A Description of Two Versions of Domestic Space by Three South Asian Women

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Introduction

In "Orientalism, Occidentalism, and the Control of Women," Laura Nader questions the relevance of an ideology of incremental progress for evaluating the position of the Third World woman (Nader 1989:3). In a critique of Western feminist ideology and its application to Eastern societies, Nader argues that through this approach Eastern women remain figures manipulated by competing patriarchies. For Nader these arguments hark back to the colonial asymmetry of power and construction of knowledge that Edward Said critiqued in his 1979 exposé of Orientalist scholars (Said 1979). Orientalism was described by Said as "an accepted grid for filtering the Orient into the Western consciousness." Nader discusses how the Orientalist grid can be used to examine the subordination of both Eastern *and* Western women while Occidentalism as a counter grid may reveal how the East deploys similar strategies for the control of their women at home. The value of Orientalist or Occidentalist constructs as tools of comparison, or as a form of 'comparative consciousness,' is that they help one understand how local elites may construct power hierarchies as they cross national borders (Nader1994). Introducing gender into this opposition locates women as central to the competition of patriarchies as they negotiate positions of power. Nader seems to argue that Western feminism fails to deconstruct these oppositions, but instead situates itself within a progressive ideology that provokes competition between Western and Third World feminist positions. The gendered subject, or woman in the so-called Third World, is caught in a triple strategy of control that perpetuates the legacy of Orientalism. The female Middle Eastern writers cited by Nader describe how the position of the Third World woman becomes central to the emancipatory discourse constructed according to a Western model. Similarly, the hierarchical superiority of Western women and consequently the West is internalized as an emancipatory ideology of Westernized elites and rejected by nationalist or traditionalist movements (Nader 1989:7).

My interest in this paper is to discuss the subjectivized construction of the South Asian woman through an Orientalist lens which, however, is orchestrated by the woman herself in order to relocate her position vis-à-vis a grid of power within her own culture. Subjectivity is here a bodily practice of self-fashioning aiming to claim a position of power. The repositioned subjectivity in this case extends from the body of the woman to her personal space—the architecture of the domestic sphere. Residential architecture becomes a container for this transformation and signifies the terms of its political potential.

Architecture has often been discussed in terms of an Orientalizing of the self; for example, discussions around the recent revival of regional styles based on Orientalist documents. In these discussions, heightened interest in preserving and gentrifying local architectures in colonial contexts is seen as feeding the interest of the local elite and rejuvenating the tourist industry. Peasant artifacts and antique everyday objects are legitimized with the stamp of historic authenticity to promote these processes. For the local elite, power hierarchies are premised on a counter process of self-Occidentalization that makes the act of consuming ones own tradition unnatural. In short it estranges familiar practices so that they can be reviewed or consumed from the appropriate social distance. What takes place is a manipulation of cultural affiliation through what Laura Nader describes as 'comparative consciousness,' however, contained in this case within the same person (Nader 1994:89). While the obvious question would be how self-Occidentalization is different from the banal imitation of Western models (i.e. "Westernization"), I would like to argue that self-Occidentalization in the following examples is an epistemic practice applied on the self in order precisely to preserve the social distance which makes hierarchy possible. It is constructed, therefore, in opposition to forms of Western and Westernized populism. It is a strategy adopted by economic and educational elites trained both in Asia and the West who locate themselves in relation to Euro-centric paradigms that continue to embrace progressive ideologies and their accompanying impediment of gender relations. From this position it is still possible to launch a critique on Orientalist practices. Nevertheless, the location of the West as a constant frame of reference makes it difficult to evaluate Asian patriarchy, gender relations, or the position of women, as autonomous and inherited systems of knowledge, or to use these systems discursively in a critique of Western gender relations.

This paper is thus an experiment in thinking about Asian gender relations in the context of the Orientalism/Occidentalism opposition and its impact on the control of women. I intend to directly address Laura Nader's efforts to identify patriarchy at the heart of the emancipatory discourse of feminism. The paper focuses on the 'Third World woman' as constructed by three parties: Western man, Third World man, Western woman; who are all three caught in a struggle for hierarchical superiority. Nader's work suggests that identifying these processes is the first step towards any useful form of resistance. My interest in this paper is to try and understand how domestic architecture may be analyzed as one of the sites of this struggle. I use a comparative analysis of ideas of domesticity and positions of gender—which shape domestic space and determine its form, use, and ownership—as an opportunity to illustrate the complex relationships through which gender relations become socially situated.

A Description of Two Versions of Domestic Space by Three South Asian Women

The chance discovery of a shop-cum-house owned by an Indian Chettiyar (money lender) in the small Malaysian town of Melaka provided an opportunity for a comparative investigation of the buildings of immigrant Asian groups in a common environment. (The study was conducted in June 1999 at Lorong Hang Jebat, Melaka, at shop house no.113.) Unexpectedly, it also led to an ethnography not of my male subjects but of their female observers. While the comparison of types were confined to a study of 19th Century material culture, the investigation itself brought attention to the significance of gender in the construction of domestic space and the ambivalent cultural positioning of the observers. This experience underlined the difficulties of disengaging subject and investigator within a shared cultural framework in a project of participant observation. Additionally, it forced us to question the validity of Western gender definitions as appropriate normative models.

