



ColomboArts

Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities

Volume 6 | Issue I

2021



9 772536 894002

Vidhya's Discursive Body: An Exploration into the Politics of Inclusion and Interpretation of Individual Experience

Achala K. Dissanayake

Department of English, Faculty of Humanities and Education, CINEC Campus, Colombo, Sri Lanka

Recommended Citation

Dissanayake, A.K. (2021). Vidhya's Discursive Body: An Exploration into the Politics of Inclusion and Interpretation of Individual Experience, *ColomboArts Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 6(I), 27-42. Available at: <https://colomboarts.cmb.ac.lk/?p=558>

Vidhya's Discursive Body: An Exploration into the Politics of Inclusion and Interpretation of Individual Experience

Dissanayake, A.K.

CINEC Campus, Colombo
achala@cinec.edu

Abstract

The abduction, gang rape and murder of Vidhya Sivaloganathan, an eighteen-year-old schoolgirl in May 2015, in Jaffna, and the events that followed this atrocious crime are demonstrative of how the body and its performance/ experiences are acknowledged, read, and interpreted from within diverse discourses such as those of law, gender, race, power and gaze. These discourses act as frames of recognition which decide the inclusion or exclusion of individuals from recognition as bodies that are vulnerable. Vidhya's bodily experiences too fall in and out of frames that serve to grant her recognition and politicize her personal experiences, space, and memory. This underscores how the meaning and importance given to the body cannot be created outside of these discourses, and how, interpretations made of the body via these discourses drain the body of any freewill, individuality, and agency. This article argues that, since meaning making of personal experience is dependent on such frameworks, more egalitarian frames of reference which would serve to minimize exclusion of bodies from further discussion, are in order.

Keywords: Discourse, frames of recognition, the body as text, personal as political, agency

Introduction

The body has been frequently defined as an entity that engages in the performance of socially constructed concepts. The idea of the body performing a social fiction becomes all the more acceptable when the body is read and interpreted after its placing within varying overlapping discourses such as gender, law, power, and sight/gaze; discourses which are the primary frameworks that decide what a particular body can or cannot perform all the while determining which bodily acts are proper, socially acceptable, moral and/or legal. In other words, the body cannot be made sense of without the discourses within which it is located, which in turn provide the tools for the formation and limitation of discussions that can take place surrounding the body.

A discourse creates and shapes the meaning of an object, a person, or an event. In his book *Representation: Cultural representation and signifying practices*, Hall (1997, p.29) describes discourse as a system of representation. He writes that “by the word ‘discourse’, Foucault meant “a group of statements which provide a language for talking about – a way of representing the knowledge about – a particular topic at a particular historical moment” (Hall, 1997, p.29). As much as “a discourse governs the way in which a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about,” it also “limits and restricts other ways of talking, of conducting ourselves in relation to the topic or constructing knowledge about it” (Hall, 1997, p.29). As such, these discourses serve to create frameworks, which Butler (2009, p. 6), refers to as “frames of recognition” that operate to identify certain individuals as worthy of recognition as opposed to others whom the frames would render “decidedly more difficult to recognize.” The ways in which the body is talked of and its knowledge represented depend on the discourses within which it is situated and in relation to which it is made meaning of. The discourse surrounding the body has already made meaning of the body by providing the rules for doing so. The person who reads and understands the body does so from within the discourse and therefore puts into practice the rules provided by the relevant discourses surrounding the object that is under scrutiny.

The abduction, gang rape and murder of Vidhya Sivaloganathan, an 18-year-old schoolgirl from Jaffna, on the 13th of May 2015, is an incident that demonstrates how bodies and their experience/ performances are molded by different discourses (such as gender, law, ethnicity and gaze), that determine the nature of morality, legality, propriety, and acceptability of bodily acts. In the weeks that followed this crime, it served as a platform for island-wide

