Inscribing the Female Body: Fuzzy Gender and Goddess in a South Indian Saiva Marriage Myth

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Abstract

The paper seeks to work through the heuristic device of marriage and female sexual bodily fluids, as they are constructed within particular strands of Hinduism. The paper applies the analytic lens of feminist Anthropology and proceeds through the contested site of female body and probes how the discursive body comes to be embedded within a discourse of matrimony and reproduction. By looking at an archetypal female or Goddess within a particular stream of Hinduism and the matrix of mythology within which she is installed, the paper unpacks how "female" has come to be strategically inscribed, constrained and performed upon through various religio-cultural devices in Hinduism. As much of the performance of female gender scripts appear to be drawn from the regulatory power of certain (male) canonized religious texts, the paper suggests re-installing the goddess within the liminal and interstitial space of fuzzy gender that might well allow for an alternate, more plastic reading of marriage and motherhood, and of female.

Introduction

This paper situates itself within the polyvocal religious complex of Hinduism and seeks to work through the heuristic device of marriage and female sexual bodily fluids, as they are voiced within particular strands of Hinduism. Recognising that the contested site of female body has become both variously, and sometimes, seemingly similarly inscribed within various religions, the paper is premised on the "fact" that her "body" is very much a social and religio-cultural "phenomenon" and

proceeds through the discursively understood body, and the transitioning of bodily fluids in marriage, from sexual to maternal, and attempts to unpack the construction of female body as embedded in an ancient Hindu marriage myth in the South Indian Tamil religious tradition. Finally the paper attempts an alternate reading of female body that can possibly challenge the performance of female-embodied body politics within Hinduism, by attempting to situate the goddess within a grey space of fuzzy gender that calls for an equally alternate reading of marriage and motherhood.

Woman, Does She Exist?

First Wave, early feminist thinking embraced in anthropology and articulated as feminist anthropology sought to recover "woman" from the many androcentric ethnographic texts where she appeared as muted and relatively invisible in the field narratives of male ethnographers. These feminists wished to clearly articulate the lived presence of the previously disenfranchised woman, and their critical stance was to attempt to dismantle the several permutations of domination over women, essentialized as a cultural universal. Thus, the initial re-ordering to de-center the male gaze on male subjects, producing male ethnographies, saw the introduction of "anthropology of woman" through the efforts of pioneering female anthropologists such as Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, Elsie Parsons et al. as well as female voices outside of anthropology such as Simone de Beauvoir. "Anthropology of woman" articulated in the seminal 70s anthologised works edited respectively by Rosaldo and Lamphere (*Women, Culture and Society*) and Rayna Reiter (*Towards an Anthropology of Women*) sought to separate the descriptive categories of sex, from the culturally defined gender. Within these hermeneutics it appeared that the cultural entity called "woman" did exist. Indeed the category of woman was seen as the being able to unite all females cross culturally.

However, post-modern sensibilities, infused into Third Wave feminism and converging on the heels of the various stages of Second Wave, insisted on not caving in and collapsing differences. This new feminist lens that was ushered into anthropological studies in religion, kinship etc. viewed any posturing of the universal as an insidiously new form of colonisation. "Truth" is seen as inflected and as embedded in context, fluidly refracting through contextual diversity. In these discourses "woman" does not exist as a universal category that lies beyond contextual interrogation and deconstruction, but is contingent to where, and what type of, feminist scholarship is positioned. Says Tauchert, "the "autonomous" female subject remains suspended between reification and cultural erasure" (Tauchert 2002: 31).

Feminist Anthropology: Drawing Attention to Positionality

In the wake of voiceless bodies being now heard, later feminist anthropologists were alert to understand gender within the differential axes of the intersections of race,

class, ethnicity, etc. Rather than be comprehended in any reified terms, gender is understood in a relational and fluid context, and as a set of appropriated behaviours within discrete cultural systems of meaning and power, useful for elucidating the workings of these selfsame systems that confer role expectations and positionalities for female and male.

It is this positionality of women that the paper is concerned with. We look at a particular South Indian Tamil myth that reveals how women come to be refracted and positioned through, what I refer to as "matrimonisation", or the imperative of having to be married, where the state of being married comes to be naturalised. The paper attempts to unpack the "Othering" effect of marriage that re-positions her, so that much of the woman or female (as I use these terms interchangeably within the context of the paper) is rendered alien, or unavailable to herself while, at the same time, making her available to her husband and children. The myth also presents a transitioning of gender representation from an area of potential gender greyness to that of culturally sanctioned female, thereby attempting to potentially sidestep issues of danger and harm to the male.

