

## Re-shaping Identity Through the Body: An Analysis of K.S. Maniam's *The Sandpit: Womensis* and Mark de Silva's *Stories for Amah*

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### Abstract

The fundamental concern of this paper is with issues of authoritative control over individual expressions of identity, as well as with the construction of identity within Malaysian society. There is a level of resistance to this process of construction and the subsequent imposition of identities on the individual at the authoritative level. The theatre is a particularly rich site for the staging of such resistance because it can *physically* embody, explore, and exhibit identities which challenge and subvert the official rhetoric. In this paper, I look specifically at how the physical bodies of the characters in certain plays become sites of contention; the plays in question are K.S. Maniam's *The Sandpit: Womensis* and Mark de Silva's *Stories for Amah*. In both plays, the bodies of the female protagonists can be seen as expressions of their identities, as well as sites which dominant figures try to re-shape and control.

### Keywords

Malaysia, theatre, gender, body, identity construction, resistance

I would like to begin this article with a quotation from the late Krishen Jit,<sup>2</sup> who as a theatre practitioner was particularly engaged, in a very deep way, with ideas of multiculturalism and hybridity. Multiculturalism for him was not merely a matter of people of various cultures living (easily or uneasily) side by side. It was not a matter of "tolerating" other cultures. Instead, he states that:

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<sup>2</sup> Krishen Jit was a founding member of Malaysian arts collective Five Arts Centre, and was also one of the leading theatre directors in the country. He was responsible for helping to create an experimental theatre language based on local performance modes, which challenged the prevailing theatrical style of the day, which was based more on Western realism.

I actually believe that in the case of plural societies such as Malaysia and Singapore, and even certain parts of India, multiculturalism is in one body. We tend to think of it as a negotiation between one body and another, but I actually think it is in one body and in many ways I have been trying to excavate that in one way or another. (Krishen Jit)

In this definition, “other” cultures are not really “other”; at some level, they are within each individual who exists within the framework of the multicultural nation. Negotiations with a variety of cultures may take place between bodies, but importantly, they also take place within individual bodies.

This belief is distinctly at odds with the response of the state to the idea of multiculturalism; their’s is a much more simplistic and divisive framework (perhaps more accurately described as “plural society”) which sees individuals holding on to specified and narrow cultures, but living harmoniously with (or, as the official parlance has it, “tolerating”) a variety of other cultures. Officially, in a land where many people have migrant origins, each individual body encompasses one specific culture, namely the culture of that individual’s “original” homeland. At the grassroots level, ethnic and cultural variety and difference are strongly evident, but at the official level, difference has virtually been erased, and this multiplicity of ethnicities is subsumed into just a few overarching cultural identities. Thus, at national-level cultural celebrations, the entire subcontinental Indian heritage, for example, is distilled into just two types of cultural expression: the southern Indian *bharatnatyam* and the northern Indian (Punjabi) *bhangra*. There are dances representing every major racial group in Malaysia, and all are presented on stage as separate and different. This practice and the constant reiteration of these monolithic identities tends not only to ignore difference and particularity, it also encourages the habit of seeing each racial or ethnic group as existing in its own separate box.

Such a view, and the official policies that support this view, work to emphasise difference and separation: it entrenches the urge to respond to those of different cultures as “other” and as separate. The official insistence that each individual adhere to a culture defined in broad terms (at the authoritative level) as being fundamentally connected with the “original” homeland serves to constantly remind the individual of his or her roots elsewhere. Loss of contact with those roots is seen as negative and dangerous. As lately as the 1980s, V. Suryanarayan stated (with reference to young Malaysian Indians) that: “The younger generation is slowly getting deculturised and immediate steps should be taken to halt these dangerous trends. The only way by which a cultural renaissance can take place in Malaysia is by strengthening relations with India” (47). “Deculturisation” is seen as a kind of rot setting in, robbing the youth of “their” culture – in this case, specifically linked to India. But why is there no recognition of the fact that culture is essentially a constantly evolving thing? Kwok Kian-Woon (writing in the context of Singapore, which is similar in

many ways) notes that the official view of tradition and culture is that they are something to be “preserved”; however, “the notion of ‘preservation’ [implies] that what is preserved is something already quite dead and that what we try to do is to keep it from decaying or decomposing further” (17). Stuart Hall also argues for the idea that culture and cultural identities must undergo development and change:

Cultural identity... is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being.’ It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, they have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. (302)

I argue that the younger generation is not getting *deculturised*, which suggests that a culture is lost. Rather, the culture is developing, evolving, and changing, as it comes into close contact with other Asian as well as Western cultures. While it may be markedly different from the culture practised by the previous generation, this does not render it worthless – which is the attitude displayed by many of the older generation, as well as by politicians and polemicists. It is, rather, a culture which takes into account and embraces its current multicultural context. K.S. Maniam sees this inclusive and embracing culture as a “common mental and imaginative space [which] is not arbitrarily or mechanically put together,” that is, it has not been constructed and imposed from above. Rather, it evolves in opposition to this tendency towards authoritative imposition: “it evolves from the recognition that man has been artificially categorised into a monocultural, ethnic, and political being when mutliplicity is his true nature” (“The New Diaspora” 10).

