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Scenes of Abjection: Power, Sexuality and Caste in Modern Tamil Literature

By

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In

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Of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

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Kiran Keshavamurthy

Abstract

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Kiran Keshavamurthy

Doctor of Philosophy in South and Southeast Asian Studies

University of California, Berkeley

Professor George Hart, Chair

This dissertation traces the figure of the sexual abject in modern Tamil literature produced between the mid nineteen sixties and the first decade of the twenty first century. Drawing primarily from psychoanalytic scholarship and Western literary criticism, I look at abjection as a structural form of marginality that threatens and reconfigures meaning and subjectivity, thus enabling the possibility of self-remaking. I draw attention to the consistent textual equation between femininity and abjection and note a shift in the representation of the sexual abject in Tamil literature produced from the nineteen sixties onwards that is multiply marginalized along axes of sexuality, caste and religion. For the sexual abject of this period, embracing abjection, I suggest, is the only available means of exercising any agency even at the risk of reinforcing the structural constraints that constitute and limit such agency. I focus on the abject body that now marked low caste and poor, becomes a strategic site of resistance against sexual violence and exploitation.

Dedication

To Amma and Appa,

Prashant

Nikhil

And

Ani

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Introduction

The early precursors of modern Tamil prose in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century valorized a socially conservative notion of marriage as the only means of controlling and reforming certain figures of female abjection like the prostitute and the (upper caste) widow. The harnessing of female sexuality to cater to the procreative needs of the family was by no means specific to Tamil literature but was part of a widespread literary and political phenomenon in late colonial and postcolonial India. One of the fiercely debated agendas of Indian social reform in the later decades of the nineteenth century was the so-called woman's question that was not so much about the specific condition of women within a determinate set of social relations as it was about the political encounter between a colonial state and the supposed "tradition" of a conquered people—a tradition that scholars have shown was itself produced by colonialist discourse.¹ It was a notion of tradition that assumed the hegemony of Brahmanical religious texts and the complete submission of all Hindus to the dictates of these texts that were supposedly the necessary bases of certain social and cultural practices which defined the tradition that was to be criticized and reformed. Indian nationalism, in demarcating a political position opposed to colonial rule, took up the women's question as a problem of Indian tradition that was already constituted for it. Indian women had to be the bearers of this tradition that included the inner sanctity of the home, marriage and the family that essentially constituted the self-identity of nationalist culture and had to be preserved from the inexorable circumstances of colonial change. The nationalist equation of femininity with the inner, spiritual world of the home clearly betrayed a fear of women becoming westernized when they, in some way compensating for the compromises men were forced to make in the face of colonial modernity, had to be the bearers of Indian tradition. Women, both in nationalist and literary discourse, were deified and feminine virtues like modesty and chastity were protected from the material pursuits of securing a livelihood in the material world (Chatterjee, 124).

Debates around the women's question especially female education and the Post-Puberty Marriage Bill were introduced in 1914 in the Madras Presidency of colonial South India. The Non-Brahmin Movement led by some elite Non-Brahmin castes emerged in the mid 1910s in colonial South India as a critique of what was primarily the Brahmin assumption—an assumption that was enabled by the powerful caste status as well as the leading positions Brahmins occupied in the colonial bureaucracy—to represent the vast majority of all non-Brahmin caste communities in the debates over women's education and marriage. The reform of women's status and lives was transfigured essentially as a problem of Brahmin caste honor and nationalist identity and the debates over women's education had a rhetorical and symbolic significance for Brahmins and their self-identity.

The political debates and legislative action taken by early Tamil 'feminists' like Muthulakshmi Reddi from the 1920s to 1940s around matriliney, the *devadasis* and the suppression of prostitution valorized marriage and chastity. This historical moment of the reform of female sexuality that transformed instances of domestic matriliney like the Nair women and non-domestic matriliney like the *devadasis* indicated an attempt on the part of the Indian reformers and colonial authorities in India to redefine the contours of the family. The historicity of the family shifted from its material bases; from ascriptive, lineage and kinship based networks tied to resources in land and state authority, to forms of family whose

¹For a discussion of the nationalist reformation of female sexuality see Mani, Chatterjee and specifically South India, Nair, Geeta and Rajadurai.

individual male members enjoyed greater property rights than their female counterparts, reflecting the needs of an emerging market in land and other resources. Increasingly the reproductive sexual economy of the family remained distinct from autonomous female sexuality, while public women were denied the comforts of domesticity. The patriarchal nuclear family was made a site of inviolable fidelity on the part of the woman. The legislative effort to homogenize family forms in India therefore cannot be understood separately from the nationalist patriarchy's efforts to reform traditional non-domestic relationships which transgressed the straitjacket of marriage (Nair, 125).

New and important concerns arose about the nature of morality in the emerging nuclear family and especially about women as the guarantors of such morality. Linked as it was with emerging concepts of women's responsibilities towards the nation, the burden of 'respectability' fell disproportionately on the shoulders of middle class women, who were increasingly 'marked off' from the disrespected, usually lower class and caste women. The double standard around which middle-class sexuality was structured did become the basis of feminist critiques in the 1920s and 1930s, though they never quite displaced the centrality of morality to the discourse nor did they challenge the class and caste bias inherent in any such formulation. Like the English feminists of the late nineteenth century, Indian feminists turned the "duties of moral guardianship" into a crusade against the laxity and degradation of those who ascribed that role to them (Nair, 140).

E.V. Ramasamy 'Periyar's ethic of social and cultural critique and transformation that fell outside the framework of nationalism and electoral politics. In her work on Periyar, V. Geeta locates Periyar's anti-caste Self-Respect Movement of the 1930s (which was a radical phase of the Non-Brahmin movement) in relation to and against Gandhi and the politics of piety that he espoused. The Self-Respect Movement opposed the holy alliance of caste, religion and nationalism that was embodied by the upper caste, devout male who was for Gandhi the legitimate subject of history. For Gandhi, the upper caste Hindu male could attain his own place in history by remaking his subjectivity through specific acts of penance and sacrifice. He could only discover the untouchable in himself, suffer his indignity as his own and thereby cleanse himself of disgust, prejudice, fear and hatred. He would have to voluntarily surrender his privileges and usher change by conferring as it were equality and self-respect on those whom until recently he had imposed his logic of difference and exclusion. At another level he had to redeploy his masculinity that premised on the irrepressible forces of desire had to be repressed lest it breed incontinences in all aspects of life and urge him into unethical action. The vow of celibacy that Gandhi counseled to his male disciples and Congress men rested on a particular vision of femininity; if men were to renounce desire and forswear excess and violence that desire propelled into existence, women had to rework the terms of conjugality. They had to actively express or put into practice the passive virtues conventionally associated with them in the struggle for national freedom: patience, sacrifice, rectitude and suffering. Women for Gandhi may be thus posited as the natural political subjects in the Gandhian narrative of non-violent resistance. They were not to be bound by their domesticity but neither were they to discard their duties. They were to assume as much responsibility for the nation as they did for the home and family.

Periyar on the other hand worked through different notions of caste identity, gender and sexuality. For him the natural subjects of history were the lowest of the low, the *adi dravidas* (the dalits) and women that could attain their rightful place in history only by collectively combating caste. Unlike Gandhi, consciousness for Periyar was always already collective. This meant that entire communities of the oppressed including women and all those non-brahmin

communities which stood shamed and humiliated by caste and Brahminism were to create their own history by actively responding together in anger and defiance at what held them in thrall to an unjust social order. On one hand, this meant a rejection of caste, a renunciation of that religious faith that legitimized caste and a remaking of society along non-hierarchical lines. On the other hand, this required a remaking of masculine and feminine subjectivities, so that the much desired self-respect, mutuality and freedom Periyar sought out as the defining premises of his utopia, could be grounded in human love and friendship rather than the enslaving institution of marriage. One of the practical and effective acts of the Self-Respect Movement that challenged caste, nationalism and patriarchy was the self-respect marriage that exemplified a secular form of marriage, dispensing as it did with the services of the Brahmin priest. It was largely an inter-caste or widow marriage that was both a social contract and premised on individual choice and desire that made the caste Hindu family suddenly appear vulnerable.

Among the Tamil writers writing in the early decades of the twentieth century, A. Madhaviah's (1872-1925) English and Tamil novels serve as an instantiation and critique of Brahmin dominance in the public sphere of early twentieth century South India. Like most of the prominent writers in Tamil during this period, Madhaviah was a Brahmin who set his fictional worlds in largely Brahmin milieus. Most of his novels were located in his home town of Tirunelveli in what is today southern Tamil Nadu, or in the newly burgeoning colonial urban center of Madras. His most famous contemporaries included writers like Vedanayakam Pillai (1826-1889) who is credited for authoring, *Pratapa Mutaliar Carittiram* (*The Life of Pratapa Mutaliar*), the first modern Tamil novel in 1879, and Rajam Iyer (1872-1898) who was known for his only novel, *Kamalambal Carittiram* (Translated as *The Fatal Rumor: a nineteenth century novel*). These early texts were organized around a fairly stable moral-sexual binary of the chaste, upper caste wife and the prostitute, both of whom were represented as types without being invested with much interiority. These texts normally ended with a reinstatement of wifely chastity and marriage. While the male protagonists of these texts were English educated professionals vulnerable to the charms of prostitutes or to their own weakness for other 'sexually available' women like young widows, their (potential) wives were young illiterate girls or pubescent women from their rural home towns. There is thus a social and intellectual hierarchy that is built in to these early literary representations of conjugality. Men were encouraged to be mentors and father figures to their wives before exercising any conjugal claims. Their moral and pedagogical relationships with their wives were crucial to the latter's education, which was considered necessary to their own moral responsibility as mothers to the future citizens of a soon to be independent India.

Even later Brahmin writers on sexuality like T. Janakiraman (1921-1981) and to a certain extent L.S. Ramamirutham (1919-2009) writing from the nineteen fifties and sixties are preoccupied with the idealized figure of the Brahmin woman. In the novels of T. Janakiraman, for instance, the Brahmin woman is an object of fear and desire. Most of the male characters in his novels are devout and sexually disciplined aesthetes or intellectuals who are debilitated by their sexual desires that have to be repressed because they are (potentially) socially transgressive. A symptom of their repressed desire is the idealization and deification of female beauty that seemingly averts the potential threat of female sexuality by rendering women inscrutable and desexualized. There is invariably a moment of crisis in these novels when these Brahmin women invariably assert their desires, which then subsequently leads to their de-idealization. Female sexuality is perceived as a threat to male sexual integrity, a threat that is offset through the aesthetic and intellectual sublimation of male desire.

Tamil literature on sexuality produced during much of the first half of the twentieth century is largely preoccupied with universal forms of sexual alienation than structural ones like abjection. S. Mani or 'Mauni' (1909-1981) as he was popularly known is a case in point. Most of his short stories that were written over three decades take the form of abstract, often existentialist reflections on the evanescence of time and life or on the nature of death. Many of his stories are ontological sketches of anonymous individuals who suffer romantic loss and agony and mourn for those losses. They often miraculously discover identical substitutes for their lost loves in what seems to be the replication of characters in an imaginary dream scenario that does not however guarantee the retrieval of the lost love. Even most of the notable women writers from the first half of the twentieth century many of whom were Gandhians, were engaged with the marital reformation and spiritual sublimation of female sexuality in the service of nationalists interests. They valorized chastity and sexual abstinence as female sexual virtues par excellence.

I suggest that it is only from the late nineteen sixties that we see the widespread and consistent emergence of the irredeemably marginalized female subject that coincides with the historical emergence of the women's movement and autonomous groups in South India. The women's movement, which was largely headed by English educated, middle class urban women, was divided from the autonomous groups in their concerns over what constituted the more pressing social and political issues that confronted Indian women, most of whom were multiply marginalized along axes of caste, class and religion. While the first wave of the women's movement in the late nineteen sixties and seventies were more engaged with problems of sexual and domestic violence and demanding the greater representation of women in various political institutions, the autonomous groups that emerged later focused their efforts on providing financial and institutional support to marginalized women and altering the very institutions of patriarchy that perpetuated social and sexual inequities.²

Tamil literature during this period registers a shift in its representation of the abject woman whose body, now marked as unchaste, low caste and poor, becomes a strategic site of resistance against sexual and gendered forms of violence and exploitation. The texts of this period are populated by women who struggle to overcome real and perceived or potential fears of sexual stigma by embracing abjection, which is the only available means of exercising any form of sexual agency even at the risk of reinforcing the structural constraints that constitute and limit such agency. Marriage in these texts can no longer capture or resolve the wide gamut of issues that affected women across lines of caste, class, religion and in more recent instances, gender presentation and sexual orientation. The writings of Rajam Krishnan (1928-) and C.S. Lakshmi or 'Ambai' (1944-) marked a significant shift in earlier writings by women as well as in the representation of women by male and female writers. Their works anticipated the entire range of themes that would characterize Tamil women's writings from the nineteen seventies and eighties onwards. Several of Rajam Krishnan's later novels feature urban educated youth driven by socialist ideals, who turn to the village to raise political awareness among sexually and economically exploited women. Men and women in her novels strike collaborations across social distinctions in their struggle for social justice and equality. Her novels usually end dramatically by staging proletarian revolutions that potentially reform or dismantle capitalism, the perceived root of all forms of exploitation. Ambai is more engaged with the cultural, economic and sexual plights of urban middle class women. Although the protagonists of her

² See Nandita Shah and Nandita Gandhi *The Issues at Stake: Theory and Practice in the Contemporary Women's Movement in India*, Menon and Dietrich

short stories are largely middle class and upper caste, her stories address universally female experiences of sexual abjection that are not exclusive to their urban middle class subjects—the psychological trauma of puberty and menstruation and their adverse effects on female mobility and independence, coerced marriages, domestic and sexual violence, the lack of financial independence, marital rape and compulsory motherhood, the shamed loss of virginity and chastity and the (potential) stigma of pre-marital or extra-marital relationships of any kind and so on.

For the purposes of this dissertation I offer a theoretical overview of the concept of abjection. I turn to psychoanalytic and feminist scholarship on abjection to draw attention to the power of abjection to affect personal transformation and change by collapsing and reconfiguring regulatory norms of sexuality. Some of the founding scholars of abjection like Julia Kristeva and Judith Butler have thought of abjection as an essentially ambiguous concept that threatens and (re)constitutes subjectivity. They define abjection as a potential breakdown of meaning due to a structural loss in the distinction between subject and object. The abject according to them is not just a collapse of meaning but also an occasion for the re-articulation of other subject positions whose exclusion constitutes dominant or normative configurations of gender, sexuality, class, race and so on. Kristeva associates the abject with “that which disturbs identity, system, order... does not respect borders, positions, rules... that which is jettisoned from the symbolic system”, which she relates to what leaks or is expelled from the individual body and its various orifices (Kristeva, 4). The abject for Kristeva and to a certain extent Butler is what violates and traverses bodily boundaries. For Kristeva, the abject is defilement, the leftover; her favorite example being the sight of the corpse (particularly of a loved one), which is the ultimate symbol and end of abjection that painfully reinforces the insistent materiality and mortality of the bodies of its viewers by association and thus has to be ritually purified or destroyed before it can infect others. The ambiguity of abjection comes through in this example—the abject is both de-individuating and constitutive of a sense of identity; it is contagious or uncontrollably relational even as it disavows or destabilizes inter-subjective community. The abject thus emerges as a symptom of the fragility of the signifying structures of language that can never represent all forms of meaning and subject positions. Abjection is the recognition of the inaugural loss that founds and threatens the sexual subject by undermining the subject/object binary.

Kristeva locates abjection in the psychosexual narrative of the sexual subject as a pre-linguistic, pre-objectal stage that precedes the entry of the subject into the realm of language. The abject marks what Kristeva terms “primal repression”, one that precedes the establishment of the subject’s relation to objects of desire and of representation, before even the establishment of the opposition between conscious and unconscious. The abject marks the moment when one is separated from the mother, when one begins to recognize a boundary between me and other, “me” and “(m)other.” This primeval bond between the subject and the maternal other is abjected or excluded with the subject’s entry into the symbolic order of language, meaning and desire. As Kristeva puts it, “Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be” (Kristeva, 10) The abject, Kristeva argues, is “a precondition of narcissism” (Kristeva, 13), which is to say, a precondition for the narcissism of the mirror stage which establishes these primal distinctions. In his essay on the mirror stage, Jacques Lacan suggests the formation of the subject’s identity is a function of his narcissistic investment in his own mirror image that conveys an illusory and fragile sense of wholeness. The abjected maternal however continues to threaten the symbolic order and is a symptom of

the latter's fragility. The abject thus at once represents the threatened breakdown of meaning due to a loss in the distinction between subject and object, self and other, and constitutes the subject's reaction to such a breakdown: a reestablishment of "primal repression". Abjection is thus an ambivalent and indefinite process of subject formation where on the one hand, there is the recognition of the inaugural loss that constitutes one's very being—the want on which desire, meaning and language are founded—and an attempt to disavow that loss by disavowing identification with or desire for the other. The abject in Kristeva's terms is the eruption of the Real or the unrepresentable loss of the undifferentiated continuity between 'self' and 'other' (between mother and child) that coincides with the subject's entry into language and threatens to collapse all oppositions necessary for meaning. The bond between self and (m)other, Kristeva suggest, is an elusive sense of wholeness the loss of which can never be restored without the realm of discourse or meaning. It is the signifiatory structures of language, she argues, that compensate this loss by disavowing and fetishizing the lack/object constitutive of meaning as an elusive wholeness whose loss can be seemingly regained.

