

## The Angry, Abusive and Controlling Men in K.S. Maniam's Short Story 'Mala'

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### Abstract

The fight against sexism has been going on for decades. However, women in the present society still experience gender and social injustice, domestic violence, and sexual harassment on a daily basis. In many cases, conservative families with patriarchal values become a breeding ground for sexism and gender discrimination against women. The bitter reality of sexism and foul treatment experienced by women are exposed through Maniam's short story 'Mala'. This study seeks to examine the male characters' behaviour, attitude, and treatment towards Malati, the main protagonist of the story – and how she deals with the treatment she receives from them. The analysis reveals that the female protagonist is suppressed by her father during childhood, emotionally abused and exploited for free labour by her husband after marriage and oftentimes harassed by her male clients at her workplace. The ill treatment, exploitation, and harassment she receives from men around her from a young age impact her mental health, thus in turn leave her with the feelings of numbness and unworthiness for the rest of her life.

**Keywords:** *Malaysian literature, K.S. Maniam, Mala, women abuse, sexism*

### Introduction

'Mala' tells the story of Malati, a young Indian girl who grows up in a poor traditional Indian family in a rural settlement among the Malay community in Malaysia. Malati is a common name for Indian girls which means 'jasmine' in Sanskrit. However, the girl's beautiful name is nicknamed to 'Mala' - which is derived from the word '*malas*' (lazy in Malay). This happens when she failed her school education and came to roost at home. In the beginning, it was only her female neighbour who branded her lazy and insulted her as 'Mala'. However, this pungent ridicule becomes more intense as her family begins to call her with the ugly name as well. To escape from continuously being the scapegoat of her family, she marries Sanker and moves to a fast-developing city, Kuala Lumpur. There, she is groomed into becoming a modern woman who discards her traditional wear and also identity to fit in the present life. She is trapped in a manipulative relationship with her husband. There seems to be no escape for her as her life revolves around men who never sought to love her and treat her with respect. Indeed, both her father and husband are controlling, angry and abusive towards her.

## Literature Review

K.S. Maniam is a well-known Malaysian Indian writer who wrote short stories, novels, poems and plays that centred on the lives of the Indian community in Malaysia. In many of his works, he talked about the struggles and hardship that his marginalized Indian community had to live in socially, politically, or economically, especially after the colonial period in Malaysia. As one of the most important and distinguished non-Malay authors in Malaysia, he was also concerned with the rights and plights of women, especially of the Indian culture. The portrayals of women in his works are influenced by the reality or cultural norms that our society exists in and abide by, which does not treat women as good as men. In fact, most women have been oppressed and exploited since they were young - unlike men who receive certain privileges on the basis of their sex.

There are a few studies on Maniam's writings in relation to women's issues - even though his writings that foreground women as protagonists or main characters can be found in many of his works; for example - *'Between Lives'*, *'Ratnamuni'*, *'Mala'*, *'The Sandpit: Monologue'* and *'The Sandpit: Womensis'* among many others (Ali et al., 2018). In fact, he never failed to bring up and explore the issues of gender inequality in some of his stories even though women are just secondary or tertiary characters in those stories. In *'The Return'*, for example, Maniam briefly addressed the ancient Hindu tradition called 'Sati' - a ritual that burns a woman to death on her husband's funeral pyre. He had also explored in great length women's struggles and hardships in his other short stories, for example *'The Dream of Vasantha'*, *'The Kling-Kling Women'* and *'The Rock Melon'*. Yahya (2005) believes that many of Maniam's writings portray various female characters as "the victims, the displaced, the deprived and the violated" (p.10).