demands for justice, originating in Pungudutivu, Kilinochchi, Vavuniya, Batticaloa, Trincomalee, Mullaitivu, and Jaffna; areas located in the North of Sri Lanka (Fernando, 2017). In 2017, it was revealed that the perpetrators had orchestrated the abduction of Vidhya with the intention of video-recording the rape and murder ("Chilling Details Emerge in Vithya Murder Case," 2017) which suggests that Vidhya was a victim of a specific mode of seeing and representation. In 2017, eight-hundred and ninety-eight days after the event, seven suspects were ruled guilty and were given the death sentence, finally 'bringing justice' to Vidhya and her family (Fernando, 2017), after demands for justice were staged island wide, thereby publicizing and politicizing Vidhya's traumatic and intensely personal experience. Almost five years later, in February 2020, the school-girl victim was brought back into the limelight as her name reached the headlines of local newspapers as investigations were conducted into a police officer's personal use of a motorcycle belonging to one of the suspects of the crime (Palihawadane, 2020), once again reminding us that the memory that was personal for Vidhya and her family is now political, and the ownership of its narration is no longer in the hands of those immediately affected by it.

Vidhya's experience is a reminder that the body could be read as a text which is constructed and scripted, an entity reflecting the socio-political realities and the cultural milieu within which it resides. An analysis of the incidents and discussions that transpired, stemming as responses to the brutality inflicted on Vidhya situate herself and experience in a realm far removed from the personal. The conversations that surround this intensely personal incident are molded by the discourses of gender, law, ethnicity, gaze, and power which serve to create a framework that decides whether Vidhya merits consideration as a body that was vulnerable and therefore 'mattered' and was worthy of recognition.

This article mainly employs Foucault's (1991) theory of discourse and Butler's theories of the performativity of the body (1988) and frames of recognition (2009) to discuss the manner in which Vidhya's bodily ordeal was made meaning of through the overlapping discourses of gender, ethnicity, law, gaze, and power. By critically analyzing the discourses constructed through journalistic and legal narratives of Vidhya's physical ordeal, this article explores the ways in which the body and its experiences are acknowledged, read, expressed, and repressed within the discourses that give it meaning, both in the personal and political domains. Newspaper articles that reported this crime from 2015 to 2020 were used as a repertoire of knowledge regarding this incident. Such an analysis of Vidhya's bodily

experience demonstrates how discourses surrounding the body decide whether bodily experiences require consideration or not and therefore suggests the need for more egalitarian frameworks which recognize the vulnerability of individuals and thereby provide them redress when needed.

Discursive bodies and bodily performance

The fact that the interpretation of bodily experiences is strongly shaped by ideas and knowledge that precede the body itself reinforces the idea that the body seems to be anything but individual and free. It echoes Butler's (1988) interpretation of the body as a "historical idea," having no agency apart from that which is granted to it through the body's capability of "rendering [...] possibilities determinate" (p. 521). In addition, Butler (1988) interprets Merleau-Ponty's take on "the body as a set of possibilities to be continually realized" to mean that the "appearance of the body in the world, for perception, is not predetermined by some manner of interior essence" and that "its concrete expression in the world must be understood as the taking up and rendering specific of a set of possibilities" (p. 521). Both the body and the set of possibilities are fictions, both are cultural constructs that are placed intact by virtue of the penalization that the body can be subjected to in the event of its transgression of the rules pertaining to how a body should perform.

In his discussion about the discourse of discourse, Foucault (1991) challenges the concept of subjectivity, which individuals imagine they have, and which is usually considered to be crucial in the process of meaning-making, the meanings later solidifying into well-established sets of knowledge, or discourses. Foucault suggests an alternative approach; that of replacing the "sovereign subject" with "'discoursing' subjects" (p. 61), the latter term probably meaning that there is no sovereign subject that creates a discourse, but just a nondescript subject that lives within boundaries of various discourses that precede the subject, and uses the tools provided by these discourses to understand the world around her/him. In short, there are individuals who are not free in the process of meaning-making but are defined and limited by already existing ideas which are considered as truths/ morals. Where the feminist school of thought is concerned too, individuals are theorized as living a social fiction, as our lives are scripted by social structures that delineate and limit the possibilities and opportunities that are open to us with regards to how and what we propose to do with our bodies, minds, and lives. Haraway (2016) compares the human being to a cyborg, which she describes as "a hybrid of machine and organism" that is a "creature" of