Melaka, a flourishing 16th Century urban entrepot in the Malayan peninsular, fell to the Portuguese in 1511, thus beginning five centuries of European access and colonization in Southeast Asia. During this period it became the site for large urban migrations from India and China who augmented the local Malay population. By the 19th century, the city of Melaka had expanded to include a number of segregated ethnic neighborhoods abutting the centers of colonial administration (Sandhu & Wheatley 1983). While European's typically lived in bungalows outside the commercial center, the Indians, Chinese, and urban Malays lived in a building type combining residential and commercial uses, known as shop-houses. In the colonial section of the city, European space was divided into public and private, while in the "native" quarter both these uses were combined within the designated spaces. The colonial city was divided up to delimit separate Chinese, Indian, and Malay districts that functioned as small spatial islands within a larger European environment.

Today, in the independent nation of Malaysia, Melaka is a shrinking neighborhood in a small city South of the capital of Kula Lampur. The historic port is no longer visible, having fallen to land reclamation and rapid commercial development. The traces of the historic ethnic neighborhoods remain visible only in the area known as Chinatown whose economic life has been extended by Western tourism. The boundaries of Chinatown become evident through a change in the built urban fabric where the polyglot combination of modern and Islamic architecture gives way to a dense, concentrated ghetto of shop-houses. These shop-houses, which bear physical similarities to American row houses combine both public and private uses and are packed tightly together with common or continuous ground floor verandah spaces. They were introduced to the Straits Settlements by wealthy Chinese merchants—later known as Babas—and were constructed according to a Southern Chinese architectural type by teams of Chinese carpenters. Beyond introducing an architectural form to the region, the importance of the Babas in the context of Melaka

identity is further evident through their marriages to indigenous women who consequently were called Nonyas and the development of this asymmetrical gender relationship into a privileged hybrid ethnic culture. This culture, identified as "Peranaken," is visible in the use of Malay language, food, and dress by what appears to be a Chinese population. The "Baba Nonya house" in Melaka—the house of a wealthy Chinese man married to a Malay woman—is a heavily ornamented dwelling combining two parallel shop-houses. Today, this form is preserved by a domestic museum which houses the objects and furniture the shop-house contained during the 19th Century and offers a guided tour for the price of 10 Ringet (around US $3) from 1 to 4 p.m. on weekdays. The museum is an attempt to both draw in tourists and recapture the life style and (lost) splendor of its once prosperous inhabitants.

As an architectural historian studying the immigrant neighborhoods of the colonial period, the "Baba Nonya house," with its elaborate material culture, provides evidence of the social mobility possible for its historic inhabitants. My hypothesis is that in the colonial period the shop-house was a site for self-fashioning and social display for a particular class of Asians with otherwise limited access to elite forms of Westernization. The "Baba Nonya house" and its invented social culture is most interesting in the subtext of my investigation which tries to understand why these Chinese forms were eagerly appropriated by South Asian male immigrants as appropriate signifiers of economic and social status. The "Baba Nonya house" presents a comparative architectural model within Asian culture whose appropriation by South Asian immigrants needs to be analyzed.

Among the South Asian ethnic groups who availed themselves of the opportunities of the new colonies were a large number of South Indian Tamil moneylenders. Identified as the Chettiyars/Chettys, or Nakarattars (as they identify themselves), they came from the Chettinad district in Tamil Nadu, India. They typically settled in urban environments which facilitated their profession. They were known for their frugality, their traditional methods of conducting business, and their tendency to migrate as single males; families were left in Tamil Nadu. If the "Baba Nonya house" is considered as a historical antecedent for the Peranaken community then the Chettiyar shop-house provides an equivalent frame for a class based comparison in South Asian culture. Gender contributes in important ways to the character of both spaces. The significant difference between the material culture of the two spaces is the ostentatious display of furniture and artifacts in the former and the austere minimalism of the latter.

While these are the parameters of my larger project, I saw my visit as the preliminary stages of an effort at typological research. My intended subjects—freshly painted for the purpose of conservation and tourist consumption—were individual buildings, antique furniture, and souvenir shops, or as in the case of the "Baba Nonya house," a domestic museum. My companions on this visit were two other South Asian women (personal friends) who were on an expedition to buy antique furniture for their own houses. As participants in carving out a the South Asian identity through the

plural ethnic landscape of modern Malaysia, they felt the need to establish historical antecedents and were interested in my research. One of them acted as a translator. (This is perhaps why they fell easily into the role of participant observers.) Our realization of the importance of gender in structuring the environments we were studying reflected on our own understanding of home, gender and ethnic space and revealed the terms of our own socio-cultural adjustments. Because we are South Asian immigrants, the lens of this ethnographic project swung to face us directly as well.