The study draws from my earlier research in the Madurai District of South India in 1998 and later visits in the summers of 2004 and 2005. I was there initially to research the goddess Meenakshi, (and ritually speaking) dominant role that she appeared to enjoy in a religion that conventionally exalted her male counterpart, Siva. While it was not the focus of the particular study at the time, I was intrigued by what the cultural transaction of marriage did to the goddess and by the immediate concepts of danger and oblique constructions of pollution that featured in the mythology surrounding the goddess. While I do not think that marriage or pollution taboos are to be culturally universalised I do feel that they appear central in certain cultural contexts. To this end, the discussion of the goddess and the marriage myth are at times punctuated with examples of similar representations, or underlying belief structures from diverse cultural communities which draws on literature culled from female ethnographic voices and women-centred feminist gazes. This is not meant to collapse the discrete cultural complexes into any kind of homogenous soup but serves merely to show cultural echoes and mimics, that are *neither,* echoes or mimics of each other, but *appear* so for the similarity that we may be able to structurally, analytically et al. perceive, or choose to construct. First, however, we need, as the Hindu would say, take our *darshan,* or "seeing of" the goddess.

"And it's a Girl!" The Birth of the, well, Female Goddess

Like the Olympian gods, the gods of the Hindu pantheon are scripted to reveal very human personalities and appearance. The goddess Meenakshi's birth is traced to the Tamil myth that communicates to us that the royal couple realise that are unable to have a child, and perform Vedic injunctive sacrifices prescribed for a

male child. At the end of the rituals the girl Tatatakai is born from the sacrificial fire as a three year old child. Much to the consternation of the king, not only is it not a male child, but to add fuel to the proverbial *vedic* fire, she is also born with three breasts.

In the narrative, the King is consoled by a celestial voice saying that the girl will lose her third breast when she meets her appropriate (sic) husband. The Hindu narrative can thus be approached through the mechanism of what I call "matrimonisation", the Hindu imperative, injunction, almost, of marriage (and subsequent reproduction) for a woman, which makes itself manifest even at the moment of birth. By deeming marriage an appropriate trope to contextualize and unpack the myth, I am not "privileging for analysis" that "intransigent stereotype—women equals reproduction" (Locke 1998: 3). Nor do I belong to the lineage of anthropologists that privileges the social transaction of heterosexual marriage as a cultural universal. However, by focusing the gaze on marriage, the intention is to reveal that, in the context of the Tamil and the wider Hindu society, the female body has been appropriated and sought to be "matrimonised" thus positioning her body as a site for (heterosexual) normative marriage, and with it underlying notions of "sex as heterosexual intercourse" (Ussher 1997: 3). Clearly marriage in the Hindu context has several other implicit notions of perpetuating hierarchical caste and kinship structures. However, it is the *re*-construction of female body to mother through the obligatory cultural transaction of marriage that concerns us. Says Amali Phillips of the Tamil community she worked with, "marriage in Tamil culture is the most celebrated rite of passage for a woman, and fulfils the purpose of her being" (Phillips 2003: 21).

The marriage myth under discussion can be seen to reveal this appropriation and positioning for marriage (and sex) with the male god as it attempts to direct the goddess towards fulfilling the purpose of her being. Tatakai, as the myth shows, later comes to be deified and worshipped as goddess Meenakshi. However, the three-breasted goddess is not the goddess in the present Madurai temple. Any worshipper visiting the temple today will see what devotees have seen for several hundreds of years, a beautiful goddess with two beautiful breasts. So what has become of the third breast? A safe assumption would be that, as per the celestial voice at birth, the girl has met her husband and lost the third breast. The explanation does indeed lie in another related Madurai narrative where Tatatakai successfully conquers the four corners of the world. She does not, however, conquer the god Siva, rather the myth communicates that she does not wish to.

Marriage Material: Why not an Extra Breast for the Bride?

Between the miraculous birth of Tatatakai with three breasts and the loss of the third breast, however, are important issues that come to shape the understanding

of the goddess. Meenakshi is brought up by the king as a male and assumes all royal responsibilities, and, until the point that she meets the god Siva, is completely successful in her conquests. The loss of her third breast upon seeing the god appears to be intimately connected to Meenakshi's transformation into the goddess in the temple. And the device by which this transformation is executed is marriage. The goddess who previously possessed three breasts suffers a "castration" and loses something of herself when she meets Siva. The breast is positioned in the myth as a signifier employed in the service of identifying the groom to Meenakshi, and its lifespan ends with the arrival of the husband. It is in the in-between spaces that the myth's layered import is revealed, showing us that gender is constructed in this context within a heterosexual matrix (Butler 1990).

