

HAI-O ARTS & CULTURE
GRANT 2019 REPORT

CAN THE INDIAN WOMAN SPEAK?

BY VESHALINI NAIDU



PROJECT REPORT

Can The Indian Woman Speak? or The Fifth Day, (current working-title) is a play that uses feminist arguments made in Gayatri Spivak's 1985 essay, *Can The Subaltern Speak?* to respond to K.S. Maniam's *The Sandpit: Womensis* and how these views of Indian womyn, and the patriarchal ways they have been written have persisted in movies, music and Deepavali advertisements until today.

A synopsis from the 2012 staging of *The Sandpit: Womensis* summarises the play as;

"a tale of love, betrayal and human survival. It is a story that revolves around a crippled man's struggle for acceptance in a cruel and uncompromising world where only the fittest can survive as told by his two wives – Santha and Sumathi."

Since *The Sandpit: Womensis* has been treated as a feminist text, I wanted to hold up K.S. Maniam's play against feminist discourse surrounding Indian womyn during the 1980s. The most prominent and relevant text of this period was Gayathri Spivak's *Can The Subaltern Speak?*.

But as I continued my research; reading and reflecting on other radical feminist sources, plays and fiction writing, I began to see the flaws in Spivak's essay. The essay perpetuates the same kinds of classist violence she talks about in reference to White-Western feminism. As a young non-binary Malaysian Indian in 2020, I recognise that even the arguments that she makes are not enough to shake our ideas of Indian womyn that have persistent long before this essay was written, and continues to take up space today. If this project's intentions were to empower and provide alternate narratives for Malaysian Indian womyn, I will

have rethink my approach.

In the book *Unapologetic*, Charlene A. Carruthers meditates on reviving the Black radical imagination. She writes;

“The Black radical tradition requires an ongoing and persistent cultivation of the Black radical imagination. It is within the spaces of imagination, the dream spaces, that liberatory practises are born and grow, leading to the space to act and to transform.”

So with this project, how do I cultivate radical imagination for Malaysian Indians, especially when I claim this project to be relevant in our society today?

I decided to take Spivak’s idea of *“representation vs re-presentation”* and define it as re-imagination instead. I approach the first draft with these 2 questions:

1. *If feminine silence is an act of resistance, what does that look like in context to these characters and what would it mean for them to break it?*

2. *How do these characters get free?*

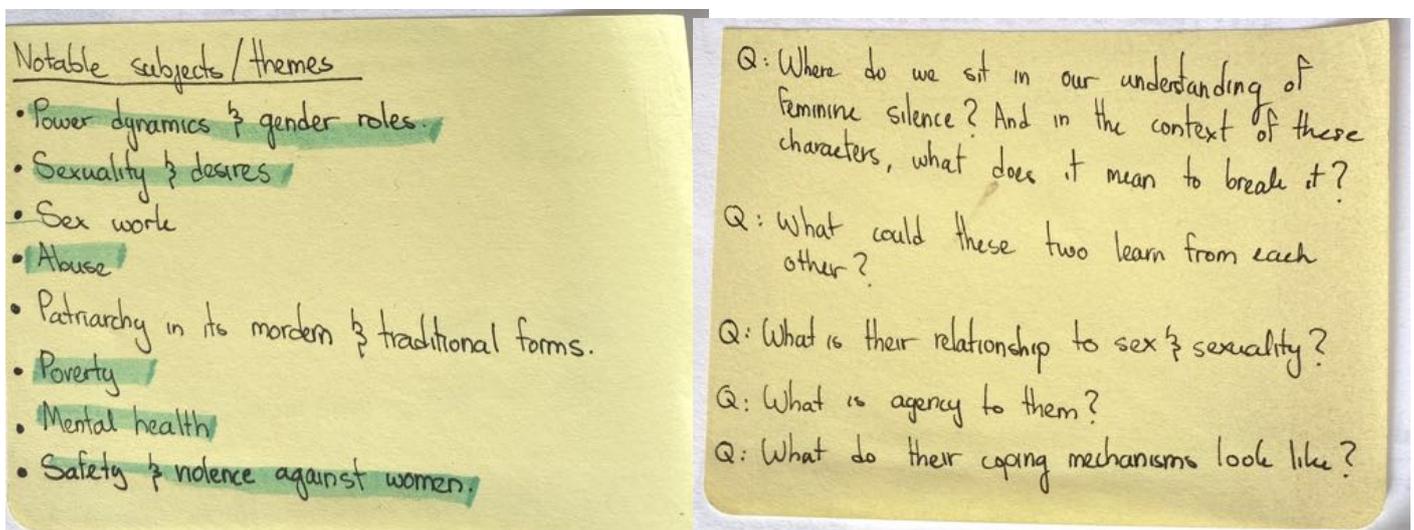
Part of this project was also to reflect on mainstream narratives and depictions of Indian womyn. As I wrote the play, I watched as many advertisements of Malaysian Indian womyn I could find, and a curated list via social media of notable Tamil movies from the 1980s to present day.

