

WHERE HAVE ALL THE “WOMEN” GONE? A CONSIDERATION OF GENDER AND LITERARY PRODUCTION IN *SIGIRI* GRAFFITI

Every spectator mediates a text to his or her own reality.

(Trinh T. Minh-Ha, 93)

. . . . [A]rt is not man’s creation, it is a product . . . and the producer is not a subject centered in his creation, he is an element in a situation or system.

(Pierre Macherey, 60)

There seemed to have been no doubt in the minds of many (predominantly male) visitors to *Sigiriya* between the 8th and 10th centuries, who left a record of their thoughts for posterity on the Mirror Wall, that the female forms of the 5th century A.D. *Sigiri* frescoes represented women. Even the identities of the women were settled in many visitors’ minds. Their fascination with the subject of the paintings was such that 666 graffiti, out of a total 685 so far gathered and deciphered, have the paintings as their principal subject although *Sigiriya* would have afforded many other marvelous sights to titillate the imaginations of the visitors judging by what it has to offer visitors even now. But as one visitor, who seems to know the preference of many visitors, put it: “Having gone (there) in an exceedingly pleased manner, we shall come (back) having looked at those long-eyed ones.’ (So thinking) everyone runs to *Sigiri*. Having seen (them, their) minds, too, become rejoiced” (graffito no. 195).¹ The question is why.

Contemporary scholars who have made the *Sigiri* artifacts their objects of study, however, do not seem to have considered this particular question worthy of inquiry.² Although many scholars have been attentive to the subject-matter of the

¹ All references to *Sigiri* graffiti are from Senerat Paranavitana, *Sigiri Graffiti*, Vols. 1 & 2, London: Oxford UP, 1956.

² Malathi de Alwis is an exception. In her article titled “Sexuality in the Field of Vision: the discursive clothing of the *Sigiriya* frescoes,” she mentions the obsession of male inditers with the frescoes and the “extremely erotic and sensual language” that they use to describe the women (104). However, she makes only a passing reference to the graffiti produced by male visitors during the 8th and 10th centuries. Her focus in the article is twentieth-century scholarship on the frescoes *after* their “*re-discovery*” by HCP Bell in the British colonial period. She argues that the seeming unwillingness of twentieth century Lankan male

frescoes and the graffiti, their efforts have been expended more in extending our understanding and appreciation of the texts in their achieved form rather than in inquiring into the conditions which enable the texts to come into being in that particular form. So Ediriweera Sarachchandra, in "Sinhala Literature and the Concepts of Sanskrit Poetics," invites us to draw the criteria for assessing *Sigiri* graffiti from Sanskrit poetics because *Sigiri* graffiti, like all Sinhala literature of the classical period, draws on Sanskrit literature for inspiration (74). Rev. Talalle Dhammananda (xviii) and Nandasena Mudiyanse (174) make only a passing reference to the fact that the principal subject of these compositions is the female forms on the paintings while Anuradha Seneviratne suggests that the inditers' choice of subject-matter is only "natural" considering their (masculine) gender (20). Senerat Paranavitana, whose contribution to the scholarship on *Sigiri* graffiti is invaluable, has not chosen to focus on them much as cultural texts, confining himself instead to the compilation and translation of the inscribed verses while writing at length about the paintings. Ananda Coomaraswamy and Nandadeva Wijesekara have, on other hand, by-passed the subject of the graffiti altogether in order to find an explanation for the subject of the paintings in the aesthetic history of that period. They inform us that the female forms on the frescoes were intended to have *semiotic* rather than a *mimetic* function because it was not uncommon during that time period to use the female form to embody abstract concepts (Coomaraswamy, 163; Wijesekara, 271). These two scholars do not consider it their business to inquire into how gender politics in the material sphere might govern such a use of the female form in the aesthetic sphere just as they give no explanation as to why so many of the inditers chose to see the female figures of the frescoes as the *object* of representation, rather than the *means* of representation.

In this paper, I would like to engage in a reading of the *Sigiri* graffiti which foregrounds the extent to which they are implicated in, and mediated by, the ideological imperatives that govern life in the material sphere. I see the *Sigiri* graffiti as a male-initiated discourse about the place of women in that particular "sex/gender system" (Gayle Rubin, 15). I would like to propose in this paper that it is the *unusual* place of the "women" on the rock which lends urgency to this discourse on "woman." Literature, as any other art form, however, has the capability both to inscribe and expose the ideological imperatives which govern textual production. Therefore, while the paper considers the ways in which men's access to authoritative and authorizing discourses about themselves and about women hint at the "real" inequalities in power which inflect relations between the genders in that

scholars to recognize "the overt sexuality and eroticism of the women in the frescoes" is explicable in terms of a nationalist project to locate the frescoes within an unbroken Sinhala Buddhist heritage, a project that requires the scholars to "clothe" the frescoes discursively.

particular social system, it presents this project as incomplete. Instead, “women,” real and imagined, stand for the unstable sign, always escaping the attempts by men to fix meaning, to make them occupy the status of the stable signifier that constructs a self-affirming “other.”

In every society where women have little or no access to the symbolic domain in order to articulate the fact of their being independently of men, the versions of their realities produced by men take on the appearance of the uncontested truth about women. In such situations, our understanding of the realities of those innumerable female subjects who have their being in the “real” world beyond the male-dominated aesthetic domain can only be partial and incomplete. What the men *thought* they saw in those five hundred or so “women” who, at one time, adorned the western face of the rock were ideal female social subjects. What they, in fact, saw was an opportunity to construct their *versions* of the ideal female social subject. The *Sigiri* “women,” in a way, were already the perfect female social subject because they could not literally move or speak unless authorized by the men to do so. Unlike the “real” women with whom the men shared a particular sex/gender system, these “women” could not contradict the male constructions of their subjectivities either through word or deed. To the men, however, the *Sigiri* “women” did not appear as a set of inanimate frescoes which owed their presence on the rock to a mixture of pigments on plaster but as soft and pliable flesh which could be molded to give voice to male imaginings regarding the women of their own society. In order to do this, they enter into a negotiation with the artist whose powers of representation are so great that he is able to accommodate the imaginings of any man. One visitor, who refused this invitation to re-imagine gender relations that the *Sigiri* “women” offered, still perceives the creator of the frescoes as the initiator of this invitation. So he says:

