

THE ROCK MELON: THE STORY OF A MALE'S NARCISSISM AND HIS INFIDELITY

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Abstract

This paper is a psychological reading of K.S. Maniam's short story *The Rock Melon* exploring the concept of male's narcissism and infidelity. This study investigates how the male character, who is an adulterer, views himself, his wife, and his sexual partner who happens to be none other than his sister-in-law. To understand the character's motives, the researchers utilize a theoretical framework of infidelity and narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) to study the male character's narration as well as his actions throughout the story. The findings suggest that the male character's infidelity is strongly influenced by his narcissistic personality disorder. His narcissistic personality disorder does not only cause troubles for himself, but also inflicts a more serious psychological damage on his relationship with others around him, especially his wife and his sexual partner.

Keywords: Malaysian literature, K.S. Maniam, psychological approach, infidelity, narcissism

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Rock Melon, written by K.S. Maniam is a story of infidelity told from a male's perspective. It centers upon the lives of a working-class Malaysian Indian family in the early 90s. In the story, both husband and wife work to earn a living. The unnamed husband spends many hours working at his office, while his wife, a highly educated and independent woman works as a school teacher – a job that is highly valued and respected in the Malaysian community. The conflict begins as the couple welcomes the wife's younger sister, Viji, into their home to take care of the household chores and their children. Viji, the 'other-woman' in this story, suffered a physical and emotional abuse as she was violated and left by her husband. This failing marriage causes her to become an outcast and burden to her extended family. She knows that the only place that she can find solace and protection is her sister's house. However, unbeknownst to her sister, the blossoming of an unlikely affair takes place between Viji and her brother-in-law. The affair lasts for ten years without a slight remorse. Throughout the story, the male character continues to play a role as a dutiful husband, while having an affair behind his wife's back.

The basic premise of this research is to seek and understand the motives and reasons behind the male character's act of infidelity. In order to do so, the researchers use a psychological approach to literature, exploring the concept of narcissism or extreme selfishness through the male character's thoughts and treatments of himself and of other female characters.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

K.S. Maniam is a prolific Malaysian Indian writer who wrote many stories which concerned with the lives of Indians in Malaysia. In common with other non-Malay writers who wrote in English, many of his writings focused on the struggles of his estranged community and issues related to their political and socio-economic marginalization. As a writer, he was also interested in exploring the sexuality and gender roles in Indian culture, especially those of women's. His writings that foreground women as important subject matters include *Between Lives*, *Ratnamuni*, *Mala*, *The Sandpit: Monologue* and *The Sandpit: Womensis* among many others. On the other hand, Wicks (1998) claims that Maniam was one of the realist writers as his writings in *The Return* and *In A Far Country* depict the construction of Malaysia itself, from the perspective of Malaysians of Indian descents. Therefore, it is believed that Maniam's writings are important as his compositions give readers not only the representation of one's culture and identity but the reality of the world they live in. However, from our point of view – some of his works are understudied. There are only a few studies found on Maniam's works from the year 2008 to date.

In 'Interrogating Malaysian literature in English', Quayum (2008) believes that the narratives in Maniam's *The Return* and his other works such as *Mala* and *Between Lives* provide important cultural references and images of the country's social and political history. Through a close analysis of Maniam's characters in *The Cord* and *The Sandpit*, Philip (2009) claims that Maniam advocates the importance of embracing ones' traditional heritage, and the culture of their new homeland. In both plays, the significance of creating a new kind of diasporic vision which embraces both 'Indian' and 'Malaysian' cultures, 'tradition' and 'trend', that allows for multiple cultural identities is also articulated in Maniam's 2001 paper, *The New Diaspora* (Philip, 2009).

According to Raihanah M.M. et. al (2011), Maniam's three novels *The Return*, *In A Far Country*, and *Between Lives* share the same themes of recognition and reification of identity. Their study discussed the struggles for self and identity experienced by the three Malaysian Indian protagonists as individuals, the members of Indian society, and as Malaysians. The reading of these three novels reinforces Maniam's idea on the importance of recognising ones' ethno-cultural identity as a part of one's holistic sense of self (Raihanah M.M et. al, 2011).