both “social reality” and “fiction” (p.3). According to Haraway (2016), social reality too is a fiction since she chooses to refer to social reality as “lived social relations, our most important political construction, a world-changing fiction” (p.3). If so, the life lead by a human being is indeed a construct, and there is no individuality, personality or freedom a person can be deemed to possess. Within this overarching fiction acted out by all of humanity, the “women’s experience” too becomes a “fiction and fact of the most crucial political kind” (Haraway 2016, pp. 5-6), and these arguments serve to save women from being a victim of a “vortex of circular arguments: woman is closer to nature and is thus inferior; woman is inferior because nature has made her so” (Alaimo, 2000, p. 3). If the woman is a social fiction, how can she be considered as close to nature and therefore more ‘natural’ than her male counterpart? If all human beings are doomed to performing a social fiction, then wherein lie individuality, agency and free will?

Licit bodies and bodily performance

Vidhya’s ordeal was not dealt with, processed, and recognized outside this limiting social script. The recognition of the violation of Vidhya’s body as an act of rape, and the consequent legal punishment of its perpetrators, albeit delayed, occurred because of its falling within the definition and the demarcation of rape in the Penal Code of Sri Lanka. In other words, in this specific instance, the discourse or framework of law was willing to accommodate the injury inflicted on Vidhya’s person as a crime that deserved punishment. The very idea that, for justice to be served, the nature of the crime and the circumstances that surrounded it have to fit the legal definition of the crime by the name ‘rape’ as set out in the Sri Lankan Penal Code supports Butler’s assertion that “the ‘being’ of life in itself is constituted through selective means” which causes any reference to existence itself to lack meaning “outside of the operations of power” (2009, p. 1). If so, the body on its own has no agency to convey specific meaning outside the discourse of law which serves to define and determine the licit/illicitness of bodily performances and include (or exclude) bodies from further discussion.

Although the Sri Lankan legal ‘norms of recognition’ were conducive to the acknowledgement of Vidhya as an innocent victim of rape, the very same norms can serve to exclude individuals from the legal realm if their experiences do not match the criteria set out in the Penal Code as defining factors of the crime of rape. Rape is, in simple words, the act of forcing a person into the performance of sexual intercourse against the person's will.

The perpetrator of the criminal act of rape, according to the Penal Code, could receive approximately seven to twenty-five years of imprisonment and be ordered to pay a sum of money (the amount of which is decided by court) as compensation to the victim (Penal Code of Sri Lanka, section 364, subsection 1, p. 389A). But such simplistic definitions and statements of this criminal act are misleading and deceptive. This is because many factors govern the classification of a sexual act as rape as opposed to a legitimate act of sex. One of them is the obvious element of the consensual voice or the willful decision to enter into sexual intercourse and the expression of this decision. Another factor is that the age of the persons engaging in the act of having sex. More importantly, a country's legal framework determines what rape means within that nation. Therefore, the experiences of the body, the recognition of what the gendered body can(not) do or undergo and the determining of which bodily experiences are (un)worthy of recognition and justice are determined by invisible, politically invested frameworks whose origination pre-date the physical experience itself.

Existing laws will not provide redress to all forms of injustice but only focus on the selected ones which the socio-cultural backdrop of the society in question would determine and define as a grievance or crime. Wolf (2002), in a review of Susan Ehrlich's book *Representing rape: Language and sexual consent* (2001), writes that "the law not only has the power to enact rules and impose punishments, but also has the capacity to impose and affirm culturally powerful definitions of social reality" (p. 120). Section 363 of the Penal Code of Sri Lanka defines rape as instances when a man engages in sexual intercourse with a woman within five specific scenarios. Sections 363 (a) and (e) merit much attention. In the former, a man who engages in sexual activities with a woman "without her consent even where such woman is his wife, and she is judicially separated from the man" commits the criminal act of rape. In the latter, a man who engages in sexual activity with a woman "with or without her consent when she is under sixteen years of age, unless the woman is his wife who is over twelve years of age and is not judicially separated from the man" (p. 389A) commits the crime of rape. As can be seen then, the law of the country tacitly and indirectly 'legalizes' marital rape, even if the act of rape involves a twelve-year-old girl. In this sense, the presence of a marital bond is given precedence over the absence of the consensual voice or the age of the woman/ girl who falls victim to this act. In other words, the voice of the victim, whether consensual or not, is silenced.