Lest this painter depict (them), I came here having kept behind my thoughts.
Where are those who do not know this among (the people) who are come to
the midst of the golden-colored ones on the mountain side? (no. 161)

The men’s desire to perceive themselves as mere interpreters of the artist’s intentions, or to attribute to the artist the capacity to embody every man’s intentions, suggest an inability to acknowledge the self-investment of the writers in the constructions of femininity that they produce. If the female figures owe their presence on the rock to aesthetic conventions of the time, as Commaraswamy and Paronavitana point out, what the male inditers saw on the rock was an opportunity to construct socially-desirable versions of the feminine. And the men wished those “real” women on the plains surrounding the *Sigiri* rock to emulate the ideal women they saw on the mountain top as in graffito no. 133 where the inditer imagines a

conversation between his mistress and himself. To his mistress' observation, "(It is as if) these people came to this rock, having heard that there are those who behave so as to meet their desires," he, therefore, replies: "There are (indeed) those who behave (in such a manner), though not ladies like you." The man's reply to his mistress takes the shape of a friendly warning to those "other" women of the "real" world who fail to conform to the desired version. While the male inditers of the graffiti therefore see the *Sigiri* "women's" function as mimetic—that is, reflections of authentic female subjects who unproblematically fulfill every male desire—I see the "women's" function as semiotic. In other words, the "women" of *Sigiriya* are signifiers of male desire—of male expectations towards the women with whom they share a particular social system.

The inscriptions on the Mirror Wall, then, capture the unceasing efforts by male visitors to fix the meaning of the "women" on the rock surface and, thereby, to determine the place of "real" women in the socio-cultural systems that they both belong to. Therefore, to set up an artificial barrier between poetry and life, to say that the *Sigiri* graffiti would fail as poetry if their authors "... made them a source for the political, economic, or social conditions of the times in which they lived" (Paranavitana ccii), is to forget that artists are all too human and become human in particular socio-cultural contexts. This is not to collapse the boundaries which separate art from life, but to suggest that art feeds on life, and that it intervenes in, and reflects, the realities of its time in a number of different ways. Graffiti no. 349 illustrates very clearly how the stance that the inditer adopts towards the paintings is influenced by his location in a particular social system. In this composition, a certain friar makes the encounter with the frescoes an occasion to offer thinly-veiled advice to women on what their "natural" place in society should be:

As if an Areca tree, laden with bunches of nuts, were to stand at a
distance from the lake,
Even so, O faithless ones, this ruined wall has been taken (by you)
as your abode though the house is there in the vicinity.

A woman taking up abode outside of the walls of the house is as unnatural a phenomenon as a laden Areca tree growing at a distance from water. The image of the Areca tree in its peak productive years—"laden with bunches of nuts"—might give some indication of the socio-political and economic stakes involved in keeping women—especially women in their peak productive years—within the seclusion of the house. However, the comparison with the Areca tree—with an image drawn from nature—makes this social need which constructs and determines the place of women appear natural, as immutable and fixed as a law of nature.

When modern scholars assume the encounter between a visitor and the frescoes to be aesthetic, and the graffiti as “. . . the passing over of aesthetic encounter (with the frescoes) into human response, . . . an act by which he takes possession of his experience of *Sigiri* and its paintings” (Halpe 3), they fail to consider the fact that in the visitor’s own mind the encounter perhaps took on definite social dimensions. Many visitors did not see themselves as engaged in the disinterested appreciation of art; to them, the encounter with the frescoes was an encounter between male and female social subjects and they saw in it an opportunity to enact and reenact encounters and exchanges between the genders as they did occur, or as they wished them to occur, in their own society. So one male visitor has found an ingenious means by which the women can make their intentions known without uttering any speech:

The *yohomu* (flower), which was stuck in front of the ear-lobe, now
rests itself on the breast.
From the diadem, (she) herself put the flower onto her hand.
(And) she is a dumb one at *Sigiri* (no. 343)

It is, of course, the man himself who invests the flower with such symbolic potential. If at all, the visitor enters into a transaction with the male artist regarding the significance of the flower’s location.³ The “woman,” the “dumb one at *Sigiri*,” has not signified her intentions either way. Her silence, however, enables him to attribute to her intentions which do not in any manner contradict his own. The unmoving, unspoken “women” of *Sigiriya* enable the male visitors to stage a version of the social drama which has only two character-types in its cast: “. . . a masculine subject to whom it assigns the prerogatives of the seer, the thinker, the doer, the law-giver; and a feminine object constituted by the subject’s gaze, his conception, his acts, his rule” (Joan Cocks, qtd Epstein & Straub, 61). At *Sigiriya*, the male I/Eye is free to construct a female subject who fulfills male fantasies without any fear that a speaking, acting, thinking, living being might disrupt these male imaginings. Indeed, that they cannot think or speak independently of the men is their attraction.

Many men were in fact willing to see the *Sigiri* “women” as mere bodies—beautiful bodies that satisfy the carnal desires of men—without the powers of

³ More than one visitor reads the flowers that the female figures on the frescoes carry symbolically, which makes one wonder what aesthetic convention subtended this tendency on the part of the visitors. For more graffiti that read the flowers in terms of an invitation, see Graffiti 6, 36, 258, 343 and 515.

speech and thought which might contradict male intentions. The inditer of graffiti no. 532 is not, therefore, satisfied with the pleasure that the “women” afford his sight. He craves the pleasure which comes with touch:

If the heart becomes refreshed when the pictures of the golden-colored ones are seen with the eyes
How will it be having received with one’s breast the touch of the breasts of that tender one of abundant splendor?