Kristeva further uses the term abjection synonymously with the constitutive exclusions that make possible normative identity within the symbolic order of language. The abject is thus a symptom of the fragility of the phallus, the meta-signifier that enables the very signification of the symbolic order. And since abjection according to Kristeva is a pre-conceptual loss in that it is prior to language and meaning or the conscious/unconscious binary, it is realized not at the level of knowledge but at the level of experience. From her example of the corpse, it is the traumatic experience rather than the meaning or knowledge of death that confronts the subject with his or her own mortality. The corpse especially exemplifies Kristeva's concept of abjection since it literalizes the breakdown of the distinction between subject and object that is crucial for the establishment of identity and for the subject's entry into the symbolic domain of language.

For Judith Butler, the abject includes the constitutive exclusions that make a normative social field possible. However these constitutive exclusions, Butler emphasizes is not outside discourse but constructed within the signifiatory structures of language as an exclusion that constantly threaten to disrupt and rearticulate subjectivity. For Butler, the abject potentially emerges in and threatens to disrupt the reiterative process by which the regulatory norms of sex are produced and naturalized. In *Bodies that Matter*, the construction of the sexual subject for Butler is a temporal process, which operates through the reiteration of norms and the sexual subject is both produced and destabilized in the course of this reiteration. She argues,

Construction is neither a single act nor a causal process initiated by a subject and culminating in a set of fixed effects...As a sedimented effect of a reiterative or ritual practice, sex acquires its naturalized effect, and, yet, it is also by virtue of this reiteration that gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities in such constructions, as that which escapes or exceeds the norm, as that which cannot be wholly defined or fixed by the repetitive labor of that norm. (Butler, 10)

Any form of agency for Butler can paradoxically emerge only in the possibilities that are opened up by those exclusions that both constitute and threaten to re-signify the normative sexual subject. Agency is clearly not outside the power of regulatory norms but at once constituted and constrained by those very norms. The abject thus serves a crucial role in denaturalizing and reconfiguring normative notions of sexuality clearly within the sphere of discourse.

This dissertation is concerned with the rather consistent equation between femininity and abjection in modern Tamil literature. This dissertation abounds with men and women who are avowedly feminized by their experience of abjection. But as I presently argue, the abjection of femininity only opens up a space of possibility and change.³ My first two chapters are engaged with writers who turn to religion and spirituality as ironic sources of freedom from sexual and social abjection. My first chapter looks at three sequential texts by Dandapani Jeyakantan from the 1960s and 70s on the seductive power of the raped woman that blurs ideological determinations of female sexual consent. Jeyakantan's rape narratives neither reduce the raped woman to a victim nor do they take the form of a revenge plot that ends up asserting the invulnerability of the raped woman. By suppressing the scene of the rape that is never described in all its violent physicality and by suggesting the woman's ambiguous desire for her 'rapist', Jeyakantan enables the negotiation and reconfiguration of female agency and subjectivity.

For the purposes of this chapter, I turn to Kalpana and Vasanth Kannabiran's analysis of the cultural and legal politics of rape in India. In their book *De-Eroticizing Assault: Essays on Modesty, Honor and Power*, they understand rape as an ideological figure that divides women according to the indices of their relationship to men. So an identical act of sexual violence is read differently—rape in the case of unmarried virgins, as consensual sex in the case of wives and prostitutes. These ideological discourses on rape sympathize or stigmatize the loss of virginity without ever really acknowledging the possibility of female sexual consent independent of patriarchal stipulations. Even when women see themselves as consenting to intercourse, the very notion of their being able to extend or deny consent is itself illusory. Consent, in these terms, is a byproduct of the structural relationships that obtain in, for instance, the specification of intercourse as the male occupation of a woman's body (Kannabiran, 10). Thus every woman is assumed to be 'rapable' irrespective of her sexual consent by virtue of her physical body that during intercourse is literally understood to be a territory that can be occupied by that of the male. Further, these ideological assumptions around female consent suggest a profound lack of clarity about what constitutes rape or indeed sexual violation. The focus is less on rape per se as a coercive act of sexual violation and really with the social perception of rape as a metaphor for all forms of illicit sexuality outside marriage (Kannabiran, 15). Thus an (unmarried) woman who has been (apparently) raped by a stranger violates the sanctity of marriage and can no longer claim integrity/sanctity to her person the loss of which can supposedly be redeemed only by marrying her rapist. The loss of virginity becomes a sign of diminished, 'public' womanhood that condemns the woman to a life of shame. She is either castigated by becoming the potential object of any male desire, a punishment she supposedly deserves and seeks irrespective/because of her desire, or possibly married, if she is an unmarried virgin, to her rapist. The individuals involved and their understandings are thus subordinated to the form of the sexual act. A resisted act and an intended act come to be the same thing and rape simply ceases to exist because it has been, by

³In his book on black male rape and abjection, Scott understands the black male subjectivity as a processual or temporalized form of being that by embracing abjection embraces other possibilities of being in the world. He relates Kristeva's notion of abjection to Ponty's notion of anonymous existence and Sartre's understanding of anguish or nothingness, which is the irredeemable lack that structures human self-consciousness and enables the possibility of becoming and self-transcendence.

definition, absorbed into marriage. That the woman can never independently extend or deny consent only reflects the lack of a social or legal personhood; she is an abject nonperson.⁴

Theorists of narrative and visual poetics like Mieke Bal have insisted on the impossibility of representing rape that only be captured through images, memories and experience. Presuming with Mieke Bal that central aspects of rape—such as physical pain and psychic violation—escape representation, yet that rape can be communicated as text only, I argue that the central paradigm of a rhetoric of rape is not simply one of rape and silencing, as feminist criticism suggests, insinuating that this silence can be broken, that we can and should read this violence or in this case its ambiguity back into the texts. Here I am in agreement with Sabine Sielke who in her book *Reading Rape* argues,

Since silences themselves generate speech, the central paradigm is rather that of rape, silence, and refiguration. If our readings focus on refigurations of rape and rape as refiguration, we acknowledge that texts do not simply reflect but rather stage and dramatize the historical contradictions by which they are overdetermined. As best, readings of rape therefore reveal not merely the latent text in what is manifest, explicit, and thus produce a text's self-knowledge; they will also evolve a new knowledge pertaining to the ideological necessities of a text's silences and deletions. (Sielke, 4-5)

Instead of trying to recover “the unspeakable aspects of the experience of rape” (Bal, “Reading” 137) or foregrounding “the violence of representation” (Armstrong and Tennenhouse) that would ignore the particular cultural functions and historically specific meanings texts assign to sexuality and sexual violence, I follow Sielke in reading rape figuratively, as a rhetoric, to follow the symbolic traces of violation, exploring its role within the structure of the literary text and larger cultural narratives as well as within the construction of individual and communal identities.

The word ‘rape’ is never used by Jeyakantan’s female protagonist Ganga to refer to her sexual encounter with her ‘rapist’. Instead of rape that automatically suggests a violation of bodily integrity Ganga uses the Tamil verb *kedu* or ‘spoil’ when she confesses to her family *she* is spoiled. By presenting herself as the subject and not as the object of spoilage she takes responsibility for her spoilage. The rhetoric of spoilage, I suggest, accommodates a degree of sexual ambiguity by stigmatizing the compromised sexual integrity and reputation of the woman without necessarily preempting the possibility of her desire. So when Ganga confesses she has been spoilt without (directly) accusing her rapist of spoiling her, her rhetoric of spoilage, I argue, captures the fear and shame of lost reputation rather than an act of sexual violation. Ganga’s confession of spoilage is an apparent attempt to seek her family’s sympathy and crucially conceal her inadmissible desire for her ‘rapist’. But her confession backfires; she realizes her sexual consent is immaterial and is condemned to lead the austere life of a shamed woman. Years later, she is seduced by a story in a magazine that alludes to her ambiguous ‘rape’. The fictional allusion enables her to retrospectively characterize her ‘rape’ as consensual by (re)sexualizing her memory of the ‘rape’, which becomes a crucial resource for Ganga in her growing and empowering recognition of her abjection. She accepts her uncle’s apparent challenge to marry her ‘rapist’ Prabhu to escape his predatory desire for her. She

⁴For a detailed contextualization of the legal and cultural politics of rape see feminist debates around rape, Brownmiller, Dworkin, Mckinnon and Cahill and for India see Bhattacharjee (ed.) *A Unique Crime: understanding rape in India*, especially Agnes (53-78), Chatterjee (98-103) and Vandana

initially desires revenge but ends up sympathizing with and ‘desiring’ a guilty man who has lost his former wealth and power.

The raped woman in these texts threatens certain cultural norms of female chastity by retrospectively characterizing her ‘rape’ as consensual to validate her abject past. She deploys abjection to seduce her guilty ‘rapist’ Prabhu, this time resorting to a rhetoric of rape. By couching her possessive desire for Prabhu in a rhetoric of sexual violence, Ganga negotiates the sexual (im)possibility of raping him and the social (im)possibility of having a sexually exclusive/conjugal relationship with him that is presumably not characterized or compromised by the (rationalized) violence of (hetero)sexuality. Ganga equates conjugality to the irreversible and violent sexual domination of women by men that is compensated by and entails the man's responsibility for the woman's security and whose only available and fetishized expression is ‘rape’. Ganga offers Prabhu exclusive sexual entitlement to her body—a privilege he supposedly deserves for appropriating her virginity—in exchange for protection from potential threats of rape. Unlike the adolescent Ganga who was seduced by the novelty of sexual experience and rendered vulnerable by the estranging consequences of the ‘rape’, the adult Ganga perceives herself as an informed and agential woman who takes responsibility for the possibly violent consequences of satisfying her desire for Prabhu. By ‘consenting to be raped’ again by Prabhu, Ganga bargains the potential violation of her bodily integrity for power via male protection. Assuming the identity of ‘wife’ even if it is fictive and violently constituted guarantees Ganga a preemptive zone of relative future safety and power. Wife/concubine, consent/rape, public/private, protection/autonomy are reversible states and identities that Ganga upholds and collapses as circumstances warrant with the dual goals of the survival of her protective and empowering relationship with Prabhu and her desire for him, and the interruption or critique of the sexual regulations of patriarchal kinship.

Abjection in Jeyakantan functions as a seductive and therefore powerful source of desire and pleasure that enables the raped woman to subvert the very opposition between sexual consent and non-consent/rape. I draw on Jean Baudrillard’s concept of seduction from his book *Seduction* to suggest seduction is a form of sexual power that subverts and reinstates regulatory norms of sexuality through an ironic simulation of desire that conceals the absent truth of desire. In other words, seduction is nothing but a form of sexual ambiguity that is irreducible to any truth of desire. By resisting sexual meaning and interpretation, seduction blurs the very distinction between desire and non-desire, rape and consent. Baudrillard further equates seduction with the realm of the feminine, which is not an autonomous realm that opposes the Symbolic or phallocratic realm of discourse, production, meaning and so on. The feminine, according to Baudrillard, blurs the very distinctions that are necessary for meaning through a “strategy of appearances” that renders these distinctions ever reversible (Baudrillard, 10).

Ganga assimilates even as she subverts patriarchal oppositions of female sexuality and sexual consent by setting up and strategically manipulating an opposition between two representatives—Prabhu and her uncle Venku—of a fallible patriarchal order. She tries to simulate an (extra) marital relationship with Prabhu. Ganga asks Prabhu to pretend she were his concubine. By simulating a marital relationship that does not amount to marriage, Ganga threatens the patriarchal equation of virginity with marriage and exposes the mythical status of virginity whose loss is at once a singular and recurrent event. She further upsets by enacting the social assumption of rape as a universal metaphor for all forms of illicit sexuality. We see seduction functioning here as a de-realizing strategy that apparently affirms Ganga’s sexual experience and agency even at the risk of incurring social censure.

Ganga's sexual pretense illustrates the power wielded by the feminine in at once reassuring and disappointing regulatory norms of female sexuality. In his essay, "The Significance of the Phallus" Jacques Lacan defines the phallus as the signification of the regulatory norms of sex that assumes sexual difference as the conditions of its own intelligibility. Being the phallus and having it denote two divergent sexual positions or non-positions within language occupied by women and men, respectively. To 'be' the phallus is to appear to signify and represent the object of desire for the Other of a hetero-sexualized masculine desire. It is an Other that constitutes not the limit of masculinity in a feminine alterity but the extension and reassurance of masculinity. For women to 'be' the phallus is to reflect and signify the power of the phallus through 'being' its Other, its absence, its lack. By claiming that the Other who lacks the phallus is the one who is the phallus, Lacan clearly suggests power is wielded by this feminine position in not having that paradoxically reflects and disappoints masculinity. The feminine thus emerges as a symptom of the fragility of the masculine subject that poses as an autonomous and self-grounding subject that only apparently originates meanings and its signifying function. His seeming self-identity attempts to conceal the repression that is both the ground and the perpetual possibility of its un-grounding.

Ganga is seduced by her own sexual pretense. The seductive power of her ambiguous desire is complete once it gives way to the hyperreality of desire that can no longer be distinguished from its simulation. Although it is impossible to ascertain the truth of Ganga's desire throughout the text, it is precisely the ambiguous status of her desire that enables her to undermine sexual meaning. By not reducing heterosexuality to sexual violence or marriage and by playing with the psychological ambiguity of the female protagonist's sexual consent—an ambiguity that is largely evoked through the novel's intra and inter-textual memory of desire—Jeyakantan is able to represent the possibilities of female desire and pleasure without virginity and marriage by parodying contradictory regulations of female sexuality.

My second chapter looks at the intersection between sexuality, on the one hand, and disease and psychological disorder, on the other, through the figure of the male sexual outcaste. Through a comparative study of two writers writing in the seventies and nineties, this chapter extends the textual equation between femininity and abjection. The male protagonists in these texts are perceivably feminized by their experience of abjection and their only hope of freedom is to be attained by renouncing worldly life and practicing asceticism. Disease and disorder in these novels function as expiatory signs of sexual excess—in the first novel by Karichan Kunju, the diseased body of the male sexual outcaste is interpreted at once as divine punishment for his homosexual (read effeminate Brahmin) past, and as a redemptive experience that conditions the possibility of spiritual self-transcendence.

In his 1923 work *The Ego and The Id*, Sigmund Freud elaborates the centrality of melancholia in the constitution of the ego and consequently to gender and sexual orientation. The ego, he argues in the process of mourning for the loss of a loved person, is said to incorporate or internalize an idealized image of the person to sustain and preserve his/her memory through magical acts of imitation. Through a specific act of narcissistic identification, the lost other becomes a part of the ego. Freud extends this recuperative process of identification to highlight the way it crucially constitutes the formation of the ego and its "object choice". Freud argues that the internalizing strategy of melancholia is responsible for the "character" of the ego that is nothing but a "precipitate of abandoned object-choices and [their] history" (Freud, 25). This process of internalization becomes pertinent to gender formation when we think of how the incest taboo, among its other functions, initiates a loss of the loved object for the ego that internalizes this loss through the internalization of the tabooed

object of desire. In the case of a prohibited heterosexual union it is only the object choice that has to be renounced whereas in the taboo of homosexual incest it is the object choice as well as the desire itself (the sexual aim and the object) that has to be renounced and thus it is the case of homosexual incest that becomes subject to the internalizing strategies of melancholia. The “young boy identifies himself with the father.” (Freud, 45)

Freud introduces the Oedipal complex to explain why the boy must repudiate the mother and adopt an ambivalent attitude towards the father because of his inherent bisexuality and not because of an identification that is a consequence of sexual rivalry. Freud seems to suggest that the boy chooses not only between two object choices but between two sexual dispositions, masculine and feminine. The father’s threat of castration forces the boy to choose a masculine heterosexual disposition but it is not so much the fear of castration by the father but the fear of castration itself or the fear of feminization that in heterosexual cultures is associated with homosexuality. In effect then it is not the heterosexual desire for the mother but the fear of homosexuality that must be subordinated to culturally sanctioned heterosexuality.

Although Freud earlier says that the boy’s identification with his father takes place without the renunciation of any homosexual desire for the father, he later argues that everyone possesses a primary bisexuality that complicates gender formation and sexuality. Thus although the boy need not renounce his homosexual desire for his father Freud still implicitly premises his psychosexual narrative of sexual development on a normative notion of heterosexuality. But there are limits to the hegemonic and ultimately heterosexist and binary framework of Freud’s and even Lacan’s theories of sexuality and gender identifications. The unconscious is a source of subversion that undermines the rigid and universal determinism of the law which makes identity a fixed and fantasmatic affair without considering multiple and coexisting possibilities that conflict and converge.

Ganeshan, the male protagonist of Karichan Kunju’s novel, is seduced and enslaved by an older man. Ganeshan grows up identifying with his lover’s virility, which results in the apparent loss or repression of his feminine youth and homosexuality. The novel equates Ganeshan’s growing masculinity with his avowed heterosexuality and represses his homosexuality, which in turn is equated with effeminacy. His homosexual orientation however is not successfully resolved but returns in the form of erotic dreams that betray his unconscious desire for men and women. But he again disavows his homosexuality and interprets the onset of leprosy as an expiatory sign of his irrepressible (homo)sexuality. I argue his (bi)sexual fantasies embody the discontinuity between the imaginary nature of desire and anatomic facticity of the body that reveal the body as the occasion and object of desire. The body in this case is not merely a sign of culturally sanctioned gender but understood as a literal and real or culturally instituted fantasy where the melancholic incorporation of disavowed homosexual desire is sustained in the anatomic facticity of sex (Butler, 146).

In the novel by the second writer M.V. Venkatram, the male protagonist’s erotic and divine hallucinations dramatize his repeated failure to achieve self-identity. He is sexually dissatisfied with his wife and is emasculated by a financial crisis that he attributes to his sexual fantasies about another woman’s seductive beauty. He struggles to disavow his father who dies shortly after his bankruptcy leaving his young son and widow in debts. Although he is never entirely cured, his fantasies enact the recurrent dissolution and remaking of meaning and self that enables him to potentially transcend abjection through piety.