The earliest study on Maniam's treatment of female characters and how he represented women issues was written based on his play, *'The Sandpit: A Monologue.'* In this study, Yahya (2003a) explores the concept of female silence or lacking a speaking voice to express one's thoughts and emotions to others. Instead of using dialogues, Maniam's use of monologue is seen as a better method to present the character's mental conflict and her genuine thoughts to the audience. Yahya (2003a) argues that Maniam's portrayal of the female protagonist's silence and passivity in this play, was a sign of strength not weakness as she is capable to endure the suffering in silence and successfully plays the role of traditional Indian woman by her choice obediently. Through a feminist reading of Maniam's play *'The Cord'*, Yahya (2003b) argues that Maniam's female characters have regained power over their own fate through resilience despite being overpowered by their male counterparts and restricted by the social norms.

Yahya (2005) further her studies on women issues in Maniam's works by analyzing the concept of the female body in his next play *'The Sandpit: Womensis'*. According to Yahya (2005), this play attempts 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" (p.12). Through her analysis of Maniam's play, Yahya (2005) concludes that the female body is always subjected to the male gaze, as its representation on stage is constructed by men, to be viewed by other men and women as an object of 'fantasies, desire, and repulsion' (p.10).

There is a gap between year 2005 to 2015, as there are only a few studies found on Maniam's works that are related to women's issues. Most studies during this period focus mainly on the construction and deconstruction of ones' identity in a multicultural country, Malaysia. Philip's (2009) study on identity discourse captured our interest as it is studied closely through an analysis of Maniam's women characters in *'The Cord'* and *'The Sandpit'*. In this study, Philip (2009a) claims that female body functions as a repository of culture. The female character in *'The Cord'*, Lakshmi, symbolises the position of the original culture associated with India, her motherland which is fragile and under constant threat from a foreign power. Similarly, in *'The Sandpit'*- two female bodies and characters Santha and Sumathi represent a contrast between traditional and modern culture of Indian heritage (Philip, 2009a; 2009b). Philip (2009b) argues that Maniam used these two opposite female characters as a metaphor for the urgency of moving towards a more 'hybrid and inclusive culture' that reflects the reality of living in a multicultural society. Other studies on identity discourse involved Maniam's three novels *'The Return'*, *'In A Far Country'*, and *'Between Lives'* which have been intensively studied by Raihanah, Hashim and Yusof (2011), Singh and Mani (2012) and Dhanapal (2014).

The study on Maniam's women characters and women issues depicted in his writings can be found in later years. In examining Indian women's position and roles in diasporic community living abroad (outside India), Dalai (2016) concludes that these women remain inferior to men in terms of social, cultural, and economic contexts. Through his observation of Maniam's short stories, *'Ratnamuni'*, *'Mala'* and *'The Rock Melon'*, Dalai (2016) discovered that all of Maniam's female characters are seen within the 'domestic sphere' with her family, husband, and children. The most recent study on Maniam's female characters discovered that his female characters use 'projection' as defense mechanism and a remedial response against any form of social injustice (Aldhafeeri, 2020).

In retrospect, studies on Maniam's women characters have not been extensively done in the last two decades, especially on his short story, *'Mala'*. Therefore, it is hoped that we can shed a light on women

issues, especially that occur in the Malaysian Indian society as portrayed by Maniam through our study of his female protagonist, Mala.

## **Conceptual Theory**

Most cultures in the world are guided by patriarchy, a social system in which men dominates public and private spheres. In public, men are found to hold positions of social, economic, and political power, as compared to women, who are likely to work as supports and subordinates (Ananthaswamy & Douglas, 2018). Nonetheless, in private spheres – the power relationship between men and women is more evident and transparent. In a patriarchy family institution, for example – when a woman gets married, she becomes her husband's property, loses her rights over her properties (see, *coverture*), and her identity as her maiden name is replaced by her husband's last name.

In describing the origin of the patriarchy system, researchers agree that agriculture was a responsible for the establishment of this system (Ananthaswamy & Douglas, 2018). When people began to cultivate the soil to grow crops and farm domesticated animals, they began to settle down in order to guard their property and resources. This event which occurred 12000 years ago had shifted the power to men who were physically stronger than women (Ananthaswamy & Douglas, 2018) thus, eroded the power of women to own, control and inherit property at any point in time.