For this inditer and the next, the “women” are delectable objects to please and satisfy the carnal appetite. What they see in the silent but pleasing female forms of the frescoes are unresisting women whose inclinations they see no reason to consult before imagining sexual contact with them. So the Inditer of no. 517 writes:

O deer-eyed ones, it is not enough, I trow, even if your (beauty of) form be brought together and drunk (by one).
This taste which came (to me) increases the hunger (for it).

What has been (only) half-eaten increased the hunger (all the more). The close affinity between the images of consummation and consumption in this composition indicates clearly enough the extent to which the man constructs a version of woman which makes of her simply the object of his desire.

Senarat Paranavitan’s assessment of the subject-matter of the graffiti, then, as “. . . concerned with airy nothings—the varied paths along which the imagination of our authors traveled when they saw *Sigiri* and its marvels” (“Introduction,” *Sigiri Graffiti*, ccii)--does not take into consideration the fact that whatever different “paths” the poetic imaginings took, their meanderings are motivated by a similar desire: to produce a version of the female social subject who does not dispute his own status as the sovereign subject of knowledge. In a way, Paranavitana’s term, “airy nothings,” best defines the principal concern of the men in these compositions because what the men see in every encounter with the *Sigiri* “women” is an opportunity to bring the fantasized “other” of their imagination to life. The “women” they imagine on the rock are more ephemeral in nature than the paint-and-plaster frescoes. The majority of the men, however, are too intent on constructing women who fulfill their fantasies to notice the fact there are, indeed, no *women* at *Sigiriya*—only, “airy nothings.” Those few visitors who remember that they are indeed paintings are puzzled by the refusal or incapability of other visitors to recognize this fact:

Though all these people, in this manner, enjoyed the good fortune of
 union (with loved ones), they, it seems,
 Have not known that the king departed, having left here these
 pictures.
 Why (is that)? (no. 130)

According to this writer, the visitors' "unions" with "the loved ones" are imaginary unions because there are only paintings where the men imagine their "loved ones" to be. Senarat Paranavitana's classification of compositions which give expression to the different "aspects of love" as "examples of the erotic sentiment," therefore, might be rephrased as "examples of the [auto]-erotic sentiment" ("Introduction," *Sigiri Graffiti*, ccii). In the absence of any encounters with "real" women to arouse their sensual and poetic imaginings, the inscriptions which record the fantasized encounters of men with "women" become expressions of auto-eroticism. A good example of such (auto)-erotic sentiments is graffito no. 69 in which the inditer addresses a *Sigiri* lady in the following manner:

(Persons) like you have made so many (people) speak just as they
 think.
 (By you) has (also) been caused, at *Sihigiri*, the bristling of the hair
 which thrills the whole body.

Both in graffito no 69, and in graffito no. 113 which follows, the visitors assign to the "women" a more active role in the seduction process than in some others. In graffito no. 113, the man projects onto a *Sigiri* "woman" an invitation to dalliance which, in the circumstances, can only be a figment of his imagination:

A golden-colored one on the mountain side, having looked at me
 with the end of her eye, which is suffused with the (red) tint,
 And having raised her rosy hand and placed it on her robe, enticed
 me who had seen (her).

What strikes the reader about the relative positions of the man and the woman in these particular constructions is the willingness of the male spectator to assign to the woman the position of the (pseudo)-subject in this courtship ritual while he occupies the position of the (pseudo)-object—the one acted upon. Whatever the role the male visitors choose to assume vis-à-vis the *Sigiri* "women," however, there is little doubt *who* is in control of these gender-role enactments.

The graffiti at *Sigiriya* indicate that the male visitors had a wide variety of roles to choose from, and the role that women might play in a particular composition

depends upon male whim. The men might with equal fervor adopt the role of the unworthy supplicant as that of the disillusioned suitor. An example of the former is no. 40 where an unfortunate lover admits,

Your eyes are water-lilies; but the fact did not satisfy me.
Good deeds have not been performed by myself (in previous births).
Speech has, therefore, not been given to me by you.

Graffito no. 251 has been composed by a man who imagines himself to have been jilted by a *Sigiri* lady, who has transferred her favours to others in his absence:

When I go to her whom I knew in former days, and who was
gratified in her attachment to me—
When I go to her, these (persons) are coming (from her); there is,
again, no adornment in her.

On another occasion, a man projects himself as the willing slave of the “ladies” on the rock:

The ladies who wear golden chains on their breasts beckon
to me (to their side).
As I have seen the resplendent ladies, heaven appears to me as not
good. (no. 89)

A visitor may also decide that the “women’s” attractions are insufficient to engage his devotion:

The happiness and prosperity which were obtained by seeing
Sihigiri were indeed small.
Even if these women on the mountain side are not there, are not
Lovable ones numerous? (no. 94)

But, whether a man perceives himself in the role of the ecstatic lover, or the scornful realist, the power that the “women” have to entice or repel depends upon a male decision because she has no speech or action independent of what he attributes to her. Every encounter with the “women” affords an opportunity for self-dramatization; every dialogue is in reality a monologue in which men speak to themselves, or to each other, through the “women”. Graffito no. 80 is a good example of a monologue which masquerades as a dialogue:

‘Ah! This manner of standing of yours, O deer-eyed damsel, is

Indeed (that) of not having known the very name of intimacy.
 'Having seen (my) smile, pleasure has been received by (other
 people).
 When you are come (you say that there is) no intimacy (in me).'

In this verse, it is as if the "woman" expresses her willingness for intimacy with the visitor; but it is the visitor's desire for intimacy with the "deer-eyed damsel" that she is made to confirm. Graffito no. 282, on the other hand, makes clear the instrumental role that the women play in facilitating and maintaining "proper" relations between men in that particular social system:

'Observe my waist without being frightened. Our word, it seems,
 has been accepted (for he) did not run away.'
 'The boor, I trow, is one who has done insult and injury to those
 damsels.'