Maniam’s view is in concert with Krishen Jit’s inclusive approach; Krishen’s statement, quoted above, implies that the official view of individuals living within their separate cultural boxes is artificial and imposed because individual bodies already encompass multiple cultures in an organic way. However that multicultural experience is denied at the official level, and therefore exists in tension with the grassroots experience of most people. The experience as dictated by the authorities has also, to some extent, been internalised by large sections of the population, and this further complicates the situation, as the reality of the multicultural social framework might be ignored or denied, with the official stance of plural cultures living side by side dominating the more hybrid reality.

In this paper I would like to examine more closely the idea of bodies and how they encompass culture – how, in the Malaysian context, they can be strategically deployed by the state to embody particular definitions of culture which suit government policy, and how these defined and disciplined bodies are

also able on the individual level to challenge state embodiments. The discussion will look at the idea of disciplined bodies, and how the state deploys discipline as a tool of control; and will then look at how some playwrights and directors have used the stage to subvert and question these issues. My particular focus will be on two Malaysian plays, namely *The Sandpit: Womensis* by K.S. Maniam, and *Stories for Amah* by Mark Beau de Silva. I will be looking not only at the way bodies are dealt with in the text, but also how they were presented on stage in terms of casting, directing, and acting choices.

### **Bodies and Discipline in the Malaysian Context**

Foucault has discussed the exertion of discipline by authorities over individual bodies, thus ensuring that they “have a hold over others’ bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes.... Thus, discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, ‘docile’ bodies” (qtd. in Bartky 130). In this view, a body is constrained, or perhaps just trained, to function in particular ways which are acceptable to the authorities, or necessary to their smooth and unproblematic functioning. Susan Bordo has argued that the body “is a powerful symbolic form, a surface on which the central rules, hierarchies, and even metaphysical commitments of a culture are inscribed and thus reinforced through the concrete language of the body” (90).

In the Malaysian context, such discipline takes place on many levels: bodies are constrained, for example, in terms of gender roles and sexuality. This occurs in myriad ways every day, at all levels. School textbooks, for example, frequently repeat and reinforce traditional views of the father as breadwinner and mother as homemaker, despite the fact that is no longer the truth for a vast number of households. However, the portrayal serves to reinscribe the values and norms of a society and leadership that are not only patriarchal but also strongly paternalistic. How the body is clothed has also become a site of contestation, with the recent issuing of a fatwa against Muslim women who do not conform to narrow definitions of what is acceptably feminine in terms of dress, voice, movement, etc., and are therefore in danger of turning to lesbianism, that is, turning away from the “correct” choice of heterosexuality (“Protest Against Anti-Tomboy Fatwa”). This points, I would argue, to a fear of losing control over women’s bodies if they are allowed the space to function in ways contrary to what is acceptable to patriarchal society.

My focus, however, is on how the body is disciplined in terms of race, and how this in turn serves to control cultural expression and affiliation. Race in Malaysia is defined according to country of origin, based on paternal lineage, and is treated as a fixed, unchangeable category. The rigid parameters of racial definition and cultural practice, as drawn up by the authorities, seek to discipline the multicultural mass of bodies that is Malaysia, into a series of streamlined, easily defined and identified categories. These categories serve the purpose of

allowing the authorities to define who is and is not Malay or *Bumiputera*, to allow for the easier administration of a variety of preferential policies (in housing, investment, education, etc.).

There is a strong tendency among those in any kind of authority to try to define racial belonging according to overly broad and essentialist understandings of phenotype, despite the fact that racial mixing, inter-racial adoption, and so on have rendered that factor virtually meaningless. There have been cases, for example, of an Indian child being adopted by a Chinese family; this child is then brought up to be linguistically and culturally Chinese, but later faces problems because the authorities refuse to accept that someone who, physically looks Indian can possibly have a Chinese name, and consider him or herself to be Chinese. Because race, culture, and country of origin are tied together in this rather simplistic, black-and-white way by the authorities, culture is defined in very rigid, essentialising terms; broad assumptions are made about religion, language, and cultural practice, and any practice that differs from these assumptions is viewed as being in some way deviant, or odd at the very least.

However, these categories are constantly being questioned, with individuals who have been defined in particular ways rejecting those definitions as being irrelevant to their actual practice, or simply as being uncomfortable. Playwright Huzir Sulaiman, in a column in the *Sunday Star*, highlighted this point in a particularly interesting and challenging way, both questioning the accuracy of racial categorisation as practiced in Malaysia, and demonstrating the porousness and malleability of these supposedly fixed borders:

Race, for me, has had to be a performance. Let me start at the beginning. My birth certificate declares my race to be Malay. However, as far as I can ascertain, out of my 16 great-great-grandparents, 15 were born in India.... The other great-great-grandparent... was a Chinese Muslim from Yarkand, an old Silk Road town in what is now Xinjiang Province. How all that makes me Malay, I don't know.... Anyway, when I started working in Singapore, I had to go and get my Identity Card there. I had to fill in a form. Under 'Citizenship' – Malaysian, of course – there was a slot for 'Race.' Suddenly I realised that I could choose what I wanted to be. I could tick any box I liked. In 2003, at the age of 30, and in another country, I became Indian. For the next few years, as I travelled back and forth between KL and Singapore, my race would change at the border. I was Malay in Malaysia, and Indian in Singapore. Finally, when I updated my Malaysian IC to the MyKad... I put down Indian as my 'Bangsa.' So now I am Indian everywhere. Or am I? I ask myself: how am I Indian?... What Indian customs do I practice?... Having a heavy lunch and then a nap?... If that's the basis for it, I might as well be Malay. Or Chinese. Or – here's a thought – just Malaysian. ("25 Things About Malaysia and Me")

Because the Malaysian authorities function according to such narrow and rigid definitions of and assumptions about race, the smallest deviation from the path serves to highlight the inadequacy and even irrelevance of these categories. When an individual questions his or her racial category, declaring that it just does not fit his or her multiple and hybrid identity, that category can no longer hold true for that person. As Judith Butler points out in her work on performativity, an identity can only hold true as long as it compels belief. But sometimes, belief in these identities can fail, and it is in these moments of “failure” that individuals are able to construct alternative identities. Huzir’s dilemma illustrates in a very concrete way how the body might be categorised by official policy, according to seemingly fixed but ultimately malleable and idiosyncratic rules. It is when choices are made to reject or challenge these apparently stable categories that their “groundlessness,” to use Butler’s term (179), is revealed. Although the authorities try to position the body as an entity that can be fully controlled, it in fact slips beyond control because, as Helen Gilbert notes, it “is open to multifarious inscriptions which produce it as a dialogic, ambivalent, and unstable signifier rather than a single, independent, and discrete entity” (205). Thus, as argued by Elizabeth Grosz, the body becomes “a site of *resistance*, for it exerts a recalcitrance, and always entails the possibility of a counter-strategic reinscription, for it is capable of being self-marked, self-represented in alternative ways” (qtd. in Gilbert 204).

The theatre is a particularly significant site for the exploration of issues of body and racial/cultural marking and imposition, partly because “performance centralises the physical and socio-cultural specificities of its participants” (Gilbert 204). Staging inevitably entails physical presence; the body – in this case, of the actor – thus functions to create a presence whose sheer visibility and physicality can make a powerful statement about its own reality. Gilbert, arguing within the terms of colonialism, states that the “colonial subject’s body contests its stereotyping and representation by others to insist on self-representation by its physical presence on stage” (204). In the Malaysian context, the post-colonial government insists on stereotyping its citizens by race and culture; the theatrical presence of bodies which challenge or engage with these stereotypes in a critical way allows for the presentation and discussion of different bodies in a public forum.

The two plays under discussion represent works by writers from two races as well as from two different generations. Maniam’s play, written in the early 1990s, deals with the conflicting urges within Malaysian Indians to “preserve” their original culture and to adapt to their current homeland. De Silva’s play focuses on the tension between official labels and a person’s own ideas of his or her culture. Maniam saw Malaysia emerge as a state in 1957, and in much of his work, he grapples with ideas of nationhood and belonging within the nation. De Silva is a post-independence, post-racial riots child; while nationhood is not

such an immediate or obvious concern for him, it is worth considering the fact that racial stereotyping and issues of separation and difference are still paramount. The central point I will be looking at is how, both textually and through strategies of staging, the writers and directors involved in these productions work towards the production of identities which ascribe “more flexible, culturally laden, and multivalent delineations to the body, rather than circumscribing it within an imposed... calculation of otherness” (Gilbert 205). Extending this further, it becomes clear that both plays also reach towards a definition of nation and belonging which rejects categorisation and otherness as its central tenets.

***The Sandpit: Womensis***

I have written about this play elsewhere, discussing how Maniam uses the two female protagonists, Santha and Sumathi, as metaphors for the need to move towards a more hybrid and inclusive culture to avoid being trapped within tightly defined, confined, and confining spaces which do not reflect the reality of living in a multicultural society.<sup>3</sup> My focus in this essay is roughly on the same theme, but I will approach it through a more detailed analysis of how Maniam presents the bodies of the two women, as well as touching on how they were presented under the direction of Krishen Jit. For this, I will refer to the staging by Five Arts Centre at the British Council Hall in Bukit Aman, Kuala Lumpur, in 1991.

The play takes the form of two monologues (not a dialogue) spoken by the two wives of a Malaysian Indian man named Dass. Dass has been missing for a few days, and his wives respond to his absence in two different ways. Santha, the more traditional first wife, waits for her husband at home, while the more modern second wife, Sumathi, goes to town in search of him. As they wait, they talk about their lives, showing how different they are from each other, but ultimately seeming to come together in a tentative recognition that neither can really survive without the other.