My last three chapters are preoccupied with the material and immaterial benefits of work or labor, which is the only form of reprieve available to low caste and poor women in their struggle for survival. My third chapter deals with the novels of Tanjai Prakash where sexual

desire functions as an agent of personal transformation and dialectical change. Whereas the earlier writers valorize the ascetic renunciation of desire by way of transcending abjection, Prakash avows the potential of desire to create change. I engage with the seductive appeal of the body that through its repeated evocations and betrayals of desire reveals the irreducibly inter-subjective and dialectical nature of desire that in ever deferring the promise of identity enables personal transformation. The repeated failure of desire to overcome the ontological disparity between self and other only discloses the abject lack that structures and perpetuates desire. The impossibility of either eliminating or entirely satiating desire makes desire the medium and instrument of personal transformation and historical change.

These texts enact a common scenario of desire: The sole male protagonist renounces the inauthenticity of his privileged existence in search of authenticity and change. He is seduced by a particularly abject woman whose laboring body suggests her apparent authenticity. But the betrayal of his desire compels him to recognize the true object of desire which is not the body but the other's desire and recognition. The protagonist is transformed by his attempts to attain recognition and identity, which by the end is never definitively achieved. The protagonist further deploys seduction to mediate and betray the desires of other abject women for him and for the other women he supposedly desires. What we have by the end of the texts are a group of women whose desires for each other and for the male protagonist are mediated by the protagonist. The women's internalization of the unattainable protagonist serves as a creative force that propels them to sublimate their frustrated desires in collective labor, which offers objective validations of their abject status. They are reconstituted through their acts of creative labor. The male protagonists thus function as creative factors in a regime of productive labor (for instance, artistic activity, land cultivation, factory work) that relies on the sublimation of female desire into action, which forms the very basis for change and historical progress.

For the purposes of this chapter, I turn to G.W.F Hegel's dialectical concept of desire that he develops in *The Phenomenology of the Spirit* and Lacan's own concept of desire, which he derives from Hegel. In *The Phenomenology of the Spirit* desire is the agent of historical development. For Hegel, historical development or dialectical change is provided by a postulate of self-consciousness, a self-identical being that constantly needs an objective validation of its own existence. It sees its object only in terms of negativity, as a thing to be used, transformed and obliterated through desire. It is only when the object of this self-consciousness turns out to be another human self-consciousness that history (as dialectical overcoming) can be said to begin: it is only from the 'moment' there is contradiction and dialectical antagonism that history and thus development and change become possible. In the section of *The Phenomenology* called 'Lordship and Bondage', Hegel enacts the struggle for recognition between two similar beings. Human self-consciousness can potentially achieve an objective confirmation of itself only through another self-consciousness fundamentally the same as itself, which requires the self-consciousness to recognize it as a subject in turn. Indeed, each must be prepared to risk its animal life and rise above its brute existence to attain the self-identity it craves. If one or both parties perish, self-consciousness does not gain the recognition of an other like itself, and thus reverts to its (mythical) proto-historical isolation and brute existence. It is only when one of the antagonists values autonomy and freedom, prestige and recognition more than animal life, when the subject is prepared to risk life itself; and when the other in turn values life above freedom—that is, when one vanquishes the other in the struggle for pure prestige—history 'begins'. The first becomes the master, the second, the bondsman or slave. The first now exists for himself; while the second now exists for

another, for the master. The master is autonomous; the slave dependent. The master thus gains the recognition he needs to have his self-certainty objectively confirmed. The slave by contrast “binds himself completely to the things on which he depends”, thus becoming like a thing himself. Ironically, while the master is recognized as subject-for-himself by the slave, the master is not recognized by a subject that he himself recognizes or values as an equal self-consciousness. The slave’s recognition, in other words, has no value for the master, for it is a recognition bestowed by an object not by an Other.

In his introductory lectures to Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, Alexandre Kojève argues history belongs to and is made by the slave, and not the master. History is the consequence of the slave’s attempt to transcend the enslavement of that slavery by which he is bound. History is his supersession of himself as a slave. History is self-exceeding, self-transforming labor: the overcoming of the inertia of brute existence, the terror of subjection by the other or master, and the refusal of any idea of freedom and autonomy that is isolated from material self-sustaining and transforming labor, and self-productive social, political and intellectual life. For Kojève, history is the movement of transcendence, the acquisition of a lived truth of the subject in an inter-subjective and social-political world.⁵

Lacan formulates his concept of desire in terms of the Hegelian dialectic. He perceives desire as the mainspring of all creativity, without which there would be no human advancement. The desiring subject, Lacan argues, signals a lack through its demand from the Other (which includes language and the set of rules that govern the subject and particular individuals like the mother) that it assumes has what it needs, while in fact, the Other is as lacking as the subject. Since the demand can only be articulated through language, it is the Other that defines the parameters of the subject’s demand: desire is thus the byproduct of language, in the Other, and is the result of the impossibility that demand can fully articulate the need. Desire for Lacan is never the reflection of a true demand for what is demanded remains hidden from consciousness. Thus it is with the acquisition of language that desire arises. The relationship between signifier and signified that is predetermined by language limit the possibilities of what can be wanted and it is the space or gap between potential satisfaction in and through language and the satisfaction actually derived that Lacan calls desire. Desire is the irredeemable leftover; the remainder of the demand (for love) that is structured as a metonymic slippage from signifier to signifier without ever being entirely satisfied. Desire is thus structured by an insatiable lack that reproduces and sustains desire. Desire is inherently desirable, or as Lacan suggests, desire is the desire to keep desiring.

My fourth chapter focuses on the subjectivity of the Dalit woman in the writings of two contemporary women writers, P. Sivagami and Bama, from the late 1980s to the mid 1990s. Sivagami’s narratives center on the exploited and supposedly violable body of the Dalit woman where competing notions of gender and caste identity are negotiated. If caste here is understood as an apparatus that regulates sexuality primarily through women’s bodies, the Dalit woman’s potential desire without marriage poses a threat to the integrity of caste patriarchy. The female protagonist in the first novel by Sivakami is held responsible and punished for her (presumed) desires for their upper caste landlords even when she confesses she has been raped. The sexual violation of the Dalit woman is thus rendered insignificant by the status of her caste body as a metonym for the Dalit community. In other words, the loss of her bodily integrity and being is overridden by the interpretation of the rape as the

⁵Fanon is similarly interested in the potential of labor to affect change and development. He understands labor as a potentially revolutionary instrument that can transcend racial abjection.

emasculation and humiliation of the Dalit patriarchal leadership. Thus the caste body is privileged over the sexual body of the Dalit woman and what is also a sexual offence is retrospectively read purely as a caste atrocity that implicates all Dalits as potential victims of upper caste aggression. Although the privileging of her caste body offers the protagonist access to traditionally male spaces of legality and some form of justice, she still has to submit to male sexual desires. The only possibility of empowerment for the Dalit woman in these narratives is her capacity to work even if it comes with a price—economic and sexual exploitation. This is true of her later work too where the Dalit woman is subject to domestic violence and marital rapes that often result in unwanted pregnancies. Her exploitation is sealed by the fact that she is never paid for working as a peasant on her own husband's fields. In her later novel *Anantayi*, Sivakami addresses the subversive potential of inter-caste sexual relations in undoing caste patriarchy. The financial power and authority of the Dalit patriarch is subverted by his betrayed desire for a non-Dalit woman, Lakshmi, whose affair with his political rival nearly costs him his life.

The second half of the chapter deals with two testimonial narratives by Bama, a Dalit Christian. As Mark s.j. mentions in his foreword to the first one *Karukku*, “At first sight it reads like a history of a village. From another angle it reads like an autobiography. From yet another angle, it reads like a brilliant novel.” In willfully violating genre boundaries, Bama's narrative depletes the autobiographical ‘I’ and displaces it with the collectivity of the Dalit community. Her story refuses to be her own but that of others too. *Karukku* does this through a number of textual strategies. Firstly, Bama's narrative, to a great degree does not deal with herself, but with the context of Dalit life in which she grew up and acquired a certain self-awareness. Her descriptions of her childhood and the exploited world of Dalit labor, which constitute a significant part of her narrative, are marked for the most part by a compelling absence of herself. Bama's childhood comes to life in a series of cameos on collectivity—childhood games which *they* played and left behind at different stages of their lives, the festivities of the Christian calendar in which *they* partook year after year and so on. Secondly, this absence of ‘I’ gets its further affirmation in the polyphony of other voices from the Dalit community that saturates *Karukku*. Bama is mostly a spokesperson for her own community even as she occasionally betrays her own narrative voice and perspective. Thirdly, the narrative is shrouded in anonymity; in a deliberate refusal to name people and events that potentially enables a politics of collectivity. By erasing specificities and masking them in a veil of anonymity, the narrative is not restricted to the local but becomes a statement of universal oppression. The village in *Karukku* goes unnamed, the upper caste Chaliyars who attacked the Dalits in her childhood days go unnamed; the dalit headman, who hid himself in their house to escape the raiding policemen, goes unnamed; the schools and college where she studied and suffering caste oppression; the nunnery and its residents once again steadfast believers in caste go unnamed (Pandian, 135).

However, the very life trajectory of Bama is one of drifting away from the world of Dalits. Access to modern education, salaried employment and the material comforts of the nunnery, which take her away from the world of physical labor and struggle for livelihood, are some of the moments of this deep alienation. In narrating these events, *Karukku* is suffused with a deep sense of guilt and a yearning to reunite with the community and share its pains and pleasures. This sense of remorse only withers and gives way to meaningful freedom when she discards her job and returns to her community. Bama looks for a future that is shaped by the will of the Dalits themselves. The very word *Karukku* signals this desire. *Karukku* is the saw-like double-edged stem of the palmyra leaf that can perform other functions besides firewood, “Dalits like

me are fired by the desire to construct a new world of justice, equality, and love. Like the double-edged karukku they keep the oppressors slashed.” (Bama, ix) *Karukku*, in other words, is a symbol of the transformative potential of abjection for it signifies both, the oppressive present and the struggle against it, a metaphor that connects the present with the future.

Bama’s re-reading and interpretation of the Christian scriptures as an adult enables her to carve out both a social vision and a message of hope for Dalits by emphasizing the revolutionary aspects of Christianity, the values of equality, social justice, and love towards all. Her own life experiences urge her towards actively engaging in alleviating the sufferings of the oppressed. When she becomes a nun, it is in the stubborn hope that she will have a chance to put these aspirations into effect. She discovers, however, that these perspectives of the convent and the Church are different from hers. The story of that conflict and its resolution forms the core of her first testimonial narrative, *Karukku* (1992).

Bama’s second testimonial narrative *Sangati (Events)* (1994) focuses on the economic precariousness of Dalit women that leads to a culture of violence. Dalit women are doubly oppressed along axes of gender and caste—they are sexually and economically exploited by their upper caste landlords and by their husbands, fathers and in some cases, even brothers. The women in Bama’s autobiography however do not merely submit to violence and exploitation—their bodies become strategic sites of struggle and resistance.

My last chapter engages with a contemporary woman novelist, S. Tamilselvi who is interested in the fraught workspaces of the factory and the field where low caste female laborers negotiate identity and power. Although these workspaces pose sexual threats to female laborers, they are also spaces where powerful solidarities between women across castes are created, which enable greater independence in a world where they are systematically exploited. I highlight the immaterial benefits of laboring activity that within the space of the field or the factory creates a sense of community and provides temporary respite from domestic violence and (sexual) exploitation. Like Sivagami, Tamilselvi invests the violated female body with the power to affect change through work and labor. While the works of earlier women writers like Rajam Krishnan feature male workers and socialists who strike collaborations with poor rural women and urge them to fight for their sexual and economic rights, men are clearly excluded in Tamilselvi’s novels. Women here forge alliances that help them potentially overcome their (internalized) misogyny and promise greater independence.

Chapter 1

Rape/Consent: The Ruses of Seduction in Dandapani Jeyakantan's Fiction

Introduction

Some of the founding scholars of abjection like Julia Kristeva and Judith Butler have thought of abjection as an essentially ambiguous concept that threatens and (re)constitutes subjectivity. They define abjection as a potential breakdown of meaning due to a structural loss in the distinction between subject and object. The abject according to them is not just a collapse of meaning but also an occasion for the re-articulation of other subject positions whose exclusion constitutes dominant or normative configurations of gender, sexuality, class, race and so on. Kristeva associates the abject with “that which disturbs identity, system, order... does not respect borders, positions, rules... that which is jettisoned from the symbolic system”, which she relates to what leaks or is expelled from the individual body and its various orifices (Kristeva, 4). The abject for Kristeva and to a certain extent Butler is what violates and traverses bodily boundaries. For Kristeva, the abject is defilement, the leftover; her favorite example being the sight of the corpse (particularly of a loved one), which is the ultimate symbol and end of abjection that painfully reinforces the insistent materiality and mortality of the bodies of its viewers by association and thus has to be ritually purified or destroyed before it can infect others. The ambiguity of abjection comes through in this example—the abject is both de-individuating and constitutive of a sense of identity; it is contagious or uncontrollably relational even as it disavows or destabilizes inter-subjective community. The abject thus emerges as a symptom of the fragility of the significatory structures of language that can never represent all forms of meaning and subject positions. Abjection is the recognition of the inaugural loss that founds and threatens the sexual subject by undermining the subject/object binary. The abject in Kristeva's terms is the eruption of the Lacanian Real or the unrepresentable loss of the undifferentiated continuity between ‘self’ and ‘other’ (between mother and child) that coincides with the subject's entry into language and threatens to collapse all oppositions necessary for meaning.

In this chapter, I draw attention to the power of abjection to collapse and remake sexual meaning and subjectivity. I suggest there is something particularly seductive about abjection that makes it an ambiguous and therefore powerful source of desire and pleasure capable of subverting and reconfiguring hitherto excluded subject positions. I draw from Baudrillard's idea of seduction in his book *Seduction*, to foreground the seductive powers of the abject, raped woman that is crucial to my discussion of the following texts. Baudrillard equates seduction with the feminine; with artifice and the ritual play and reversibility of appearances that conceal the absent ‘truth’ or ‘meaning’ of the desire of the subject. Through the strategy of appearances, seduction, like abjection, threatens the masculine order of production—the production of meaning, discourse, desire, identity, sexual difference and so on—with ironic desire that is irreducible to any ‘truth’ of desire. Seduction in Baudrillard's terms is a “gestural, sensual, ritual game” that fascinates by its theatrical, made up, make-belief simulation of desire that seemingly conceals a truth which is really nothing (Baudrillard, 12). By concealing the absent ‘truth’ of her desire, the abject woman deploys seduction to ultimately reveal the

utterly contingent nature of identity. In foregrounding the abject lack that constitutes and undermines desire and subjectivity, the seductive powers of abjection enable the reconfiguration of other possible ways of being in the world.

The Texts:

There are few female characters in Jeyakantan's fiction whose lives are not touched by sexual abjection. Leaving the exceptions aside, one of the primary concerns of this chapter is to address the inevitable and inescapable fact of abjection that structures female subjectivity. Embracing abjection is thus the only available option to exercise whatever little agency or power is possible under constraining conditions, which qualify or limit any unified and universalist notion of the modern subject. The act of incorporating abjection has to be understood not merely as a reinstatement of a constrained sexual agency or the subject's complicity in her own victimhood but as enabling a seductive form of power that at once incorporates and destabilizes regulatory norms of sexuality. This essay engages with the raped woman as a rhetorical figure that is invested with a particularly counter-intuitive form of sexual power—seduction. In the following texts, the seductive power of the raped woman lies in her ability to blur ideological determinations of female sexual consent through psychological narratives of ambiguous and explicit female desire. The mode of seduction is never open hostility but a strategic form of ambivalence that simultaneously reinstates and subverts regulatory norms of sexuality to reveal the contingency of sexual identity.

Before discussing the texts I address some of the ideological tensions that underscore patriarchal discourses on rape that only apparently acknowledge female sexual consent by dividing women into spheres of consent according to indices of relationship to men (Kannabiran, 40). So wives and prostitutes are assumed to be ever consenting and therefore 'unrapable' while 'virtuous' women like young girls, are incapable of consent, virginal; 'rapable'. An identical act of sexual violence is therefore read differently—as rape in the case of unmarried virgins, as consensual sex in the case of wives and prostitutes. The preoccupation is only peripherally with larger questions of criminal assault and bodily integrity, and centrally with sexual integrity or virginity, an essential attribute for marriage exchanges. Thus the very 'rapability' of a woman depends on her positioning within the system of alliance (Foucault, 37).