The second line of this graffito admits that a male spectator has put words into the "ladies'" mouths in the first line. However, the speaker of the second-line reprimands the imaginary speaker of the first line, not for this evident enactment of male fantasy, but for violating proper behavioral norms of the social system that they both inhabit in the enactment of this fantasy: "ladies" do not make their wishes known in such a blatantly improper manner. What keeps the social drama alive for centuries therefore is the necessity to attribute to the "women" a meaning which is available from within the cultural codes that the men bring with them to *Sigiriya*.

A few scholars, among them Gooneratne, Basnayake & Bandaranayake and Illangasinghe, have searched the graffiti for information on the societies and cultures that these visitors were drawn from. So say Gooneratne, *et al.*: "It is also possible to extract from the writings both empirical and structural information regarding the society and social organization in a way that quite usefully supplement data from other sources enriching attempts to reconstruct patterns of social organization" (219). Although the authors attempt a classification of the graffiti by gender in this exercise, they do not read the compositions for insights into gender relations that they might provide. Illangasinghe draws our attention to the broad cross-section of society that the visitors appear to have come from: a detail that says something about the access to literacy in those particular social systems (32-33). But for Illangasinghe, the graffiti, though spread over several centuries, attest without question to an egalitarian social organization: one where divisions on the basis of caste, colour and gender had no place (32). My reading of the *Sigiri* Graffiti contradicts the reading of the social text that he attempts through the texts of *Sigiri*. Gender operates to assign different roles to men and women and to subordinate

women to men. These gender roles in turn subtend the responses of male visitors to the female forms on the *Sigiri* frescoes. So a question that is raised over and over again is the question of ownership: whose women are they? What function do they serve on the rock? Most inditers do not have any difficulty in yielding the property rights over the “women” to the proprietor of the rock: King *Kasyapa*. According to the inditer of no.61, the absolute power that the king wields over his “women” cannot in fact be terminated with his death:

‘I shall foresooth die and pass away to the next world;’
 So (thinking), the king passed away having had these (ladies)
painted,
 And having told them ‘May you make love to the rock and reside
(here).’

His theory is ingenious in its ability to both explain why the king “risked” a display of “his” women in such a public spot as well as to forestall any temptation on the part of the spectators to imagine in such a display a sign of availability. One is not sure if such a theory has its origins in the feudal mentality of the speaker—one which grants to the king absolute powers over his subjects, both male and female—or if it should be attributed to a desire to invest in the king a power over “his” women that the inditer would have liked to exercise over “his” own. Whatever its social basis, the underlying message is clear: the King’s power over the women extends beyond life. According to another visitor, however, the king does not need to coerce his women to comply with his wishes:

As you are (women) who have contracted a union in an honorable
manner,
 (You) did not speak to me who came here with the desire of seeing
 (you), even though I came here because I had heard of you.
(no.140)

This whole effort at reaffirming the property rights of the king is ironic for one reason: the men have no way of getting at the king’s intentions. The absolute power that the king seems to have had over his female subjects is something that the men attribute to him. Does this desire on the men’s part indicate the existence of a social system in which they themselves had such power? Or does this willingness on their part to invest such power in the king signify an attempt at wish-fulfillment? While we may only speculate about their reason, it is a fact that many visitors see “women” on the mountain side whose affections for their husband remain unchanged even after his death:

Piyal, having come (here), saw on the mountain side the long-eyed
 (women) who are separated (from their lover)
 Who are grieving for the sufferings of the king, and who possess
 eyes (like unto) full-blown blue lilies. (no. 124)

One visitor, at least, found in these ideal women of *Sigiriya* a means of chastising the not-so-ideal women he has known in real life. His ability to visualize the existence of “women” on the mountain top who cater to his every whim enables him to reprimand those “real” women he has known who fall short of that ideal (no 133).

It was Claude Levi-Strauss who first pointed out in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* that social relations in human societies are predicated upon the exchange of women. Luce Irigaray, elaborating on this statement, went on to suggest that these social relations are relations among men; the exchange of women establishes and facilitates these relationships of men with each other (183). However, if women are objects to be exchanged and owned by the men, a system of proper exchange and ownership of women must be instituted and maintained in order to ensure the smooth functioning of the social order. What makes the centuries-long enterprise of poetry- and meaning-making at *Sigiriya* possible is the big question that the men see next to these “women” who occupy such a public spot on the mountain side. *Whose women are they?* Is it proper that they should be subjected to the gaze of every passerby in this manner? The questions of property and propriety share a close affinity in the men’s minds as they try to determine what the king’s “true” intentions might have been in displaying his “property” in such a public location. So, one visitor is surprised at the king’s decision to leave his “women” in such a spot:

The women who have no speech and no secret look smiled because
 others smiled at them.
 What (wonder) is it that you went away, leaving behind (your) wife
 on the mountain side, and were quite at ease in your mind?
 (no. 136)

The writer seems to find such trust and confidence unfathomable. Another composition contains an element of reproach against the king for his decision to leave pictures of his fair ones at a spot where they could be subjected to the gaze of sundry individuals:

Fie! The king departed, having tastefully painted and left on the
 path
 The pictures of the lovely fair damsels for the sake of diverse (sorts

In his introduction to *The Mirror Wall*, Richard Murphy expresses his surprise that the “‘women’ in the pictures were seen by the writers from various, even contradictory, points of view but never “rearing children” (xv) while Senarat Paranavitana finds it noteworthy that the word *magam* which had been commonly used to denote “woman” in textbooks meant for monastic schools is absent from the graffiti; the word *magam*, Paranavitana informs us, literally means “mother” while the various words used to denote “woman” in the graffiti suggest ‘love’ and ‘romance’ (clxxiv-v). It is an important observation, and one that offers some very interesting insights into the centuries-long effort of men to make sense of these “women” on the rock. To understand why the men refuse to imagine the *Sigiri* “women” in the role of motherhood, we have to consider what social and cultural meanings are attached to child-bearing in patriarchal societies. According to Irigaray, what makes the possession of women so important is “. . . the reproductive use value that she represents” (174). However, as Engels points out, in societies where private ownership and inheritance of property become increasingly more important, the man must also ensure that his heirs are of undisputed paternity (125); the father’s name when bestowed upon the son should signify to all and sundry that he is indeed the product of that singular male seed and none other. Only the complete withdrawal of the woman from circulation in the open market assures man that this relation between the signifier and signified—father’s name and father’s seed—is not destabilized. The *Sigiri* “women” cannot, then, be contemplated in the role of motherhood because their presence in such a public spot puts their social status in doubt. What makes the *Sigiri* graffiti possible is this ambiguity which inflects their social status.