It is clear from a quick glance at some of his other works, that Maniam physicalises and embodies issues of cultural, ethnic, and national identity rather than letting them remain abstract. In the novels *The Return* and *Between Lives*, belonging within the nation is expressed through the metaphor of owning and cultivating the land. Connection to the land is also emphasised in *The Sandpit* (the short story, the monologue, and the duologue) – Dass literally gains strength in his wasted lower limbs by burying the lower half of his body in the sand, suggesting a strong link between the land and the individual’s sense of power. But apart from the issue of land ownership, Maniam also grapples with

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<sup>3</sup> See my article “Diasporic Spaces in K.S. Maniam’s *The Sandpit: Womensis*.” *Asian Theatre Journal* 21.2 (2004): 177-86.

ideas of cultural belonging; this issue he generally embodies in his female characters. In the play *The Cord*, for example, Muniandy's wife, with her impeccably folded sari and her dignified silence, is the repository of Indian cultural values; her literal rape by Muthiah symbolises the way in which these cultural values are in a way "violated" by being transported to this foreign country. However, Maniam does not view this "violation" as purely destructive: he is aware that enshrining and worshipping what is past, can lead to "a 'cultural entrapment,' a reluctance to enter into the perspectives offered by other cultures" ("The New Diaspora" 6), and a reinforcement of the sense of non-belonging within the new country. This is symbolised by the figure of Ratnam, the product of the rape, who must learn to embrace the multiple cultures and languages around him so that he is able to engage meaningfully with his society. Maniam hints at this, but does not present it as an easy solution or a *fait accompli*.

In *The Sandpit: Womensis*, however, he is more certain about the point he is making, although his conclusions are still tentative and hopeful about the future rather than positive about the present. In Santha and Sumathi, he has embodied two contrasting views – the traditional woman who adheres to cultural norms and ideals imported from India, and the younger, more "modern" woman who seems eager to discard these values as being overly restrictive and irrelevant to her current situation. Santha, the more traditional figure, is representative of individuals who seem to accept the authoritative stance that each individual must hold on to cultural practices and norms imported from the original homeland. Sumathi can be seen as the restless, seeking individual, more aware of her multicultural status but not entirely sure how to deal with it. However, Maniam does not present a bald, black-and-white, tradition-vs-modernity scenario. Rather, his exploration of the issues is complex and nuanced; he is aware that there is a need to balance tradition and change, that the multicultural must come to the fore, but that it must include the original culture as well.

Maniam's physical description of the two women is telling. Santha, the more traditional wife of Dass, is positioned and dressed in ways which emphasise her desire to hold on to the cultural values she has inherited:

*There is an old-fashioned, roughly-carpentered chair to the right. A woman, Santha, is seated on the floor to the left of the chair.*

*It is late at night, verging on midnight, and she has been working on a wide and long piece of cloth that she has in her hands. The sari that she has on is worn primly and tucked tightly at her waist, its border wide and stiff. (Sandpit 183 )*

Everything in this description works towards positioning Santha, both literally and metaphorically, as the repository of culture, and as subservient to the dominant male figure in her life. The chair next to which she is sitting is Dass's chair; despite his absence, she refuses to sit in it. It signifies his dominant



presence in her life, and she deliberately positions herself much lower in relation to the chair – she is on the floor, to the left of the chair. She appears to accept that her position within this framework is lower than that of her absent husband, thus reinforcing the dominant patriarchy.

Maniam also shows that Santha is embroidering a sari border while she waits for Dass, despite the lateness of the hour, thus perfectly embodying the ideal of the industrious housewife. Again, although it is past midnight, she is still in her sari, still looking neat and tidy. It is significant that Maniam emphasises this point, also underlining the fact that the sari is tied tightly, though worn “primly,” and that the border is “wide and stiff.” Physically, Santha is hemmed in by the tightness and stiffness of the sari, just as her adherence to old cultural values works to keep her in a subservient position.

The sari is a powerful physical emblem of Indian culture and what it demands of Indian women. While women who are used to wearing it are able to function well enough within its folds, it remains (especially for the neophyte) a cumbersome and somewhat restrictive garment. It is not easy to put on, and keeping it looking neat is also a difficult task. Physically, then, women who wear the sari are constrained to behave in a restrained and restricted manner – a manner which will ensure that the sari remains tidy and that the wearer continues to look “prim.” The first time an Indian girl puts on a sari can be regarded as a rite of passage of sorts – her induction into a potentially confining and restrictive womanhood. The fundamental importance of the sari as a signifier of Indian culture was apparent a few years ago, when the MIC,<sup>4</sup> worried that Malaysian Indian women were not wearing the sari enough, organised sari-tying classes to re-popularise the skill. Underlying their efforts was the fear that these women were straying too far from the traditional values of their culture, were becoming less “feminine,” and were therefore in danger of becoming un-marriageable. Femininity, in this view, seems to be tied to adherence to cultural values, and a willingness to be confined and restricted. In Maniam’s play, Santha seems to accept the restrictions placed on her, as evidenced by her acceptance of physical conditions and positionings which can be seen as confining.

Contrast this with the younger wife, Sumathi, who seems determined to reject everything that Santha stands for. She has moved away from the confines of the house, and she is in:

*A hotel room somewhere in Kuala Lumpur.... She is wearing a fairly fashionable but rumpled dress. On the coffeetable beside the armchair is an expensive leather handbag.... She has been walking up and down.... (Sandpit 183–84)*

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<sup>4</sup> Malaysian Indian Congress, a component party of the ruling alliance Barisan Nasional (National Front).