These ideological discourses on rape sympathize or stigmatize the loss of virginity without ever really acknowledging the possibility of female sexual consent independent of patriarchal stipulations. Even when women see themselves as consenting to intercourse, the very notion of their being able to extend or deny consent is itself illusory. Consent, in these terms, is a byproduct of the structural relationships that obtain in, for instance, the specification of intercourse as the male occupation of a woman's body (Kannabiran, 47). Thus every woman is assumed to be 'rapable' irrespective of her sexual consent by virtue of her physical body that during intercourse is literally understood to be a territory that can be occupied by that of the male. Further, these ideological assumptions around female consent suggest a profound lack of clarity about what constitutes rape or indeed sexual violation. The focus is less on rape per se as a coercive act of sexual violation and really with the social perception of rape as a metaphor for all forms of illicit sexuality outside marriage (Kannabiran, 50). Thus an (unmarried) woman who has been raped by a stranger violates the sanctity of marriage and can no longer claim integrity/sanctity to her person the loss of which can supposedly be redeemed only by marrying her rapist. The loss of virginity becomes a sign of diminished, 'public' womanhood

that condemns the woman to a life of shame. She is either castigated by becoming the potential object of any male desire, a punishment she supposedly deserves and seeks irrespective/because of her desire, or possibly married, if she is an unmarried virgin, to her rapist. The individuals involved and their understandings are thus subordinated to the form of the sexual act. A resisted act and an intended act come to be the same thing and rape simply ceases to exist because it has been, by definition, absorbed into marriage. That the woman can never independently extend or deny consent only reflects the lack of a social or legal personhood; she is an abject nonperson.⁶

‘Trial by Fire’ and *Some People in Some Situations*

I look at three sequential texts that blur ideological definitions of rape that have been inextricably linked to constructions of the female body and sexuality and their supposedly indexical relationship to familial honor and reputation—a short story ‘Agni Pravesam’ or ‘Trial by Fire’ (1969) and two novels *Sila Nerangalil Sila Manidargal* (*Some People in Some Situations*) (1970) and *Gangai Enge Pokiral?* (*Where is Ganga Going?*) (1977). The narratives of the first two texts plot the psychological vicissitudes of the female protagonist Ganga’s uncertain desire for her ‘rapist’ Prabhu undoes the structures of consent by confounding the opposition between consent and non-consent and challenging the ideological equation of female virginity and asexuality with marriage. What is not clear either in the story ‘Trial by Fire’ or the novel *Some People in Some Situations* is whether Ganga was raped or seduced. While the story renders the rape uncertain by suggesting the female character’s desire for her ‘rapist’, the novel does not describe the scene of the rape in all its violent physicality but recalls the sexualized memory of the rape that again renders the rape uncertain. In the story, the female character’s confession of ‘spoilage’ ultimately wins her mother’s forgiveness and sympathy but in the novel Ganga is condemned and ostracized following her confession. In the social worlds of both the texts, the possibility of female sexual consent is never a matter of significance, the emphasis being more on the loss of familial reputation. Setting aside questions of familial honor for the moment, I focus on the textual/psychological ambiguity of desire and sexual consent that blurs the very opposition between rape and consent.

I discuss the story that is partially quoted in the narrative of the first novel in tandem with the novel itself. I begin with a brief overview of the first novel *Some People in Some Situations* that may help clarify the temporal convolutions of a psychological plot. The novel opens with Ganga reading a story (which is also an inter-textual reference to Jeyakantan’s earlier story ‘Trial by Fire’) that alludes to her uncertain rape and suggests and evokes her desire for her ‘rapist’; she retrospectively (re)sexualizes her vivid memory of the ‘rape’ even as she remembers the initial anxiety of potentially losing her virginity before the ‘rape’ and the fear and regret that followed. Thus it is not clear whether Ganga was raped or seduced in her youth. We are never privy to the scene of the ‘rape’ and we only discover through Ganga’s memories of her past that she was castigated for ruining the reputation of her family by losing her virginity to a stranger whose unknown caste identity runs the risk of ritual pollution. For years after the rape, she is ashamed of her lost virginity that, I suggest, symbolizes her ‘public’ diminished womanhood, and leads the austere, mundane and solitary life of a disgraced working woman. Neither Ganga nor her family seeks legal redress for fear of further losing

⁶ For debates around rape and female sexual consent see Dworkin, Brownmiller, Mckinnon Cahill (1-49), Kannabiran, Agnes (53-78) and Menon (200-238)

their social reputation. Her patriarchal uncle Venku who secretly desires her, challenges her to get married to her 'rapist' to redeem her lost chastity and consequently their family's honor. He is convinced her 'rapist' Prabhu will never trust her honorable intention of marrying him and (mis)interpret her offer for sexual looseness.

Ganga's decision to meet Prabhu twelve years after the 'rape' is determined by a multiple and contradictory set of shifting motivations that constitute her struggle to validate her abject self. It is initially impossible to discover the truth of her desire from these motivations. She initially meets him with the apparent intention of marrying him to avoid her uncle's predatory desire. During their encounter, she secretly admits her desire for Prabhu when he insists on getting her married to redeem his rape and her life. But Ganga refuses to get married threatened by the possibility of losing Prabhu. Then she suddenly decides to exploit Prabhu's past indifference to her claim to virginity to ascertain his desire for her. Later, she admits her intense need for Prabhu's protection. Over their conversations, Prabhu emerges as a model of fallen masculinity characterized by alcoholism and sexual promiscuity. His intellectual insecurity and sense of worthlessness before Ganga's education and professional success redeems Ganga's own lack of self-esteem. Now she is driven by yet another motivation, which is her determination to reform his debauched life. Her eventual inability to win Prabhu's love enables the subsequent repression and sublimation of her sexual desire that over the course of the second novel grows into an asexual companionship, finally resulting in apparent freedom from abjection via worldly renunciation and purificatory death.

The early part of the first novel elaborates Ganga's inner conflict with guilt and shame over her lost virginity, which is most clearly felt by her loss of faith in the world *and* in herself. *Some People in Some Situations* begins years after the 'rape' whose abject effects are sensed in the opening chapter that describes Ganga's acute discomfort and indignation as she travels to work in a crowded city bus. Her heightened vigilance of the danger around her that is always already sexualized and her silent determination never to trust men are, I suggest, a compensatory preemption of the violation of her bodily integrity and being. The impossibility of separating her sexual vulnerability from any real threat of molestation is implied by her uncertainty of the sexual innocence of a male co-passenger's touch. Even the attempt to defend herself against the constant threat of a potential assault is precluded by the fear of undermining her sexual integrity and reputation. She suspects her very attempts to appear plain and inconspicuous are precisely what attract male sexual attention. She insinuates her perpetual and potential victimhood that structures her very existence by suspecting every man's sexual intentions; she is convinced even her brother Ganeshan would have expressed his desire for her had they not been siblings. She realizes in impotent rage that sexual molestation and assaults are unfortunate but necessary costs of female independence.

In her introspections Ganeshan emerges as one of the disembodied voices of patriarchal authority that she both internalizes and disavows. Ganga remembers his familiar accusations of her sexual affairs with random men on the bus. He interprets her apparent sexual insolence as a function of her financial independence and professional reputation and considers her a disgrace to the family's honor. She is convinced her brother's suspicion betrays his jealousy and frustration with his own wretched existence. She is certain her sister-in-law is falsely concerned about people casting aspersions about her sexual indulgence and Ganeshan's reputation when she is clearly jealous of her financial independence.

Ganga is irrespective of her sexual consent structurally stigmatized for the loss of her virginity that I suggest, marks her diminished, 'public' womanhood—a stigma that is only entrenched and seemingly legitimized by her working life. In public spaces like the city bus

her financial independence and simple appearance that betrays no visible sign of marriage are read by men as a mark of her single and therefore virginal/‘rapable’ status. Her family perceives the attendant sexual risks of a working life not as a threat to her bodily integrity and being but as her opportunities for sexual indulgence. Sexual assaults are presumably punishments that Ganga seeks and deserves as a necessary consequence of her past sexual indulgence, which is at once a perpetual and a recurring marker of her fallen status.

The mythical status of virginity is suggested by her family’s perception of Ganga’s lost virginity that serves as a permanent and potentially recurrent index of her sexual abjection and disrepute. This points to the imaginary or fantasmatic construction of virginity, which is both lost once and for all and yet can be lost again and again irrespective of the possibility of sexual intercourse. The fantasmatic imagination of virginity as an ideal female virtue includes the possibility of its own destabilization that reveals the essentially contingent equation between virginity and marriage.

Seduction assumes an inter- and intra-textual form of simulating and affirming female desire and pleasure that blur subtle patriarchal distinctions of woman as either perpetually consenting or non-consenting or lacking the ability to consent to an (apparent) act of sexual violation. Ganga’s reception of a fictional allusion to her ‘rape’ in the novel, which is also an earlier text by Jeyakantan, compels her to retrospectively characterize her rape as consensual in order to affirm her own desire and pleasure and thus validate her hitherto abject past. The act of incorporating a narrative of sexual irony dissolves the very ideological opposition between perpetual consent and the absence of consent so that it is impossible to ascertain the truth of female desire. I quote the following excerpt from the short story at some length to elaborate the correlation between reading and narrative and desire. Reading operates at two narrative levels, one framed within the other—one is that of us, the readers, reading Ganga’s seductive story of ambiguous desire that frames the other, which is the inner narrative of Ganga reading the fictional allusion to her ambiguous rape. There is yet another relationship between the reader and text, which is the reader’s presumed prior familiarity with the story about Ganga’s ‘rape’ that, independent of Ganga’s and our own (re)reading of the story, is inter-textually recalled and framed by the novel. All these three levels of reading recall textual and readerly (Ganga’s and ours) memories of ambiguous female desire and pleasure that crucially enable Ganga’s growing and empowering recognition of her abjection.

Ganga identifies with the female character in the story that describes her virgin beauty and evokes her uncertain sexual pleasure in the man’s presence:

The young woman in the story is *initially fascinated by a beautiful white car* that brushes past her as she stands alone under a tree waiting for the rain to subside. [The narrator says] *Any man would want to possess the young woman's innocent, unblemished and precious beauty.* Then the car suddenly stops and slowly backs up. A stylish young man *with a captivating smile* leans over the back seat to open the door for her to get in. He offers to drop her home but she refuses. When she tries to shut the open door she feels his hand on hers. *Flustered, she withdraws her hand and looks at him laughing beautifully.* Then the young man gets out of the car, walks around it to where she is and asks her to get into the car. She sees him getting wet in the rain and gets in *unable to refuse him.* She feels *he has imprisoned her* when he shuts the door behind her. The spaciousness of the car amazes her and to her suggests the man's elite status. She suddenly feels unrefined and places the books she has been hugging to her chest beside her on the seat and sits more comfortably. She is fascinated by the sophisticated fittings and lights in the car that resembles a small house. He looks at her

in the rear mirror and smiles. As she curses herself for wearing a transparent *davani* that she discovers is accidentally torn the man hands her a towel to wipe herself. *She loves the fragrance of the towel and buries her face in it.* She suddenly realizes the car is not taking her home and asks the man to take her home but *he remains indifferent to her mild protest.* She *smiles politely to suppress her anxiety lest he grows impatient and abandons her.* He drives her to an isolated place in the midst of a forest. She is *alarmed* to see the car has stopped. In the dim light of the radio in the car *she silently admires his beauty for the first time as he moves his fingers to the rhythms of the drum from the radio.* She is *as attracted to as she is intimidated by the light in his eyes and his eyebrows that have an air of determination.* He offers her some chocolates and chewing gum and then gets out of the car and gets in through the rear door. He sits close to her and confesses to her surprise that his car has been following her for the past two years. He asks her if she likes him and *she quietly says yes.* She says she is *scared because she is new to this experience.* As he tries to comfort her he seduces her; *her protests gradually relent to her desire for him.* But later when she realizes she has been *spoiled* she *angrily and desperately* begs him to take her home. The man is moved by her plight and regrets having seduced her even as he silently rebukes her for *misleading* him. He wishes she had clearly expressed her refusal as he drops her. (Jeyakantan 1189)

It is the sheer novelty of an anonymous sexual encounter that both draws and intimidates the sexually inexperienced young woman besides her fascination with the young man's rather suave sex appeal. She is anxious to appear relaxed, confident and refined even as she berates herself for having been careless. Although she is initially nervous and scared, she later acquiesces to the man's sexual advances but not before informing the man of her virginal status that, I suggest, is an internalized sign of her desirability. But the man's desire for her is indifferent to her claim to virginity. She is only retrospectively scared and ashamed of her uncertain reaction to her spoilage when she anticipates her mother's angry reaction to her lost virginity and reputation. But from the story it is clear that the woman struggles to reconcile her fear of social stigma and humiliation with her new experience of sexual desire and pleasure. Are the man's sexual advances encouraged by the woman's visible signs of pleasure and anxiety to be (retrospectively) interpreted as an act of sexual violation?

The word 'rape' is never used by Jeyakantan's female protagonist Ganga to refer to her sexual encounter with her 'rapist'. Instead of rape that automatically suggests a violation of bodily integrity Ganga uses the Tamil verb *kedu* or 'spoil' when she confesses to her family *she* is spoiled. By presenting herself as the subject and not as the object of spoilage she takes responsibility for her spoilage. The rhetoric of spoilage, I suggest, accommodates a degree of sexual ambiguity by stigmatizing the compromised sexual integrity and reputation of the woman without necessarily preempting the possibility of her desire. So when Ganga confesses she has been spoilt without (directly) accusing her rapist of spoiling her, her rhetoric of spoilage, I argue, captures the fear and shame of lost reputation rather than an act of sexual violation.

The story abruptly ends and what follows the spoilage is revealed when Ganga asks her mother Kanakam to read the story. The story has a similar closure to the novel but it also crucially diverges from the novel in its exploration of the social and psychological implications of the spoilage. In the story and the novel Ganga is ritually purified of her stigma—in the story, the mother forgives and sympathizes the daughter's confession of spoilage and bathes her in a symbolic act of purification, and in the novel, Ganga seeks sacred redemption by 'accidentally' drowning in the holy waters of the river Ganga. But unlike the

mother in the story who trusts her daughter and values her dignity and privacy by keeping the 'rape' a secret, in the novel, Kanakam laments Ganga's spoilage to Ganeshan's family and the neighbors who immediately ostracize Ganga and her mother who sympathetically decides to accompany her. Ganga later regrets not safeguarding her reputation by preserving the secrecy of the spoilage. The confession of spoilage, I argue, is initially the only available means of disavowing her ambiguous and inadmissible desire for her 'rapist' and possibly winning her family's sympathy. However she later realizes that the loss of her reputation is indifferent to her consent to the sexual encounter. She is trapped in a deadlock between either being potentially stigmatized and/or being stigmatized forever. The undesirable publicity of her spoilage materializes and constitutes her forever fallen status and transforms the secret event of the 'rape' that lacks a history besides the circumstantial proof based on the victim's and perpetrator's testimonies into a social reality that upsets the social value placed on virginity. Ganga is held responsible for the supposedly irrevocable loss of her chastity that now forever signifies her immoral, public sexuality and her sexual accessibility. She is perceived as a whore who, having lost her virginity is only apparently no longer 'rapable' and ever consenting. But as I argued earlier, this is contradicted by the mythical construction of virginity that once lost is still a recurring threat to familial reputation.

Unlike Ganeshan's overt patriarchal authority, Ganga's uncle Venku manipulates and eroticizes the ideological contradictions inherent to imaginary constructions of female sexuality and sexual consent that enable the possibility of their own undermining. Femininity is equated with lack or in this case with sexual passivity and chaste asexuality but also has to reflect male desire. Ganga is thus perceived at once as an asexual woman lacking consent and as a desiring, agential woman whose illicit sexuality is interpreted as an eroticized bearer of masculinity. On the one hand, Venku, a lawyer by profession, exploits the moral and legal authority that he supposedly represents by trying to convince Ganga of the irrelevance of her sexual consent and violation by referring to religious/moral valorizations of female virginity that precondition wifely loyalty. Although Ganga's/the novel's psychological narrative is ambiguous about Ganga's desire and her status as an adult when she was 'spoiled', Venku resorts to formal stipulations of statutory rape defined by the law that eliminates the psychological ambiguity of a woman's consent to a sexual act. Thus Ganga's stipulated status as a minor precludes the possibility of consent and deprives her of any claim to her own desire and bodily integrity. Venku preserves the structures of consent by equating marriage with sexual intercourse and consent with non-consent. By apparently encouraging Ganga to marry her rapist he effectively demands Ganga's retrospective consent to legitimize a (dubious) act of sexual violation. Rape is thus reduced to the status of a myth by its absorption by marriage. But on the other, Venku tries to further his secret desire for Ganga by preventing the possibility of her marriage under the pretext of upholding the sanctity of virginity and marriage. He urges Ganga to get married to her rapist even as he tries to convince her that her rapist will assume she is a whore and never trust her honorable intentions of marrying him. His apparently indignant response to RKV's story that desecrates marriage by encouraging respectable women to become sexually promiscuous prostitutes barely conceals his pleasure of discovering the story's allusion to Ganga's inadmissible desire for her 'rapist'. His attempts to extract an affirmation of her sexual consent are evident through Ganga's memories of her conversations with Venku who constantly steers their conversations to her 'rape' by obsessively questioning her true feelings for Prabhu.

He asked her, 'So you got into the car as soon as he asked you?'