In fact, most male visitors are unable to reconcile the contrary interpretations regarding the women’s function that compete for attention in their own minds: the women’s position on the rock signifies their extreme obedience and attachment to the king; their position signifies their availability. Situations of adultery, therefore, are commonly entertained with a mixture of horror and fascination in a number of graffiti. A good example is graffito no. 18:

Without having your lord come for your sake, you are adorned in
this wise.

Or there may be a person who resides here, and you are adorned for
the sake of that paramour.

In her face, she manifests deceit. When I go away from the rock,
(she) has called me.

When (I) come, the long-eyed one, having observed, looks at (me)
in the manner of a fawn with her long eyes.

The composition illustrates clearly the extent to which attraction and revulsion are interwoven in the writer's reaction to this (imaginary) encounter with an "attached" lady at *Sigiri*. The perceived invitation to dalliance on the part of the "ladies" becomes the occasion for another writer to warn fellow male visitors of the proverbial inconstancy of women:

Having become a slave to this (wench), one like that, though he
heard our speech, rejected it—(our speech) which said,
'Did you know that she, who has taken flowers in her hand, smiled
(even) when her lord is dead?' (no.27)

For another visitor, blaming the women paves the way to absolve himself of guilt for the perceived impropriety of the act. So he sees the *Sigiri* women as resorting to typically feminine wiles in order to subvert the king's express intentions. Here, the "women" do not openly defy the code which determines their proper place in the social order; they make the cultural code accommodate their wishes in covert ways. Hence, the silent "women" of *Sigiriya* speaks to him through the flowers they carry in their hands:

'Ah! What is in our minds has, it seems, been known by them by
means of our flowers.'
'When the wall, in this manner, has been taken (by you) to reside
(on), I saw the manner in which what is (in your minds) has been
revealed.' (no. 295)

Others try to visualize situations in which communication between the "women" and their admirers is possible without the taint of adultery:

The flower petal, which became detached from the ear, came to the
pair of breasts of (the damsel adorned with) a golden chain,
Taking it in one bound. It came and spoke, though (she herself) was
dumb. (no.515)

The "true" identity and function of the *Sigiri* "women" and, by extension, the "true" character and place of women in the "real" world around *Sigiriya*, will of course remain disputed ground. What is of relevance for our purpose is that the *Sigiri* graffiti reveal an inordinate desire on the part of male visitors to make "sense" of these female forms on the rock—to make sense of the "women" through reference to gender roles from their own sex/gender systems. The multiple and

contradictory meanings that the *Sigiri* frescoes have triggered over the centuries however attest to the failure to “fix” meaning, to find the definitive interpretation of the “women” on the rock. Meanings proliferate and the “women” float free of the anchor of meaning that lines inscribed on stone would confine them to. Do they signify loyalty or disloyalty? Should they be worshipped or reviled? Are they “good” women or “bad”? Those men who imagine the *Sigiri* “women” in the role of the good wife are, in fact, expressing their conviction that there is no discrepancy between the ideal social subject they imagine and the “real” women that they share a particular social space with. Those men who see “non-conformity” writ large on the foreheads of “women” at *Sigiri*, on the other hand, are articulating their own uncertainty about the willingness of “real” women to conform to male wishes in every way. In the following composition, the male visitors see the “women” as perfect embodiments of the good wife; their loyalty to their lord is such that they do not hesitate at adopting what Gayatri Spivak calls the exceptional gesture of good wifehood: *sati* or widow sacrifice (Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” 302). Although no historical evidence exists to suggest that widow sacrifice was ever a sanctioned social practice in ancient Lanka, one man is so transported with ecstasy at the contemplation of such an act that he invites others to join him in a reification of this act in the symbolic domain:

Like Truth by those treading the path of goodness,
By whom, indeed, was the gazelle-eyed one not honored—
She who is like one painted on the rock whilst
Hurling herself down and dying for the sake of (her) lover.

(no.131)

The “woman” is “like one painted on the rock” because she is so firm in her steadfast devotion to her dead husband. She is in fact a “real” woman who, because her resolve is such, appears as still and silent as a painting.

The male-centred focus of the musings is quite obvious in a number of compositions that contemplate the consequences of the writer’s attraction to the “women.” Since the woman is associated so closely with worldly enjoyment and sensuous indulgence in the men’s minds, she is also a principal attachment to the world that he must forego in order to seek release from *samsara*. If Buddhist teachings invite its adherents to see the world—the phenomenological world we live in—as illusion, the ideology of gender which constructs male-female relations in this particular context invites the men to see the women too in a similar light. Graffito no. 103 is a good example of the paradoxical sentiments that the men entertain towards the women:

(She), the coquettish smile given by whom is (comparable to the
 rows of) seeds of melon,
 Whose pleasant speech is as sweet as the marrow of that (fruit),
 Whose long eye is (like) a segment of the rind of the same (fruit),
 Inflames my heart and leaves not my mind.

In this composition the writer engages in an elaborate construction of the woman as erotic object before telling us of the hidden trap. The power that the woman has to fill his senses with extreme delight also describes the path to obsession—an obsession that would keep him in the world that he ought to aspire to leave behind. As a novice from the Monastery of Hunagiri realizes, not even an ascetic life is sufficient guarantee against the fatal charms of the woman.