More specifically, the intention of this paper is to understand how the study of architecture as a container of particular types of gender relationships situated in a historic past may help delineate the modern project that constructs Asian women as potential Westerners. The historical presence of legitimate Malay, rather than Chinese women, within the Peranaken domestic space, and the absence of women altogether in the Chettiyar equivalent are highlighted by the passage of modern Asian women in and out of these same spaces. The entry into and appropriation through research of these gendered spaces by observers whose natal relationships are fashioned by this same spatial vocabulary allows us to examine the predicament of a subject who is caught between two sets of relevant, yet conflicting signifiers.

The irony of three women who are on an expedition to buy antique furniture investigating a house/historic antecedent that is empty of it, describes one aspect of our own social transformation. Our histories and personal responses and resistance to progressive ideologies that underwrite contemporary gender positioning, suggests a complexity that straddles the ideology of this East/West divide and requires continuous social adjustments. As the principal investigator of the architectural space and as a South Asian woman struggling to appropriate a Eurocentric methodological, imperative of distance, this research is a preliminary preoccupation with a larger epistomological predicament. My intention is to apply the analytical tools that address Orientalism, Occidentalism, and feminist ideology to a process of self-Occidentalization. Again, taking "self-Occidentalization" as describing a process by which contemporary Asian elites create social distance within Asian culture.

The "Baba Nonya House"

The "Baba Nonya house" in Melaka is a combination of two, three-story tube-like spaces. Each of these narrow linear spaces is just short of one hundred feet deep and around fourteen feet wide with two sky-lit courtyards, two staircases and a ten foot deep verandah style street entrance. While the building frame and party walls between buildings are masonry structures, the interior floors and partitions are made of timber. Ceilings are high—12 to 15—feet and the light from the courtyards can be seen from any point in the structure. Consequently, they are well ventilated.

On removing one's shoes at the door, one is escorted through the "Baba Nonya house" by the museum assistant. The front rooms have large mirrors and ornate timber screens as well as marble topped and heavily ornamented furniture. The

floor has a checkered marble tile that is cold to the foot's touch and dour family portraits adorn the walls. The first three rooms are living spaces with arrangements of chairs and tables for guests and family members. The ante-room flanks the brightly lit courtyard where intricate tile work decorates a small ornate fountain. A wrought iron spiral stair leads up to the second floor while full height decorated screens divide the interior. The trims around windows, the sashes, and the transoms are heavily ornamented with what appear to be traditional Chinese motifs ranging from calligraphy to familiar mythical animals such as lions, swans, or dragons. The kitchen spaces and the washrooms are at the rear of the house and are arranged around a second courtyard with a door to an alleyway beyond. The kitchen is a large airy space. The upper floors look down into the courtyard through timber shutters. Four or five sleeping spaces on this floor are furnished with heavy decorated beds with netted curtains. Ornate furniture is found on every floor and include delicate chairs and tables, large Chinese Almiras and chests, and an abundance of exquisitely embroidered linen. On table tops and inside glass fronted cupboards various every day objects such as hair brushes, hand mirrors, porcelain tableware, and clothing exquisitely painted, inlaid or embroidered have been placed on display. One is left with the impression that every visible surface has received the attention of a superior craftsman. Although the "Baba Nonya house" is a highly constructed interpretation of a life style from the past, the opulence of the occupants and their Chinese influence is evident in the architectural treatment.

Who were the Peranaken community and what was it that gave rise to their financial success during the colonial period? In his discussion of *Creolized Chinese Societies in Southeast Asia,* William Skinner uses the term "third social system" to describe the mixed racial group that is identified under the racial category of Mestizo or Peranakan (Skinner 1996:65). Here race is interchangeable with ethnicity since no categorical distinctions are made using skin color. Skinner describes how in the early colonial period the economy was truncated in a way that privileged Chinese or Indian ethnic groups over the indigenous population. Mixed ethnicity, previously subordinate to the ruling indigenous classes, rose in social status under the colonial system. Skinner constructs his argument primarily through examination of the Creolised Chinese communities of Southeast Asia in the Philipines, Java, Melaka, Penang and Singapore; stressing that in each case the mix of Chinese and indigenous elements had "stabilized into a tradition." He further states that this Creole tradition was clearly distinguishable from the Chinese or indigenous societies and was created through the inter-marriage of Chinese immigrants with indigenous women. This distinct identity was further accentuated because the offspring of these marriages were not incorporated into indigenous society, but encouraged and continued to reinforce Creole culture. This factor contributed to the rapid growth of the Creole population. Skinner shows us how in the Straits settlements, the Dutch colony of Melaka had 850 Chinese households in 1678, but had increased to 2,161in 1750 when the British took over. Creolization took place in the domestic realm of food, clothing, and housing while religious practice remained fairly stable. A significant change in the social

structure was observed in the shift from a patrilineal to a bilateral kinship system (Skinner 1996).