A video projection, made from snippets from these films and advertisements will be used as a secondary visual storytelling element to the events that play out throughout the script. This allows for the project to also take on a macro conversation and aids the script to focus on other parts of the characters

experience and centre their joy. Rather than having the characters describe their trauma, the video projection does that labour for the audience.

With help from June Tan and Darryn Wee of Five Arts Center, I was able to access their archival recording of *The Sandpit: Womansis* in 1994 and speak to Anne James (who played the character, *Santha*, in every staging since 1987) and Chee Sek Thim, who directed the 2012 version which Anne was also casted in. From my conversations with Anne and Sek Thim, the urgency to respond and address the inherit sexism of play and centring the Indian womyn was clear.

I noted down the overall subjects and themes from the *The Sandpit: Womansis*, as well as what I found to be key events to the characters personally, outside of their shared husband.



With all of this, I slowly began to piece together the first draft over the course of 8 months, from February to September.

RESEARCH/RESOURCE LIST

- Anne James
- Chee Sek Thim
- Five Arts Center (June Tan & Darryn Wee)
- BFM Radio

- "The Sandpit: Womansis" by K.S. Maniam. (1987)
- "The Cord" by K.S. Maniam. (1983)

- "Can The Subaltern Speak?" by Gayathri Chakravorty Spivak. (1985)

- "Female Silence in K.S. Maniam's The Sandpit: A Monologue" by Wan Roselezam bt. Wan Yahya. (2003)

- "Re-shaping Identity Through The Body: An Analysis of K.S. Maniam's The Sandpit: Womansis & Mark De Silva's Stories for Amah" by Susan Philip. (2009)

- "Unapologetic: A Black, Queer, Feminist Mandate For Radical Movements" by Charlene A. Carruthers. (2018)

- "Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches" by Audre Lorde. (1984)

- "The Rice Mother" by Rani Manicka. (2002)
- "In The Dream House" by Carmen Maria Machado. (2019)
- "Collected Plays: Volume One" by Girish Karnad. (2005)
- "Trojan Barbie" by Christine Evans. (2010)
- "A Doll's House - Part 2" by Lucas Hnath. (2017)
- "Fleabag" by Phoebe Waller-Bridge. (2013)
- "Hitting A Straight Lick With A Crooked Stick" by Zora Neale Hurston. (2020)

DRAFT 1 [28.08.2020]

**[WORKING TITLE] THE FIFTH DAY (a.k.a CAN THE INDIAN WOMAN SPEAK?)
BY VESHALINI NAIDU**

TRIGGER WARNING: Alcohol use, drug use, abuse, mental health and references to physical and sexual violence.

NOTES ON THE PLAY

The play is a response to KS Maniam's The Sandpit: Womansis using feminist arguments made by Gayathri Spivak's subaltern essay, Can The Subaltern Speak?.

The play is an experimentation on using visual elements as part of the storytelling.

Video projection is constant. The projection (a montage of petronas ads plays, with snippets of tamil movies, malay movies, movies with indian womyn in it) is a reflection and/or a secondary layer to the events that play out throughout the play.