Sumathi has physically positioned herself far beyond the confines of the home, thus rejecting the culturally- and socially-approved role for women. Her rejection of these limits is also evident in the way she dresses: her clothing is fashionable rather than traditional, reflecting her own likes and dislikes. But it is rumpled – unlike Santha, she is not concerned with maintaining the prim façade of the good housewife. Her expensive handbag indicates that household economy is not one of her concerns. Her desire to break away from the borders placed around her by “her” culture is physicalised by her constant movement. Unlike the very still and disciplined Santha, Sumathi is depicted as moving ceaselessly and restlessly.

In performance, Anne James as Santha embodied the stillness of the disciplined body. Her hair was pulled back and confined in a bun, and her sari was pulled tightly round her body and tucked in at the waist, thus denying the natural flow and movement of the sari’s shoulder fall. Sumathi’s costume, by contrast, flowed and moved; she wore a clinging T-shirt and a loose flowered skirt which swirled as she moved, reflecting not only her apparent freedom, but also her rejection of discipline and confinement. As Sumathi, Charlene Rajendran moved constantly, but where the script specifies merely that she walks up and down, the actress, under Krishen Jit’s direction, performed movements reminiscent of traditional Indian dance. This was an interesting point of intersection, with the supposedly “modern” woman embodying her rejection of tradition, by constantly performing traditional dance movements. The movements hint at sensuality and sexuality, but they also suggest that Sumathi’s rejection of tradition cannot be “complete.” It is one of the cultures contained within her body.

But Sumathi’s relative openness compared to Santha’s tight control of her body also leaves her vulnerable to attack. Having stepped beyond the boundaries traditionally allowed her by culture – specifically, having left the confines of the domestic sphere – Sumathi’s body is now seen as being available, and she must confine herself within the locked hotel room to avoid being pimped by the hotel keeper. Santha’s confinement to the verandah of her home, by contrast, keeps her safe even from the gangsters who come there in search of Dass.

But Maniam complicates the issue by showing that Santha, too, is aware of the fact that she is confined. She rails against Dass, saying “I’ve been here all the time, eating nothing, drinking only water now and then. I’ve given away my body. Made it live for something else. For you” (*Sandpit* 207). She imposes physical discipline – perhaps it can even be called punishment – on her body in order to maintain the standards and traditions she still believes in. She has been taught by her society that this is the correct behaviour – but it becomes increasingly clear to her that this “correct” behaviour does not ensure either happiness or security. She states that “For my marriage everything was done

correctly,” but also admits that “Now there’s nothing to show for the marriage” (*Sandpit* 185). She shows awareness that perhaps tradition is not enough, and that some kind of change is needed. And she is capable of taking steps towards that change; for example, she sits in Dass’s chair, occupying “his” space with her body, thus transgressing the borders tradition sets around her. Mocking Sumathi, she imitates her, sitting “*with her legs spread out, her breasts thrust forward*” (*Sandpit* 190). While her body has been disciplined by society into following particular cultural norms and values, she clearly has a measure of control over her own body, and can choose to reject the strictures of that discipline if she wants to. Maniam declares that the fact that Santha “can, and does, enter into the psyche and personality of Sumathi... is indicative of her and, therefore, tradition’s built-in capacity for change and development” (“Preface” xiv).

The extent to which tradition can develop is evident in Sumathi, who embodies an “emergent” tradition (“Preface” xv). Sumathi is an intensely physical and sensual person – factors brought out in performance by her long, loose hair, her flowing skirt, and her ceaseless dance movements. This sensuality violates the cultural insistence on modesty and decorum for women; as a young woman living at home, she buys a red ribbon, visibly flagging her sensuality. On that same day, the wind blows her skirt up around her thighs, again suggesting sensuality and physical enjoyment and (perhaps) availability. Such openness defies the discipline imposed on her female body, and the response of her parents is to punish the deviant body, tying her tightly in a sarong and pouring cold water over her. The punishment “sucked my blood away, sucked my nerves away” (*Sandpit* 194), so that symbolically, her sensuality, her transgressive body, is punished and disciplined. But Sumathi remains defiant and brings her body back to life by flagellating herself with purifying neem leaves. She imposes a different kind of discipline on her own body – rejecting the “lifelessness” of her mother’s life, she urges her body to embrace life.

Maniam’s conviction that cultures must emerge from a melding of the old and the new, the traditional and the modern, is embodied in the final moments of the play, when Santha and Sumathi engage in a dance together. In the stage directions, Maniam specifies that the two women occupy separate physical spaces – Santha is at home, while Sumathi is in a seedy hotel room somewhere in Kuala Lumpur. In Krishen’s production, these two spaces were placed next to each other; but although the women “shared” the stage space, there was no contact between them. Thus a very strong image was created of their separation from each other, subtly reflecting the result of authoritative insistence on holding on to “original” cultures: the two women, one trying to preserve her culture, the other rejecting what she sees as its stifling influence, occupy the same physical space (the country) but are kept apart by conflicting ideologies – the individual urge towards a hybrid identity, and the authoritative insistence on separation and difference.