The core of Skinner's argument of a "third social system" is that the obstacles to assimilation were self-imposed by an established cultural identity that saw indigenization as a loss of social status. This argument of social orientation towards an ascending individualization depends on the following assumption: the culture of the male immigrant (or Creole) needed to be continuously reproduced by the indigenous female partner. One of the reasons given by Skinner for the absence of female immigrants and the marriage of Chinese immigrants to indigenous women is the Chinese State policy against female migration. However, the hierarchical distinction of an ascending individuality is not based on racial superiority but on the allocation of power. The Chinese thus sought to retain their (Chinese) identity in societies where the power structure was truncated by European intervention. The demotion of the indigenous elite in such a case meant that no advantages would be gained through adapting an indigenous identity. In regions where assimilation did occur—such as Thailand and Cambodia—Skinner argues that the indigenous hierarchy remained in control and the society was not truncated. There it was to the advantage of the immigrant group to form alliances with and take on the identity of the indigenous people. A second reason given by Skinner for the development of the "third social system" is religious difference. The Chinese religion that was based on Taoist principles and cultural practices such as ancestor worship, and eating pork was radically different from the Islamic religion that forbade eating pork and practiced male circumcision. Again, in places like Thailand we find a similarity between Chinese and Thai Buddhist practices that allows for easy assimilation.

How are we to approach this concept of a "third social system"? Is the idea of an ascending individuality of a dominant male culture creolized through marriage to indigenous women an appropriate model for the creation of an autonomous tradition? Skinner reveals to us that the "third social system" was in fact recognized and provided advantages by early Colonial governments. Colonial policy, taxation, and revenue farming was adapted to include the Creole community as a distinct group with an equally distinct legal system. The opium farm system that was controlled by the Chinese, and the relations between Indian Chettiyar moneylenders and Colonial merchant banks, are some examples of advantages that were available. The Creole community thus emerged as a trading group outside the indigenous corvee structure. Their relative social position was determined by the policies of the Colonial government. At this early stage of commercial capitalism where Colonial policy was more personalized, the actual ethnicity of this group appears to have been unimportant. Its function as a commercial mediator between the Colonizer and the Colonized was an adequate identification. We may observe that the "third social system" deployed the trade based social relationships of the indigenous corvee structure. These groups used methods of trading which were often inaccessible to the Colonial government. As long as Colonial policy exploited existing commercial structures they were essential as mediators. They were able thus to grow into a

relatively advantaged elite class vis-à-vis the indigenous population, which envied their position. The industrial capitalism of the late colonial period caused large labor migrations from India and China that created discrete racial groups under colonial control. The racial policy of the colonial government during the 19th Century changed to accommodate these demographic changes. With the rationalizing of the Colonial structure there were attempts at essentializing and classifying these communities via categories of ethnicity and religion (Skinner 1996:92).

The Chettiyar Community in South India

Unlike their Chinese counter parts, the Chettiyar community in Malaya resisted assimilation for two reasons. First, their loyalties were firmly bound with kinship groups in South India. For them, Malaya was a business venture. This sharp division of public and private lives was reiterated in the Indian context in the patriarchal organization of the family around business interests in organizing domestic architecture. The Chettiyar house in South India as described by David Rudner was divided sharply into male and female territories with associated public and private functions (Rudner 1994:notes to plates 9-12). What is important to realize in an analysis of the Chettiyar house in South India is that it was built to accommodate a number of conjugal families within a larger joint family system. The lineage was strictly patriarchal with the father passing down both the control of business and domestic affairs to his eldest son in a strict hierarchy based on male seniority that extended for several generations (Rudner 1994: notes to plates 9-12). Rudner provides us with a detailed account of how a young boy would be trained within the Chettiyar system:

> from an early age a young boy learned multiplication tables, memorized formulas for computing compound interest in a traditional Tamil style on the verandahs of their Chettinad homes probably from a member of the family, from about the age of ten he learned how to make ledger entries in a business ledger/ journal with information received periodically from the families business offices overseas. Before he reached his teens he left home to be apprenticed as an errand boy to his family's business agent in a business office abroad. He returned home wearing gold rings, diamond earrings etc... talismans of his trade. [1994:115]

He was now ready to seek employment with another family, which would enable a business alliance and later a marriage to a business partner's daughter. Although very little information is given about the upbringing of daughters Rudner suggests that marriage was an important avenue through which Chettiyars formed business alliances. They practiced a form of territorial endogamy through which they expanded their mini empires (Rudner 1994:106). Following the British flag, the

Chettiyars are said to have arrived at the newly opened ports of the Straits Settlements in the first third of the 19th Century and quickly moved to dominate the opium market by extending credit to Chinese traders (Rudner 1994:85). By the 1870s and 1880's they financed most of the opium trade in Singapore and Penang and monopoly as intermediaries between British exchange banks and Chinese traders. Through foreclosures, defaults, and direct purchases, the Chettiyars gradually acquired large plantations and tin mines in Malaya which further increased with acquisitions made during the 1930's depression (Rudner 1994:85).