Trauma, when it becomes present, is reflected through the projection.

CAST:

SUMATHI (early 30s, cisgendered)

SANTHA (late 30s, non-binary)

Video projection plays. In the centre is an old black leather sofa chair. It looks worn down. The montage changes to the first 5 minutes from The Sandpit (1994). Lights come up to reveal SANTHA and SUMATHI watching the projection in front of them. The montage switches back to the movies and ads. SANTHA turns away, picks up the saree border from the chair and sits down to continue stitching.

SANTHA

(to SUMATHI.) Do you know why I didn't follow you to look for him? Because this is not the first time he disappeared. The first time he disappeared was for two days. Didn't tell me anything. For the first time I had to go to the shops myself.

SUMATHI

(snarkily.) That must have been stressful for you.

SANTHA

I was so anxious, you never know what's going to happen, you know?

SUMATHI

The world is an ugly place for a woman.

SANTHA

Anything can happen! I had to run here, run there. I had to run. To run. To move. What made him move then I don't know. I don't know what made him move now also. Did he stop to think about me? About *you*? Maybe I wanted to disappear too, how about that? Tcha! What a man. In fact, I can't remember the last time anyone asked me what I wanted.

SUMATHI

(half focused.) But do you know what you do want?

SANTHA

You know what, I do.

SUMATHI

(very curious.) Oh! finally something interesting, tell me.

SANTHA

(slowly, luring) A...

SUMATHI

Yes?

SANTHA

Fine...

SUMATHI

Akka...

SANTHA

Saree border.

SUMATHI groans.

Just for me.

SUMATHI

Well then what?

SANTHA

What?

SUMATHI

You're almost done with it, so when you're done, then what?

SANTHA

What else is there to do, you put it on the saree lah!

SUMATHI

Well put it on then!

SANTHA

It's not finished!

SUMATHI

Oh come on, aren't you curious about how it'll look? Just fucking pin it, dei!

SANTHA

It's not ready!

SUMATHI

Well then how will you know if that's the border you really want if you don't actually try it?

SANTHA

Since you know *all* about trying things out, you wear it then!

SUMATHI

Oh fuck that!

SANTHA

Chicken.

SUMATHI

Fuck you!

SANTHA

Your mouth is a chicken's backside, everything you say is shit, nothing real and just as filthy!

SUMATHI

Oh please, unlike you, I didn't let them breed me up for slaughter. You're the real chicken! Factory injected, cooped up, silent chicken. I'm kampung chicken, at least it looks like I'm free, it feels like I'm free!

SANTHA

Well kampung chicken, tell me, how's freedom looking now that we're both on the dinner table anyway?

Pause. SUMATHI considers this and redraws a little.

SUMATHI

It's the illusion, you know. It's so sticky and sweet with it's promise. Look at this, this grand freedom. This liberation. Women in the office, women climbing the ranks, women becoming leaders. You want us to keep our legs folded, we'll stretch them far and wide. You want us to be seen and not heard, we'll shave our heads and scream in your face. You want us to bear children, you quit your job and raise the baby. But the truth is they are gonna get you some way. And somehow, I'll end up on the dinner table anyway no matter what I do. At least.. I go down blazing. I go down, tits out, fingers up, knowing I

fought for myself, I fought for my right to be here, to live just as fiercely. So yeah,
freedom still looks good.

SANTHA considers this.

Akka, you can't tell me you've never thought about it, not once, what you imagined your
life would be, before they told you what it would be?

SANTHA
(solemnly.) No.

SUMATHI
Not even when you were little?

*SANTHA sighs, reaches behind the sofa and tosses SUMATHI a bottle of Black Label,
already half empty. SUMATHI looks very surprised, even impressed, but doesn't say a
word and takes a swig.*

SANTHA
You will experience 3 deaths before you actually *die-die*. The first when you get your
period, your childhood dies. The second when you get married, your identity dies, and
third when you have your last child, and I mean last child. Sometimes it happens faster,
especially if its a string of girls and no boys. Your purpose dies. No one tells you this. By
the time I was born, my mother was a husk of a woman. How could she have told me?
She was the 9th in her family, how could her mother have? I have had 3 deaths already,
but what's a marriage without a partner right? God is giving me a chance, that's what I
think. Gave me one more life back. Maybe now I'll imagine.