In addition, Singh and Mani's study on Maniam and his works (2012) argues that Maniam's writings are deeply rooted with Indian culture, and usually immersed with various aspects of life that are distinctive to his motherland in India. In their opinion, writers whose nationalities are not of their motherland and those who are of immigrant descents often become the 'spoke persons' of their communities, voicing out their dissatisfaction, agony, musings and struggles in the new land through literature.

Through an existentialist reading of Maniam's novel *The Return*, Dhanapal (2014) argues that the main protagonist in the novel experiences existential crisis, as he suffers from alienation and identity crisis in the new land. Yet, he is able to triumph as an existentialist hero as he was able to define the meaning of his existence, and struggles to achieve his dreams in this 'nonsensical' world he lives in. Likewise, through an in-depth study of characters and settings, Zabihzadeh et. al (2016) advocate that alienation, unhomeliness and desire of belonging are the central them in *The Return*. This autobiographical novel

speaks of the Indian immigrant community's struggles as to assimilate and adapt in the country after it became an independent nation in 1957.

In conclusion, the last ten years has signified that most studies on Maniam's writings are found to be on his prominent novels *The Return*, *In A Far Country* and *Between Lives*. We believe that his short story, *The Rock Melon* has not yet been extensively discussed or studied outside literature classrooms in educational settings.

3.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Theories of Infidelity

Moller and Vossler's study (2015) concluded that infidelity can be clustered into three broad categories: infidelity as a sexual intercourse outside the committed relationship, infidelity as extra-dyadic sexual activities (e.g.: cybersex, masturbation, pornography use and etc) and infidelity as emotional betrayal. Infidelity or extramarital sex, the state of being unfaithful to a spouse is an immoral behaviour and socially unacceptable in many cultures. Cross-culturally, people condemned extramarital relation as it involves lying and cheating that could weaken a marriage institution and family. In many religions, including Hinduism - the act of a married man or woman having sexual relationships with anyone other than his or her spouse is considered sinful and a breach of 'dharma' or religious duty (Jayaram, n.d). Indians believe marriage is a sacred union of two persons that continues even after their death - as they will remain together in several lives through reincarnation (Madathil & Sindhu, 2008). Therefore, those who violate the marriage covenant by committing adultery will suffer social ostracization, ridicule, and humiliation as well as alienation by family and friends (ibid.) In the context of civil law in Malaysia, the husband and wife may wish to petition of divorce if they believe that adultery has led to breakdown of their marriage. If the husband is 'wronged', the wife will not be entitled to any alimony. However, the wife can get higher spousal maintenance if the husband is found guilty of adultery. In fact, adultery was the second most common cause for divorce (20.2% after incompatibility at 35.5%) in Malaysia according to the Fifth Malaysian Population and Family Survey 2015 (Azizan, 2016).

Infidelity is becoming more common among married couples; with more men than women appear to be involved in this matter. In a study by Mark, Janssen and Milhausen (2011), almost one-quarter of men (23.2%) and 19.2% of women admitted to infidelity during their current relationship. Many researchers have conclusively established the connection between ones' gender and infidelity. The work and research on evolutionary theory (Buss & Schmitt 1993; Kenrick & Keefe, 1992; Trivers, 1972) suggested that men and women use different strategies for spreading their genes and having offspring (as cited in Lammers et.al, 2011). Theoretically, men are thought to seek multiple partners so as to produce greater numbers of offsprings; while women are thought to be faithful with a single partner, because of their greater investment when procreating: internal fertilization, 9-month gestation, and lactation (Buss, 1989; Li, Bailey, Kenrick, & Linsenmeier, 2002 as cited in Lammers et.al, 2011). Research on biology and reproduction suggested that long term monogamy is difficult to attain, as human (specifically men) are not monogamous in nature (Barash & Lipton, 2001). Buss (2003) claims that men are simply wired to seek out as many female partners as possible as they are capable of fathering unlimited number of children.

Neuman (2008) has estimated that one-third of men will engage in infidelity during their lifetime. His study revealed that 92% of men cheated due to lack of emotional connection they had with their spouses. They were feeling underappreciated and insecure. The researcher further notes that 88% of the men

surveyed claim that the ‘other’ women they had an affair with were no better looking or in no better shape than their wives.