A constructivist approach allows an unpacking of the institutionalized understanding of breast, in turn revealing underlying beliefs about the female. For in terms of Tamil religious tradition it is believed that the woman's "violent power" is concentrated in her breasts (Shulman 1980: 145, 235). There are tales that refer to the wrath of the female who is said to have hurled off her breast in anger, thereby setting fire to the city of Madurai. There are also narratives of the male god Siva taking the form of a baby in order to suck the anger from a goddess after she slays a demon. There seems an apparent need to defuse what is perceived as a concentration of power in the breasts, potentially harmful to the male. The marriage myth, I feel, functions to re-organise our understanding of female breasts and their so called true purpose, ostensibly spelled out as that of providing nourishment to the child.

The goddess losing a breast translates to a loss of power that the text itself preordains. Consider another example of "woman with three-breasts",

> [T]here was born to a king a daughter with three breasts. The Brahmins warned the king never to look at the child, lest he die an early death. The king avoided the sight of his daughter, and he offered one hundred thousand gold coins to anyone who would marry her and take her out of the country (Shulman 1980: 203).

In this narrative the daughter with the three breasts is perceived as being dangerous and a threat to the father. The only way around this permanent threat for the king was for the daughter to marry. The threat is later transferred to the blind husband when he discovers the wife's infidelity. The myth resolves itself in a way, which, by now ought to be familiar to us. The husband throws the lover against his wife and the weight of the lover pushes in her third breast (Shulman 1980: 204). Notwithstanding the fact that the husband is unable to see her, the three-breasted woman is still considered dangerous and the myth connives to somehow "de-breast" her.

Sex, Milk and, the All-Powerful Semen, Hang on to it!

Semen and mother's milk reveal themselves as highly gendered fluids, whose meaning and import is refracted through gendered sexual roles for the male and female in South Indian Tamil, and the wider Hindu society. Sexual relations are contrastingly defined for the male and female in the post Vedic texts, Sanskritic Upanishads. These ideas of northern origin have become assimilated into the later south Indian Tamil conceptualisation of the (so called legitimate) flow of sexual fluids. The texts decree that the flow of fluid from the man and into the woman in sex erodes into the power of the man, while feeding into that of the woman (See Doniger 1981). Carole Counihan has done ethnographic work with the Kafe of New Guinea and in her rather eruditely titled essay, "Food, Sex, and Reproduction: Penetration (sic) of Gender Boundaries," she notes that the men of several pre-industrial societies of New Guinea and the Amazon observe a number of strategies to reduce male contamination during sex. She states, "especially in New Guinea, there is a clear sense that not only do woman receive semen through male penetration in sex, but that women penetrate men with powerful doses of masculinity-threatening female essence" (Counihan 1999: 68).

Hindu religious texts that have become infused into South Indian, Tamil Hinduism, have similar ideas of the "depleting" act of having sex with the female. The Vedic poet writes in the Rig Veda of the sexually aggressive wife, "the foolish woman sucks dry the panting wise man" (RV 1. 179. 4). In the context of the Tamils, the way out of this impasse, to not have the male power eroded into, nor that of the women increased, as the woman is not meant to become stronger at the expense of the man, is recourse to the common fallback in Hindu thinking, that of ascetic abstinence. For the male, then, it is prescribed that the fluids are held back while for the female the prescription is the inverse, except it is not sexual fluid that is meant to flow freely, but mother's milk. The texts attached to the Vedas, the Upanishads, ascribe to it an immortal non materiality by claiming that a man's soul is transmuted from food into semen. In Tamilnadu, it is said that a man's power, his *sakti*, enters him in food and is stored in semen. To increase and retain this *sakti*, males are meant to retain their semen and hence lead an ascetic life. The texts declare that females, while having *greater* sakti of their own, also acquire, in intercourse, the *sakti* stored in the semen, thus further increasing their supply (see Shulman 1980; Harman 1989; Doniger 1981).

