of conflicts, Maniam places a greater value on compromise, on the capacity to live with contradictions and to balance conflicting alternatives in order to resolve problems. If one reads *The Sandpit: A Monologue* in Maniam's spirit of compromise, one is likely to recognise the new strength in Santha and her positive hope of beginning a new life with her husband at the end of the play:

My patience is not born out of being passive. My patience will be the anger I haven't used since I married you. If that woman [Sumathi] can be like a man, I'll be both man and woman, the left and right legs. (*Pause* .) It's going to be the fifth day. A good number. I'll sit and wait and work on this border. Maybe before I finish it you'll come. We'll make another beginning, start a new border.

(168)

Therefore, to Maniam, silence is to be preferred to confrontation; but at the same time, silence is also simultaneously resented and desired. It is resented when the silence means passive exclusion or lack of authority, and it is desired when silence brings female empowerment and confidence:

We've always been together. We'll always be together. I'll be the silence, you the noise. You think I don't know you? Yes, I haven't been to that street where you're the master and everybody obeys you. Here we work together. You can be me, I can be you

(165)

This reflects Santha's confident state of mind: she trusts that her husband will come back to her because they complement each other; that her silence is her active strategy of choice and resistance to achieve liberation, if only within her mind. Santha has created for herself a quiet space in her mind within which she can resist any oppression that she experiences in her life. However, if read from a feminist perspective, such a compromise connotes a denial of autonomy, individuality, and freedom. Obviously, Maniam's play offers no concept of personal freedom or autonomy to his female protagonist (except that exemplified in the figure of Sumathi, which Santha rejects).

## **Conclusion**

It is clear that Maniam's use of monologue serves to convey Santha's various emotions and thoughts which could not have been presented adequately if conveyed in dialogue form.[14] By means of the monologue, the audience and the reader are made to feel that they are being taken into the speaker's confidence, creating the illusion that she is telling the 'truth'. The world of Santha and, at second hand, of Dass and Sumathi, is reflected, and graphic instances of various activities are recorded. The audience sees through the speaker's eyes and the audience's imaginations are stimulated to visualize things that the speaker has seen although these are not visible on stage.

Often Santha's gaze passes beyond her immediate surroundings; her imagination engages that which takes shape before the inner eye (as opposed to literal eye). Within the confines of the monologue a self-contained drama is played out. A dramatic effect arises when the audience is able to trace a transformation in Santha; her interplay of questions and answers within the monologue results in a final attitude quite different from that prevailing at the beginning of the play. Santha's main purpose is to reveal her personality and virtues while negating those of Sumathi, at the same time glorifying her inner knowledge and newly discovered solution to her oppressed condition. By using their oppositional character traits to denigrate Sumathi, Santha seeks to persuade the audience to accept her own self-image as positive.

The ending of the play seems unproblematic to Maniam because it is his projection of the image of woman and his 'well-intentioned' interpretation of the best way to deal with the female condition, given the existing state of his society, an interpretation which inevitably upholds patriarchy. The isolation of Santha from the beginning to the end of her monologue is, of course, in keeping with the traditional role and place of women in Indian society, which the playwright seems to view as the acceptable female condition in a patriarchal society. Maniam's conclusion seems to exalt the suffering, sacrificing, submissive wife, since it is through these qualities that she will not only survive, but finally triumph.

When examined more closely, what at first sight, and seen from a distance, appeared likely to show a single, straightforward line of development of Santha's psychic consciousness, has turned into something very much more complex. Clearly, the development of the character can be divided into three acts or stages: in the first act she is playing the role of a submissive wife, inherited from her tradition, with all the acceptance of an ideal wife; she is dutiful, obliging and apparently happy in her own world. The second act shows her 'female weakness' which become apparent as she reveals her jealousy for Dass' second wife and justifies herself against her rival. Santha's acceptance of Sumathi is ambivalent, for on the one hand she is forced to bless Dass' second marriage through the Indian ceremony, and on the other she wants the new wife to provide her husband with an heir. (It is essential to note that Santha's miscarriage has rendered her infertile.) Dass' behaviour is equally contradictory: his role for the new wife in the household is not an extension of the role Santha has played in his life; he takes advantage of his culture's acceptance of polygamy, but his new wife is not the Hindu ideal, she has rebelled against tradition. She is more of a companion to him than his quiet, submissive first wife.