[Ganga] 'I said no first.'
 [Venku] 'Were you really willing or were you not serious?'
 [Ganga] 'I was scared that's why I said no.'
 [Venku] 'Then how did that fear disappear?'
 [Ganga] 'I got in feeling scared.'
 [Venku] 'Did you also like him?'
 [Ganga] 'Nothing like that.'
 [Venku] 'Then why were you scared?'
 [Ganga] 'It was raining.'
 [Venku] 'Was it raining heavily? Were you dripping wet? Was it cold? Did you feel like (here Venku lowers his voice and secretively asks with a smile on his face....He winks and tightens his hold on my shoulder. I feel like crying but I am scared) you could have hugged someone in the cold? Tell me, you liked it too didn't you?'
 [Ganga] 'No I didn't like it.'
 [Venku] 'Don't lie, if you hadn't liked it this wouldn't have happened.'
 (Jeyakantan, 1217-1218)

Ganga is rendered helpless and vulnerable by her filial gratitude to Venku for rescuing her and her mother when they were disowned by Ganeshan. When Venku tries to take sexual advantage of her vulnerability, she realizes she had rather be raped by a man than pretend to be innocent and affectionate to a lascivious old uncle. Ganga realizes her internalization of Venku's sexual imperatives is responsible for the loss of faith in herself and in all other men and silently curses her uncle in indignant rage,

Women who are trapped by womanizers like you cease to find anything desirable that suits their hearts. When you who are old enough to die can assume that I would find you desirable, wouldn't he (Prabhu) at his age, not have felt desire? It is because you believe that I can make myself like you that you think I must have liked him. Even if I desired him I don't desire you. (Jeyakantan, 1219)

The seductive power of the fictional allusion to Ganga's 'rape' enables her to embrace her abject past and affirm her initially uncertain desire that oscillates between shame and sexual affirmation and whose temporal vicissitudes result in ever new and shifting interpretations of the 'rape'. Her decision to find Prabhu suddenly gives her lonely and austere life as a shamed woman a new sense of purpose. She believes her decision is not a sign of her restored trust in or love for Prabhu but the only available means of defying her uncle's authority and avoiding his predatory desire for her. But her reencounter with Prabhu actually turns out to have a mutually redemptive effect that ultimately enables the possibility of Ganga's spiritual freedom from abjection. Although she is initially angry and bitter after her first telephonic conversation with Prabhu who is completely oblivious and shocked at this unexpected call, during their reencounter, Ganga evokes his guilt and wins his sympathy by describing her misery and humiliation after the 'spoilage'. Prabhu remorsefully confesses he had misunderstood her apparent consent. His perceived worthlessness and intellectual inferiority rouses her sympathy and she decides not to deceive him when she discovers he actually trusts her. He says,

'You have a lot to say. I am good for nothing. You say you are educated; I don't even have the right to sit next to you. You probably wonder how I can speak in English. I studied it. I studied in a convent before high school. But what's the

point? Now I can neither speak fluently in Tamil or English. That's why I am scared to speak sometimes.' (Jeyakantan, 1221)

Ganga tries to seduce him by eliciting his past indifference to her claim to virginity during the 'rape'. For Prabhu unlike Venku the secret loss of Ganga's virginity is really not an impediment for marriage although marriage is still the only means of redeeming himself and her life. Ganga evades his attempts to get her married that she feels would threaten her desire for him. She tries to win his sympathy for suffering an austere life of solitude to apparently atone for the loss of her virginity. When Prabhu assumes she is a married woman who wants to renew their acquaintance, Ganga sarcastically says, "Oh! So there are married women who call you up and meet you like this?" Prabhu indifferently replies,

'What's not there in this world? But as far as I know you are the only woman in this world who wastes her entire life.' Ganga protests, 'How is that possible? Set aside my conscience. Who would want to marry a spoiled woman whose lost virginity has been openly discovered?' (Jeyakantan, 1303)

Prabhu dismisses her,

'What are you talking? You keep saying, 'spoiled woman'! I've seen many instances of women who get divorced and marry again. Did everyone watch you lose your virginity? There has to be some use to our meeting now...I want to see you married. Really! It's not right to see a woman waste her life like this! I will find you a top class man myself, just watch! I will bring you a man who is beyond all this nonsense about being spoiled. What do you say to that?' (Jeyakantan, 1304)

Prabhu's indifference to her virginal status and her desire for his reassuring and protective presence enables Ganga's self-affirmation. She exercises her agency by parodying the inherent contradictions of a patriarchal order that at once precludes the possibility of female desire and sexual consent and requires women to reassure male desire. This only instantiates the power wielded by women in their paradoxical position in the Symbolic order of at once lacking desire and reflecting male desire. Ganga assimilates even as she subverts patriarchal oppositions of female sexuality and sexual consent by setting up and strategically manipulating an opposition between two representatives—Prabhu and Venku—of a fallible patriarchal order. She tries to simulate an (extra) marital relationship with Prabhu. Ganga asks Prabhu to pretend she were his concubine, "I'm not asking you to marry me or accept me as your concubine, just pretend I'm your concubine". She expresses her desire to be his concubine "only in name" (Jeyakantan, 1307). By simulating an (extra) marital relationship that does not amount to marriage, Ganga threatens the patriarchal equation of virginity with marriage and exposes the mythical status of virginity whose loss is at once a singular and recurrent event. She further upsets by enacting the social assumption of rape as a universal metaphor for all forms of illicit sexuality. We see seduction functioning here as a de-realizing strategy that apparently affirms Ganga's sexual experience and agency even at the risk of incurring social censure. She attempts to make agential what was once passively received as sexual abjection. She is determined to "change people's naive impression of her as a sexually innocent fool by pretending to lose her virginity (again)" (Jeyakantan, 1309-1310) She feels secretly vindicated

and triumphant whenever her rides back home in Prabhu's car elicit neighborly stares and her mother's shame.

Prabhu's sense of degradation and estrangement partly redeems Ganga's fallen stature. In their conversations, Prabhu emerges as a model of fallen or abject masculinity characterized by sexual abuse, alcoholism and sexual profligacy. He confesses he was robbed of his sexual innocence when he was raped by his nanny at the age of twelve. He describes himself as the disenfranchised son of a wealthy businessman who bequeathed all his property to Prabhu's wife Padma, empowering her to control Prabhu's debauchery. Prabhu confesses alcoholism is the only means of mitigating his oppressive subordination to his wife and his shameful failure as a son and father. Padma refuses to indulge his alcoholism when she discovers his secret visits to prostitutes. Prabhu claims no woman including his wife has ever loved him; every woman he had a sexual relationship with deceived him by getting married to someone else (Jeyakantan, 1313).

The more Prabhu sinks into low self-esteem the more he feels unworthy of Ganga's possible friendship. Her growing self-esteem on the other hand helps her realize she is no longer intimidated by Prabhu's suave masculinity. She "even forg[ets] [she] is sitting next to a man in the car" and "realizes how much stronger she is than he ever was" (Jeyakantan, 1313). Prabhu's now diminished masculinity reduces him to "a small child who hasn't changed since the rape." (Jeyakantan, 1314). She discovers she may have come to terms with her past now that has lost her earlier "naïveté and innocence that made her sacrifice herself to a fool like Prabhu" (Jeyakantan, 1314). She is amazed at how much she has changed in these years to even notice such a difference in herself. She is emboldened and amused by Prabhu's perception of himself as someone who has been cruelly wronged by the world. She ridicules his urbane masculinity, "Did you really expect every woman on the street to fall in love with you just because you are smartly dressed and wear perfume?" (Jeyakantan, 1314)

Her anger and bitterness gives way to sympathy and concern and determination to reform his debauched life. Ganga experiences a motherly sense of purpose and responsibility for Prabhu's welfare and perceives him as "Padma's spoilt child" who needs to be disciplined and nurtured lest "he spoil the other sons." (Jeyakantan, 1330) Although she tries to have an ostensible affair with Prabhu to defy her family and protect herself from Venku's sexual advances, she is seduced by her own sexual pretense for she discovers to her fear, that she really desires Prabhu. The seductive power of her ambiguous desire is complete once it gives way to the hyperreality of desire that can no longer be distinguished from its simulation. She hopes Prabhu's "concern, respect and sense of responsibility" actually insinuate his desire and love for her (Jeyakantan, 1356). She jealously perceives his secret visits to prostitutes as an impediment to the possibility of a sexual relationship. She struggles to repress her feelings for Prabhu by being falsely concerned with the possibility of Manju and Padma mistaking their "friendship" for a sexual relationship. She realizes she is "trapped" in her "fake" concern for their opinions when she is actually unable to admit her "desire to be raped" by Prabhu (Jeyakantan, 1336). She feels his rape "that violated her privacy entitles [her] to have an intimate and honest relationship with him." (Jeyakantan, 1338) She assumes the redemptive possibilities of their "friendship" are an exclusive privilege that empowers her over his wife (Jeyakantan, 1340). But Prabhu's refusal to take sexual liberties with her only provokes her scorn for his hypocritical respect and concern. She confesses she has lost faith in herself and fears she will succumb to any man's desire to rape her. She seeks his protection and confesses she had rather be raped by Prabhu than by any other man if she is destined to be raped.

When Prabhu angrily dismisses Ganga's internalized fears Ganga silently rebukes him for his inability to take sexual advantage of her vulnerability.

The raped woman in these texts threatens certain cultural norms of female chastity by retrospectively characterizing her 'rape' as consensual to validate her abject past. Ganga deploys abjection to seduce her guilty 'rapist' Prabhu, this time resorting to a rhetoric of rape. By couching her possessive desire for Prabhu in a rhetoric of sexual violation, Ganga negotiates the sexual impossibility of raping him and the social (im)possibility of having a sexually exclusive/conjugal relationship with him that is presumably not characterized or compromised by the (rationalized) violence of (hetero)sexuality. Ganga equates conjugality to the irreversible and violent sexual domination of women by men that is compensated by and entails the man's responsibility for the woman's security and whose only available and fetishized expression is 'rape'. Ganga offers Prabhu exclusive sexual entitlement to her body—a privilege he supposedly deserves for appropriating her virginity—in exchange for protection from potential threats of rape. That Ganga never allows Prabhu to forget the rape becomes the defining act of their relationship; her indifferent and insistent thrusting of her fallen status upon Prabhu and her attempts to win his sympathy and protection by expressing her vulnerability reflects Ganga's sexual agency that is constituted by her negotiations with a patriarchal system. Unlike the adolescent Ganga who was seduced by the novelty of sexual experience and rendered vulnerable by the estranging consequences of the 'rape', the adult Ganga perceives herself as an informed and agential woman who takes responsibility for the possibly violent consequences of satisfying her desire for Prabhu. By 'consenting to be raped' again by Prabhu, Ganga bargains the potential violation of her bodily integrity for power via male protection. Assuming the identity of 'wife' even if it is fictive and violently constituted guarantees Ganga a preemptive zone of relative future safety and power. Wife/concubine, consent/rape, public/private, protection/autonomy or empowerment are reversible states and identities that Ganga upholds and collapses as circumstances warrant with the dual goals of the survival of her protective and empowering relationship with Prabhu and her desire for him, and the interruption or critique of the sexual regulations of patriarchal kinship.

In her defense against his determination to get her married, she ostensibly upholds the ideological status of virginity whose loss preempts marriage and rationalizes rape as a necessary expression of heterosexual violence. Her attempt to compromise her bodily integrity in exchange for sexual gratification is hindered by Prabhu's self-deprecatory guilt, which renders him sexually inaccessible. Prabhu wearily absolves himself of all responsibility for his worthless past now that he no longer has his reputation at stake. His resignation only makes Ganga uneasy and desperate and strengthens her resolve to similarly absolve herself of responsibility for her lost virginity and reputation, her family's tainted honor and even her desire for him. Having nothing at stake only urges her to pursue her desire for Prabhu as the only available way of redeeming her abject status.

Ganga's defiant affirmation of her abject status is undefeated by her family's disapproval, her widowed mother Kanakam—herself a hypocritical embodiment of female sexual morality who until Ganga's mocking retort does not conform to sartorial prescriptions for orthodox Hindu Brahmin widows—is dismayed and disgusted by her daughter's transformation from the austere woman she admired and even sympathized with to a heavily made up and well dressed woman. When Kanakam chastises Ganga for her illicit relationship with Prabhu, Ganga declares that she and Prabhu "have surpassed the possibility of being a couple since Prabhu already has a family...Prabhu will henceforth be [her] support" (Jeyakantan, 1326).

Kanakam abuses Ganga for ruining the family's reputation and accuses her of being a whore, "from your very dressing up the world knows you know the world." (Jeyakantan, 1327) Ganga acknowledges and comes to terms with her sexual vulnerability when she spurns Venku's final desperate attempt to seduce her. She feels she has managed to overcome her fear of being raped by men. She realizes people like Venku "are responsible for women's internalizations of certain notions of feminine modesty that make them avoid men so that when they reach adolescence they can no longer inhibit their sexual desires for men. Men mistake their shy modesty for love that they then exploit to their sexual advantage." (Jeyakantan, 1471)

Ganga attributes her newly discovered power to her intimate relationship with Prabhu that she realizes is the only significant relationship she has ever had. A sure sign of their intimacy lies in the security of his presence that seems to deflect male attention. But till the very end of the novel she is unable to distinguish this reassuring sense of security and concern from the love that it seemingly presupposes. She wonders if they are in love with each other when she discovers she "always thinks of his body, his mind and his life with a lot of concern" just as "he always thinks of her with such devotion." (Jeyakantan, 1446) She notices their relationship unlike most romantic relationships that begins "with a sublime, poetic and seductive notion of love and ends in sex" began with "cheap, frenzied and animal-like sex like an accident" only to progressively end with "a sense of duty, an honorable friendship, affection and love" (Jeyakantan, 1446). Ganga feels their relationship has progressively matured from a vulgar sexual experience that was entirely accidental to an "honorable friendship and love" which is constituted by mutual concern and respect and presumably no longer merely premised on sexual attraction (Jeyakantan, 1447).

The novel ends on a note of worldly renunciation. Prabhu decides to renounce the moral degradation and meaninglessness of urban life and retire to the idealized redemptive purity of the countryside. He is determined to atone for his past "sins" by leading a solitary life of hard labor. At Ganeshan's behest, he threatens to sever ties with Ganga if she refuses a marriage offer. The possibility of never seeing Prabhu again threatens her desire and compels the desperate profession of her exclusive love for him. She is determined to marry him although she confesses she had "lied" earlier about the impossibility of their love (Jeyakantan, 1502) But her inability to convince Prabhu of her exclusive love and his subsequent loss/disappearance initiates Ganga's mournful descent into alcoholism in open defiance of her family's disapproval.

Gangai Enge Pokiral? (Where is Ganga Going?)

Gangai Enge Pokiral? (Where is Ganga Going?), the sequel to *Some People in Some Situations*, gestures at two inter-generational possibilities of addressing sexual abjection—one is the sacred redemption and spiritual transcendence of an abject existence through death and the other is the preemption of sexual abjection and stigma by sublimating desire towards altruistic purposes. While Venku, Ganga and Prabhu seek religious purification and spiritual transcendence through worldly renunciation and death, the younger generation that includes Prabhu's daughter Manju, Ganga's niece Vasantha and her orphaned doctor friend Arjun represents the idealized possibilities of an altruistic friendship that transcends social and sexual differences and sublimates sexual desire to better the world.

The novel traces Ganga's affirmative transformation from a sexually disgraced alcoholic mourning a lost love to a woman whose growing independence and social impunity is a function of her newly discovered financial authority. She gradually emerges from her

alcoholism when her relationship with Prabhu is accidentally renewed. When Prabhu decides to redeem his debauched life by retiring to a village to pursue a bucolic life, Ganga also decides to renounce her present life to share a future life of asceticism with him. But her desire to renounce her worldly life is temporarily frustrated by her sudden responsibility to rescue her debt ridden family. She inherits Venku's house—an expiatory act from a remorseful uncle who tries to redeem his guilt by retiring to the holy city of Benaras where he dies a painful and lonely death. Before he dies he requests Ganga to take care of his wife Ambujam who we later discover was a victim of his sexual and physical abuse. Ganga's new inheritance and her brother Ganeshan's unexpected sickness that reduces his family to a penurious plight favor Ganga's empowerment over the family. Ganga redeems Ganeshan's debts and rescues him from bankruptcy. She takes responsibility of her brother's family and their mother. The financial crisis does not however redeem the family's disgraced perception of Ganga although they express their apparent gratitude. The novel ends with Prabhu's and Ganga's worldly renunciation and her final spiritual liberation and death by drowning in the holy waters of the river Ganga.

When Ganga accidentally reencounters Prabhu she realizes they have exchanged fortunes—while Ganga is now the alcoholic who has been reunited with her family, Prabhu has become the solitary outcaste whose prior alcoholism results in his familial expulsion. Prabhu's guilt, his miserable estrangement and his gratitude for Ganga's friendship only reassures her growing sense of maturity and emotional independence. Although she is initially overjoyed to meet Prabhu she is betrayed by his indifference. She bitterly remembers the moments when she yearned for his presence. She clarifies she only wants “his friendship, his company” and not “a sexual or romantic relationship.” (Jeyakantan, 1657) She is convinced that neither of their lives can be changed and that “advising each other is futile” (Jeyakantan, 1657). She discovers she is no longer tormented by Prabhu's frequent and longer absences and her familial responsibilities make her life more purposeful.

This novel like the previous one is a self-referential narrative—it frames an inner narrative that thematizes the meta-narrative. The framed story embedded in this novel has a narrative and didactic function that alludes to Prabhu's redemptive transformation from a life of debauchery. When Prabhu disappears for a year Ganga hopes for his return when she discovers another story by RKV that alludes to Prabhu's attempt to commit suicide, which is stalled by an act of compassion that results in his spiritual rebirth. The story describes a wealthy youth whose father wills his property to his daughter-in-law before he dies to prevent the son from squandering his wealth on alcohol and women. The man feels betrayed by his father. When the wife's attempts to reform her husband fail she asks him to leave the house. The man shamefully leaves the house in the middle of the night and bitterly warns the older servants in the house to leave before his wife drives them away. Before leaving he swears to return a rich man. But he is so ashamed of himself that he is determined to commit suicide. He drives aimlessly along a cliff and just as he is about to fall off the precipice, an old woman appears in the middle of the road gesturing him to stop. They do not speak the same language but from her gestures he realizes she has a pregnant daughter who has to be rushed to the nearest government hospital some miles away. When he sees the pregnant woman, the man is filled with a new sense of purpose. He feels needed and this incident makes him realize that his life is worthless if he cannot help people in their time of need. The sight of the new born baby and the old woman's gratitude and blessings fill him with a sense of hope and affirmation. He feels happy when he sees himself being surrounded by poor people. He wonders if their happiness

lies in their simplicity. He feels his own life is much happier now that he has renounced his wealth.