Men are encouraged to perform asceticism. However, rather than spell out what might otherwise appear as a logical reduction, that females are free to engage sexually to increase their power, females, are told that they can increase their *sakti* merely by being pure chaste wives. The texts construe to subvert the sexual prerogative of the female into what is deemed as more normative behaviour. The chaste wife is supposedly a mother full of milk, rearticulated as the new source of a woman's power. Thus, she is made out to increase her power by letting her fluids (milk) flow

freely, but not her sexual fluids (Shulman 1980: 45). A popular (masculine) adage in the Indian subcontinent translates to "if you have suckled the milk of your mother", is often used to express male physical prowess. Kumar points out that while this may well "show appreciation for the mother's role in imparting nourishment, there is no admission that the mother's sexual fluids contributes to the identity of the child" (Kumar 2006: 281). He adds,

> In popular understanding as well as in Ayurveda, the indigenous system of physiology and medicine in India, semen is understood as derived from blood. Being the product of the father's "seed", a child inherits the father's blood and is therefore placed in his group. (Kumar 2006: 281)

Tapper (1991) concedes that the Afgan Durrani admit ideologically that some traits to the child are transmitted through women, where it is said that she is the source of descent. The "men's role is associated with semen, or the 'seed' of the child, and also identity from men and women is transmitted through the blood of the veins (*rag*)." The other way that the women is said to transmit status is through their milk. However, Tapper points out that all this is at the ideological level, for, as her ethnographic contact with the Durrani revealed, in practice, the male role in procreation was thought to be primary (Tapper 1991: 54-55).

Fruzetti (1982) commenting on Hindu Bengali society, and Counihan (1999) commenting on her work with the pre-industrial societies of the Pacific and Amazon, tell us that the male and his role is defined as the more prominent and essential throughout the pregnancy. The child is thought of as almost "entirely a male product" (Counihan 1999: 68). "Women are the sperm bearers, and males are the sperm itself. Sperm, *bij* (seed), is culturally defined, embodying male descent and male-linkedness", states Fruzetti (1982: 126).

What Marriage does to the Goddess, From Nobody to Somebody?

Through the process of matrimonisation the female body is *re*-constructed into that of "mother", and the fluid that is meant to flow, freely, is milk. It seems also that in most respects except her biological sex, the three breasted Tatatakai is male until she meets the god Siva. She then assumes the socially constructed role of female, playing the conquered, and significantly her third breast disappears. And it is through the socially and religiously sanctioned transaction of marriage that the female is meant to transition to mother. Perhaps the imperative for a woman in Tamil society to marry is closely allied to why the woman ought not to remain unmarried. The Tamils believe that the virgin culturally understood as the unmarried woman is invested with innate power (*ananku)* which, if properly controlled, by the

male one presumes, can be used to great effect. This idea also finds its expression in the priests, who it turns out, according to *agamic* religious prescription, have to be married. The priests interviewed all echoed that marriage was essential as then they would have access to the women's power or *sakti.*

Notwithstanding the military prowess of Tatatakai, in the mythic narrative her mother, artfully fulfilling the role of the typical Indian mother, is said to lament the unmarried state of her daughter. For a woman is thought to be incomplete until they marry and marriage is seen as that which "transforms" women from "nobodies" to "somebodies", an identity "conferred on women by the men who choose them as their wives" (Phillips 2003: 22). If one looks at how Harman (1989: 114) puts it, that according to the text, "Siva saves the day by his prophetic appearance, and eventually by his marriage to her *(Meenakshi)*" the text, it seems, ingenuously presents Siva as the saviour. *Mangalam* in the Tamil language means happiness and auspiciousness and the term *mangalai* refers to one of the goddesses in Hinduism, the married goddess Parvati, or significantly, to any married woman. Furthermore, in contemporary India, Hindu women from the South Indian and Northern (Bengali) traditions are meant to idealize the husband, as the god Siva.

Married women may well be equated to the goddess through such linguistic devices however, the marriage of Meenakshi effectively renders the goddess acquiescent to the (male) god and hands over the territory, that is the city of Madurai, and power to the god.

Quick: From Wife to Mother

Sexual union, even between the gods is, strictly controlled and ceremonial. All through the day when the goddess "receives" her devotees in the Madurai temple, she is housed within the restricted confines of her shrine, which is separate from that of the god's. Meenakshi's role is clearly circumscribed as the virginal goddess, except when she is allowed to ritually consummate their conjugal relations late at night. The ritual *paliyari puja* which I witnessed on numerous occasions is a ceremonial sanction for the sexual union of the gods. Just before the smaller Meenakshi idol in the bedchamber is ritually prepared for the god's nocturnal visit, the diamond nose ring from the main Meenakshi image in the inner sanctum is removed. The removal of the ornament signifies a removal of power so that Siva can unite sexually. Shulman, (1980: 48; Kinsley 1986: 202) describes that the god's mating with the powerful "virgin goddess leaves him vulnerable to her violent energy". "The goddess of the shrine still embodies the ideal of *karpu,* "chastity", but *karpu* now seems to refer not to virginity per se but to a wife's faithfulness to her husband" (Shulman 1980:148).