That person, who has been spoken about, resides (here);
 (Therefore) place the wakefulness of mind in (the door of) hearing
 and guard it (thoroughly).
 As her broad smile spreads, having caused me fright, my mind
 trembles exceedingly. (no. 88)

In a way, both compositions cited above are examples of the (auto)-erotic sentiment, because the man projects onto an imaginary woman an act of seduction that is the outcome of his own imagination. But underlying the men's perception of the *Sigiri* women as a source of distraction is their construction of the woman as pure body, one who therefore cannot be the man's equal in spirit in the arduous journey to disentangle oneself from *samsara*.

For a few male visitors, the men's preoccupation with the subject of women is not so much a display of power over women but a subjection to women. Or so says one visitor who attributes this sentiment to his friend:

Having obtained a golden-colored creeper of a woman to look at,
 this has been said by you:
 'The man who praises women—has (he) not taken the fire on his
 head,
 After having warmed (himself at it)? (no. 672)

But, as evident from the number of graffiti evincing an attraction to the female forms of the frescoes, not many male inditers heed the warning. Hence, the frustration that one inditer feels at his perceived failure to make the "women" speak where others have been successful:

One lighted fires in the sea; one pierced gems with the tip of the
finger nail;
Camphor comes to be in the long pepper creeper; there is no
companionship of these (damsels).
By whom has it been thought thus? (no. 427)

Another refuses to bemoan the cruelty of the “women.” He sees their “hard hearts” as the result of a royal command:

I joked, (saying that your) husband died on account of her who has
a hard heart.
He made your heart in such a manner as to be hard as stone.
How did (your) lover, then, die on account of you? (no. 673)

This man does not quite acknowledge that the “hard heart” of the *Sigiri* “women” attests to their actual status as mere pigment and plaster on a rock surface, but he is quite close to it.

Pierre Macherey in his *Theory of Literary Production* has this to say about the attempt to recover meaning: any attempt to get at the “true” meaning of the text only produces a discourse which says something *about* the text but not what the text itself is saying (4). It is in the nature of art to lend itself to multiple significations because the text cannot signal its “true” intentions independently of its reader. Thus the meanings that the reader derives from the text are invariably inflected with meanings that the reader brings to the text. So, if the men do not seem to know that the “. . . the king departed, having left these pictures. . . . (no. 130), as one friar points out, it is perhaps because the men do not wish to know this fact as it would set limits to their desire to make the *Sigiri* “women” the bearers of social and cultural meaning. To the men the absolute silence and passivity of the *Sigiri* “women” make them the perfect material with which to shape the ideal female social subject of their imagination. But their very silence and passivity also unsettle the men’s efforts to present them as the bearers of male desire, because by their very silence they fail to make the relation between the signifier—i.e. the imaginary “women” of *Sigiriya*—and the signified—the “real” women who share social space with the male inditers—clear. All that the frescoes can do is to become the platform for the wish-fulfillments of male inditers regarding relations between men and women in the “real” world beyond *Sigiriya*.

At least one visitor sees the silence of the *Sigiri* “women” as disqualifying them from playing the role to which the male visitors appoint them: signifiers of male desire. So he asks:

O men, lay (aside the idea that) these who stood (here) were ladies
 who attracted one's heart.
 Not having known that those who stand here are obstinate ones, I
 was attracted and went there. (no.8)

The “women” of Sigiriya neither affirm nor refute the subject positions that the men assign to them because they have no speech. By “refusing” to speak, they flout the men’s attempts to make them say what they [the men] want them to say. But would “speech” make them “real” women that enable male wish-fulfillment? This question informs the composition of another:

How do (they) say that she there is one of seasonable speech?
 (but) this has been realized (by me) on the mountain side.
 Whether (she) spoke or did not speak, she to whom (I) am
 accustomed is no longer remembered. (no. 160)

The relationship between the male discourse (on woman) and reality (“real” female subjects) is a complex one. As Pierre Macherey would say, every discourse is predicated upon the “temporary absence of [its] object.” Graffito no. 160 foregrounds the gap between the discourse on “women” that is produced and circulated on the *Sigiri* rock and the absent referent—in this instance, the inditer’s partner/wife in real life.

Speech and silence, however, are categories to be interpreted in context as Rajeswari Sunder Rajan reminds us in “The Name of the Husband.” Silence could be voluntary or imposed, hence empowering or disempowering, as the case may be. Similarly, speech which more often than not is celebrated as liberatory can be involuntary, hence disempowering (85-88). Some feminist theorists refuse to celebrate speech which they see as turning women from the absolute Other to the self-affirming “other” of man in what Irigaray calls phallogocentric societies (qtd. in Shoshana Felman, 178). To speak is to be known. And knowledge enables the knower to claim possession—to fix the place—of the object of knowledge. To refuse speech, on the other hand, is to remain outside the orbits of representation and, by extension, to refuse appropriation by the knower. One visitor to *Sigiriya* therefore refuses to assign the status of “woman” to the *Sigiri* frescoes. He attributes his friend’s desire to see “women” where the *Sigiri* frescoes are to the hallucinations of a man recovering from the death of his wife:

These, who are (like unto) flashes of lightning, appeared in this
 manner,

Causing pleasure, as your wife died.

Would they not have given a word if they were women? (no. 516)

According to this visitor, “real” women speak; if they do not speak, they cannot be women. However, for women to speak is to give their word to men. That is why some men, according to another visitor, leave the speechless “women” at *Sigiriya* for the speaking women they imagine elsewhere:

Those really going away are they who have seen golden-colored
ones who are women in reality—
(Women) who, in their hands, bear flowers and, in their eyes, the
rays of gems. (no. 227)

“Real” women speak through the “flowers” in their hands and the “rays of gems” in their eyes. These signs, whether imagined or otherwise, enable the male visitors to interpret and thereby know the women. *Sigiri* “women” continued to both inspire and frustrate male visitors for several centuries because they stubbornly refused speech.