(beat.)

Well, don't be greedy.

SANTHA motions for SUMATHI to toss the bottle back. SANTHA takes a swig.

SUMATHI
Well, shit.

SANTHA
Yeah.

SUMATHI

That's some real shit.

SANTHA

Well.

SUMATHI

So why the fuck are you so cold to me?

SANTHA

What?

SUMATHI

You act like you have no idea who I am, the things I've gone through, that I'm like some alien when you've had just as shit a childhood as me.

SANTHA

I-

SUMATHI

You *knew* what I've been talking about. This whole time. So what the fuck, why are you so mean?

SANTHA

Well I don't agree with your choices around it.

SUMATHI

Ah, my *choices*.

SANTHA

You always have a choice.

SUMATHI

Your husband told you that?

SANTHA

In fact, no. It was my aunt who taught me that.

SUMATHI

She taught you to drink like a fish too?

SANTHA

Ah, now that I got from my solitude of 20 years. But yes, (*waving the bottle, and tossing it back to SUMATHI.*) I learnt that from her.

SUMATHI

She sounds fun, why didn't you get that side from her?

SANTHA

(*ignoring SUMATHI, talking out loud to herself almost.*) She was a bharanathayam teacher, proper woman, everyone in town knew her and respected her, even priests touched her feet. She moved like it too. Like a god. Like Saraswati. No, like the Nataraja himself! Now that woman would give Shiva a run for his money. One time, when I was small, my parents sent me over her house, I can't really remember what for now. I walked into the kitchen and there she was, our proper woman, tipping that black label down straight from the bottle. She stashed it behind the glassware, you know, the one you only use on fancy occasions? Genius. No one ever touches the glassware. (*pause.*) She caught me looking at her. I was so scared, I thought she was going to wallop me but instead, she just screw the cap back on the bottle, looked me in the eye and-

SANTHA raises their index finger to their lips.

with so much seriousness. The way she raised her finger- you know how they say when the Nataraja dances, its so beautiful that when the world ends, you won't see it coming? It felt like that. And so long as I have mine (*points at the bottle.*), I won't see the end coming either. Besides, Athan never knew. He doesn't bother to talk, let alone touch me. Sure, he'll still fuck me, but he won't touch me.

SUMATHI pulls out a joint and lights it. SANTHA notes it and is at first curious, but then conceals it quickly with disgust before SANTHA notices.

SUMATHI

Didn't you use to say, "the pottu is sign that you're wedded. It must always be on your forehead. When you wake up, wash your face, then go to the shrine, pray and put on the pottu. Then go and look upon your husband's face. That way you won't bring

misfortune to your family and yourself. (*Now, viciously mocking, playful*) Wash the pots, mugs and plates with ash and assam before the husband gets up. Don't sit down with the husband at breakfast. Don't sit with him at lunch. Serve him first and eat last. Don't look at any man who talks to you. Keep your head covered with your sari border."

SANTHA

"Pride" and "honour" is code for safety and security. You learn to speak in codes that will keep the man in the house happy and you don't end up dead. (*sighing.*) But it is not true. These are not things that will protect you or me. I did these things to remind me that I am not the one with the problem when he beats me until my saree is ripped to shreds.

SUMATHI

(*Still mocking.*) Sit down, sit up, spin around. Move left, move right, move diagonal, like a game of chess.

SANTHA

Playing the game that men have made, using all the right words and gestures, *and* our body is *still* just a toy to him. Winning was never in the cards. But there is no right way to love a man who doesn't love himself, and certainly does not respect you to love you either. You know, after that night, I stayed in the room and didn't come out for 3 days. I sat there looking at my shredded saree. The fabric that has always held my body so tight, so confident, now in rags. I wondered about what would leaving mean for me. And after 3 days I decided I am unbelievably afraid. In this house that I lived in for 20 years, with this man for 20 years, there is no corner in this place I do not know. No instinct of his that I do not know. Here, it is clockwork. I am evenly matched, even if I will never win. But outside of this house? I looked at you and thought, if you, a modern woman, are in the same sandpit as me, what hope do I have for me?