Sexism indeed begins in early childhood, where children are socialized and encouraged to behave according to their biological sex. Men, for example are expected to display masculine traits such as strength, assertiveness, courage, and independence since young while women on the other hand, are expected to embrace feminine traits such as politeness, empathy, and receptivity. Too often, girls are assigned with helping their mothers to do house chores as they grow up. Sweeping, mopping the floor, and cleaning the dishes are some of the regular tasks they do to please their families. UNICEF (2016) reported that “girls between 5 and 14 years old spend 40 per cent more time, or 160 million more hours a day, on unpaid household chores and collecting water and firewood compared to boys their age” (para. 1). This means girls have less time to do other activities such as playing or studying. In some parts of the world, girls are not even allowed to go to school, while some have to cope with lack of educational opportunities because their parents think education is only necessary for male children (Sultana, 2012). Whilst in a more developed country, such as The United States of America - the number of women involved in fields related to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics remained little. According to the National Science Foundation (as

cited in Rogers, 2020), women account for only 27% of doctoral degree holders in mathematics, 15% in physics, 20% in computer science, and 20% in engineering. Rogers (2020) claims that this results from sexist treatments that girls received during their formative years.

Sexism against women is not only manifested and nurtured at home, but women continue to experience prejudice, discrimination, exploitation, oppression, and violence at a daily level in school, the workplace, online and offline. Green (2017) claims that media and advertising perpetuate the objectification of women through images and messages conveyed to the public. Women's bodies are used to sell products and through advertising, young girls are taught that their worth lies in their looks (Green, 2017). Nonetheless, women are pressured to look beautiful and attractive by conforming to an unrealistic body image and beauty standards set for them. This socially coercive beauty practice is no longer voluntary but has become an obligation for women to fulfil.

When a woman is married, her duty is to serve and obey her husband. The husband will control every aspect of her life, and make decisions on the reproductive process, number of children and types of work they do (Leone, 2005 as cited in Mudau & Obadire, 2017). Women should take care of their husband and children's well-being, while at the same time being burdened with household work, such as cooking, cleaning, and washing the clothes and dishes. To control women, men often resort to violence that hurts women physically such as beating, slapping, kicking, and burning or violence that harms women's emotional state and well-being such as threats, insults, intimidation, and humiliation. In some parts of the world, wife battering is a common practice as it was neutralized and embedded as a part of culture (Sultana, 2012).

Sexism also poses difficulties and challenges for women at workplace. Women are often discriminated in terms of 'recruitment and selection, role assignments, training opportunities, pay, performance evaluation, promotion, and termination' (Stamarski & Hing, 2015, p.3). In this case, women can be seen working in low-ranking positions while receiving less opportunities at work, resulting in their under-representation at higher levels of management and leadership within organization (Martell et.al, 1996; Eagly & Carli, 2007 as cited in Stamarski & Hing, 2015). In addition, women also face sexual harassment at workplace such as unwanted touching, suggestive gestures, inappropriate comments, or jokes, ogling or leering, and requests for sexual favours in exchange for money or promotion (Barreiro, n.d.)

In conclusion, sexism which lies in the root of gender inequality has affected women all around the world, in all aspects of their lives. While some claim that girls nowadays have an equal right to education, and women

have more power and established important positions (especially in leadership) from what it was in the past, sexism still exist to degrade and discriminate women.

## **Analysis & Discussions**

This section describes the treatments Mala receives from men around her and how these treatments affect her psychological and emotional well-being.

### **The father and male siblings**

Mala's father is a traditional Indian man who strictly follows regressive Indian customs that are patriarchal in nature. In conservative Indian families, parents tend to prefer sons over daughters. They believe that sons are important to them as their sons will carry their family name, take care of them when they are old and perform a ritual that allows them to go to heaven when they die. On the other hand, daughters are less preferred and considered as liability because they are not the carrier of family traditions.