On the other hand, Lammers and Maner (2015) reported that power increases infidelity among people, as it releases people from the inhibiting effects of social norms. Orbuch (2012) claims that powerful men are surrounded by people who protect and idolize them, and even ‘approve’ of their vices to be inside their social circles. This has made them believe that they are impervious to getting caught or can conceal the evidence of their wrongdoing (ibid). In a traditionally patriarchal society, men hold greater power and positions than women. This power affects their psychological states making them more confident to approach women in romantic contexts (Lammers, 2011) thus increases their likelihood to cheat.

3.2 Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) & Infidelity

The term “narcissism” is originated from Greek mythology of Narcissus; a handsome hunter who fell in love with his own reflection in the water. He was unable to stop staring at the beauty of his own image and this extreme self-admiration has led to his death. The myth of Narcissus gives readers a lesson that self-love or loving oneself to the point of absurdity is indeed self-destructive.

In psychology, narcissism is a term refers to a type of mental disorder which is commonly characterised by a high level of self-love and selfishness. The term, according to Mahari (2015) is closely related to egocentrism – “a personality characteristic in which people see themselves and their interests and opinions as the only ones that really matter.” This reflection of an inordinate degree of self-love is profound in narcissists. The narcissists believe that they are “special, unique, and superior to others” in terms of sex appeal (or attractiveness), intelligence and accomplishment (Raskin & Terry, 1998 as cited in Strelan, 2007). According to Vaknin (2009) this malignant self-love is also associated with manipulation and exploitation of others in order to pursuit “one’s gratification, dominance and ambition”.

Nonetheless, American Psychiatric Association (2013) viewed narcissism as an impairment of personality functioning and is listed under Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) (Barnett & Sharp, 2017). Individuals with Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) normally possess several traits of the following nine characteristics: grandiosity, fantasies of success, viewing self as special, need for admiration and entitlement, envious of others, lack of empathy, interpersonally exploitative, and “haughty” and “arrogant” attitudes (APA, 2013).

Investigations about gender differences in narcissistic behaviour indicated that men are more self-absorbed than women (Barnett & Sharp, 2017; Holtzman et.al, 2010). In pursuing romantic relationship, narcissists tend to have problems forming “close, caring and warm relationships with others” as they exploit these bonds only to gain social status and self-esteem (Tanchotsrinon, Maneesri, & Campbell, 2007). Therefore, they are likely to approach individuals who are successful, popular and attractive that can supply them with “self-enhancement” that feeds their ego through association (ibid).

Relationship with narcissists frequently suffer as they have an utter disregard for others’ feelings and opinions. Foster and Campbell (2005) reported that numerous researches found out that narcissists are notoriously negative for partnership, collaboration and competition (e.g.: Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Campbell, Foster, & Finkel, 2002; Campbell, Sedikides, Reeder, & Elliott, 2000). They are often found to be engaged in “infidelity, game-playing and low commitment” (ibid). Indeed, it is understandable that individuals with narcissism traits are prone to betraying their partners (Brewer et al, 2015) as they are less sympathetic and considerate. Whitbourne (2014) claims that narcissistic individual requires unconditional admiration, love and attention from his or her partner, and ready to look elsewhere if the requirements are not met.

4.0 ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION

4.1 The Narcissistic Husband

The narrator of *The Rock Melon* is a man that commits adultery with his sister-in-law who is living under the same roof with his family. This affair has been going on for ten years without his wife's knowledge. This unnamed character confesses his act of infidelity and justifies his wrongdoing without any regrets. The story, which is told from his own perspectives is a defense against his immoral act. Over the course of the story, the man can only see things from his point of view; and he believes that only his perspectives matter. This is a trait of a true narcissist.

The story begins with the man's monologue - questioning his illicit affair with his sister-in-law, named Viji. *"My first thought was to expose her ... When I think of the ten years I spent with her, I really get angry. What was I doing with her when I had a wife wedded in temple and at registry?"* (Maniam, 1998: 53). The man tells us that he is furious about his sexual affair with his sister-in-law. He is perplexed with his own sins, as he has a wife that he is supposed to love and honour for life. His anger however, is not lashed out at himself, but towards his sister-in-law for ruining his reputation as a good man. The man also displays a sense of arrogance, and lacks of accountability as he only wants to expose 'her' not 'them'. Despite his explosive rage on his sister-in-law; he still finds that his illicit affair as something that 'amazes' him because it goes on unnoticed 'for close to ten years' (Maniam, 1998:54), which eventually makes him feel exceptional and brags about it.