Even in contemporary India the husband's honour is made out to depend on the chaste behaviour of the wife. This is echoed in Nancy Tappers study in with the

Durrani Pashtuns, where she says that in models of Middle Eastern marriages, men's honour depend on their female agnates and their sexual modesty (Tapper 1991: 16). There are also several rituals that the Tamil wife performs at certain times in the year to reciprocate being chosen by her husband and petitions god to keep her husband safe with long life, ostensibly articulated as keeping *her tali* safe (Phillips 2003: 22). The husband comes forward to bless the wife at this time and would sometimes give the blessing of many children, which is the same blessing bestowed by elders at the time of marriage. Thus, "the sacred Tamil woman, is [constructed as] procreative rather than erotic" (Doniger 1981: 246).

Deification comes to be connected to motherhood and the divine marriage, in Madurai as elsewhere, is used as paradigmatic for all earthly marriages. This is what I refer to as the Othering effect of marriage, where, aside from reconstructing the import of her body so that it is more available to husband and child, her reproductive role is also reconstructed in a way that further alienates her from the child. For while "in different cultures of South Asia, the contributions of mother and father in biological reproduction are expressed in terms of bodily fluids-semen, blood and milk", the contributions are constructed in a way that *others* the female and her contribution in the reproductive process (Kumar 2006: 282). Fruzetti points out that the seed symbolises the father's contribution and the field is said to represent the mother, and that it is the seed in the semen that is purported to be the *essence* for the creation of the offspring (Fruzetti 1982: 24-28).

Thus, cultural notions of the maleness and femaleness of blood throw a spotlight on patriliny, where blood is construed as male, as unchangeable, transmitted in the male line and said to be cut of somehow in the female line. Pushpesh Kumar (2006) points out that the metaphor of seed and field or earth for the contribution of each of the parents to the child is highly pervasive and deep-rooted in India. In patrilineal cultures blood is defined as male and women are expected to be like the "earth", as the receptacles of male seed and are meant to give back the male fruit. This cultural definition of blood alienates the children and gives the male more proprietary rights over them as in the context of divorce in certain communities. Says Kumar of the cultural definition of blood, "It seeps into everyday language, becoming a paralegal reference point during family crisis-death, divorce and property divisions" (Kumar 2006: 282).

This othering effect is also embedded in scientific metaphors as in the egg and sperm story. Emily Martin shows that early nineteenth century medical literature presented the passive waiting egg in counterpoint to the sperm on a mission to move through the female genital tract, to seek out and penetrate the egg. She continues that later revisionist accounts were no better as they projected the egg as aggressor who sought to capture and tether the sperm (Martin 1996: 32, 37).

Motherhood is Divine! Perpetuating the Sanctity of Motherhood

Meenakshi's powerful aggression as the woman-king and warrior, as well as her sexual potential, have become diverted into asexual energies and functions, as mother to the male god Muruga. The kingship in turn passes in patrilineal succession to this male god. The myth would have us accept that it is saving grace that Meenakshi brings forth a (male) child. And, as Meenakshi is made to proclaim in the text, he, meaning of course Siva, has saved the Pandya royal line from extinction (Harman 1989: 50). Meenakshi, although not the male heir that her father desired, begets the male heir to the throne.

The name Meen-akshi means fish-eyed goddess. Several informants in Madurai told me that "just as the mother fish causes the eggs that she has laid to hatch merely by looking at them, so too Meenakshi can grant us her grace and *moksha* (soteric release) if she merely looks at us." I found that it is this particular exegete of the name of the goddess that further helps to unpack just who the queen Tatatakai has become transformed into. Meenakshi's eyes are not the erotic eyes of the goddess Kamakshi, where *kama* means desire. Her eyes are not directed sexually towards her spouse Siva. Tatatakai has become transformed into a mother and the theological import of the loss of the third breast is in a sense duplicated in the way the devotees understand the meaning of the goddess's name. Domestic commodification is exercised through marriage which also serves to desexualise the goddess. The goddess is now a mother and the connotation of her breasts and eyes are now functional rather than sexual. Sex itself is made out, within the general body of Hindu texts, to be the least desirable aim of marriage in Hindu thought for both men and women but especially for women.