However, this is not the image that we are left with, as Maniam goes on to create a transcendent moment. Maniam and Krishen both subvert this image of division and separation by having both women dance; during this dance, they cross, for the first time, into each other's separate spaces. Since physically they are far apart, this crossing must be read as a kind of psychic and spiritual transcendence of the borders created by society's demands and expectations. Physicalising this moment through dance underscores its significance; both women have taken steps towards each other, and this is reflected in the dance they perform together – Sumathi's dance now has a tinge of bitterness to it, toning down her sensuous physicality; Santha for the first time breaks out of her externally-imposed stillness (the discipline imposed on her body) by dancing in "her own controlled and yet... vital fashion" (*Sandpit* 216). Her body is still controlled, but *she* controls it, and she is alive and vital. Thus Maniam's vision of inclusion and hybridity is embodied through the two women.

### ***Stories for Amah***

Mark de Silva's play does not have Maniam's assured handling of dialogue and dramatic interplay. It is the first major work of a much younger and less experienced playwright, and is riddled with faults of construction, but it is still an engaging and sometimes thought-provoking piece. The protagonist Ruth de Souza is the child of a Portuguese Eurasian father and a Chinese mother. In the eyes of the authorities in Malaysia, this makes her officially a Eurasian. The trouble is that Ruth has been brought up by her Chinese grandmother (the "amah" of the title), and physically she resembles her Chinese mother. The play follows the dilemmas she faces in trying to reconcile her own inclination towards the Chinese culture in which she was largely brought up, and the expectations imposed on her by the title "Eurasian." Again, both playwright and director interpret these issues in interesting ways, both textually and through performance strategies. For the purposes of this analysis, I will be referring to the second staging of the play in Kuala Lumpur, at the Actors Studio Theatre in Bangsar, in 2003. Both performances were directed by Joe Hasham.

The play is narrated by Ruth, and her story told through a series of flashbacks. She recounts the tensions in her hybrid family, most of which seem to spring from the inability or unwillingness of her father to think beyond the racial and cultural boundaries which have been set for him, and which he has embraced.

The playwright foregrounds issues of racial and cultural identity by highlighting matters such as speech, physical appearance and consumption of food, all of which are centred in the physical body. This focus on the body is particularly apposite because of how racial categorisation works in Malaysia. Although a fluid and contested category, race in Malaysia is seen as something fixed, especially in terms of physical appearance. Most Malaysians, when

thinking of what members of “other” races look like, function by stereotypes which resolutely ignore difference, hybridity, and border-crossing identities. Nirmala PuruShotam (writing in the context of Singapore) comments on the pictorial representation of racial stereotypes: “the Chinese are represented in yellow-ochre skin tones, with just a touch of pink that gives them a pleasant rosiness. The man will be dressed in trousers and a shirt, but the woman will be clothed in a cheongsam” (52). She goes on to describe the representation of other races in the same way, indicating how a very generalised and limited set of appearances is expected to represent a wide and varied range of identities. Difference is erased, cultural particularity ignored; and individuals who try to escape categorisation are met, as PuruShotam notes, “with either mirthless laughter or cold annoyance” (53).

De Silva’s play serves to bring these issues into the forum of public discussion, thus both highlighting the way in which hybrid individuals are constantly boxed in, and at the same time visibly challenging and deconstructing these limited and limiting labels. As Werbner points out, hybrid identities can be dangerous, potentially disrupting the authoritative desire to separate and define:

... on a culturally hybrid globe, cultural hybridity is still experienced as an empowering, dangerous or transformative force. Conversely, we can begin to consider why borders, boundaries and ‘pure’ identities remain so important, the subject of defensive and essentialising actions and reflections, and why such essentialisms are so awfully difficult to transcend. (4)

In the Malaysian context, labelling is seen as being necessary for nationalistic affirmative-action policies to be carried out. By tying race and culture together, the authorities have appealed to “primordial” loyalties which have encouraged the various ethnic and cultural groups to hold on tightly to what are essentially constructed categories. But increasingly, as can be seen through work by the newer generation of writers such as Huzir Sulaiman, Jit Murad, and Mark de Silva, these loyalties are beginning to break down as hybridity is acknowledged more openly.

In *The Sandpit*, Santha and Sumathi are empowered and transformed when they choose to transgress boundaries and reject the notion of “pure” identities. However, Maniam’s discussion of the issue, while relevant on a wider scale, nonetheless takes place within the confines of a single ethnic group. De Silva’s play is interesting for tackling the issue of race and racial stereotyping through a figure who is both racially and culturally hybrid, and because of this, is unable to find a place of belonging within the essentialising social framework of Malaysia.

A central part of this play actually focuses on the issue of physical discipline of the body. Ruth’s father, Papa, is a domineering man who believes that discipline consists of forcing his daughter’s deviant body to do what he

believes is correct. Papa can be read as a symbol of the paternalistic state imposing monolithic racial and cultural identities on the populace; like the state, Papa is hybrid and multicultural. And like the state, he functions by essentialism, and believes in discipline for deviant or disobedient bodies. Thus both his children get caned when they cannot do their multiplication tables, when they are caught playing “doctor,” and when Ruth finds herself unable to cope with the alien taste of a cheeseburger.