If the identity or the definition of rape and the penalization it could receive are in the hands of the lawmakers, rape too becomes a construct. Rape cannot be labeled as rape unless it is read in relation to the framework laid down by law and gender. It is not for the victim to determine whether s/he has been raped or not. Instead, a country's law determines whether rape has indeed been committed or not. The law of the country can choose not to recognize rape as a criminal act at all. The violation of personhood does not simply recognize the act of rape for what it means to the individual who has been subjected to it. The recognizability of this crime and the acknowledgement of the brutal physical and psychological violation as a criminal offense is determined through the frame of recognition named 'law'.

Gendered bodies, crimes, and gaze

Any discussion of rape places the body in the overlap of the discourses of gender and law. It should also be noted that Section 363 of the Penal Code has, right at the outset, delineated rape as perpetrated by the male against the female, making the act of rape a gendered crime. Therefore, the recognition of bodies that are subjected to this particular crime as deserving justice takes place within the discourse of gender, which is yet another frame of reference that serves to govern the way in which the body is given meaning. As part of performing a cultural fiction, the body has to abide by the rules of gender. Gender, Butler (1988) argues, is not "a stable identity or locus of agency". It is, instead, an "identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*," a "constructed identity", a "compelling illusion" and an "object of belief" (pp. 519 - 520). This illusion serves as a "strategy of survival" with "punitive consequences" (p. 522). If one transgresses the boundaries of one's gender, s/he would be penalized. Gender is therefore an identity reinforced by the repetition and reception of sanctioned actions and the continuous penalization of acts that fall outside the boundaries of what is considered proper or legal. If all bodies are defined by gender, they become entities that are both performed and scripted according to the discourses which make sense of them.

The labeling of bodies as male or female has led to the successful placing of sexual activities on a legitimacy/illegitimacy scale. The positioning of the body within the discourse of power and law is made explicit by Foucault (1978). He writes that in the Victorian era, sexuality was carefully confined and compartmentalized as proper or illegitimate activities, and that the former was absorbed into the "serious function of reproduction" (Foucault, p.3). While the "legitimate and procreative couple laid down the law," "imposed itself as a model,

enforced the norm, safeguarded the truth, and reserved the right to speak while retaining the principle of secrecy,” room was made for “illegitimate sexualities” in places of profits if not in the “circuits of reproduction” (pp. 3-4). Sex was therefore repressed and regulated through the “triple edict of taboo, non-existence and silence” (p.5), due to its incompatibility with a “general and intensive work imperative” (p.6). At a time when “labor capacity was systematically being exploited,” this capacity could not be allowed to “dissipate itself in pleasurable activities” (p.6), except in those that allowed to reproduce this capacity. This repression of sexual activities, centuries later, coincided with the development of capitalism and became an integral part of the bourgeois order (p.5) and is evident even today. It is this same phenomenon that Butler (1988) refers to as “the reproduction of a given culture” which is ensured by instating “sexual reproduction within the confines of a heterosexually based system of marriage which requires the reproduction of human beings in certain gendered modes” which guarantees the “eventual reproduction of that kinship system” (p. 524).

The abduction and gang rape of Vidhya can be construed as a by-product of dominant modes of seeing that constitute the male gaze. Reports of this incident having been planned with the intention of it being video recorded and sold overseas (“Swiss Kumar’s Pornographic Racket,” 2017) invites into the picture the fact that not only was Vidhya a prey of injustice but also a victim of (and for) the male gaze. These revelations of the ulterior motives of the perpetrators of this murder transport Vidhya’s intensely personal experience into a different realm of discussion altogether, one involving topics such as explicit sexual content, morality, voyeurism, and consent. Not only did Vidhya have brutal injury inflicted on her, but the perpetrators of this crime had also intended to create a visual record of this act in which Vidhya played the “traditional exhibitionist role” as an object to be “simultaneously looked at and displayed” (Mulvey, 1999, p. 837). Therefore, Vidhya’s victimization was not only acted upon her. It was also meant to invite and to be presented to the male gaze; an act to be viewed and enjoyed. Vidhya had been victimized on another level, i.e., by the male gaze in a world which is, in the words of Mulvey, “ordered by sexual imbalance” (1999, p.837).