By articulating the king's (and Tamil society's paternalistic) wish for a male heir, the text positions Meenakshi as the "second sex". It is only when the celestial voice intervenes to inform the king that Tatatakai should be brought up as a (surrogate) male that the king is consoled. Even then, Tatatakai, as far as the myth is concerned, is merely the *temporary* heir, until she *marries*. The paradox of female power in the context of goddesses is conveniently resolved in post Vedic theological texts by explaining that to be given female authority, "the goddess must have sons . . ." made out to be the legitimating point of female (Doniger 1981: 118).

Pushpesh Kumar's work with the indigenous community of the Kolams in India reveals specific procreative ideologies concerning the male and female contribution to biological reproduction. He points out that the metaphor of "seed" and "earth" in several South Asian cultural understandings, are "demonstrably gendered, acting sometimes as a central variable in mediating men and women's access to material and symbolic resources" (Kumar 2006: 279). He continues that this metaphoric understanding articulates as a powerful mechanism in controlling both the body, as well as the sexuality of the female, and affects the everyday lives of men and women as gendered subjects.

One readily concedes that there is no singular hegemonic discourse on marriage in Hinduism but rather multiple discourses. Nor is this particular myth a master narrative on marriage. Jennet (2005) citing Vasudha Narayan says that, as far as spokespersons for Hinduism go, it (Hinduism that is) appears to be in the custody of high caste, male oriented and text based religion. What Jennet is referring to here, is the predominantly Sanskritized Hinduism passed of as the essential Hinduism to the outside world, while in actuality the polyvocal reality of the so called little tradition is part of the lived religious world of many rural and urban based Hindus in India. Locke and Kaufert (1998: 22) make a vital point that,

> Recent critiques of cultural anthropology claim that anthropologists remain insufficiently sensitive to the way in which their interpretations create a appearance of a cultural coherence in the societies in which they study, a coherence which is in fact an artefact produced by the intellectual gaze from afar.

Certainly in the context of Hinduism it is a complete fallacy to expect any kind of cultural coherence. While revivalist Western educated thinkers of the nineteenth century, the likes of Gandhi, Tagore and Ram Mohan Roy may have attempted to gather and cohere what they conceived as the essential Hinduism, there is no master narrative for the religion. It is rather composed of many different historically and ideologically rooted strands of Hinduisms, and most anthropologists of religion attempt for nuanced relativistic readings of certain aspects of the religion, fully aware of the internal relativism that exists inside the religion. There are times when a kind of strategic essentialism is practised that seeks to, for political reasons, prop up a nationalistic discourse. Anthropologists, however, are cautious not to look for, or end up "seeing" and retelling hegemonic narratives about socio-cultural phenomena like marriage and kinship.

While there may well appear to be a pan Indian primacy attached to marriage, that is not the context of the paper, rather that particular Hindu sacred texts, like the marriage myth in the Madurai text, can indeed be viewed as having naturalised and sacralised marriage, which comes to be accepted as socially normative, or prescriptive even. Moreover, unique to this particular city is the motif of the popularised ideal wedded couple that "resided" here in the form of Meenakshi and her groom Siva. The married women that I spoke to would frequently reveal the gold pendant strung from their sacred *tali*, carrying a golden image of the divine couple. The tying of the tali as a central act in the marriage and is explained by scholars as marking an entry into the husband's domain and as "signifying her sexual, marital and domestic boundaries" and delimiting her by a "code of conduct marked by chastity, fidelity and devotion" to the husband (Phillips 2003: 24).

The Madurai text, among a host of other texts (like the Dharmashastras, themselves rooted in the earlier Vedas), has been interpreted within the tradition, by priests and religious leaders as proclaiming marriage to be a religious act, and the process itself comes to be divinised. Devika Chawla notes that the thematic tenor of these scripts was that "marriage was a duty and a religious sacrament that was required of all" and that this was the "objectified and prescribed role for women" (Chawla 2002: 30). Marriage is made out to be divinely ordained and articulated as part of the scripturally sanctioned *varna-asrama dharma*, or rules for right living. Notice the religiously loaded diction used in reference to marriage. *Velvi,* the Tamil word for (ritual prayer) "sacrifice" is used consistently to mean marriage. The seat on which the married couple are to be seated is referred to as "the sacrificial altar" (*veti),* and the covering over the area, as a "temple" (Harman 1989: 67-69). Perhaps most telling is that the bride is also made out to be entering into marriage with a god, for the groom on the day of the wedding is treated with full rituals usually reserved for a deity.