The moral didacticism of RKV's story is unmistakable; it traces the redemptive shift from the moral corruption of the city to the idealized rural life of the countryside, which is spiritually rejuvenating and characterized by a sense of community premised on compassion and altruism. The moral valorization of rural life and its liberating possibilities is further conveyed through Ganga's desire for his bucolic life that later encourages her to renounce her disgraced life in the city. She is amazed at the sight of Prabhu's idyllic world as a mechanic that comprises co-mechanics, a poultry farm and an adopted son. The redemptive potential of Prabhu's rural existence lies in the ethics of work and labor that constitute Prabhu's self-worth and independence. His new sense of freedom from urban degradation lies in his laboring body that embodies his struggle against class privilege. He feels he has redeemed his abject past by becoming a self-reliant worker "whose sweat drips on the land" (Jeyakantan, 1731). He tells Manju that "her [old] father... is dead" and that a new father "has been resurrected" (Jeyakantan, 1731). Prabhu feels "alienated from them and their class" for he "now belongs to the working class"; the new world he has fashioned "has no room for marriage or family" (Jeyakantan, 1731). He says his assistants at the workshop are his friends and family. He is amused at the thought of having a four year old son without a wife.

Prabhu's self-fashioning as a worker free of worldly distinctions can be read as an attempt to challenge and opt out of the institutional inequities of class, patriarchal marriage and family. What is also suggested is an alternative, fictive image of the family that excludes women; an exclusion that is premised on Prabhu's assumption that women unlike men have to be married; an assumption that is only challenged towards the end of the novel by Ganga's niece Vasantha.

Vasantha and Manju, Prabhu's daughter, belong to a new generation of independent young women who equate marriage with the patriarchal enslavement of women. Marriage for them is an institution that cannot be redeemed without being discarded. Both of them represent the idealized possibilities of cross gender friendship that is indifferent to desire, gender and social difference. While Manju extols the virtues of friendship to win her mother's trust when she suspects her apparent affair with a male classmate, Vasantha despite Ganga's entreaties refuses to resort to marriage simply to avoid social disgrace and humiliation. Marriage, Vasantha says, merely "preserves female sexual honor" by inscribing women as wives (Jeyakantan, 1749). She calls marriage a form of female enslavement; "an aggressive yoke that insults, enslaves and vulgarizes women" (Jeyakantan, 1750). She questions the hypocrisy of women like her mother and grandmother who praise the "heavenly" virtues of marriage when they have had unhappy marriages (Jeyakantan, 1750). She even objects to Ganga's devotion for Prabhu and suggests her faith in marriage is only a reflection of her naiveté. While Vasantha expresses her admiration for Ganga's independence as a working woman she interprets her urge to marry her as a sign of her "naive misrecognition" of patriarchy (Jeyakantan, 1750). She condemns all those Tamil writers and poets who have sung songs and composed poems that advocate gender equality when it is clearly "a man's world" (Jeyakantan, 1750).

During Manju's wedding, Ganga and Prabhu have an argument about her marriage. Vasantha supports Ganga's decision not to marry that Prabhu interprets as middle class hypocrisy; as "her middle-class, Puranic, Vedic, feudal mentality that she tries to disguise beneath a veneer of western cultural refinement" (Jeyakantan, 1760). Prabhu accuses Ganga of embodying the unchanging hypocrisy of middle-class values that unlike the rural, working class world is ridden with social distinctions. He claims his growing faith in himself enabled him to belong to a world that welcomes everyone irrespective of their social class. Ganga is determined to

renounce worldly comforts for a life of asceticism. When Prabhu insists on her marriage Vasantha has an argument with Prabhu about the oppressive and misogynistic implications of marriage. Vasantha questions the very ideological institution of marriage that she implicitly associates with heterosexuality—she claims she is neither a misandrist nor against married couples but the very institution of marriage that guarantees a life of slavery for women. She clearly stigmatizes sexuality for she urges men and women to relate as friends without having any sexual relationships. Sexual desire has to be repressed and sublimated to forge philanthropic friendships between men and women driven by the noble purpose of bettering the world, “men and women should volunteer to collaborate to serve the world... and not renounce the world without a social purpose just to escape or avoid social misery...” (Jeyakantan, 1763). She expresses her contempt for people that ridicule the body by merely perceiving it as an object of pleasure when an artist or an aspiring doctor like her would respect and worship the body (Jeyakantan, 1764). Her friendship with an orphaned classmate from another province embodies the noble ideal of altruism that affirms life.

Ganga decides to retire from the world and live the rest of her life with Prabhu and relinquishes her property to Vasantha. She admires Vasantha, Arjun and Prabhu to whom “asceticism comes naturally... not in renouncing the world but devoting their lives to bettering it; serving it” (Jeyakantan, 1808). Unlike her brother, her sister-in law and mother, they “have thought of the world with a sense of duty; they have even turned their private affairs into a general dharma and have become images of sacrifice for the people of this earth to have better lives.” (Jeyakantan, 1810) Prabhu weeps helplessly to see her ‘accidentally’ drowning in the powerful currents of the river as she slips. Ganga feels she is finally being purified of her disgrace by the holy waters of the river she was named after. The narrator’s description of her experience of death suggests her absolution from shame and abjection and freedom from all human ties. Death is a self-divesting moment, a moment that erases distinctions between the past, the present and the future as she becomes part of an internally undifferentiated whole that is beyond existence and meaning. But the transcendental experience of death as I argued earlier is not without irony. Death is apparently the ultimate form of sexual liberation that comes with renouncing desire and patriarchy even as its religious and redemptive significance implicitly reinstates social ideals of female sexual virtue.

Cinemavukku Pona Cittalu ***(The Construction Worker who went to the Cinema) (1972)***

Introduction

In line with the earlier works discussed in this chapter, the following novella explores the seductive visual experience of cinema that has sexually empowering implications for its abject female viewer. The seductive power of cinema, I suggest, lies in its ability to resist a rational distinction between reality and illusion or more crucially, as the novella suggests, moral-ideological distinctions of female sexuality.

The novella is an allusion to an iconic male actor turned politician whose cinematic image is an endless source of desire and pleasure for its female voyeur. The seductive appeal of the spectacular image of the film star, I suggest, is its synthetic beauty that for the viewer acquires a certain ‘reality’ in the very absence of meaning. In other words, the artificial and made up beauty of cinema stars is, to use Baudrillard’s term, a simulacrum, a truth-effect that veils an

absent truth.⁷ What governs the seductive relationship of cinema stars to their viewers is not a signified desire, indeed, the satisfaction of desire itself becomes a mythical or "hypothetical prize", but a reversible and agonistic logic that repeatedly evokes and deceives the viewers' desires (Baudrillard, 133). The synthetic beauty and desirability of the cinematic image is not a function of knowledge or truth that lack the former's reversibility and mortality but that of the viewer's ideological fantasy that remains indifferent to the 'reality' or knowledge of visual misrecognition.

Before discussing the novella, I turn to Jeyakantan's preface to the novella that takes the form of a moral invective against popular cinema. His prefatory remarks are contradicted and far exceeded by the claims of the novella. While Jeyakantan is determined to expose and disillusion the insidious and immoral effects of cinema on the masses, his novella clearly shows that the seductive power of the cinematic image blurs any rational distinction between reality and falsity or moral definitions of female sexuality. The cinematic image of beauty simulates desire to the extent that desire acquires a hyperreality that cannot be distinguished from its simulation. Jeyakantan cautions his readers that cinema directors, producers and actors compulsorily persuade viewers through artifice to identify with social ideals and values that actually mask simulations of erotic pleasure. He is wary of the morally corrupting effects of erotic pleasure that apparently determine every cinematic representation of society.

Jeyakantan says his choice of a rural female character was determined by his intention to show the corrupting transformation of an innocent working class woman who, never having watched a movie, becomes the seduced, delusional fan of a popular cinema actor only to cruelly suffer disenchantment. But the novella complicates, as we shall presently see, any easy dismissal of cinema as a self-deceptive distortion of reality that can be disillusioned.

Jeyakantan's moral didacticism is unmistakable—he compares the degraded effects of popular cinema to his childhood experience of watching 'Bhakta Meera', a movie about a sixteenth century female poet who spurns a ruler's love to devote herself to her beloved lord Krishna. Although Jeyakantan is initially upset by her "cruel and immoral" rejection, the later discovery of her divine love for Krishna legitimizes her earlier rejection and ennobles her. Her love for Krishna is meant to achieve a 'higher' and more 'meaningful' state of being that makes it inherently superior and real. But Jeyakantan still fails to address the fundamental ability of cinema to evoke desire and pleasure despite its artifice.

If there was not the philosophical background of the great ocean that is Krishna, Meera's story of abandoning her husband and trampling his love and emerging from an opened cage would have been such a cruel and immoral incident! But Meera's story is like the natural sorrow of the separation of the bird of the soul from the body. Even if attaining a higher and more meaningful state by renouncing family life and the love between husband and wife causes a lot of sorrow, it does not signify the downfall or betrayal or immorality of those concerned. That very [state] is supreme; that is the highest state of human life...According Meera's place to the fools that are seduced seeing the dissembling dissembler who wanders in the street dressed like Krishna is the sign of the downfall of society. No good can come of such a downfall for either art or those concerned with it or life. Those who are concerned with cinema are just people. (Jeyakantan, p. xi)

⁷ For a larger discussion of the concept of seduction see Dianne Hunter (Ed.) *Seduction and Theory: readings of gender, representation, and rhetoric*, and Baudrillard, p 8.

Justifying the 'noble intentions' of his criticism, Jeyakantan clarifies his criticism is not directed at any particular individual only to revert to his former stance of disillusioning viewers of cinema. Jeyakantan clearly contradicts himself here. On one hand, he asserts the didactic function of his novella is to disillusion the delusional viewers of cinema and caution the few disillusioned viewers, who he acknowledges, have tried to resist the illusory and pernicious effects of cinema. And on the other, he disavows any intention to reform the world of cinema or blame cinema actors in his novella when that is precisely what he emphasizes in his preface. Jeyakantan's response to some of the 'hollow arguments' that viewers use to justify watching cinema is his very novella. He says,

They ceaselessly reply with hollow arguments, 'Time pass', 'Just enjoying for a short while'. Shouldn't I at least respect the few when they realize they should look out for greatness by wondering why our 'time pass' and 'enjoying for a short while' is ruined like this without getting trapped? It is this anxiety that has driven me to write this story... My intention is not to reform the world of cinema or accuse cinema actors. Through this story I know I look with pity at how our cinema world and everyone concerned have, without any such intention of mine, become the mark of sin and blame, destroying themselves. A work's intention will not become dishonorable by the downfall of the setting of the story, the language of the characters or the degree of the problem. (Jeyakantan, 6)

The Novella:

The novella opens with a description of one of the three protagonists, Chellamuthu. Chellamuthu is an unemployed and lazy young man who spends most of his time sleeping. He occasionally earns some money by taking people on his cycle rickshaw until Singaram, his neighbor and friend, tricks him into selling it to him. The narrator compares Chellamuthu to Singaram and suggests that unlike Chellamuthu, Singaram is a smart and resourceful man who manages to make a comfortable living although he is relatively new to the city. He buys his own cycle rickshaw and takes people during the day while he rides the other one at nights. Chellamuthu feels stupid and helpless and finds himself completely at the mercy of Singaram; he argues and pleads to borrow his cycle rickshaw on nights when he is not riding it. Singaram reluctantly agrees but hardly ever allows Chellamuthu to borrow his cycle rickshaw. Unable to make enough money, Chellamuthu decides to sell tickets to Vadiyar's ('teacher' or 'guru' as M.G.R was popularly known) films at the local cinema theater, being an ardent fan of the actor.⁸

⁸ Born in 1915 to a Malayali family in Candy Sri Lanka, M.G. Ramachandran (MGR) left school at the age of six when his father died. His impoverished family then moved to Tamil Nadu, where, like the other early Tamil actors, he and his elder brother joined a boys' drama troupe. By 1936 MGR had made his first film and his first hit came out in 1947. He was a member of the Congress Party until 1953 when he joined C.N. Annadurai's DMK party. Due to certain political and personal differences, he was expelled from the DMK in 1972 when he founded the ADMK, which was later renamed AIADMK. He was chief minister of Tamil Nadu from 1977 to 1987.

MGR dominated Tamil cinema for at least thirty years from the 1930s to the 1960s. He was the first actor to take full advantage of cinema's features as a political tool, in particular, its potential for

Singaram is also a fan of the actor. He sticks a picture of Vadiyar with flags drawn on either side behind his cycle rickshaw which earns him some extra money. When he is bored he drinks and spends his time with prostitutes. Chellamuthu silently questions Singaram's morality but secretly envies his success and sexual freedom. The opening paragraphs reflect Chellamuthu's despondency and low self-esteem that as the novel progresses grows into a threatening sense of impotence and failure.

Chellamuthu's grandmother orders him to marry Kamsalai, a woman she raised in their village. We learn the grandmother had promised to marry them the day Kamsalai was born. Chellamuthu initially hesitates; he escapes to Madras in search of a job. But he often thinks of Kamsalai and fondly remembers their quarrels. He notices older cinema actresses pretend to look young and buxom on screen like Kamsalai but somehow fail to approximate her youthful beauty. While Kamsalai lacks the suave refinement of cinema actresses, the actresses lack Kamsalai's youth. He thinks to himself,

... all donkeys, the city donkeys and the village donkeys, are beautiful when they are young. But these city donkeys, wishing to remain young even after they grow old, smear all kinds of things to their faces and bodies! When male donkeys are themselves like that, how can female donkeys be blamed? That's cinema! Smearing is cinema! Isn't it all makeup, all light? Isn't cinema turning off the lights and performing a trick? A trick where old changes to young and young to old... dark to fair, fair to dark... isn't it all just a trick? .. But what is the point of changing someone? Can [she] be touched or felt? One can only keep looking at her, like a villager looking at a candy store. Can hunger be satisfied by just looking? Can hunger never come? The more Chellamuthu saw, the more he felt hungry. Does one feel hungry at the sight of a job, a salary or status? With a job, a salary or status one may never feel hungry. But someone who has none of them

broadcasting a carefully crafted and widely appealing image in an area with no comparable mass media, and the accompanying network of fan clubs. Unlike other industrialized countries, few people in India can afford to watch news on television; even the use of the radio is limited as a medium of information and used more to listen to film songs. Film's accessibility and its wide spread makes it amenable towards promoting a public image. Though there have been many Tamil actors who have made political use of cinema and now even own or patronize their own television channels, MGR remains the most successful in translating a movie image into an effective political persona. In the process, he also transformed his network of fan clubs into a powerful political support system.

In forty years of film acting, MGR developed an image as a dashing romantic hero and the protector of the poor, an image that came to be accepted as a representation of his own personal nature. With his growing political involvement he added many roles and changed film scripts that reflected the populist ideology of the DMK party, frequently playing the oppressed but victorious position as a crucial grass-roots network in the ADMK party and the propaganda value of the social services they performed, which operationalized the star's philanthropic image.

The novella alludes to some incidents that occurred during MGR's career as an actor and his tenure as chief minister of Tamil Nadu. He distributed umbrellas and raincoats to the rickshaw drivers who voted him to power, some of his female fans would drink his leftover juice and he was shot by a co-actor and nearly died. His fans not only prayed but also mutilated themselves to ensure his survival. Until the very end of his life, he projected himself as a youth icon by wearing wigs, tall caps and sunglasses to mask his age.

For a historical and anthropological study of MGR see Dickey, Pandian.

will feel very hungry. Intense hunger, hunger that possesses you; not hunger for food but hunger that comes with watching! That was it. Chellamuthu rushed to Nathapatti, his village, where she waited like food for his hunger. (Jeyankantan, 12-13)

Chellamuthu is not disillusioned by the synthetic beauty of cinema actresses; to the contrary, he is aroused precisely by the seductive artifice of cinema. His knowledge of the actresses' simulation of youth by no means undermines his voyeuristic pleasure; in fact their physical inaccessibility enhances and sustains his insatiable desire for them, a desire that is mutually mediated by his longing for Kamsalai. His desire constantly oscillates between the cinematographic image of the actresses and Kamsalai that complement or fetishize each other in their imperfect desirability. Chellamuthu feels the older cinema actresses can never be as young and desirable as Kamsalai who lacks the former's refinement. Although the narrator suggests Chellamuthu's sense of disillusionment when he marries Kamsalai, "The poor Chellamuthu didn't know then that cinema was just a show; just a trick that happened in the dark." (Jeyakantan, 13), I argue Chellamuthu's seduction by cinema resists interpretation and is ultimately irreducible to any 'truth'.

The novella suggests Chellamuthu's desire for Kamsalai is mediated by his identification with and tacit desire for Vadiyar's seductive image: he introduces her to Vadiyar's movies with the hope of creating sexual intimacy by educating her on the art of lovemaking. When he tries to seduce her she resists and is revolted by his advances. He is baffled by his inability to elicit any sexual interest in her. Chellamuthu realizes Kamsalai is completely besotted by Vadiyar's image. He notices a troubling transformation in her from a naive "village insect" to a "stylish" urbane woman who dresses carefully "wearing bra and laced petticoats" and is amazed and discomfited to see her spend, what he assumes is more than half her salary from her job as a construction worker, on a mirror, kohl, *kungumam* and talcum powder (Jeyakantan, 13).⁹ He is seduced but also discomfited by her growing preoccupation with her ideal beauty; he feels he is not entitled to ask her for an explanation being financially dependent. Demanding an explanation, he realizes, would be "insult[ing]" himself and acknowledging his failure to support his wife (Jeyakantan, 14). He tries to dismiss his insecurity and feigns indifference. When he sees Kamsalai speak with suave confidence to other women from the city he is amazed but nonplussed and hurt when his inquiries upset her. Clearly, Chellamuthu is inexorably seduced by her ideal and newly discovered suave beauty even though she does not desire him. He begins to consider himself unworthy of her beauty and is threatened by her financial independence.