Ellis (2006) defines pornography as the meeting point of sexual activity and representation, within which the former is specified, as opposed to being hinted at. In addition, definitions of pornography are shaped by several factors involving legitimacy, laws relating to obscenity, and ideas of morality. Whether pornography is to be viewed as “a form of sexual

expression,” and a “healthy part of an overall sex-positive agenda” (Crawford, 2007, p. 140) or as a context in which women’s bodies are “appropriated,” and “possessed,” “used” and “hated” and where the “power of men” is equated to “imperial power” where men keep “taking and conquering for the pleasure of power and the power of pleasure” (Dworkin, 1989, p. 223), is to be decided based on the absence or presence of the consensual voice. In Vidhya’s ordeal, the absence of the consensual voice of the female body involved in the act shown in the video would definitely make this particular attempt at creating pornographic content fall into the latter category.

The reading of rape as a gendered crime that can only be inflicted by a man on a woman is problematic. In the insightful article titled “On rape and neocolonialism” published in the *Sri Lanka Guardian*, Vigo (2013) writes that “[t]o demarcate rape as a unidirectional domain whereby only women are raped by men (or that only men can possibly be rapists) is a disservice to undertaking any honest discussion about rape today.” To realize that the legislature and judiciary of one’s own country provides one with no legal recourse in the event of being subjected to domestic violence in the form of marital rape is a source of disappointment and shock. Equally shocking is the exclusionary nature of the discourse of law and its inability to provide justice to each and every individual who seeks its protection.

The absence of the punitive element and ethnic narratives

It is not this exclusionary nature of law, however, that the nation protested against in the event of the gang rape and murder of eighteen-year-old Vidhya Sivaloganathan in May 2015. Conversely, it is the absence of the punitive element where this incident is concerned that people rallied against.

The abduction, gang rape, and murder of eighteen-year-old Vidhya Sivaloganathan in May 2015 triggered island-wide protests demanding that the perpetrators of the crime be punished. The inaction on the part of the police and the shocking nonchalance they had displayed (Muttulingam, 2017) coupled with the subsequent alleged attempt made by the police to smuggle out one of the nine suspects, triggered anger among the masses which resulted in protests outside the Jaffna Magistrate’s Court House, where the protestors demanded justice for Vidhya and that the suspects be handed over to them i.e., the protestors. The protests in different parts of the country involved school children, university students and lecturers, and women’s groups (Christopher, 2015a).

Apart from protests, Vidhya's predicament initiated a candlelight vigil, which was organized by some politicians (Christopher, 2015b) and resulted in a statement being issued by the then Northern Provincial Council Chief Minister stating that had the police taken prompt action, the victim could have been saved (Christopher, 2015a). Having visited Jaffna and met Vidhya's parents, the former Sri Lankan President assured them that swift investigations would take place and that the criminals will be punished (Muttulingam, 2017). Justice was served 898 days after the death of Vidhya, in September 2017.

Vidhya's continuous placement in and out of frames that would recognize her vulnerability and precarity is made evident in the timeline of incidents that follow the family's realization that Vidhya may have faced some sort of danger. Butler (2009, p.1) writes about the "politically saturated" frames through which an individual is perceived (or fails to be perceived) as being vulnerable. Such frames, and the "mechanisms of power" (Butler, 2009, p.1) they entail, mould existence and life experiences, and serve to determine if these lives and experiences 'matter' or not. In the case of Vidhya, the initial nonchalance of the police officers and villagers who had suggested to Vidhya's mother that this may have been an elopement (Muttulingam, 2017) highlights the fact that, at this particular point in the sequence of events, the vulnerability and precarity of Vidhya and her family were deemed unworthy of recognition.