In addition, the man seems to contradict himself at every turn. He says, *"I am by nature, an honest man, even an attractive one. I'm decisive. I've principles which have supported me through a not-so-comfortable life. I could have had more beautiful women, but I didn't..."* (Maniam 1998:54). The man's grandiose views of himself as someone who is trustworthy and handsome is conflicted with the story. There is a high possibility that the husband lies as he exaggerates his self-importance, and claims that he is a man of principle. In the story, however, only Viji is attracted to him - and because of this, he manipulates her to gain sexual access in the comfort of his home. This action reaffirms his belief of his superiority as the man of the house. An individual with NPD feels that he or she is superior to others, and entitled to many privileges. According to Ni (2016), narcissists do not only engage in, but thrive in breaking rules, creating offenses or involving in unethical or immoral activities because these made them feel extraordinary and entitled.

The man also thinks highly of himself as man of principle. He believes that he is a noble man; similar to the hero in his favourite movie. *"I remember a Tamil film I saw in my adolescence. It was named after man; a very strong man and he has continued to be the guiding light in all my relationships with people. It was the way he stuck to his principles that won me over to hero-worship."* (Maniam 1998: 55). However, the comparisons he made are irrelevant and absurd as the hero in the film is a selfless man who is loyal to his lover and does not violate his lover's marriage. He on the other hand, is adulterous and selfish. He is of the opinion that he does not abuse his marriage. He fails to see his wrong doings yet convinces himself that his affair with his own sister-in-law has *"strengthened the ties"* with his wife (Maniam 1998:56). Indeed, his narcissistic mind does not perceive cheating is wrong, and he believes that it is impossible for him to do anything wrong.

Nonetheless, the man has a strong need to be admired by others. To narcissists, admiration from others is essential and it leads them to the feeling of emptiness if others do not applaud them. *"We were a family, Viji included, and had always enjoyed the reputation of being thought of highly. I was a hero in my in-laws' eyes, somewhat like that man with the principled behavior, in the film I mentioned. My good looks, height and width of chest added no little weight to the impression.... People looked upon us as a kind of model family – sun seemed to add a gloss to the picture we made – and I fear, with envy in their hearts."*

(Maniam 1998: 59). However, the sudden cold shoulder shown by his mother-in-law and brother-in-law later in the story really dents his sense of self-importance.

4.2 Viji – The Other Woman

Narcissists are devoid of empathy, and appear to be manipulative, insensitive and inconsiderate about others. In his narration, it is certain that the man is ashamed to admit his faults and blames his sister-in-law for creating a circumstance or opportunity that made him vulnerable for a marital infidelity. He also does not understand why he is attracted to her in the first place; *“It was something more superficial or something that defies understanding. I’m hurt by the idea that I don’t understand, humiliated by the recognition that I was drawn into some kind of a trance or enchantment. Did she or did some personal agent of chaos seduce me?”* (Maniam:1998: 54).

The man’s relationship with Viji is merely exploitative, as he only uses her for sex. He often describes her in a sexual way; as how sexually attractive she is, and what their love-making routines be like. In the beginning of the story, the man speaks admirably of Viji, and praises her *‘husky and caressing voice’* and the feelings she gives him when she comes to him at night for sexual favors. *“When she put her hands on my body she roused more than blood... Her fingers on my chest broke the Gordian knot of discipline in me and set loose that wavering need to be free.”* (Maniam 1998:53)

The man also belittles, and criticizes her in subtle and overt ways, and this is evident as he begins to lose control over her. He even calls her *‘a quarrelsome bitch who wanted to have everything her way’* (Maniam 1998: 59), and *‘a woman of having evil designs on her own sister’* (Maniam 1998: 57). In the story, the man’s anger and resentment towards his sister-in-law begins when she starts to demand for love, attention, and rights as a woman in his life. *“She admitted, when I talked to her on returning to K.L., that she too wanted to be honorable, a woman as unspotted as my wife.”* (Maniam 1998:63). He feels threatened and terrified when his in-laws are studiously avoiding him, and giving him a cold shoulder. He is bewildered by their treatment at first, but later he finds out that that Viji has been telling all kinds of stories to his in-laws. Viji accuses his wife for treating her as a servant and looks down on her. She also accuses him for not wanting his in-laws’ presence in his house. It is obvious that her actions crumble his self-confidence in keeping two women at his side in his own home.