Vadiyar, Chellamuthu and Kamsalai form a love triangle with Vadiyar as the metaphysical object of their inter-mediating and competing desires and identifications. Although Vadiyar is physically absent, his internalized and hence pervasive presence makes him the desired object of a collective seduction that blurs the heterosexual polarity between desire and identification. Chellamuthu's desire for Kamsalai and his identification and tacit desire for Vadiyar are equally threatened by Kamsalai's apparent desire and devotion for Vadiyar. In the novella, we see an instance of Kamsalai's desire for Vadiyar that is impossible to separate from her internalization of the actor. She sees Chellamuthu sleeping in a vest that sports a picture of Vadiyar and a pair of black shorts with inch long red strips stitched on either side that allude to

⁹ Ibid. *Kumkum* or *Kungumam* as it is called in Tamil Nadu, is a red powder made of dried and powdered turmeric and slaked lime that is worn by unmarried and married Hindu women on their foreheads as an auspicious symbol of marriage

the actor's political party. The narrator suggests his fervent devotion to the actor and his sworn allegiance to the Vadiyar fan club, "He was particular never to wear a shirt over his vest lest he was unable to see Vadiyar's face". His feelings for the actor, the narrator emphasizes, could not be trivialized for "he [was] even willing to sacrifice his life for the actor." (Jeyakantan, 16) The sight of Vadiyar's picture on Chellamuthu's vest resembles the motions of his cinematic image, it "expanded as his chest rose and shrivelled as his chest fell" arouses Kamsalai's passion. She looks at the picture and imagines it is "like a dream scene in a movie... Small circles of sunlight shone through small holes in the thatched walls of the hut and danced on Chellamuthu and the floor." (Jeyakantan, 16-17) She is suddenly possessed by a frenzied desire for Vadiyar that seems to bum her entire body. She "slid beside him and g[ave] him vigorous kisses on his face and chest...she kisse[d] him as though she [wa]s possessed and between kisses ask[ed] him, 'Shall I leave for work? I shall see you later, see you.'" (Jeyakantan, 18)

Chellamuthu is awakened by her kisses amazed to see Kamsalai ostensibly reciprocate his desire. When he tries to embrace her, she emerges from a trance, as it were, and violently repels him as she indignantly scolds him and leaves. Clearly, Vadiyar's picture is only a metaphor for his cinematic image that enables Kamsalai's fantasy of seducing and being seduced by the actor.

In another instance Chellamuthu is merely an eroticized extension of the disembodied Vadiyar. He remembers Kamsalai biting his finger in a fit of passion when he tells her he has touched Vadiyar.

[Kamsalai]: 'Have you have really seen Vadiyar?

[Chellamuthu]: Look at what you've asked me! Did I become his fan without seeing him?

[Kamsalai]: Have you gone close and seen him?

[Chellamuthu]: Oh yes, I have even touched him!

[Kamsalai]: Uh huh. In her surprise she choked'... She suddenly tightly hugged Chellamuthu.

[Kamsalai]: 'Didn't you touch him with this hand?

[Chellamuthu]: Yes, with this very hand', said Chellamuthu proudly when she vigorously kissed his hand.

[Kamsalai]: With this very finger isn't it?

[Chellamuthu] I said yes! 'Ah!'

Chellamuthu cried. Kamsalai had held his finger and bitten it with a crunch in a frenzy of desire!" (Jeyakantan, 19)

Chellamuthu's own internalization of Vadiyar initially impedes the possibility of discovering what he assumes is Kamsalai's exclusive desire for the actor. He remembers a large crowd of female fans including Kamsalai pursuing Vadiyar's car when he arrived during the elections. Like every other married man he had assumed his wife was chaste and had naively mistaken her desire for devotion. The sight of the female fans expressing their frenzied passion for Vadiyar and their entreaties to accept their offers of fruit juice so that they may incorporate him by consuming his leftovers conditions Chellamuthu's own unconscious desire for the actor. Chellamuthu silently expresses his admiration, "People say he is one in a thousand- but I think there is no one like him even in a million or ten million." (Jeyakantan, 23) Chellamuthu remembers how his "eyes winced" at the sight of the actor's "fair complexion and brilliance." (Jeyakantan, 23) Chellamuthu's fascination for the actor is not undermined by his knowledge

of the actor's deceptive youth for Vadiyar is an idealized and fantasmatic image that can never be substitutable.

He has a revelation when he is watching a Vadiyar movie that is suddenly interrupted by a tear in the film reel leaving the theater in darkness. It is precisely when the movie is abruptly interrupted that he snaps out of his entranced voyeuristic state and realizes he had naively mistaken her sexual fascination for a fan's 'innocent' devotion. The lights come on and he realizes to his sorrow that

the man he had been searching for so many days had been discovered right in front of his eyes... He realized in a second that her embraces, kisses, and seductions were not for him.'(Jeyakantan, 24)

Vadiyar's purely internalized and idealized status only enhances his authority and presence and any attempt to challenge him is only futile and self-threatening. Chellamuthu struggles to reconcile his devotion with his resentment for the actor. Chellamuthu initially perceives the absent actor as a real threat, as a supreme sexual rival to his wife's attentions who cannot be discredited without simultaneously emasculating himself. His fear lies in the impossibility of redeeming his impotence that will always fail to emulate his internalized standard of Vadiyar's virility. He later remorsefully exonerates Vadiyar and disavows his threatened masculinity by controlling Kamsalai's sexuality.

His memories of his quarrels with rival fans and Vadiyar's personal generosity, reaffirms his faith in Vadiyar. He says to the picture of the actor on the calendar,

Vadiyar! O Vadiyar, forgive me! [But] am I not a man too? I may be a fan of yours but I am also a man! I did not know what I was doing in my anger and fury... What can you do, Vadiyar? Is it only this mule Kamsalai who is like this? The city is full of entranced women who yearn for you—what can you do about that? What can any man do about that? (Jeyakantan, 25)

He decides to destroy any signs of the actor that may remind Kamsalai of the actor. Chellamuthu regrets exposing Kamsalai to Vadiyar's movies, which have only intensified her desire for the actor. He realizes merely destroying anything that would remind Kamsalai of Vadiyar is as futile as "hoping the world would turn dark if the cat's eyes are closed." (Jeyakantan, 25) He thinks of all the posters of MGR on roadsides and street corners and decides to forbid her from working.

Chellamuthu grows indignant when Kamsalai apparently questions his devotion for the actor. She discovers a torn heap of Vadiyar's posters she had carefully made from newspaper cutouts and asks him if he has been bribed by rival fans to destroy them.

What a house you have created! The walls are bare; they would at least look pretty if I stuck these pictures. Which house doesn't have pictures? Why are you so angry with him [Vadiyar]? Is it because he generously gave you an umbrella to protect you from the fiery heat and rain? Is it the insolence that comes with that? Remember, without him there is no government (Jeyakantan, 30).

Chellamuthu self-righteously replies,

Stop! Are you telling *me* about him? Shouldn't I be hit with slippers? You were collecting firewood somewhere in the forests of Nathipatti, I was the one who brought you here and showed you movies. Are you teaching me a lesson now? Just shut up! From now on, this picture shouldn't enter the house! I have nothing against him! It's the ground you stand on that's unstable. (Jeyakantan, 34)

Kamsalai repeatedly fails to understand the significance of his predicament. Chellamuthu swears his devotion for Vadiyar and his loyalty to the fan club but not at the cost of apparently sacrificing Kamsalai to Vadiyar.

Shut up! Who needs their leftover money? Let them find someone else for that, even now I'm telling you-I shall even give up my life for Vadiyar if necessary. But that does not mean I shall give them my wife! (Jeyakantan, 35)

The sight of the sullen Chellamuthu reminds Kamsalai of their violent fights whenever he returned home drunk, and his attempts to have sex with her. Her repulsion is met with anger and unsolicited assertions of his financial independence that betrays his sexual insecurity, "What's your problem? Am I drinking with your father's money? I shall break your bones. I will drink; what's your problem? Who are you to ask me?" (Jeyakantan, 37) Chellamuthu's believes his financial independence naturally justifies his demand to be desired. Even his desperate attempts to win her assurances of his masculinity fail. The narrator suggests Kamsalai's deception for she fantasizes about Vadiyar even as she finally relents to his violent attempts to have sex with her.

When he asks her to swear she had never thought of Vadiyar whenever they had sex she is shocked to hear him speak disrespectfully of Vadiyar. She indignantly asserts her right to think of him and Chellamuthu threatens to throw her out of the house for being an unworthy wife. Kamsalai replies,

We are wives because there is no way of leaving. Will everything be fine if I left? Everything is lost for him [Chellamuthu] if I think of him [Vadiyar]! Just keep shut! It's our fate that we eat stale rice. Does that mean I can't think of *biriyani* (Jeyakantan, 38)

Kamsalai contradictory response is significant. She knows she is trapped in an unhappy marriage and her fascination with Vadiyar's cinematic image is merely a fantasy that holds no promise of liberation. She is clearly not deluded by her fascination with Vadiyar which is not grounded in illusion but in her secret fantasy to be seduced by him. Her fascination resists the very rational distinction between reality and illusion or any moral distinctions of female sexuality that were essential to Jeyakantan's rhetorical tirade against cinema in the preface. Kamsalai fiercely defends her right to fantasize; she knows she cannot and does not want to substitute her fascination with Vadiyar's cinematic image for an actual relationship.

Chellamuthu tells her he would not have resented her had she eloped with someone else. He is helplessly jealous of Vadiyar but feels Vadiyar has betrayed him by seducing Kamsalai. He tries to convince her of his own virility by disillusioning her fantasies of the actor without realizing that his faith in and fascination with the actor is no more an illusion than her own. He emasculates Vadiyar and discredits his identification with the actor's masculinity to recuperate his own virility when he tells her,

...you have only seen him in the shade...he is a girl. When you saw him did you think he was brilliant? It's all makeup, he's an old man! (Jeyakantan, 40)

When Kamsalai fiercely defends Vadiyar against his derision, Chellamuthu furiously assaults her. He cries loudly slapping his chest,

He is a girl! I am a hero! He is a hero only in the movies! I am really a hero! Did you think I would spare you? You shall not work from tomorrow... I shall have two more mistresses at home and take care of all of you. (Jeyakantan, 42)

Although he initially questions his morality, Chellamuthu secretly admires and envies Singaram's financial success and sexual freedom. Here, he tries to emulate Singaram when he similarly identifies virility with financial independence and sexual promiscuity. He proceeds to discard Kamsalai's cosmetics unwilling to be seduced and deceived by her made up beauty.

Forbidden from working, Kamsalai spends most of her time at home. She occasionally goes to the water pump at the street corner to draw water. She does not speak to anyone and "lowers her head muttering to herself and thinking of her fate" while everyone stares at her swollen face and her eyes reddened with crying." (Jeyakantan, 60) She stands at the water pump and "sighs with anguish looking at Vadiyar's picture at the tea shop and the film poster stuck on the wall" (Jeyakantan, 64). When she hears the radio at the tea shop playing songs from Vadiyar's movies she feels "as though honey washed her body." (Jeyakantan, 64) Kamsalai, imagining she is having a conversation with Chellamuthu says,

You kept me all locked up? You tore all the pictures...you asked me not to go the cinema...you asked me never to talk about him [Vadiyar]... alright...now-what can you do about this you fool? (Jeyakantan, 65)

She is happy and relieved Chellamuthu has forbidden her to work, she spends all her time idly singing songs from Vadiyar's movies. She

closes her eyes, she can hear Vadiyar's voice. His form would appear before her eyes like he does in the movies. He would lift his arm as he came singing...then she would loudly sing only that part of the song that was sung by the woman paired up with him... those listening would wonder why she sang only half the song. Isn't the mischief in her mind after all! Singing all day long is good too. If she worked would she have time for this? Kamsalai likes singing all day it was like watching movies all day long. Now it seems even if she was asked to work she wouldn't. (Jeyakantan, 68)

She steps out to bathe at the water pump with the other women from the locality. She is excited when she discovers a poster advertising Vadiyar's new film, "One In A Million". The poster arouses her, she sees him "holding a woman like a bow with her back bending over his knee as he bends over before her face—only his eyes specially look at me. Oh! Ooh!" (Jeyakantan, 70) She imagines Vadiyar is seducing her when the poster seems to be asking her, "Shall I bend you over like this and kiss you?" (Jeyakantan, 70) She waits for the evening and the other women to leave and once she is alone looks around to ensure no one is looking at her and quickly kisses the poster.

Determined to watch the new film, she asks Chellamuthu for his permission who refuses. Meanwhile, Chellamuthu undergoes a transformation; he is no longer an idle drunkard who sleeps most of the time but a self-reliant and industrious man who renounces alcohol and denies his desire for Kamsalai to recuperate his virility. When Kamsalai tries to seduce him to enact her fantasy of being seduced by Vadiyar, he indignantly repels her sexual advances. His proud sexual self-denial is really his last desperate attempt to seduce Kamsalai by proving he is more than just sexually interested in her.

Singaram takes sexual advantage of their mutual estrangement. When he hears them fighting as usual he tries to console Kamsalai. He exploits Kamsalai's fascination with Vadiyar by impersonating his seductive on-screen appearance, "he smiled, stylishly [holding] the ends of a red and black colored scarf he [wore] around his neck." (Jeyakantan, 73) Kamsalai implicitly equates him with Vadiyar and is convinced of winning his sympathy. She sobbingly reenacts her quarrel with Chellamuthu and self-righteously protests his unreasonableness.

Do I interfere with your life? Do I disobey you? Fighting with me and dragging me and beating me up, what bullying! Aren't you ashamed! Are you a man? You asked me not to work, fine! But you threw away my talcum powder, my *kungumam* and my kohl so that I don't wear a bun or flowers in my hair or even & *pottu*...I can't even watch a movie...! worked hard to earn some little money... did I ever ask you for a *nayapaisa*! In fact you would come and ask me for money to buy tea or a *bidi*.. .Didn't you eat my food then? You never worked hard then, you just ate and slept. I never made you feel guilty because I supported you. I'm only telling you because it never struck you. But now when I ask you for a rupee you kick me... A rupee is nothing.. .Even now I can buy tickets for four women and take them to the cinema- have I never gone there? I still have the courage to do that. Why are you quiet? I only respected you because you're my husband. I am obeying you only because I respect your wish... shouldn't you feel the same? Shouldn't you voluntarily say, 'Take this money. Your favorite movie has come, go and watch it'? What's the point of you being a husband and me a wife. Anyway I don't want your money. I can take any number of women with me and buy them tickets... won't even one of them accompany me? Alright. You don't have to give me any money. I told you I can go by myself. What's wrong in that? What do you say? [To Singaram] You support a family with two mistresses. If they asked you whether they could go alone to the cinema what would you say? A husband says [Chellamuthu] 'you might as well leave'... is that what you say? *Aiyo*! So what if I leave? Am I going to stand in the street? Was I born for you to take care of me? What talk! (Jeyakantan, 75)

She resents him for frustrating the very source of her seductive fantasies. She claims it is her respect for Chellamuthu that prevents her from disobeying him. By protesting against Chellamuthu's injustice in his absence, Kamsalai seems to recognize the impossibility of escaping her unhappy marriage by fantasizing Vadiyar. She can only negotiate and compromise her relationship with Chellamuthu to simultaneously further her fantasy of seduction and prevent a potential separation that would result in social stigma.

Singaram tries to win her sympathy and desire by seducing her. He apparently empathizes with her plight and tries to evoke her sympathy by describing his unfortunate and unhappy condition as a childless man. Although he has two mistresses they are both sterile. He complains about their indifference and ingratitude. He is sad that neither of them is interested in accompanying him to the cinema theater.

Singaram encourages Kamsalai to watch the night show of the new Vadiyar movie at a distant theater before Chellamuthu returns to make sure he does not discover her. Kamsalai is initially reluctant but when Singaram agrees to accompany her she grows excited and they secretly plan to meet at a nearby Kali temple on their way to the theater. As he is leaving, Kamsalai admiringly compares him to Chellamuthu and for the first time openly expresses her contempt for the latter:

He [Singaram] is like a king, having smartly saved money to buy his own cycle rickshaw. Doesn't this one [Chellamuthu] ride his cycle rickshaw as though he were his assistant? Shouldn't he have any shame? Where's his pride when it comes to this? Is strictly forbidding a woman not to go anywhere being a man? Will he in any way ever have Singaram's qualities? Singaram asked me to 'watch the movie without letting him know' only because he knows him [Chellamuthu]. What's wrong in that? If he [Chellamuthu] doesn't value my request, this is the only way. (Jeyakantan, 88)

Singaram assumes Kamsalai is sexually accessible when she suggests she does not share intimacy with Chellamuthu. He suggestively winks at her says he is surprised to know they never speak to each other at night. Kamsalai is immediately taken aback and ashamed by what she interprets is an intrusive assumption of intimacy that unfortunately confirms the reality of her marriage, "look at what a man asks a woman." (Jeyakantan, 89) Singaram clearly desires Kamsalai and wants to seduce her with the hope of winning her reassurances of his masculinity, something he does not get from his mistresses. She is unable to suppress her vulnerability and confides in Singaram although she does not entirely trust him. She pities herself and sobbingly realizes Chellamuthu's denial of his own desire for her could never make her forget Vadiyar. Her fantasies about Vadiyar are redemptive; they enable her to temporarily forget her poor, lonely and wretched existence.