Contrastingly, in as much as the female body is appropriated as site of marriage and deemed auspicious by the act of marriage, the state of not-being-married is construed/constructed as inauspicious. Mala Sen's book *Death By Fire* (2001) documents the supposedly voluntary, self immolation of an eighteen year old widow, urged on by her spousal family and the rest of the village, for 'being such a good wife', while Phillips reminds us that in many parts of India, north and south, the widow is ostracised for not keeping her husband alive and points out that the "removal of the *tali* after the death of the husband makes her ritually inauspicious and socially inconspicuous" (Phillips 2003: 24).

So What, it is just a Myth!

Religious myth is not construed by the adherent as mere story, or a fictitious narrative of events. While contemporary monotheistic Hindu has inherited this intellectual bent, many other diasporic, and Hindus in India still perceive myths as "being" fundamental truths, often grasped in literal terms. Certainly this is true for almost all of the people I interviewed in Madurai. In Madurai, as in many other religious centres in India, secular history and mythological narrative appear to be inextricable intertwined in almost seamless continuity. Very often in the course of the interviews, my informants in their recounting of the history of the city would pass from actual events to events that were quite obviously mythological.

The myth thus comes to be regarded as a sacred story by the devotee. The document in turn organizes the devotees' perceptions of the sacredness of Madurai, and in terms of the marriage myth, the sacredness of marriage. Referring to another pair of deities, the Vedic Soma and Surya, Apte tells us that all human marriages are in turn meant to "follow this celestial marriage ceremony" (Apte 1978: 3). As

revealed by the men and women I interviewed, on some level, the gendered behaviours naturalised by the gods in this myth were appropriated, and internalized.

That this was an accepted as a natural state of female was clearly revealed to be in my many interactions with both men and women in Madurai. The primacy that the Hindus in Madurai attach to the ritual and socio-religious importance of marriage was best illustrated by the many questions that were posed to me concerning my own marital status. *Kalyanam wunama agile* literally translates to—"not yet married?", and was a question that I met with on several occasions while engaged in fieldwork.

An Alternate way to see the Goddess: Transgender as a form of Fuzzy Space

I would like to suggest that there is an alternate, richly layered way to "see" the literary and theoretical representation of the goddess in the myth, who for all intents and purposes, is raised as a male. In so called "modern" "western" cultures, given that both of these terms themselves do not occupy essentialized spaces of meaning, Meenakshi could be ostensibly "assigned a subject-position linked to a body that that has perceived potentialities for birth" (Tauchert 2002: 29). Meenakshi, however, can also alternatively be seen as occupying a grey area or a fuzzy space. While born with an extra breast, a signifier of so called female, she lives and is raised plastically, outside of the prevailing cultural mores prescribing the behaviour for a female. She is raised as a male and appears endowed with the imperialistic tendencies culturally associated with male, in terms of Hindu popular consciousness. The extra breast in this context does not translate to her being, *even more female*, but rather, *more male*. This "female masculinity" or "feminine masculinity" can perhaps be construed in the "articulation of a third sex, the category of inversion" that opens "up a terrain for imagining both 'feminine men' and 'female masculinities'" (Breger 2005: 76). I quite like the possibility of construing the goddess as an inversion of the sexes and as occupying a space of fuzzy gender as this was echoed by the way both male, and even more so, female devotees perceived the goddess, as she was *prior* to her marriage. The Hindus I interviewed spoke proudly of the goddess' exploits. While they did not overtly appear to perceive her as male, or even in any sense androgynous, their narrative of her was constantly punctuated with, "just like a man", "courageous like a man".

Not male, but just *like* a male. Meenakshi appears to occupy a fuzzy space, that has some resonances with transgendered space, partially at least. I suggest that she can be understood in modern parlance as an example of "partial transgender as opposed to complete transgender identifications" as she presents an example of a cultural, rather than a sexual transgender (Breger 2005: 32). Meenakshi, as an example of fuzzy gender, offers a challenge to "historical signatures" of male-

embodiment and female-embodiment and an androcentric understanding of labour that harks all the way back to man the hunter in opposition to woman the gatherer and reproducer (Tauchert 2002: 32; Slocum 1975).