In his chapter "A collective spirit of capitalism," Rudner critiques a comparison of Chettiyar bankers and Weber's Protestant capitalists. Two points most frequently made when comparing these two groups who are seen to exemplify the systematic and methodical pursuit of wealth by individuals are that the Chettiyars pursuit of wealth was facilitated by a range of practices, including accounting procedures, marriage alliances, worship of deities, and the customs related to all these activities that were directed towards their professions. The second point is that of their Spartan banking offices, and concomitant frugality. These two features are compared to the individual and the ascetic construction of the Calvinist doctrine, where economic gain sought not personal rewards but public good. Rudner suggests, however, that while for the Chettiyars profit making and moral duty did intersect they were radically different from Calvinist principles. The Chettiyar God had multiple forms and could be approached for direction in worldly goals, while their actions were directed for the benefit of their specific social group. The groups were marked by collective ritual practices that directed the way business was done and was an amalgam of collectivism and rationality rather than individualism. According to Rudner their concern with orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy additionally makes the moral argument very different (Rudner 1994:106). In order to suggest that the Chettiyars were sacralizing their "mercenary" practices through an increased frugality, it would be necessary to understand whether Chettiyar or indeed Indian morality was predicated on such measures.

What has been discussed so far are two contrasting models of capitalist practice that are rooted in particular social constructs and deviate considerably from the rational individualistic model. While the communities in their adaptability, their mobility, and overall economic success embody important ingredients of what one might call "modernity" it seems this modernity deviates from the prescribed European version. Moreover, the projected "rationality" of the European example itself is questionable. Let me return to the question of the treatment of gender.

If we are to analyze the role of women in both of these Asian examples of domestic space according to the Western definitions of gender equality, the asymmetries are obvious. In the colonial period, where journeying by sea was a hazardous prospect, these asymmetries rested partly on practical considerations. That the social systems they developed were patriarchal and rest on a male monopoly over public life is evidenced from the confinement of females to the domestic sphere. What

one needs to understand, however, is how women in these contexts operated *within* these patriarchal parameters. In the Peranaken shop-house as has been previously described, indigenous women took on a new ethnicity bestowed on them through marriage to a more advantaged ethnic group with an established tradition. Chinese furniture, decoration, and artifacts of urban life dominate domestic space although daily practice seems determined by indigenous culture. Cultural capital in public display was accumulated in the terms set by the patriarchal group, but collective and communal interests were ceded to the local culture.

In the case of the Chettiyars, the imitation of exterior architectural forms of Peranaken buildings present a competing urban expression of Asian modernity understood in a local idiom. Inside, however, we are faced with the austere interiors of the traditional Chetty business space that is part of their ideological inheritance. The absence of women from the Chetty houses in Malaya seems to signify the lack of female mobility and the patriarchy of business practice within Chetty culture. Should the women too have migrated to Malaya along with their partners to apply themselves to the family business? What supports would women have found to ensure their increased liberty in an alien environment? An image of the same woman remaining at the center of a complex familial and social structure in Chettinad enjoying liberties that she both understands and is able to manipulate is an equally empowering picture. As argued by Carla Makhluof in the case of Yemenese women, it is the loss of such solidarities that most affect the lives of women (Nader 1989:20). Let us shift now to what we identify as the "contemporary" period.

The Participants

Enter three South Asian women in short hair and Western dress seeking a past embodied in antiques, buildings, and furniture. The search for the past, which is prompted by a sense of loss in itself, is a nostalgia evoked by their modernization. What they seem to have is what the Chettiyar woman did not have—mobility, individuality, and business acumen. While they function outside the patronage of one particular definition of patriarchy the question we are investigating is whether they are constructed by another one. The issue links us to the historic construction of self by patriarchal systems through the manipulation of gender. What we see here is how education and rationalization allows modern women to practice this manipulation on themselves without recognizing their complicity in gendering processes.

The three women who enter the Chetty shop-house whom I will refer to as W1, W2, and W3 are complex representatives of a particular version of modernity that can be understood through their own interpretations of domestic space and how they see its liberating potential. I will briefly discuss each of their personal histories in relation to the spaces they occupy keeping in mind the sharp contrast with the Chetty model. Because I myself am W1, I will refer to the three women in the first person plural and act as their spokeswoman. What is common among all of us is that we are

in our early thirties, of South Asian ethnicity, and trained in the West as professionals. All three of us, however, are acutely conscious of astrological beliefs that are embedded in our domestic culture.