The third act is one of disintegration if seen from the feminist perspective: when Santha has finally accepted her fate as Dass' faithful and strong wife, the transition of the weak traditional wife to the strong traditional wife is complete, and her hope of uniting with Dass in order that they should complement each other negates her individuality. Santha has succeeded completely in annihilating her identity as a separate, autonomous individual and assumed her femaleness, her otherness. Yet she is fully aware of her own contribution to the destruction of her potential: she willingly submits to her tradition because she cannot imagine an existence outside her marriage to Dass.

## NOTES

[1] See Hedges and Fishkin, 'Introduction' in *Listening to Silences: New Essays in Feminist Criticism*, pp.3-14, for more details.

[2]Tillie Olsen, *Silences*; Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence. Selected Prose 1966-1978*.

[3]Ann Rosalind Jones, 'Inscribing Femininity: French Theories of the Feminine', in Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn eds. *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*, pp. 80-112; Janis P. Stout, *Strategies of Reticence: Silence and Meaning in the Works of Jane Austen, Willa Cather, Katherine Anne Porter, and Joan Didion*.

[4]See essays in Part I and Part II in Hedges and Fishkin, *Listening to Silences: New Essays in Feminist Criticism*.

[5]See essays by Cristanne Miller, Helga Ramsey-Kurs, Margarete Rubik, Margaret H. Freeman, etc. in Gudrun M. Grabher and Ulrike Jessner, *Semantic of Silences in Linguistics and Literature*, pp. 139-364.

[6]Helene Cixous, 'Castration or Decapitation' Trans. Annette Kuhn in *Signs* 7, p.49. Quoted in Showalter, pp.160-61; in Christina Luckyj, ' "A Moving Rhetoric": Women's Silences and Renaissance Texts' in *Renaissance Drama*, 24, (p.42).

[7]This play was given a workshop performance at the British Council in Kuala Lumpur in 1988.

[8]See Susan Wadley, 'Women and the Hindu Tradition', p.30; Sudhir Kakar, 'Feminine Identity in India', p.62; both in Rehana Ghadially, ed., *Women in Indian Society: A Reader*; Sara Mitters, *Dharma's Daughters*, pp.87-89.

[9]See David Kinsley, *The Goddesses' Mirror*, pp. 91-110; Sudhir Kakar, pp.52-59; Susan Wadley, p. 31.

[10]This form of consciousness in women is often deemed to be 'false consciousness' because it involves only an awareness of one's individual self, and not of others who share the same plight.

[11]This page number and all the subsequent page numbers for Maniam's text refer to 'The Sandpit: A Monologue' in K.S. Maniam, *Sensuous Horizons: The Stories and the Plays*, (London: Scoob Books Publishing Limited., 1994).

[13]*The Sandpit:A Womensis* was written much later to include the voice of the second wife, Sumathi.

[14]Susan Wadley, 'Women and the Hindu Tradition' in Rehana Ghadially, *Women in Indian Society: A Reader*. Wadley explains that "[in] Hindu cosmology, the universal substratum from which all being arises is known as *brahman*: 'Invisible, inactive, beyond grasp, without qualifications, inconceivable, indescribable...ever

aloof from manifestation'[...]. From this unmanifest substance, beings are made manifest through the tension created by the opposition of cohesion (Vishnu) and disintegration (Siva). This tension defines *sakti* - the manifesting power, the creative principle. The Hindu notion of divinity rests upon that of *sakti* (power) [...]: greater power is what distinguishes gods from men. So, *sakti* underlies both creation and divinity; and *sakti* is female. Therefore, all creation and all power in the Hindu world is based on femaleness - there would be no being without energy/power", p.25.

[15]For the discussion of monologue, I find it useful to refer to Una Ellis-Fermor, 'A Technical Problem: The Revelation of Unspoken Thought in Drama' in *The Frontiers of Drama*, pp.96-126; Wolfgang Clemen, *English Tragedy Before Shakespeare: The Development of Dramatic Speech*; and Wolfgang Clemen, *Shakespeare's Soliloquies*

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