Furthermore, once the enormity of the crime that Vidhya was subjected to was unveiled, local Tamil media resorted to reporting that this murder may have been conducted in retaliation to Vidhya's mother having reported a robbery to the police (Muttulingam, 2017). In this instance, we find that Vidhya's fate may have been charted by her murderers as a response to her mother having reached out to the judicial framework of the country, the existence of which, ideally, is to safeguard individuals against vulnerability in the face of injustice and violence. Such an interpretation of her fate suggests that Vidhya may have had to face a ghastly death due to a lack of fear and respect among wrong doers towards the law of the land, a context in which voicing personal concerns and seeking justice can only result in the individual being placed in even more vulnerability.

The sexual act performed upon the body of Vidhya falls outside of the domain of licit sexual acts for several reasons, the chief among them being the absence of consent. However, after the incident, the parents in the region where Vidhya lived were requested to "protect their

girls against rape by preventing them from attending evening tuition classes or wearing inappropriate attire” (Pinto-Jayawardena & Guthrie, 2016, para. 8). This advice was offered to parents despite the fact that Vidhya was “raped and killed in broad daylight on her way to school while wearing her school uniform” (Pinto-Jayawardena & Guthrie, 2016, para. 8). Such interpretations of Vidhya's predicament continue the discussion of this crime as a gendered one; a discussion which seemingly attempted to load the blame onto the female victim and her ‘invitation’ of rape, while rejecting the fact that Vidhya's vulnerability stemmed from social injustice and lawlessness.

As a result of the attention focused on this incident, ‘Vidhya’ became a household name. The illicit act that was acted upon Vidhya's body and the disappointing absence of punitive measures resulted in her body being placed within a political domain. In other words, Vidhya's body, in the weeks that followed her abduction and murder, became politically significant.

Alongside the interpretation of Vidhya's murder as a symbol of moral degeneracy and lawlessness, there is a consistent treatment of Vidhya's experience as contrasting with other crimes that have resulted due to ethnic oppression. Vidhya's murder contradicts the assumption that “sexual violence will not emanate from one's own community” (Pinto-Jayawardena & Anantharajah, 2016, para.20). In addition, this incident is not “a direct manifestation of ethnic oppression on the part of state officers” (Pinto-Jayawardena & Anantharajah, 2016, para.21). Therefore, although there have been many cases similar to Vidhya's which took place in northern Sri Lanka, Vidhya's case stands out as different as the perpetrators and the victim are of the same ethnicity, and due to the fact that justice was served to Vidhya's family. Interestingly, Vidhya's gang rape and murder, which, in its immediate aftermath, was so strikingly neglected by law enforcers that it resulted in protests for justice, is considered today as proof of the proper function of the arm of justice in the country. The discourse surrounding the gruesome murder of Vidhya has now slightly shifted, to include discussions about ethnicity, politics, and power.

In addition, days after the incident, the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), a nationalist political party in Sri Lanka, “urged the police and security forces to implement the law against the angry mob that tried to take the law into their own hands in Jaffna by hiding behind the rape and murder of Vithya” alleging that “angry mobs were threatening the Sinhalese in Jaffna to leave that area” while “separatist and terrorist groups were trying to gain their goals by

hiding behind this incident that involved acts of violence” (“JHU sees racism behind Jaffna hartal,” 2015, para.1). Vidhya’s experience is therefore no more a personal one. It is of political and racial significance and was seen by some as a threat to national peace. In other words, her experience was a battleground on which resided the potential for racial violence to be unleashed.