W1 is your quintessential migrant professional. She is a Sri Lankan national. She studied in Sri Lanka and completed her training as an architect in the US She has been working in Singapore for three years. She is unmarried, has studied and worked outside Sri Lanka but her family and friends remain in Sri Lanka. Her parents' marriage was arranged by caste and ethnic group and they are both Protestants. Her experience of domestic space for the past ten years has been in a rented room with shared accommodation—what her mother anxiously describes as living in stranger's houses. She has her own bedroom but shares kitchen and bathroom with other tenants. She has little choice over determining her environment.

W2 is a Malaysian national of Indian descent born to a migrant Indian father and a Malaysian -Indian mother. Her schooling was in Malay but she was trained as a finance broker in London. Because her parents broke tradition and formed a romantic attachment across caste and ethnicity (North versus South Indian) her family has been alienated from their Indian relatives. She herself has never been to India and she identifies more with her mother's culture. Her father worships Hanuman and her mother worships Krishna within the Hindu pantheon. She believes that her sister's marriage to a Keralite has created strong affiliations with a traditional Malayalli belief system. (The Mallayali ethnic group originate in Kerala.) She is single and lives alone in an urban terrace house that she recently purchased. She has furnished her unit to her own taste with a mixture of Eastern and Western furniture.

W3 is an American national born to Sri Lankan migrants. Her schooling was in the U.S. and in the U.K. where she met her spouse, a Malaysian of Chinese and Sri Lankan descent. She worked as a corporate lawyer in New York until her marriage, when she moved to Malaysia. She has two children. Her parents are Roman Catholic but she has embraced Hinduism since her marriage so as to bring up her children in this same tradition. She recently completed renovations and additions to a large two story bungalow which she bought and converted into a gallery/residence for a home run business as an art dealer. Her interest is in promoting Malaysian and Sri Lankan artists and creating an environment/lifestyle that is both modern and tropical. She has furnished her home with numerous antique pieces that range from peasant objects to valuable artifacts suited to the gallery environment.

While all three participants are attempting to rationalize their identities according to Westernized formulae they are faced with numerous cultural contradictions. While Westernization is evident in the act of choosing individualized domestic spaces that need not accommodate males the spatial constructions are not self consciously gendered like their antecedent examples. The homes of the three participants do enable a form of existence that seems independent of patriarchy even if borrowing from established images of domesticity. The first two spaces can easily be occupied by single men, while the bungalow accommodates a family of a husband and

two boys—three male members. The modern domestic space in its ability to be accommodating appears gender neutral. What is critical to this construction of a Westernized space is a narrative of use that may suggest an alternative appropriation. The rice and curry meals cooked and eaten within the space, the removal of footwear at the door, the shrine room, the relationships between friends and family members, the languages spoken within the space, and the customs and traditions celebrated bring us closer to the Chetty example. To recognize the way in which constructions of self are used to negotiate social positioning requires analyzing a space that is perceived as fixed in cultural time and representative of a recognizable social position. The Chetty shop-house provides us an opportunity for self-recognition.

The Chettiyar house

Gaining entry into the Chettiyar shop-house took a degree of negotiation. I first made several inquiries of nearby establishments and held a brief discussion with a Chettiyar lawyer who proved to be a nephew of the owner. He suggested we enter the shop-house of Mr. Sethu because it was the only house in a row of five in which food was prepared and so was open to female visitors. Mr. Sethu was a gentleman in his seventies, neatly attired in white shirt and dhoti with a differential demeanor. Our awareness of his obvious wealth—he owned a three story turn of the century shop house in the heart of Melaka—made us in turn, self-conscious and aware of our intrusive presence. Because none of us could speak fluently in Tamil, I, as the principal investigator W1, directed my questions through W2, who spoke with him in Malay and acted as translator. Mr. Sethu is fluent in both languages. Above the entrance was a picture of Lakshmi, the Goddess of wealth, garlanded in dry mango leaves. Similar pictures marked each of the five shop house entrances. We asked permission to photograph the interior and take notes that was met with amusement rather than resistance.

It is important here to understand that our presence was legitimized by contact with the nephew, whose name along with our own South Asian identity, provided the key to our entry into these private spaces. We entered the space as South Asian women deffering to the goodwill of the proprietor. Entry into the house of a stranger without invitation or social introduction would be for us entirely inappropriate. Mr. Sethu's resemblance to our own grand uncles made us acutely aware of this transgression. Standing at the doorstep we attempt to make amends by familiarizing Mr.Sethu and his partner with our own personal narratives, South Asian origins, and engaged both of them in our own larger project of historic retrieval.

The entrance floor and business space of a Chettiyar establishment is a long open hall with a low platform covering two thirds of the floor, leaving just a three foot passage to the rear. On this platform the Chettiyars sit cross-legged with their accounting boxes in front of them in which they keep their books and ledgers. Behind them are two almiras for storage of safes and along the wall are long low cupboards.