Does this signal the existence of a social contract in the “real” worlds that these male visitors to the Rock were drawn from where women were amenable to male wishes in every way? Such an assumption might have been possible if no woman had made her presence known, and made it known independently of the men, at *Sigiriya*. But not all women were denied access to the metal stylus in order to inscribe their thoughts to posterity on the Mirror Wall. At least 12 graffiti have so far been attributed to women—at least, where the inditer elects to take on the classification of female (Guneratne, *et. al.*, 223). And these women who speak at *Sigiriya* articulate desires and wishes which do not affirm the sovereignty of the masculine subject in every way. One woman’s light but firm rejection of the masculine effort to speak on the women’s behalf comes in a composition which informs the men that their unsuccessful overtures to the “women” of *Sigiriya* are proof enough of their ignorance of the female mind. Since the *Sigiri* “women” cannot make their wishes known, this woman offers to speak on their behalf. No one can dispute her right to speak on the *Sigiri* “women’s” behalf: *they are all women*.

(We), being women, (this has been) sung on behalf of the lady.
O you dunces, who have come to *Sihigiri*, apart from (having) recited
songs, composed with four efforts,
None whomsoever among you (thought) that we are women and gave
Rum and molasses to us. (no. 272)

The men attribute to the *Sigiri* frescoes a gender—the feminine gender—in order to enlist their help in bringing to life the ideal female subject of their imaginations. The female inditer, however, seems to have seen in the shared gender identity that the men posit between the *Sigiri* “women” and “real” women like her an access to knowledge about the *Sigiri* “women” that the men are denied because they do not possess the right (gender) credentials. We will never know if “rum and molasses” would have been more successful than four-line stanzas in winning the ladies’ favour. What is important is that the female visitor disputes the men’s assumptions about their ability to please “women” and, indeed, makes space for a consideration of women’s wishes in a social order the construction of which so manifestly safeguards and promotes male interests.

She is not alone in seeing a sense of affinity between the *Sigiri* women and herself. The inditer of graffito no. 272 poses as their spokeswoman in order to reject male overtures. Similarly, the inditer of graffito no. 543, speaking on behalf of the *Sigiri* “women,” reprimands the inconsistency of men who, while saying that other sights draw their attention away from the *Sigiri* “women,” still compose songs which beseech the ladies for their favour:

Whatever thing came (into being) of the Lake Lady, we do not
know (why) this (stanza) was written down here by these persons,
After having themselves proclaimed that their life would pass away.

This composition, written as a protest against graffito no. 580 which refers to the afore-mentioned “Lake Lady,” satirizes the inconstancy of men who have forgotten their boast in graffito 580 that the Lake Lady can cause them to neglect the *Sigiri* “women.”

Another female visitor, however, refuses to endorse the make-believe world of male and female subjectivities that the men create on the rock. She, in fact, seems to have found the male efforts to enact gender roles on the rock at *Sigiriya* rather amusing. Her question to a male visitor who has apparently returned empty-handed from his sojourn at *Sigiriya* is laced with a satirical humor that signals the presence of a woman who does not find the male fascination with the *Sigiri* “women” threatening to her well-being at all:

Did you come (back) leaving (behind) that deer-eyed one (to whom)
you having come here gave your heart?
You did not make her yours. (Yet), you said, ‘We live happily.’
It is fine. (no 266)

The woman writer here claims to see through the man's conviction that the "deer-eyed one" brings him happiness.

The few compositions of female visitors therefore record diverse reactions to the obvious male fascination with the *Sigiri* frescoes. While some found cause for amusement in the fascination, others found it troubling. So a woman, by the name of Kanna, reads in the male fascination with the *Sigiri* "women" a fatal attachment to the material world which they must guard against if they wish to find release from this world of suffering (no.99). She does not indicate clearly whether such a warning arises from someone who has internalized the male assessment of women as lesser beings the attachment to whom is indeed a distraction from the higher spiritual goal, or from someone who sees the power that the men attribute to women to her advantage. To warn the men against the distraction of women is also to claim paradoxically that women indeed wield such power over men. Others are more explicit in the expression of unease. Graffito no. 504 is a good example of the unease expressed by some women at the male preoccupation with the frescoes:

We are not women. *Yagi* and *Sahali* were composed by you, having
 looked at these (women),
 Who, by reason of separation from their lovers, go away without
 having (their) minds attracted (by you).

The inditer of this song takes her inability to become a recipient of male adulation as a sign of personal inadequacy; without male approval her sense of feminine identity is lost. Another woman expresses her concern at the inordinate number of graffiti which have the *Sigiri* "women" as their principal subject by refusing to compose yet another song for them.

I am Bati who, having ascended *Sihigiri* and recalled (things) to
 memory, am composing a song.
 There is no song for those (the ladies) who captivate the eyes and
 minds of people. (no.72)

Although she speaks of her desire to ignore "those ladies," her composition signals unmistakably that they are indeed her preoccupation—even if her reasons are different from those of the men. Graffito no. 335 is more explicit about what these other reasons might be: the obvious attraction that the men evince for the female forms of the frescoes makes them appear rivals in the women's eyes:

Come and look at a lady who remained on the rocky mountain side.
 O disdainful ones, it appears as if you had gone round (and round) when

women come (here).

In this composition, the writer attributes to the *Sigiri* “women” an antagonism towards her which she perhaps feels towards them.

Such varied compositions which hint at the presence of female subjects who do not adopt a uniform attitude towards the male visitors’ preoccupation with the *Sigiri* “women” make any attempt to get at the authentic female subject futile. Some women take the distraction offered by *Sigirya* “women” to the men as cause for concern while other express amusement; a few are angry. There is nothing to suggest that their varied and contradictory responses capture the essence of some (stereo) typical woman. But that is exactly how R.H de Silva describes these graffiti composed by a handful of women between the 8th and 10th centuries; that their compositions, although elegant, “. . . are characteristic of the female sex” (15). He does not specify whether such compositions are characteristics of the female sex of centuries ago, or whether they would be characteristics of the female sex even today. His failure to be specific conjures up the image of an eternal feminine whose responses to any situation remains the same for all times. The graffito he offers as an example of a composition characteristic of the female sex is worth taking a look at:

A deer-eyed young woman on the mountain side aroused anger in
my mind.