In the story, Mala has two brothers. However, there was no indication of whether the brothers are older or younger than her. Growing up in a rather conservative male-dominated family establishment, Mala has to adhere to traditional values that daughters should be silent and stay at home, learn domestic skills and help their mothers with house chores. In the family, her brothers are often seen "running errands for their stout mother" and spend "their afternoons desultorily digging at an unyielding plot of ground" (Maniam, 1998, p. 65). This makes them feel as if they are the more important members of the family. The brothers "looked at Mala with a sense of achievement" (Maniam, 1998, p. 65). This shows that her brothers purposely show off to her that they are the better ones in their family, and this reduces her self-worth, as if she is useless to her family.

The suffering starts after Mala leaves school as she comes "into full encounter with her family" (Maniam, 1998, p. 65). Her family members are offended when they find her relaxing, humming "a tune in the bathroom", or sitting in "the doorway reading a magazine" (Maniam, 1998, p. 65). In fact, they consider her relaxing as being lazy and call her "Mala" (for the Malay word '*malas*') (Maniam, 1998, p. 65). This derogatory name-calling, which is painful and damaging, hurts her so much especially the ones that call her with an ugly name are her own family members, worse her own parents.

Other than name-calling, Mala's father also allows the whole family members to isolate her by "a terrifying ritual of silence".

The punishment began the day they learned she had failed her final school examination. There was no show of anger or of disappointment. They withdrew into silence that froze her movements and spirit. No talk passed between them. If they saw her, they turned the heads away. Meals were swallowed in utter silence, beds made in rustling quiet. Outside the house they resumed interrupted conversations with their neighbours as if nothing happened. (Maniam, 1998, p. 66)

In this story, Mala's father is described as a thin, tall man whose "colleagues at work never know this side of him for he was always smiling" (Maniam, 1998, p. 65). Her father acts differently in the public, than he does in front of Mala. He is friendly with his friends but treats Mala with hostility as he is always reprimanding and scolding her.

To Mala's father, having a daughter in the family is unfortunate, as she is the cause of misery that can lead to suffering. To get rid of her bad luck, Mala's father with the help of her mother perform a water ritual to cleanse her soul and purify it. However, the ritual is done by force and hatred.

Mala's mother stomped back, thrust the door of the room open and tore off Mala's clothes. She wrapped white sari in suffocating folds around Mala's well-fleshed body...she was dragged to the bathroom. Inside the bathroom, her mother poured pail after pail of water over her loosened hair. The water came so fast the woman held her so tightly, Mala could not breathe. (Maniam, 1998, p. 67)

She has been punished with the pails of water until she feels numbed. Then, "her father placed his hand on her head so that she would remain on her knees" (Maniam, 1998, p. 67). The way her father uses his strength to force her to be on her knees in front of the family niche is sickening. Being dragged and forced to kneel as if she is guilty of a huge sin is heart breaking.

In a favour-asking ritual from the dead, Mala's father asks the dead to grant them sobriety, patient, long life and grant that "this girl, does not shorten that life" (Maniam, 1998, p. 70). The harsh words uttered by her own father in front of her, tormented her heart, made her feel unworthy and "for the whole week she hardly left her room, suffering depression that left her convinced she really belonged to the dead" (Maniam, 1998, p. 71). The fact that she is still young, but she had to endure this is disheartening.

In a patriarchal society, shame is attached to having an unmarried daughter, therefore marrying off the daughter at the young age can be seen as a way to protect the family's honour. The father sees that a forced marriage is a customary way for her daughter to settle down. He gives her no choice to set a future of her own. However, her father fails to realise the plan as no decent men came to ask Mala's hand for marriage.