This last incident is particularly significant in the context of this discussion. Ruth, having been brought up in small-town Kulim by her Chinese grandmother, is unfamiliar with anything except her grandmother’s cooking. Even Chinese food cooked by others is strange to her – for example, she dislikes the wonton noodles served in Kuala Lumpur because it is not cut into shorter pieces, the way her grandmother does it. This fine degree of difference is significant because it underscores the impossibility of thinking in broad, essentialising terms. Yes, Ruth’s grandmother is Chinese, but “Chinese” is not a monolithic, one-size-fits-all category; the “Chineseness” of Amah is different from that of Chinese people in Kuala Lumpur, and to subsume all into one massive category would not only be reductive, it is also, as implied by Ruth’s nuanced response, quite impossible. Ruth’s culture is not just “Chinese” in a broad, essentialist sense; it is, rather, very closely tied to her relationship with Amah – a relationship in which she feels secure because Amah protects her from her father’s discipline (*Stories for Amah* 6-7). Ruth’s father insists that the children must come and live in Kuala Lumpur, ostensibly because the schools there are better. But it quickly becomes clear that for him, a move to KL represents a move away from the Chinese cultural influence of his mother-in-law; his children have been brought into the sphere of a more Western influence.

This is why the issue of Ruth eating her McDonald’s cheeseburger turns into such a battlefield between father and daughter. On her first trip to McDonald’s Ruth vomits the alien food; her body, attuned to a different kind of food, refuses to accept these new tastes. But her father insists, and at home, he forces them to eat “ham and cheese and bacon and cow milk” (*Stories for Amah* 10). If he believes in the old adage “you are what you eat,” then clearly, he is trying to exorcise Ruth’s “Chineseness” by disciplining her body into accepting Western food.

But why this insistence on Western food, when Papa is clearly Asian? In his reactions, and his interactions with the various members of his family, it becomes apparent that he, his cousin Uncle Zack, and Zack’s wife Liza (all Eurasians) have chosen to focus more on the ‘Eur’ rather than the ‘Asian’ aspect of their cultural and ethnic heritage. The same kind of attitude is visible in Aunt Liza, who is unable to remember the name of the restaurant “Sakura,” presumably because the name is foreign, and treats the quite ordinary dish of

steamed tofu with shredded chicken as something fabulously exotic and “other,” quite outside her more Western sphere of experience. As an ethnic group, Eurasians in Malaysia are almost impenetrably hybrid, but since hybridity is not encouraged in the official schema, there has been a tendency of long standing to highlight the ancient Portuguese roots of many Eurasians within the country. As with Malaysians of Indian and Chinese origin, the official stance is to go right back to the culture of the country of origin; thus, in tourist festivals, Eurasian culture is always represented by dancers in traditional Portuguese costume. This is how the Portuguese connection is highlighted and the reality of hybridity and a strong Asian component is minimised, even marginalised.

De Silva is aware of this blind spot, and embodies it in Papa, Zack, and Liza, who “always tok in clever English” (*Stories for Amah* 11), and who insistently set themselves out as being utterly different from Papa’s “other” family. And that family is considered “other” in more ways than one. The Eurasian side of the family is, undeniably, racially hybrid – a fact borne out by casting choices: the actor playing Papa (Kennedy John Michael) could be either Eurasian or Indian; Uncle Zack was played by Ben Tan, a Chinese actor; and Sabera Shaikh, who played Auntie Liza, is an Indian Muslim. Ruth herself was played by Chinese dancer/actress Mew Chang Tsing. This very obvious hybridity – made all the more clear by the fact that it is expressed through the visible bodies of the actors – is in stark contrast to the attempts of the Eurasian relatives to position themselves as non-hybrid and largely European.

The issue of physical appearance, by which most Malaysians try to define an individual’s “race,” is particularly thorny for Eurasians, although it is getting more complex across Malaysian society generally. Despite a general awareness of the history of the Eurasians in Malaysia, and widespread personal experience with Eurasian friends and colleagues, there is a general expectation at many levels of Malaysian society that Eurasians should look identifiably European. Ruth’s classmates, for example, on learning that she is Eurasian, demand to know if her father is English or American, if he has fair skin and blond hair, demonstrating the extent to which they function by stereotypes. Ruth refuses to show them who her father is because he does not conform to these stereotypes; instead, he is dark-skinned.

But Papa also has issues with Ruth’s appearance. She looks Chinese (a fact highlighted by the decision to cast a Chinese actress in the role), and that might be why he beats her so often: “I know Papa beat us because he want us to be good in matematik, but all my aunty and Mama say is because I look like you Mah” (*Stories for Amah* 43). Is he trying to beat the Chineseness out of her? Is he disciplining her deviant body so that it adheres to his demands and perceptions? How, then, does he deal with the fact that his own dark-skinned body should be considered deviant in this context?