Mr Sethu tells us he has been in Malaysia for the past 50 years. His business is managing palm oil and rubber plantations for numerous Chettiyar businesses. He says they once had a business in Pagan in Burma before the Burmese expulsion of Indians.

Mr. Sethu takes us to the interior of the first floor; it is sixty feet in length, interrupted by a single courtyard which separates the business space from a large floor level kitchen. To eat his midday meal, a man sits on a raised platform covered with woven mats. In the courtyard is a waterspout for washing, while the kitchen leads to the rear yard and to the street beyond. Compared to the "Baba Nonya house," with its three heavily furnished living spaces, the Chettiyar interior may appear semi-abandoned. At this point we arrive at the threshold of working and living space—the entry into the upper floor sleeping quarters. At the foot of the stairs we automatically begin removing our shoes, Asian fashion. It is a natural habit that we all follow in our own "Westernized homes" partly for reasons of hygiene. Mr. Sethu however halts this process and declines our consideration. The act of removing our shoes makes the entry into his private space take on an intimate social meaning and he would prefer that we maintain our distance as Western researchers. The intimacy and cultural understanding that brings us into the private spaces must be masked in order to allow our presence.

A long single wooden flight of stairs takes us to the next level where we are surprised to find there is no furniture. We assume that the inhabitants must sleep on woven mats that have been rolled up and stored away elsewhere in a cupboard. We find that similar to the "Baba Nonya house," although the exterior is a masonry construction the entire interior is of timber. Mr. Sethu describes his first years in Melaka while showing us around the empty spaces. He recalls a time when this three storey building housed 50–70 people. Now he says this building houses three people. He says the shop-house was built by the Chettiyars at the turn of the century. (His nephew informed us that what was distinctive about the Chettiyar buildings was their use of egg shell plaster.) Up another flight of stairs, we arrive on the third floor where a door leads on to a open terrace. From here we are able to look down in to the rear alley on one side and into the interior courtyard on the other. The added height gives us views across the rooftops of Melaka from where we can see the Chettiyar temple. The front room on the third floor has a low dresser with a shrine composed of three religious pictures. A single clothesline is strung across this room carrying cloths and towels. Apart from this there is no other evidence of furniture. Tall windows at the front edge of each level open into the street and provide views to the river.

When we inquire about Mr. Sethu's family he says he has a wife and children in India who he visits several times a year. His children are educated and have desk jobs and work with computers. He seems to feel that his is the last generation to conduct his profession in this manner.

What we witness is the demise of a gendered space which time seems to have frozen, leaving us with a South Asian antecedent. The freezing of time, however, is constructed artificially, by our own internalization of Western progress, which

presents itself as chronological and incremental. Our notion of elites has traveled considerable from this austere self-presentation to a model that represents itself through furniture and decoration. We could argue that although this elaborate model is available in the Peranaken house, what we the investigators are appropriating in our own domestic spaces is a Westernized individualized version of consumptive elitism. Why have we created a Western self to differentiate ourselves from these available models? If our only objection to our historic past was its patriarchy, how have we adapted our domestic architecture to alter that perception? What is it about the arrangement of space in a Westernized domestic interior that allows us to believe it is gender neutral?

Discussion

The importance of questioning models of gender equality and emancipation that are being adapted by Asian women needs to be analyzed against a Western interpretation of female exclusions. The exclusion of women from political and economic life that is an issue within feminist discourse also facilitated the formation of female solidarities within domestic space which are absent from the more inclusive Westerns models. As argued by Makhlouf, the romantic ideal of a male and female partner and a nuclear family unit is not necessarily liberating and may increase a woman's dependency on her partner. Examining the contemporary limitations on female empowerment she suggests that in fact "the key to women's changing positions is the transfer of solidarity from women to husbands" (Nader 1989:20). The increasing presence of women in urban public life, and the emancipatory ideology that accompanies their appearance, often conceals the contradictions of their new predicaments.

In Malaysia the emergence of a female labor force separate from the natal unit and the community, and the consequent circulation of young women in the city, has brought into question the terms of these emancipatory models. Aihwa Ong writing on Muslim feminism and citizenship in Malaysia addresses the rising incidents of baby dumping that is related to the rising number of casual liaisons facilitated by this phenomenon. She describes how Islamic fundamentalists have revived patriarchal arguments for polygamy as a solution for this problem. Here it seems that monogamy takes on a different significance (Ong 1999). The single woman, the unmarried woman or the unwed mother, are constructed as a threat to the ideal of a woman defined through her place within the patriarchal system. Despite her new found independence, the woman's claims to ownership of her own body and sexuality is still considered to be illegitimate. Neither the social nor the legal structure is adapted to enable these claims or to offer the accompanying protections. In Ong's description, even in arguments supporting Muslim feminism in Malaysia, female sexuality continues to remain an issue that is not the natural privilege of the woman (Ong 1999:365).