The personal as political

In *Nation, race and history in Asian American writing*, Zamora (2008, p.6) writes that “bodies are manipulated to produce meaning and purpose” and that they can function both “symbolically” and “politically” in the process of nation building. According to Butler, the feminist claim that the “personal is political” suggests that “subjective experience is not only structured by existing political arrangements, but effects and structures those arrangements in turn” (1988, p.522). These assertions provide testimony to the fact that the personal and the political co-constitute each other. The body is a text produced by and inscribed with both the personal and the political experience, and it functions as a space which reproduces the personal and the political. In Vidhya’s case however, her body and her experience form a space through which the personal is utilized with the view of remedying the political. Her experience has been converted into a weapon of revolt and is being used not to maintain the status quo as it is, but to point out to the fact that she, and many before (and after) her, have been deprived of the right to justice. The manipulation of Vidhya’s experience and body does not take place with the intention of preserving the demarcation between the personal and political. It is instead an attempt at restructuring these ‘political arrangements’ or the political sanctioning of the act of turning a blind eye towards injustice.

Butler (1988, p.523) also writes that “the personal has also been immunized against political challenge to the extent that public/private distinctions endure”. Vidhya’s narrative, conversely, can be considered a point at which the personal and the political meet and clash. While her experience is now symbolically and politically used for the benefit of the entire community, Vidhya’s predicament remains a personal experience, a loss and a memory for her family members and friends. This clash between the political and the personal is in line with what Zamora (2008) writes regarding the violation of literal bodies within the context of nationalism. Where nationalism is concerned, “literal bodies have become [a] powerful metaphor or symbol for/to the nation, yet such figural appointments customarily result in

the very real violation of the person inhabiting such a designated body” (Zamora, 2008, p. 8). The circulation of images of Vidhya's mutilated body through the internet is an example of the violation Vidhya has undergone due to her body and experience being politically invested. It is against seeming acts of indifference of this nature that Vidhya's family, along with the women's group 'Women of Wednesday,' have spoken. Such instances problematize the placing of a body within the political domain. Describing Vidhya's family's yearning for justice, it was reported that the victim's siblings were not pleased at the way in which photographs of their sister's mutilated body were being circulated among the public via the internet. It was seen as an insensitive and futile act (Muttulingam, 2017). According to Zamora (2008), “[c]onsidering bodies as living texts lends itself to Roland Barthes' well-known commentary on the limits of authorization” (p.8). She adds that “live bodies never function as a single “theological” meaning (the message of the Author – God)” and that “the idea of the human body as ‘open’ text yielding a multiplicity of readings is at once at odds with the predominant impulse to authorize bodies, to limit and furnish their meaning with a single signification” (Zamora, 2008, p.8). These observations are true of Vidhya too, since her body, or the knowledge of assault acted upon her body, now functions as a multidimensional space in which society writes varying narratives in its attempt to revolt, for the benefit of the community, against the existing political circumstances. But enclosing Vidhya's experience within a political domain and appropriating her narrative to suit the public drain away the personal element in this scenario. Vidhya's story does not belong to her or to her family anymore. The author/performer of that body is no more, but narratives basing this particular body circulate among the public. The body is being utilized for a political cause, in a domain far removed from that of the personal.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it could be stated that the meaning generated of the historical idea of the body, along with the set of possibilities it has the capacity to achieve, are both social and discursive constructs. Both are social artefacts and a part of a strategy of survival and can be understood only once they are placed within the discourses of gender, law, power, and race, all of which inscribe the body with an identity which grants it agency while at the same time represses it. The use of the noun 'construct' does not mean that these concepts are non-existent. Instead, what an analysis of the interpretations and reactions to Vidhya's predicament reveals is how this traumatic experience has been placed within different frameworks and discourses which serve to either recognize her experience as deserving sympathy and legal

redress or render her invisible altogether. As a result of meaning made inside overlapping discourses and then being deployed as a platform on which to protest against injustice, her body and its experience are placed in a political domain. Her experience is appropriated in order to address public, political, legal, and racial issues. This leaves one with questions on how frameworks through which the body is read and understood can be made more democratic so that the levels of exclusion from frameworks can be minimized. The placing of the body within a political domain can be interpreted by some as a violation of the memory of the individual – eighteen-year-old Vidhya Sivaloganathan of Jaffna – who faced the most atrocious crime that the body could ever be subject to, a crime for which serving justice took a long time.