"Fuzzy" as a conceptual tool is traceable to Buddhist philosophic notions of fuzzy logic and the Hindu and Buddhist matrix of non-dualism, and as such is not completely foreign to the Indian subcontinent and Hinduism. Fuzzy gender is described by Tauchert as "denoting a non-binary understanding of difference that takes us beyond either/or, without collapsing into a model of atomised, chaotic or disembodied subjectivities" (Tauchert 2002: 34).

Choi et al. (2005: 169) employ Judith Butler's notion "performing gender" as engaging in behaviours that are appropriate, consistent and reiterative. They point out that by "engaging in them, we perpetuate and reinforce such cultural norms so that they remain unchallenged" (Choi 2005: 169). One adds that the religious gaze of Hindu religious texts, sanctioning the divinity of marriage and motherhood, and prescribing social emulation, also serve to reinforce the "appropriate" performance of gender and routinize such maternal bodily practices for the woman. The imperative of marriage (and motherhood) appears to be encoded on the body and surface as "orthodox frameworks of meaning surrounding the body" (Locke and Kaufert 1998: 12). Nicolson shows that the by now, established tenet of the maternal instinct is conjoined to Darwinism and is itself central to evolutionary psychology and heterosexual mating behaviour (Nicolson 1999: 165). Positioned for mating, and from having three breasts, with one spare so to speak, the goddess is reduced to having none, for the remaining two have been culturally (more so than biologically) appropriated by her so called maternal instinct in the guise of her child. The first mastectomy, viewed as a kind of castration, (and ordained at her birth) is physical, while the mastectomy of the remaining two breasts is ideological.

Polinsky points out that "the decolonisation and redescription of women's bodies" has vital theological implications and may also offer a new way of looking at the goddess and understanding her body within a fuzzy space that can exist comfortably outside of (obligatory) marriage (Polinska 2000: 55). While cultural feminists choose to argue for a difference feminism and for superior "female essence" that, they argue, needs to be re-appropriate and re-valorised, I believe that such a so-called re-valorisation can itself be hijacked to serve the self perpetuating marriage imperative, thus continuing power being enacted over the body. The concept of fuzzy liberates one from seeking to isolate and situate in binary spaces, a female or male essence, with their concomitant hegemonic femininity and masculinity scripts.

Many writers have pointed out the enormous emancipatory power of the (single) female goddesses, known as *Amman* or Mother Goddesses within non-Sanskritized village, Hinduism, Diesel, Doniger, Shulman, Harman to name a few. These mothers are all unwed and single, and notwithstanding their sometimes frightening demeanor, are theologically understood as mothers for their caring and compassionate attitude

perceived by the adherents. In terms of the varieties of popular worship in the villages, the goddess' power, while being suitably feared by the villagers, was also comprehended as the very traits of aggression and violence that were essential for the goddess to be able to protect the village and its inhabitants. Here the goddess is seen as being married to the village as a whole. The goddesses from the so called larger Sanskritic tradition are often assumed to be dangerous and wild if single and unwed. Meenakshi or Tatakai is an example of this. It is quite the opposite in the village-goddess cults. Here the independent female deity is associated with the stability and order of the village (Kinsley 1998: 203-204).

I would like to suggest that, rather than refer to the village goddesses in the various non- Sanskrit traditions for a model of female-embodiment around which women can choose to review their performance of gender, we look to Meenakshi as a representation of fuzzy gender. What this new "seeing" is perhaps able to facilitate is a collapsing of the binary space separating the sets of male-female gender scripts operating to cohere the Tamil women, and wider Hindu female community into marriage and motherhood. There would not be an "othering" effect as Meenakshi would remain who she was. Motherhood would have less to do with looking physically, and being biologically, female and more to do with perceivable qualities of compassion and strength, as they exist in the goddess (Meenakshi) who was able to vanquish the four corners of the earth for her kingdom and the subjects therein. In her, would also be the possibility of collapsing the asymmetrical values attached to semen and milk as in her fuzzy form, the goddess potentially "carries" both the fluids. Much of the performance of female gender scripts appear to be drawn from the regulatory power of certain (male-centred) canonized religious texts, themselves authored by male religious custodians. Thus, it may be that "(f)uzzy gender offers a model for mobilising female-embodied subjectivity as a political and theoretical figure resistant to institutional embodiment" of marriage, motherhood and so on, thus liberating her to see that both marriage and becoming a mother are both (to be seen as) performed or acquired (Tauchert 2002: 29).

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