Paradoxically, Malaysia along with Singapore, Hong Kong and the Middle East is one of the primary destinations of South Asian maids seeking two to three year terms of employment. As young women venturing into modern urban environments, they too experience an increasing individuation. Versions of this modernity are mediated through these migrant workers to their rural environments with the circulation of labor. In Singapore and Hong Kong their presence is articulated spatially in their Sunday off-days, when large gatherings of women form into several intimate ethnic groups in urban public spaces. The mobility of these women is promoted not by their education or their gender equality but paradoxically because of their domesticity and their role as care givers. Their publicity is in fact enabled by the private domestic space that defines their vocation. Once again solidarities within groups are formed by these Sunday gatherings that allow advice and support to be exchanged and have led to the formation of localized labor unions. While it is not unusual to see a few men and women mixing within these groups, female solidarity is a form of defense and protection in an alien environment. What we have before us is a gendered space constructed by and for the empowerment of single women migrant workers.

Female mobility of the types described above thus questions the nationalist ideology of women within patriarchy as the preservers of culture. South Asian maids who remain in domestic spaces, yet work out of agencies and form unions, blur the separation of public and private. Their appearance in public as a gendered group seeking community mitigates to some degree the force of their individuation. The forms of solidarity described here are perhaps the contemporary equivalent of 19th Century male immigrant strategies in environments where public agency was limited by colonial spatial segregation. Both the Peranaken and the Chettiyar shop-houses in their discrete environments were examples of such segregated spaces. Although it is clear that we can trace close parallels between patriarchy and colonial strategy, my objective is to articulate strategic distancing within the same gender.

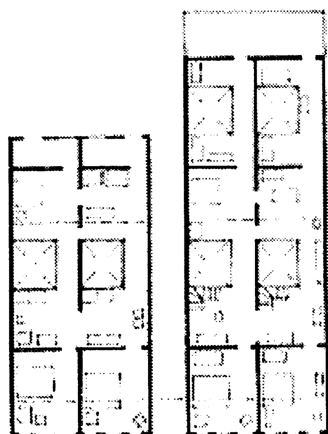
The discussion of the 19th Century Asian elite and the gendered division of public and private spaces helps us revisit the conflation of these categories in contemporary experiences. What I am questioning is the assumption that Western models of economic and social individuation enable female emancipation. I would like to suggest instead that the solidarities achieved by these South Asian maids are in fact unavailable to their elite ethnic counterparts who seek equality on Western terms. The modernity that is mediated through Asian women workers is dependent more on their ability to contribute as women to their natal or extended family units rather than through a blurring of gender roles or expectations. Physical transformations of domestic space at home would not extend beyond a popular Western clothing style or a few consumer items.

The usefulness of a Western feminist ideology deployed by Asian elites seems less one of morality or progress but rather an effective means of creating social distance. The education of the self through Western ideas that I have called self

Occidentalization is a strategy that is being used in this case by a wealthy minority to counter the rapid dissemination of Western populism within a larger population. In a time when a considerable number of rural women have become trans-national travelers to Westernized locations and participate in the global market place, such strategic positioning on the part of Asian elite women seems additionally to be an act of self preservation. Curiously this self-education and social distance is manifested through a nostalgia for a traditional past, or a categorization of familiar traditions as belonging to the past, in the context of a confidently Westernized self location. Antique furniture re-entering domestic space signifies this privileged access and describes the contemporary split between colonial and popular forms of Westernization.

The consumption of the past as an act of modernity carries us into the post-modern moment. The ease with which three South Asian women expect to travel through an 'out-moded social space' and their enthusiasm for consuming this same space as history is interrupted by an intrusive avuncular presence. They find themselves precariously positioned at the threshold where a dying past confronts a scavenging present. What the Chettiyar shop-house exposes through its legitimate claim on contemporary space and time, are the problems faced by a gendered subject on a project of self-Occidentalization.

Figures



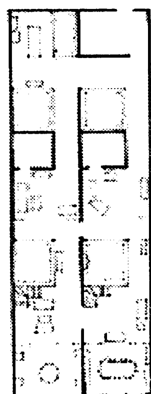


Fig. 1. Baba Nonya House

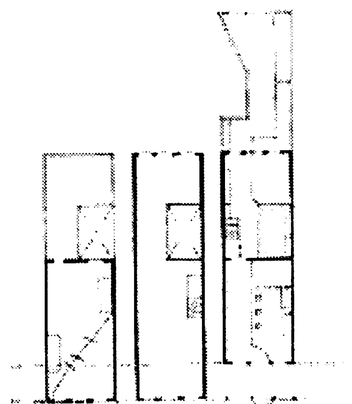


Fig. 2. Chettiyar House

(Sketches made on site by author. The Baba Nonya House did not permit measuring on site so these are conceptual sketches.)

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