In (her) hand she has taken a string of pearls and in (her) look she
has

Assumed rivalry with us. (no, 152)

He does not think it necessary to explain what is so characteristic of the female sex in this composition. The graffito, he seems to assume, is self-explanatory. Therefore, some speculation is necessary in order to unearth the (stereo) typically feminine trait which would lead de Silva to cite it as one that typifies female authorship. Is it the proverbial rivalry between women who perceive themselves as competing for the same man’s attention? Of course, de Silva’s pronouncement on the character of the female sex is based on the (apparent) admission of such rivalry by the female inditer of this graffito. However, a closer examination of the composition makes clear that the translation (into modern Sinhala) is influenced by the *translator’s* understanding of what is characteristic or not of the female sex. A literal translation of the second line of the song reads:

In (her) hand she has taken a string of pearls and in (her) look she
has assumed the status of a co-wife.

The translation as we read it owes its shape to the decision of the translator to substitute an interpretation for a literal translation (that is, “assumed rivalry with us” for the line “assumed the status of co-wife”) which, in turn, encourages a male critic to make a blanket judgment on the nature and character of the female sex.

This is not to say that Parānavitana’s *interpretation* of the analogy of the co-wife is necessarily invalid. In this particular context, considering what the woman says in the previous line, it appears to be valid. However, Parānavitana’s decision to substitute an interpretation for the analogy of the co-wife seems to be influenced by *his* understanding of what is characteristic or not of relations between co-wives. Hence, in another graffito where the meaning of the woman’s use of the analogy is much less clear, he makes the same unproblematic substitution:

This look of yours from a corner of your eye has verily been recognized
 By us as *that of a rival* [=having become a co-wife]
 Of you whose hair laden with blue water-lilies, being combed in
 style, Droops down on your neck. (no. 41; *my emphasis*)

In this graffito, the interpretation is far more speculative than in no. 151 because the visitor merely observes that she sees in the outward form of the *Sigiri* “women” a possible relationship between them. It is quite possible that rivalry characterized relations between (some) co-wives. However, if that is the case, we need to inquire into the social, political and economic conditions which lead the women to regard each other as potential rivals rather than attribute such a tendency to some eternal feminine essence. Relations between women, as much as relations between men and women, are influenced and determined by socio-political and economic phenomena of the society they live in. What I found noteworthy in these two compositions was the fact that polygamy was indeed a viable option for men and one that the women contemplated with a degree of trepidation. Their expressed concern reminds us in no uncertain terms that not every social practice comes into being, and continues in being, with the consent of every participating member of that society. Every social order has its discontents, and should we be surprised that in a male-dominated social order they would be women?

However, the question is if this discontent characterizes a few women or many. Should we assume that only a few women are discontented with their subordinate positions as the second sex of a social order which gives primacy to male interests and desires, or should we assume that even those who are seemingly content with the roles that society assigns to them as the signifiers and facilitators of male desire might conceal “other” intentions which may never be known? The ambiguity which characterizes the response of one female inditer to the *Sigiri* “women” suggests that the women’s silence prevents the men from ever knowing

the true feelings of the seemingly-docile female subjects. So a woman named Bati asks the *Sigiri* “women”:

As there is no loving heart of (yours), beyond (your) glamour
Did I not know, O faithless ones, that your hearts, alas, are made of
stone? (no. 87)

At one level, it is possible that her intention is to disparage the “women” whose beauty of form might deprive her of that much-needed male attention. At another level, however, what her commentary foregrounds is a mismatch between appearance and reality—that a beautiful body does not always carry a beautiful heart; that outward docility does not always indicate inward compliance. The question is, how is she so sure that a pleasing appearance does not always point to a heart that desires to please? Does she also know of “other” women who might dissimulate in order to win male favours? Any attempt at inferring authorial intentions must of course remain in the realm of speculation. She suggests nevertheless that the men can never be sure of the absolute loyalty and consent of the women with whom they share a particular social space.

The relationship between the text and the world, the complex process by which relations between the genders in the material domain become inscribed in the symbolic, has not aroused the interest of many of the scholars who have sought to make the *Sigiri* graffiti available to a lay audience. In spite of passing references to the historic value of the *Sigiri* graffiti, no effort has yet been made to foreground the social dimension to the *Sigiri* graffiti—the *complex process* by which the texts come to reproduce relations in the world. The problem with some scholars’ expressed interest in enlisting the *Sigiri* graffiti as historical documents in efforts to “. . . reconstruct patterns of social organization” (Gooneratne, Basnayake & Bandaranayake, 217) is that it treats the literary text as a passive reflector of reality. My attempt, in this paper, on the other hand, has been to examine the ways in which the literary text might both reflect and refract reality in its attempts to fit the “real” into forms and frames that conform to, and confirm, literary and social expectations. The text signals the world beyond its boundaries more often than not through “what it does not say”—not through “what it says” (Macherey 87). The inclination of most visitors to *Sigiriya* to regard an aesthetic convention—the female forms of the frescoes—as embodiments of the “real”—of authentic female subjects—already signifies a desire on their part to mediate in the representation of reality. Moreover, the fact that the men perceived themselves as free to construct versions of the desirable feminine which do not threaten their own status as the sovereign subject of knowledge gives some indication of the relative positions of men and women in that particular sex/gender system. Of course, the little or no access that women have

to the symbolic does not necessarily mean that they do not speak or act on their own behalf in the "real" world. The few female inditers of graffiti on the *Kaedapath Pavura*, or Mirror Wall, suggest otherwise. Therefore, to take the version of the social world produced by men at *Sigiri* as the "objective, comprehensive societal world" (Trinh 103) is to ignore the ways in which discursive formulations of reality intersect with, and intervene in, the politics of social relations in the real world. It is to ignore the gaps and silences in the literary texts that both inscribe and expose the ideology of gender in that particular society. This paper has been an attempt to position the scene of meaning-making we observe on the *Sigiri* rock against the complex scene of gender relations from which the composers were drawn.

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