### **The husband**

Sanker's marriage to Mala, conducted without any fanfare and performed at the registry office, with no audience, is not based on any romantic love notion. They are not romantically in love as their union is more of a marriage of convenience. "She has only seen him briefly but there was a certain breeziness about Sanker that she likes" (Maniam, 1998, p. 73). For Mala, her marriage to Sanker, who is her friend's brother, acts as a form of escapism "from the daily torment, imprisonment, boredom and slow dying" at the hands of her family and busybody neighbour (Maniam, 1998, p. 68). It is also an escapism from arranged marriages planned by her parents who wish to get rid of an unworthy daughter. The theme of Mala's marriage as a form of escapism appears in Quayum's article (2015), titled '*English in Malaysia and Singapore*' whereby he states that "Mala marries Sanker to escape her sufferings at home with her parents, triggered by her bad performance in school" (para.9). By marrying Sanker, she is "taking the shame out" of her family's house and venturing into freedom (Maniam, 1998, p. 74). As for Sanker, he marries Mala because she is, perhaps, the girl recommended by his sister, Susi. He does not look out for his bride himself in Kuala Lumpur but rather trusts his sister to find the best one for him as "he wants to marry in the old way" (Maniam, 1998, p. 72). He marries her due to his marriageable age and it does so happen to be that Mala is available at that time as her "parents are looking for a bridegroom" and she needs to "escape" her miserable life (Maniam, 1998, p. 72). The timing is just so right for them. To him, he is Mala's saviour who has saved her "from the black hole" (Maniam, 1998, p. 82). Thus, she should be grateful enough to have him as a husband.

Sanker is a dictator who dictates Mala's life in their toxic relationship. People such as Lucy, see Sanker as a good man but in reality, he is a controlling husband who dictates his wife. In her article titled '*Controlling Men: Empowering Advice for Women Involved with Bullies*' Davenport (2016, para.10) claims that:

Controlling men are not always beefed up tough guys you see in the movies who yell and scream to get their way. They can be the soft-spoken boy next door or the well-educated, amiable extravert. They can come from just about any background and socioeconomic status. What they have in common is the need for control and the compulsion to exert that control in their intimate relationships.



Sanker is one of those men. He dictates his wife's body. He decides on his own without consulting Mala that they are not ready for a baby. He cites his financial status and his small packaging business, as the factors. He promises that they will have children when they are better off. He claims that they are not ready financially to start a family. But it could be that he does not really want to start a family with Mala – the woman he conveniently marries but not in love with. To prevent any unwanted pregnancy, he takes “Mala to a doctor who put some metal inside her” (Maniam, 1998, p. 75). He decides on the contraceptive method by himself as if Mala's body or womb is his. There is no discussion whatsoever with his wife in determining such an important matter. His exercise of male objectification of the female body is just not right. He rules over her. He dominates and she succumbs.

Sanker is a bully, a “big brother” who acts as a control freak. Besides dictating his wife's body, Sanker also dictates Mala's personal appearance. He acts as a bully who “inspects her clothes, make-up and the way she carries herself” every morning before going to work (Maniam, 1998, p. 79). He acts as a Drill Sargent who controls Mala's every action and movement. As a bully, he bullies Mala emotionally by his harsh criticisms such as the following comments: “You slouch too much”, “Make-up mustn't be that thick”, “They might think you're a country cow” and “Clothes should follow the body, not hide it” (Maniam, 1998, p. 79). Those harsh remarks belittle her confidence and destroys her self-worth. Even though he criticizes Mala harshly, but he is also charming by his way of always giving “her an encouraging hug, just before they descended the steps to the office” (Maniam, 1998, p. 79). He fits the characteristics of abusive men who have the personality that draws people in because of their level of charm that is part of their art to deceive and manipulate (Taylor, 2013).

Sanker is also abusive in the relationship. He is never physically abusive towards Mala. But his treatment of her as a sex slave is humiliating, tiring, and dehumanizing. Based on the story, it implies that his demand of his conjugal rights on the marital bed is just too much for the wife to endure. After the contraceptive instrument is inserted into her body, “Sanker ceased to be gentle in bed with her. She was reminded of the way her mother had punished her with water. The slapping, the bending down and the humiliation had followed her into marriage. There was the lethargy too, the following morning (Maniam, 1998, p. 75). Quayum (2015) concurs that Sanker exploits her sexually to meet his own appetite as well as to get mileage with his business clients.