References

- Alaimo, S. (2000). *Undomesticated ground: Recasting nature as feminist space*. Cornell University Press.
- Butler, J. (1988). Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory. *Theatre Journal*, 40(4), 519-531.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/3207893>
- Butler, J. (2009). *Frames of war: When is life grievable?*. Verso.
- Chilling details emerge in Vithya murder case. (2017, July 2). *The Sunday Leader*.
<http://www.thesundayleader.lk/2017/07/02/chilling-details-emerge-in-vithya-murder-case/>
- Christopher, C. (2015a, May 24). Out on IGP's orders. *The Sunday Times*.
<https://www.pressreader.com/sri-lanka/sunday-times-sri-lanka/20150524/281629598861911>
- Christopher, C. (2015b, May 31). Island of fear. *The Sunday Times*.
<https://www.sundaytimes.lk/150531/news/island-of-fear-151555.html>
- Crawford, B. J. (2007). Toward a third-wave feminist legal theory: Young women, pornography and the praxis of pleasure. *Michigan Journal of Gender and Law*, 14(1), 99-168.
- Dworkin, A. (1989). *Pornography: Men possessing women*. Plume.
- Ellis, J. (2006). On pornography. In P. Lehman (Ed.), *Pornography: Film and culture* (pp. 25–47). Rutgers University Press.
- Fernando, L. (2017, September 27). *The rape and murder of Sivaloganathan Vidya: Justice Served – What we know*. News First. <https://newsfirst-staging.3cs.support/2017/09/rape-murder-sivaloganathan-vidya-justice-served-know/>
- Foucault, M. (1978). *The history of sexuality*. Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, M. (1991). Politics and the study of discourse. In G. Burchell, P. Miller, & C. Gordon (Eds.), *The Foucault effect: Studies in governmentality* (pp. 53-72). The University of Chicago Press.
- Hall, S. (1997). *Representation: Cultural representation and signifying practices*. Thousand Oaks.

- Haraway, D. J. (2016). A cyborg manifesto. *Manifestly Haraway*, 3–90.
<https://doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/9780816650477.003.0001>
- JHU Sees Racism Behind Jaffna Hartal. (2015, May 22). *Daily Mirror*.
<https://www.pressreader.com/sri-lanka/daily-mirror-sri-lanka/20150522/281934541536771>
- Mulvey, L. (1999). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. In M. Cohen & L. Braudy (Authors), *Film theory and criticism: Introductory readings* (pp. 833-844). Oxford University Press.
- Muttulingam, T. (2017, September 28). Justice ensured for Vidya. *Daily News*.
<http://www.dailynews.lk/2017/09/28/local/129633/justice-ensured-vidya>
- Palihawadane, N. (2020, February 17). *IP Nishantha used motorcycle belonging to one of criminals who killed Vidya – CID Special Unit*. Ceylon Ananda. <http://ceylon-ananda.com/ip-nishantha-used-motorcycle-belonging-to-one-of-criminals-who-killed-vidya-cid-special-unit/>
- Penal Code of Sri Lanka. <https://www.lawnet.gov.lk/penal-code-consolidated-2/>
- Pinto-Jayawardena, K., & Anantharajah, K. (2016). A crisis of 'legal indeterminacy' and state impunity. In K. Jayawardena & K. Pinto-Jayawardena (Eds.), *The search for justice: The Sri Lanka papers*. Zubaan.
- Pinto-Jayawardena, K., & Guthrie, J. (2016). Introduction. In K. Jayawardena & K. Pinto-Jayawardena (Eds.), *The search for justice: The Sri Lanka papers*. Zubaan.
- Swiss Kumar's pornographic racket revealed (2017, August 15). *Sri Lanka Mirror*.
<https://srilankamirror.com/news/4427-swiss-kumar-s-pornographic-racket-revealed>.
- Vigo, J. (2013, January 1). *On rape and neocolonialism*. Counterpunch.
<https://www.counterpunch.org/2013/01/01/on-rape-and-neocolonialism/>
- Wolf, K. (2002). Representing rape: Language and sexual consent by Susan Ehrlich. *University of Maryland Law Journal of Race, Religion, Gender and Class*, 2(1), 115–136.
- Zamora, M. C. (2008). *Nation, race and history in Asian American literature: Remembering the body*. P. Lang.