SUMATHI

(*sighs.*) I asked Arumugam to bring me a married man, Akka. I asked for a married man because they cannot afford to have dirt on their hands. If I am safe, their reputation is safe. He brought me Atha. Athan offered me marriage, I knew every twitch of his muscle by then, as long as I listened to it, I'd be safe.

SANTHA

But did you feel safe?

SUMATHI

I had a roof over my head, I had food in my belly.

SANTHA

But did you feel safe?

SUMATHI

You know, those nights when Athan would take me to town, we would roam the backstreets, the motel I used to work in, trying to “save” girls. Athan would sit there all puffed up as if he stopped the holocaust. All he did was pay the men back what they paid for the girl for and send them away. But even deep down I knew that didn’t change a bloody thing for those girls. They were still there in the streets. They will still have to come back the following night. One time, Athan said there was one girl, wearing a tight skirt and a tight blouse. Hair cut short, cheeks painted red. Coming in with a man, speaking with an American accent. The flier wasn’t even a foreigner. Athan laughed, and I laughed along with him but honestly, when I heard that story, my heart broke. All of that was just code. Code for safety and security, and true safety has no conditions.

(beat.)

I did feel safe with you though.

SANTHA scoffs.

SUMATHI

Your anger and hate towards me was unconditional and honest. You need nothing from me. So yeah, safe.

Beat.

SANTHA

You know, this works out for me either way. He’s gone so I don’t have to leave. I happen to like this house. I like the people here, my neighbours, the Makchik. I’ve got community here. I made home here. I’m not the one who needs to keep running out to try to find it. I watch him and I used to wonder why does he try to catch the flashes in the sky, instead of becoming the sky, rising above everything, silent, watching, waiting? I thought that waiting for him here showed how I had no fear. Whether or not he came home, I would be here, stubborn like his right leg. That patience is a hard rock that has made my life. But rocks sink. And to be fearless, is not waiting at all. Fearless is the sky,

yes, but the sky is far from silent. It is filled with sounds our human ears can barely catch. Sounds of a whole world that lives full and complete, whether or not we are in it.

Pause. SUMATHI tries to control her laughter but lets out a drunken crackle.

SANTHA

What's so funny?

SUMATHI

(trying to compose herself.) No, no.. I'm sorry. That was just..suddenly so poetic!

SANTHA

(annoyed.) Oh, shut up.

SUMATHI

"Fearless is the sky", wah, wah! Vinayagar! Have you possessed my Akka in our finest hour? Such poetry!

SANTHA grabs her saree border and flings it at SUMATHI. SUMATHI continues to laugh, takes the border and wears it over her forehead like a bandana.

SUMATHI

Come, Vinayagar, please! Deliver us, oh Remover of Obstacles! Remove whatever obstacle that has got my Akka's saree caught in a bush. Free my Akka, oh Vinayagar!

SANTHA

Tcha! See the filth in your mouth? Such blasphemy! *(towards the sky.)* My lord, my life, pay no mind to this heathen and her wicked tongue.

SUMATHI

Aah? Heathen, Akka? How is me asking for your freedom so vile? You burn joss-stick, I burn joint-stick. You sing a mantra about how great he is, I cut to the chase. We both ask for help. I didn't even ask for help for myself tadi, I ask for help for you! Who is more holier? Did you even pray for me?

SANTHA

(deadpan, very serious.) Sumathi. I always pray for you.

Pause. Both slowly break into a laugh. SUMATHI offers the joint to SANTHA. SANTHA is hesitant at first, but takes the joint and smokes it. SUMATHI waits expectantly for a reaction but is shocked when SANTHA doesn't react to it. It is clear that this is not their first time smoking weed. SANTHA looks at SUMATHI wickedly, raises her finger to her lips, and passes the joint back to her.