It shows that in the marriage, as a wife, she is voiceless. She is not an equal partner in the marriage. All important matters and decisions are made by Sanker alone. It seems that Mala lets Sanker to be the thinker and decision maker in their relationship. Her action of just letting Sanker decide everything for them could be due to her background, uneducated and unexposed to modernity. She accepts Sanker's mistreatment,

could be, because she respects him as her husband, her saviour who makes possible her freedom from the “black hole” (Maniam, 1998, p. 82). Her acceptance and respect towards Sanker are due to Indian society's ideology that says a woman is worth half a man. The same ideology states that a husband is the wife's master and guru. To her, Sanker is her saviour who has freed her physically, mentally, and emotionally from the black hole and brings her to a happier home in the form of Sanker's “rented part of a flat” (Maniam, 1998, p. 74). Thus, she is indebted to him to the extent that she endures the mistreatment in silent and her voice is suppressed.

### **The male clients and some other men**

Mala works as a secretary at her husband office because hiring one is “too expensive” (Maniam, 1998, p. 78) and her husband believes that she “could do some work” for him (Maniam, 1998, p. 78). However, being a secretary is a not a menial work that requires no skill and has little workload. In the office where her husband runs “a packaging business” (Maniam, 1998, p. 79), Mala is not only responsible for administrative duties, but she also has to work as a customer service representative or receptionist for the company. Whenever clients call, she has to “give the rates”, tell them “the kind of services available”, and “take down times and dates if the client wanted to hear from the boss” (Maniam, 1998, p. 80). Other than that, she has to do the work of an account clerk such as “typing invoices, ringing up lorry drivers and making entries into the office ledgers” (Maniam, 1998, p. 81).

The workplace environment is very uncomfortable for Mala because “too many men come in” there (Maniam, 1998, p. 80) while her husband is not around. The male regulars who come to the office can sometimes cause her to stress out with their disrespectful behaviour. On one occasion, they attempt to chitchat with her while waiting for her husband to arrive. However, Mala refuses to entertain their small talk, and keeps herself busy with work. Her action angers one of the men, who gets up from seat and raises his voice saying, “This one won't even talk *lah!*” (Maniam, 1998, p.80).

When Mala complains to her husband that the presence of lorry drivers and other men causes her some sort of anxiety, her husband ignores her. He tells her that “this is a place of business” (Maniam, 1998, p. 80) and “emphasizes how important it was for her to be courteous to them” and that the “customer is always right” (Maniam, 1998, p.81).

## Conclusion

Maniam's short story '*Mala*', is a depiction of the sexist reality we live in. It provides the narratives of women's passivity, long suffering and unfavourable experiences as a child, adolescent, wife and working female in the male-dominated society.

Growing up in patriarchal or sexist familial practices, Mala's father favours his sons, than his daughter, Mala. He is ashamed of his own daughter and feels like she is a burden to the family. Being a girl denies Mala freedom, and privileges that her two brothers received. The brothers often look down on her. To escape this bitter experience she has had with her family, she hastily marries a modern Indian man, Sanker. However, this marriage has also bound her and made her suffer. She is not free to choose life for herself without being dictated by her husband. The relationship she has with her husband is also complicated with exploitation, as he forces her to work without being paid at his small office. Her husband asserts his dominance through constant criticisms and belittling her thoughts, behaviour, and appearance which negatively affects Mala's psychological and emotional well-being. Working for free at her husband small office gives her discomfort as she has to please male clients, and other men such as lorry drivers and packaging subagents who come to the office for business.

Throughout Maniam's short story '*Mala*', the female character undergoes distressing experience as a woman, whose freedom of thoughts and actions is dictated by her father and husband. We are reminded that women have to follow and obey men in their lives and remain true to their feminine ideals. However, contrary to the belief, Maniam's short story '*Mala*' demonstrates the need for women to fight against suppression at home, or in a patriarchal and hostile society so they would not end up like Mala.

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