However, as a narcissist, he is unable to place himself in her shoes. He is only concerned with his own bliss and well-being. He would never understand the pain he inflicted on her. Instead of owning his mistakes, he turns all his rage on her, devalues her and continues to remind himself that the ‘violation’ comes from her, not him.

4.3 The Wife

Throughout the story, the man has never even once uttered his wife’s name. It implies that he views the wife as of no great importance compared to his mistress, Viji. He addresses his wife as ‘my wife’ and not by her name. It indicates that the woman belongs to him. He is her master and she is borne to serve him. The man views his wife as merely a sexual object. He believes that by fulfilling the marital conjugal rights *“on two nights of the week”* is sufficient to keep the marriage going. He claims that *“On two nights of the week, my wife and I practiced the smooth passage with each other that supported and paced our marriage”* (Maniam, 1998: 54). Physical intimacy with his wife is a just an obligation and husbandly duty that is devoid of any passion. It seems that their sexual relationship is a routine activity that lacks of spontaneity and excitement. To him, the wife is his *“afternoons, evenings and nights”* while the other woman Viji is his *“dawn and early mornings”* (Maniam, 1998: 59). To him, sleeping with his own wife

“on those appointed nights” is just a delicious experience “of being with a different kind of woman” (Maniam, 1998: 56). This is a typical remark of men who view women’s role as a sexual object in fulfilling their own sexual needs. In all religions including Hinduism, the act of physical intimacy between married couples is sacred but the husband in *The Rock Melon* has defiled the sanctity of the marriage and betrayed his wife by being a sinner.

However, as a narcissistic man, he sees no wrongdoing in two-timing his wife with her own sister. He does not consider the pain he inflicts towards his wife as being a narcissistic, he is interpersonally exploitative. He lacks empathy and sees himself above the rules. The man takes the wife for a ride; assuming that she is a complete fool for not suspecting the affair. He claims that “*My wife didn’t know I touched another woman, not because I hesitated to tell her but because it was unnecessary ... It even seems irrelevant to talk of betrayal*” (Maniam, 1998: 57).

Being a narcissistic individual, the man is highly confident of the wife’s blind trust in him and their so-called stable marriage. He is confident of his wife’s innocence and ignorance that she is clueless about his scandalous affair with Viji. He attributes the wife’s ignorance and complete trust in him that causing him to embark on the illicit affair.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The man in the short story *The Rock Melon* is a person who suffers from narcissistic personality (NPD). He possesses six out of nine traits of NPD as he is often found to exaggerate his self-importance, believe that he is special, fantasize of great success, seek constant admiration from people around him, have lack of empathy, and take advantage of others.

Throughout the story, the man reminds us how good, and attractive he is. He exhibits a constant need to talk about himself favorably, in flattering and egotistical way – without realising that his words contradict with his actions at every turn. The man’s self-absorbed perspective has blinded him to see his own faults for the sins he has committed and the suffering he has caused on his wife and family. He even shifts the blame on his sister-in-law and condemns her as an enchantress; a woman who bewitched him, making him loose control of himself. He is also gratified of finding fault with his wife, and accuses her trust, innocence and ignorance that compelled him to commit adultery with his own sister-inlaw. These are some common excuses that a narcissist like him made in order to hide his weakness, deficiencies or failings.

To conclude, the man in *The Rock Melon* exemplifies the typical traits of a narcissistic male who commits an extra marital affair and being nonchalant about it. He is just one example of many other narcissistic males who have involved in affairs, blamed the wives and their sexual partners for their immoral actions, and devalued the women when they challenged their ‘superiority’ in any possible way.

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