SUMATHI

There is no such thing as silence, it's just that they don't know how to listen. Just because you can't hear something, that doesn't mean it's not real! Even when you think you're silent, you're not.

SANTHA

He brandished those whips, his Stinger, his Firecracker like it was poetic justice. As if by telling some dramatic story that it would elevate his lashing into some metaphor of the oppressed. As if he had no choice. That this was the only way he could save himself. That he could have some sense of control. I ask you what does that change, repeating the same thing that happened to you to the people who actually love you? What good is there in repeating what you know can only break and kill? I never understood.

SUMATHI

Your silence is a scream. I heard you screaming even before you opened the front door that morning I arrived here. I hear you screaming even now. Why not just use your voice then? Why not scream normally?

SANTHA

Every thwack of that Stinger was like a beat. He beat and beat until I could hear the marching. I can still hear the marching. I can hear the sound of trumpets. I can hear my ankles ringing at every stomp of my heel. Whipping me as if I needed his beat. I never have. I never did. Foolish. Foolish! You can say anything you want. Say you don't know any better. Say you were made this way. Say your country made you this way. That is all true. But you know what is also true? Choice. He made a choice, to skin that stingray and cure its bone and turn it into a weapon of his self-loathing. He made a choice to shred my saree in it. He made a choice to marry another woman. He made a choice to hurt. To abuse. That No-Fear Tan, that Six-Faced Arumugam? Accomplices. Even the Machik. Even my father. Even you. Even me!

SUMATHI

Scream Akka, you know you want to! Scream! Scream!

SUMATHI pulls out the Firemaker and hits the chair in the middle. Each hit on the chair becomes a dance beat, to which SANTHA dances Bharathayam, the Stinger in hand, while screaming. SUMATHI is screaming and dancing. This entire movement is done in silence, and in slow motion, until SUMATHI and SANTHA, caught in the sudden mania and euphoria begin to laugh and dance freely. They eventually forget the Firemaker and Stinger completely and are just enjoying themselves.

SUMATHI

(singing.)

Dance through life,
dance through life,
don't be thrown into the pit.
Be with life, be with life
don't be ruled by uncertainty

SANTHA

(singing.)

Clap for life, clap for life,
don't be swayed by authority,
don't be swayed by uncertainty,
don't be swayed by the unholy.

SANTHA and SUMATHI slowly calm down.

SUMATHI

(breathless.) Feels good right?

SANTHA nods tiredly.

SUMATHI

(breathless.) See, Akka? You have all you need to be happy. It's in your body. My body has, and will always be there for me. That's how I know no matter what happens, I will always be happy.

SANTHA

(breathless.) Tell me, kamping chicken, what do *you* really want?

SUMATHI

(breathless, and slowly catches it.) A home. Somewhere I can feel the ground so steady under my feet. Where my heels are never at the ready to run or kick. Where I don't have to fight, or remind myself in any way that I am alive. I'm not just living, but *thriving*.
When I look in the mirror, I see the person I needed to see when I was a little girl. Maybe I'd be a teacher, or a sex educator, something. Or, better yet, I'd run my own sexual service.

SANTHA chokes on their whiskey and coughs.

SUMATHI

Think about it! I know what it's like, I know how fucked it gets, how fucked up men are, who better to ensure the needs and safety of sex workers than a former sex worker? I did sex work because it was practical, and I did enjoy it. And I needed to get by. It's not the work that makes it sub-human. Humans make it sub-human. To be nothing but some creature, bullied and squished. The club owners didn't care, the police didn't care, hell, sometimes they were the clients themselves. My body is everything that I have, the one thing that never failed me. It kept me alive when I suffocated in that house. It kept me alive when I was on the streets. I stand here because of it. I, among many. At least, with me, I can't promise 100% safety, but it'll be sure as hell a lot safer. Lets see.. Oh you know what, it should look like a bathhouse, yes. Not for the clients, but for my *dewis*. I'm going to call my employees *dewis*, is that cultish? Who cares. Where they can get massages and relax, there's great food. And whatever money they receive extra they can keep on top of their salaries which will be a minimum of RM5,000 which.. is not much is it? Hmm.. I'll figure out the numbers. Think Thai Odyssey, but with sex. And only my people get the massage. Yes, that's what I want.