Also significant are their speech patterns: when talking to his Chinese in-laws, Papa adopts their speech patterns, but when talking to the Eurasian relatives, his speech (and theirs) becomes somewhat more “standard,” with a tendency towards British slang, as when Uncle Zack declares that he is “going out for a crap” (*Stories for Amah* 12). Liza also harps on the issue of speech, declaring that it is amusing that Papa, who spoke with an accent (presumably Chinese or Malaysian) as a child, has chosen to marry a Chinese woman and produce children who now speak with this same funny accent. Liza thus marginalises Papa, separating him from the rest of the Eurasians in the family by using perceived faults in his speech to highlight his difference and the racial hybridity of his current family. Speech and accent are also central issues for Papa, who battles to get Ruth to pronounce “thank you” and “don’t know” properly (*Stories for Amah* 26, 44).

But we might profitably question why Liza, Zack, and Papa insist on proper English as a marker of identity, when their background is Portuguese and (in Liza’s case) Dutch. I would argue that this is the result of authoritative and social attempts to contain their “dangerous” hybridity within a neatly labelled box which highlights “European” and “Western” identity. Because their identity is defined in such all-encompassing and monolithic terms, Papa and his family are able to unthinkingly appropriate English as “their” language, without at the same time considering that adopting English in fact adds another level of hybridity to their already very complex cultural and racial identities.

Clearly, hybridity is considered undesirable. Zack tries to dissociate himself from Papa by suggesting that, since he has married a Chinese, he cannot really be categorised as Eurasian; Zack, unlike Papa, has married a “real” Eurasian with Dutch blood (20). At the very same time that he is trying to maintain the purity of Eurasian bloodlines by denying Papa’s eligibility for the label “Eurasian” because he has chosen to dilute the blood by marrying a non-Eurasian, Zack is ironically highlighting the hybridity of Eurasians by emphasising Liza’s “half Dutch” status (*Stories for Amah* 20).

De Silva highlights a number of troubling issues in this play, though his approach is rather scattershot. He is – unsurprisingly, perhaps – unable to provide answers. Director Joe Hasham’s casting choices embodied the central issue of racial hybridity and the impossibility of claiming a “pure” identity of any kind. Physical embodiment of these issues helps to bring them into the arena of public discussion, to allow the public to contemplate and engage with matters which are otherwise hidden by the public myth of racial and cultural purity.

## Conclusion

Authoritative and social insistence on categories and labels complicates life for the multicultural individual, as evidenced by the issues confronted in these two



plays. Both playwrights ask whether it is possible to be culturally hybrid. Maniam does not at the same time deal with racial hybridity, which is central to de Silva's play. Maniam champions multiculturalism – for him, as for Krishen, it is a reality that is encompassed even within each racially and culturally overdetermined body. His two protagonists take tentative steps towards each other, suggesting a positive move towards cultural hybridity and the embracing of multiculturalism. But we should also take note of the fact that in the end, both these women remain physically apart, though they appear to have moved closer together spiritually. This suggests to me that the conclusion is tentative at best. Despite a desire within individuals to move towards an inclusive multiculturalism, the practical reality of living in Malaysia, with its insistence on separation and difference, works against that desire.

De Silva's play also comes off as tentative at the end, although he tries to take a positive stance. In the final moments of the play, Ruth declares that "my voice is slowly coming, and I can slowly talk and fight back already... that voice don't have a colour, and don't have a name, is just a voice that you help me find" (*Stories for Amah* 59). This sounds like a declaration that she is finally beginning to overcome issues of appearance and speech, so central to her father's perception of her. But the triumph of this declaration is somewhat watered down by the fact that Ruth's speech patterns have not in fact changed. It is further undermined by the constant presence on stage of the character of Amah. She is always on stage, mostly silent, but placed prominently upstage centre, impossible to ignore. This serves as a strong visual signal of the influence she has over Ruth – despite Ruth's ringing speeches, we are left with the impression that she is unable to comfortably embrace multiculturalism. Despite stating that she has found her own voice, it still sounds and looks, on stage, as if she is primarily influenced by her grandmother's voice and presence.

Thus neither writer is able to convincingly stage the inclusive, multicultural Malaysian body for us – a reflection, perhaps, of the current impossibility of transcending labels and boundaries in Malaysian society. Referring to his short story "Haunting the Tiger," Maniam declares that "[t]he leap is not made into a common culture for this common culture has not yet been evolved. What Muthu discovers is that he has to cling to an inherited sense of culture, that is, Indian culture and, at least for him, this has tragic consequences, and he dies unfulfilled" ("The New Diaspora" 6). Neither of the plays discussed here is quite that pessimistic, because both show an awareness of the need to create that common culture, or at least, to cross the barriers between cultures, as well as offering tentative ideas of how to do so. But the common culture remains unevolved, and the need for it largely unacknowledged. Theatre practitioner Jo Kukathas suggests that in Malaysia, "people are sometimes suspicious of one another and go through the motion of living together, which is 'possibly a result from the many years of being subjected to a single narrative.'" There is a need

to embrace the multiple narratives available within this society, to move towards a richer, more inclusive, multicultural mindset.

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