SANTHA raises their finger to say something but SUMATHI cuts them off.

SUMATHI

OH! And also a fully stocked super equipped BDSM room and monthly staff training on latest techniques and kinks around the world.

SANTHA raises their finger again to say something but SUMATHI cuts them off.

SUMATHI

AND! A super high tech security system where there are distress buttons at strategic places in the room and on their person. Also a thorough screening process for all potential clients, you have to book 6 months in advance! Ah! Isn't it perfect? They say modern woman is the sexual woman. But for whom? I don't think that sounds right. Sex is older than man itself, sex is ancient. No. Modern woman is just another word for woman. Saree or a dress, long hair, short hair, no hair, job, no job, all the choice and none, whatever woman is today will change tomorrow, but it will always be in service to old, ancient fight for her freedom, whatever freedom means.

SANTHA is about to say something, but chooses against it and turns to watch the projection on the screen instead.

SUMATHI

What?

SANTHA

I didn't say anything.

SUMATHI

I can hear you, I can hear you thinking.

SANTHA

Nothing.

SUMATHI

Oh, just say it.

SANTHA

I think.. it's a good idea.

SUMATHI

YOU'RE SO JUDGY- wait, what? You think so?

SANTHA

Yeah, you are taking action. You're making it better for people like you, instead of waiting for someone to do it for you.

SUMATHI

Yeah!

SANTHA

Where will you get the money though?

SUMATHI

I'll figure it out, I always have.

SANTHA and SUMATHI watch the screen. SUMATHI holds their hand and briefly squeezes it.

SUMATHI

I'm sorry.

SANTHA

For what?

SUMATHI

I'm sorry you believed performing womanhood would save you. I'm sorry you believed hiding was the answer. I'm sorry you believed that your protection from a horrible man comes from hating a woman. I'm sorry you never got to learn what loving looks like for you.

Beat.

SANTHA

I'm sorry that everyone in your life has failed you. I'm sorry you never had a friend. I'm sorry you've had to struggle and endure so much abuse throughout your life. I'm sorry that marrying him was your best option. I'm sorry you had to tell so many stories to yourself about who he was and how he treated you so that it was bearable. I'm sorry you became a ragdoll, a plaything, because it gave you some clarity to what you were to him. I'm sorry that this is the love you thought you deserved.

BOTH

I'm sorry we both hurt each other.

SUMATHI

I'm sorry you lost a child.

SANTHA pauses and takes a moment.

SANTHA

I didn't know what to feel at that moment. It's not nothing, 4 months - the tiniest human, the size of my palm. I'm grateful that no one was there, that I was alone. A moment to look at what could have been, so sacred between us two, and no one else. It would have been both of us against the world.

(beat.)

I don't know if I wanted a child at all actually. I knew I was supposed to. All the women in my family, I know they had children because it was expected of them. And in a twisted way, it meant I could care for someone who could, maybe love me back. I don't know.

SUMATHI

Another person to save you?

SANTHA

And this time, I'd have the power to emotionally guilt trip them into it.

SUMATHI

And repeat this story like a broken tape recorder? I would dread to think that 20 years from now my child is sitting in a house waiting for their partner to come home because they don't think they can save themselves. Or believe that they must save everyone. I dread to think anyone like you and me is still here. Paavum. Fuck them up while they're young, lagilah they don't stand a chance.

SANTHA

I'm kidding la, I'm not that cruel.

SUMATHI

Aa ya, I'm sure.

(beat.)

Being a child is not easy. You know how everyone thinks like "oh, children! They enjoy everything. Doesn't remember what happened yesterday. Lets today be today." But if that were any bloody true then Athan wouldn't be so obsessed about being bullied in his

childhood, and I wouldn't be bitter about what my parents did to me. No, children never forget. They just try really hard to get on with it. But once you're an adult, there's nothing left to get on about. Get a job, get married then go die, right? Left with your thoughts only. These childhood ghosts return. They haunt. And the child in you finally falls apart.

SANTHA

You know, for someone who runs around with ribbons in her hair, you talk a whole lot about death.

SUMATHI

Dressing up helps, for me at least. The moment I was born I was already gazing at the faces of dead relatives in the altar room. There is so much living in the world, so much to do, to see, to feel, to hold, to touch, to smell, to taste, but all my family knew was grief and deprivation. Grieving over what people would say or the way I looked, or their dashed dreams or honour. Straightjacketing themselves from any pleasure as self constraint and respect. They prepared so much for their death and the after-life, they might as well have been dead. My mother's dutiful bow, her eyes never meeting my father's, her head nodding yes, shaking no, like a well handled puppet. Limbs lifeless until a task presented. I couldn't let that happen to me. Even if I couldn't run away. Even if fate would have me dragged into the same vicious house with a new puppet master, I couldn't become like that inside. Death itself is not scary to me. It is the living dead, like my mother, that is worse than death itself. Eventually cutting myself with vellapai leaves wasn't enough to just remind me that I am alive, I have to look like I am living too. I know you love your sarees and shit, but to me, its just 6 feet of mothballs and funerals, past, present and future.

SANTHA gets up and goes off stage. SUMATHI watches the montage and continues to smoke. SANTHA returns with several very heavy sarees, one of them is their wedding saree, and bags of gold jewellery. SANTHA dumps the sarees on the sofa and starts a fire. They throw their wedding saree in.

SUMATHI

Akka! What the fuck are you doing?! That's your wedding saree!

SANTHA

A wedding saree for a marriage with nothing to show for. Besides, there's more than one way to use a saree.

SANTHA takes a stick and fishes out a burning stone, takes out her slipper and beats it to cool down.

SUMATHI

Wait, is that..?

SANTHA

Gold. You're going to need some of it too for your sex-massage parlour place.

SANTHA and SUMATHI watch the fire for awhile.

SUMATHI

What about you, factory chicken?

SANTHA

Me, ah?

SUMATHI

What do you really want?

SANTHA

To sing.

SUMATHI looks surprised.

SANTHA

Before all of this, I wanted to be a carnatic singer. That's why all these things, our tradition, our gods, these rituals, they mean so much to me. Because they made me feel like I am part of something bigger, I channel something bigger. When I hear the sound of the shruti, I feel my body grow bigger. Bigger than this house. I walk amongst them, these gods. Holy, sacred, safe. And this saree, holds me in every way I need to be, in every way I am meant to be. Both man and woman, my left and right legs, like Ardhanarishvara, like.. Santha.

(The projection behind alludes to their non binary identity, and the grandeur that it sits in their body.)

I will teach music. I'll call it the Lakshmi-Narayana School of Indian Arts. We can have lessons in the hall here. The kitchen is the pantry. We could have classes out at the

back too. They can pay what the can with every class. There should be no price to knowledge, knowledge like this. We could nights of poetry and dance. And love. Every fibre of wood will ring with such.. music. No need to be afraid. No need to be anything other than you.

SANTHA and SUMATHI close their eyes and sit in this imagination for a moment. We hear the echoes of this vision. The sound of the shruti, the thudding of feet, the voices singing, all playing faintly and fades as quickly as wind.

SANTHA

But before all that, we're gonna need a little something to kick us both off. Besides, I think this house could use a renovation.

SANTHA finishes the last of the whiskey and throws the bottle into the fire.

SUMATHI

Akka.

SANTHA

Mm?

SUMATHI

Guess what? It's still the fifth day.

SANTHA

(smiling.) Yeah, you're right. Fifth day, a good number.

SUMATHI

We'll make another beginning, start a new border.

SUMATHI sings softly as they watch the flame burn. Projection plays the last 5 minutes of The Sandpit (1994). Lights out.