Kamsalai understood what he was asking for- she understood very well what he wanted! Even after so much had happened, her heart wouldn't permit 'that'. Playfully touching and hugging and even kissing is alright. But isn't it fair to stop with that? When she thought of how he held and dragged her as though he were her husband, something within stop[ped] her saying, 'I shouldn't'... She only thought of Vadiyar but one *cannot* say she would leave even if Vadiyar himself held her by her hand and dragged her away.. *It is only because he is beyond her reach that her heart nears him and gets trapped*" (Jeyakantan, 90)

The shopkeeper of a teashop familiarly greets Singaram and to Kamsalai's shame spots her and smiles approvingly at Singaram assuming she is a prostitute. Singaram takes her to a dark and deserted brothel behind the teashop. She is thoroughly disgusted when she discovers she is in a brothel. Singaram introduces Kamsalai to the madam Manomani, a flamboyant and imposing middle-aged woman. Kamsalai instantly develops a certain affinity for Manomani and momentarily forgets her anguish. Kamsalai is happily reassured to see pictures of Vadiyar stuck all over the walls of the brothel. When Manomani sees her looking at the pictures she says,

I am the one who cut out these pictures and stuck them on the walls of these rooms. Are you wondering why I took the trouble? Have you seen the faces of the men who come here? They are *all Manmatas* (Cupids)! It's my fate! Those poor

girls! Why not let them at least see a handsome man in the movies- Here Singaram, don't get angry, I'm not talking about you... (Jeyakantan, 92)

Manomani sarcastically suggests that her clients are so handsome that the prostitutes do not have a choice but to 'satisfy' their voyeuristic pleasures by looking at pictures of the actor. With their employment at stake, the prostitutes cannot exercise sexual discretion but only simulate their seductive fantasies when they are with their clients.

Kamsalai realizes Singaram is a familiar and frequent visitor to the brothel. She anxiously begs Singaram to take her home. When Singaram refuses, Manomani reassuringly convinces her of Singaram's concern and promises she will not be forced to reciprocate his desire. She offers to introduce her to any of her favorite film stars. Kamsalai is amazed and suddenly wonders if Manomani is an actress too. She eagerly wishes to watch Vadiyar perform and Manomani promises to take her to the shooting of a Vadiyar film. She offers Kamsalai alcohol who becomes so drunk she does not notice Manomani leaving her alone with Singaram. When Kamsalai wakes up later she realizes Singaram has raped her. She grows terrified and ashamed of seeing Chellamuthu again convinced her sexual disgrace has ruined their marriage. She sobbingly confides in Manomani and begs her to let her stay. She decides to return to her job as a construction worker and pay Manomani her salary.

Kamsalai's disappearance creates a crisis that compels Chellamuthu to acknowledge his unprecedented concern and remorse, "His heart thumped. They may have fought, but Chellamuthu had never spent a night without her in the hut. From the time they got married, Kamsalai had never lived away from him. There had been days when they never spoke to each other, when they didn't look at each other's feces. But they had always lived together in the same hut. They never even lived in neighboring huts." (Jeyakantan, 93)

He is determined to avenge his betrayal by apparently tolerating her fascination for Vadiyar and winning her love. Deception, for Chellamuthu, becomes a way of redeeming himself through artifice or a simulation of legitimacy that vindicates him by implicitly displacing blame.

He was somehow confident and happy she may have come home by now. He thought he shouldn't fight with her even if she went to the cinema. He must tell her, 'Here, from now on tell me where and with whom you're going.' Otherwise, if she talks about any film or Vadiyar, I should just keep quiet and listen with one ear and let it out with the other. It has only become cheap to argue and fight about this. Then she will only become uncontrollable. On the days I earn well I should give her money and say, 'Here mule! Go and watch a movie'. And then... the talcum powder, the kohl that I threw away *in* anger... I should buy them all tomorrow itself... I shouldn't interfere with her life and she shouldn't interfere with mine. Didn't she say 'stale rice'...I should keep quiet...I should give her everything..., I should do everything correctly for her without missing anything. Only then am I great!...and then her heart itself will change... didn't she call me 'stale rice'. She herself should say, 'Milk pudding, you're milk pudding'. That's how her heart should change...yes... it should change. Should make it change... Ah! If it changes it changes, if it doesn't let it not! As a self-respecting husband, I should do what needs to be done...She is a naive village girl. I will return tomorrow once I know she has reached safely. Kamsalai is an innocent child. (Jeyakantan, 95)

Feigning innocence, Singaram tells him he saw Kamsalai at a brothel. Chellamuthu is shocked and humiliated and goes to the brothel in search of her. He is morally outraged when he sees

Manomani sitting at the door chewing betel leaves with her legs spread out. He feels like "biting her and spitting her out." (Jeyakantan, 95) But then he realizes that, "there is no point in being angry with her when [his] wife has lost her virginity to the city. He should speak well and take Kamsalai with him without making her angry... it's all [his] fate." (Jeyakantan, 96) He is ashamed of confessing, "he has come to take his wife who has come here to become a prostitute." (Jeyakantan, 96) Manomani is astonished to see him and says,

What kind of a man are you? Aren't you crying? That girl told me she went to the bioscope that day without telling you... she's been here for a week scared that you would beat her up... And listening to what she said I thought, 'her husband seems to be a rough man'. . Just as I was thinking he would come with a moustache.. .you come crying like a newborn child... Oh, sit son, sit... here, I'll call her... if she comes, take her and go... (Jeyakantan, 97)

Manomani anticipates a virile and aggressive man with a moustache from Kamsalai's intimidating description of Chellamuthu but is astonished to see him cry like a "newborn child"(Jeyakantan, 97). Chellamuthu earlier laments thinking of Kamsalai's childlike naiveté but that is only a projection of his own pitiable state of impotent helplessness as he thinks of Kamsalai's disgrace. He is infantilized and emasculated by her lost virginity that for him precludes any possibility of desire.

Despite Manomani's repeated entreaties, Kamsalai refuses to see Chellamuthu. Chellamuthu cries,

Eh Kamsalai! Who are you being stubborn with? If I ask you nicely, you're being obstinate. Did I marry you and bring you to the city so that you could go above the village (lose your virginity)? Think about it, did my grandmother struggle to raise you so that you could destroy yourself like this? What have I done that's so wrong? Why do I still call you after all this? Think a little about it...it's the affection I have always had for you. I'm standing here despite my shame... You don't know the world, you're a child. I hit you and scolded you by mistake, forget all that and come with me. I'm telling you for your own good...you don't have to come and live with me... come and live in my hut for the sake of the *tali* you wear around your neck. I call you as a brother...you called me 'stale rice' and brushed me away but now you're eating leftover food... work as you did before... watch movies... do anything you like but don't stay here... (Jeyakantan, 97)

Chellamuthu struggles to appease and convince her of his affection, he even asks her to be grateful to him for enduring the shame of her disgrace. He grudgingly forgives her by infantilizing her. He reminds her of her ritual obligation towards their marriage and tries to make her realize her pitiable condition. Then he tries to convince her of the genuineness of his concern by seductively desexualizing their sexual-marital relationship by conflating it with kinship; he "calls her as a brother" (Jeyakantan, 94). He tempts her by promising to let her work and watch movies.

When Kamsalai finally decides to talk to him she tells him they are no longer married now that she has been raped. She tries to symbolically end their marriage by removing her *tali* when Manomani anxiously chastises her for renouncing Chellamuthu when he is alive. Manomani realizes from her own marriage that marriage is a guard against the mistaken desires of other men while enabling her to pursue her own sexual fantasies. The narrator parodies her remonstrations:

Manomani started preaching, 'What is this stupid woman! What are you doing? Good or bad, he who tied the *tali* around your neck stands before you like a mountain. Removing your tali indeed... *that* should never happen before my eyes... this [tali] should stay on your neck as long as he who robbed you of your virginity is alive; that's why, I have been wearing this tali for so long... he who disappeared before my eyes, did I see him dead or did I see him alive?' (Jeyakantan, 95)

Manomani later takes Kamsalai to watch the filming of the movie at a film studio. When they arrive there are a group of stuntmen waiting at the gate. When Kamsalai learns they impersonate Vadiyar in action sequences, she is disappointed. She is amazed to see the vast natural settings of the studio but is disappointed when she sees the wooden facades, the bamboo furniture and the bare walls of the studio. Manomani laughingly tells her,

That is cinema ... even the stories of men are like this. A man who doesn't have hair wears a wig- he who doesn't have teeth has false teeth, an old man is dressed up like a youth, women's dresses are stuffed with cotton...it's all makeup girl, all makeup! (Jeyakantan, 95)

One of the stuntmen instantly agrees and secretly whispers,

Even Vadiyar is just like that, his head is completely bald! That's why he is always wearing a wig. Do you know why no one is allowed to watch the shooting? When a stunt scene is being shot, the wig comes off and so it has to be repeatedly stuck to the head. It'll be disgraceful if some outsiders came to watch, that's why." (Jeyakantan, 96)

When one of the crew members announces the arrival of one of the actors of the film, Kamsalai nervously anticipates Vadiyar's appearance but is disappointed and disgusted to see another actor she immediately recognizes as the villain in many of his movies. She is anxious and disappointed she may have to watch the filming of a duel rather than a romantic scene. Kamsalai nearly swoons when she finally sees Vadiyar who ignores her familiar with other women fans like her. Vadiyar has an argument with the other actor who accuses him of ruining families and swindling those who worked in the film industry. Members of the film crew rush to appease the two actors. They are taken to the dressing room where there is a loud altercation that turns into a scuffle and ends with the actor stabbing Vadiyar. Kamsalai is initially confused but when she sees a bloody Vadiyar stagger out of the room with his wig askew, she is disillusioned and realizes to her horror that it was not a scene from the movie.

Vadiyar is rushed to the hospital while the others try to capture the other actor who manages to escape. Kamsalai rushes to the hospital with the crew where someone announces Vadiyar's death. Kamsalai is so shocked that she begins mourning for him. She wanders the roads of the city in a stupor loudly singing songs from his movies. Chellamuthu discovers her lying on the road next to Kannaki's statue singing Vadiyar's film songs to herself, her naked body wrapped in his posters. Kamsalai is alarmed to see him and begins to run away. Chellamuthu chases her on his cycle rickshaw and when he finally catches up he sees her tearfully gazing at a poster of Vadiyar. He realizes she thinks Vadiyar is dead and convinces her of his survival by showing her a poster of his new movie. Kamsalai incredulously asks someone else on the road who confirms Vadiyar's survival. He promises to let her watch movies as he takes her home. They

ride home singing songs from Vadiyar's movies. The novella ends as Kamsalai points to Kannaki's statue and ironically asks the weeping Chellamuthu, "Isn't that a statue of me? Wasn't this statue made for me?" (Jeyakantan, 104)¹⁰ When Kamsalai suddenly imagines Kannaki's statue is a representation of her, she betrays a certain glamorous and exemplary perception of herself as the chaste wife who she would like to believe is publicly acclaimed.

While Jeyakantan would conclude Kamsalai is fully delusional, I would argue that her belief is neither illusory nor psychological but only a function of her secret fantasy of seduction that is enabled by her undying faith in Vadiyar which determines her perceptions of herself and becomes a way of being. Her fascination for and faith in Vadiyar's cinematic image, can never be disillusioned because it not an illusory belief for it is a simulacrum resists the very rational distinction between reality and illusion and ideological determinations of female sexuality.

Conclusion

The above narratives of uncertain and explicit female desire complicate the very notion of consent where consent is, initially at least, neither a (verbal) affirmation nor a refutation of desire. The texts foreground the seductive powers of the raped woman as a particular figure of female abjection that dissolves the very distinction between rape and consent. By not reducing heterosexuality to sexual violence or marriage and by playing with the psychological ambiguity of the female protagonist's sexual consent—an ambiguity that is largely evoked through the novel's intra and inter-textual memory of desire—Jeyakantan is able to represent the possibilities of female desire and pleasure without virginity and marriage by parodying contradictory norms of female sexuality. I also gesture at the liberating possibilities of abjection that when recognized or embraced enable new, sacred forms of intimacy between abject men and women through worldly renunciation and redemptive death that transcends abjection. The liberatory potential of abjection clearly has beneficial effects in remaking the future world for the younger generation in the last novel and offers an alternative way of addressing sexual abjection through the preemption of sexual or romantic relationships and sublimating desire towards altruistic ends.

¹⁰ Jeyakantan 1972, p. 104 Kannaki is a character from the fifth century A.D Tamil Jain epic poem *Silappadikaram* (The Tale of the Anklet). She is eulogized and deified especially in Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Sri Lanka as the epitome of chastity and praised for her steadfast devotion to her husband Kovalan despite his adultery. She is also praised for her bravery for demanding justice from the king who murders her innocent husband. In her grief she tears one of her breasts and flings it at the city of Madurai, setting it on fire.

Chapter 2

The Sexual-Moral Outcaste: On the Intersections of Disease, Disorder and Sexuality in the Works of Karichan Kunju and M.V. Venkatram

Jeyakantan's fiction equated desire with the oppressive ties of patriarchy and presented two (inter-generational) ways of renouncing desire and sexual abjection—one was asceticism and a redemptive form of death that seemingly promised freedom and the other an asexual companionship between outcastes that represented the idealized possibilities of sublimating desire towards social reformation. I suggested that this redemptive form of death was an ironic resolution of sexual abjection that apparently granted freedom even as it reinstated female sexual norms. In line with my previous chapter, this chapter explores the conflicted representation of disease and disorder as a religious experience of sexual expiation that offers potential freedom from abjection and as an alternative modality of sexual agency. I look at the feminized figure of the male outcaste in fictional texts by two contemporary writers—Karichan Kunju and M.V. Venkatram—whose engagement with the diseased and disordered body on the one hand, is a corporeal metaphor for the alienation constitutive of sexual identity and on the other, enables certain alternative sexual possibilities. I argue that these texts try to resolve the untenable contradiction between the sexually empowering potential of disease and disorder and their moral interpretation as punitive and expiatory signs of sexual excess by resorting to piety and asceticism.

Karichan Kunju's *Pasittamanidam* (1977) (*Hungry Humanity*)

I begin with a discussion of Karichan Kunju's only novel *Pasittamanidam* (*Hungry Humanity*) (1977). *Hungry Humanity* extends the textual equation between femininity and abjection—the male protagonist is perceivably feminized by his experience of disease and disfigurement. But his diseased body also enables new sexual possibilities precisely by foreclosing others that are contingent on the able/healthy body. This is not to preclude the stigma and humiliation of disease but consider the sexually empowering implications of the diseased body whose social insignificance and anonymity affords certain exclusive sexual liberties. What characterizes the corporeal shift from health to disease or from ability to disability is a phenomenological shift from primarily one form of sexual perception to another—from touch to sight. While the idealized able body of the past primarily enjoys a tactile form of sensual pleasure, the diseased body resorts to voyeurism. The social anonymity of the diseased body enables the erotic gaze to function as an exclusive form of sexual consumption even in the most public spaces.

To summarize the basic plot of the novel, Ganeshan returns to the holy town of Kumbakonam where he grew up after a forty year absence. We discover he has returned after leading a life of sexual debauchery and exploitation in search of medical treatment for leprosy. He is convinced his disease is an expiatory sign of his homosexual past that he feels he has to suffer to achieve redemption and self-transcendence. But his moral perception of his diseased condition is contradicted by his irrepressible sexual desires that are expressed through erotic memories and dreams. He is on the verge of recovering at a charitable hospital

run by Christian missionaries when to his dismay his 'repressed' sexual desires for the white nurses at the hospital 'return' with a vengeance. Threatened by the possible frustration of his apparent desire for self-transcendence, he escapes the hospital to tour the province as an itinerant beggar. On one of his nomadic journeys, he accidentally encounters Kitta a childhood friend and his wife Ammu whose sister had a childhood affair with Ganeshan. Although they do not recognize Ganeshan he does, which triggers memories of Ammu's and her sister's youthful beauty and his healthy body. The novel traces Ganeshan's gradual descent from an idealized childhood to homosexual indulgence and exploitation to disease, which in the end is only redeemed by his self-conscious acts of compassion and worldly renunciation.

The novel presents Kitta, another male outcaste who functions as a foil to Ganeshan. The young Kitta escapes the home town that humiliated him for his licentiousness and worthlessness, determined to earn his own living with the help of a network of friends and relatives. But even after he becomes a successful businessman, his sexual affairs create a domestic crisis that upsets his authority and power over his family and employees. He loses his family's esteem and his son tries to overthrow him. He is reformed by his final encounter with Ganeshan who encourages him to renounce the world to attain spiritual liberation.

Although he is raised by a childless Brahmin couple, Ganeshan is 'adopted' by his entire village that loves and celebrates his beauty and intelligence. He is the beloved orphaned child who belongs to everyone precisely because he exclusively belongs to no one. This is literally suggested by Ganeshan's liberty to inhabit all the households in the Brahmin locality and become a welcome part of several surrogate families. The entire Brahmin community in the village organizes and celebrates Ganeshan's sacred thread ceremony that is required by the religious boarding school at Mannarkudi, a neighboring town where he is spotted by the wealthy and influential *mirasdar* (tax or revenue collector) Singaram Rauthu. There is a clear disjuncture between the anonymous narrator's idealization of Ganeshan's prelapsarian youth and his later seduction and incarceration by Rauthu. The brief happiness and security of his childhood is interrupted when Rauthu seduces him with the comforts of a luxurious life in exchange for his sexual companionship.

When I see beautiful boys I'm enchanted and feel like taking them home to live with me. Then one day I told my mother you look just like my [dead orphaned] nephew. Ever since then she has been insisting that I bring you home... (Kunju, 208)

Singaram decides to 'adopt' Ganeshan and bequeath him the property he inherits from his brother-in-law.

Ganeshan's 'homosexual' body is invoked as an absence; as a concealed, incarcerated image. Rauthu's political influence and financial power enable him to pursue his homosexual relationships with impunity. He firmly establishes his possession of Ganeshan and renders futile his foster father's attempts to rescue him. We see Ganeshan being subject to Singaram's growing scrutiny and surveillance. With his education discontinued Ganeshan's mobility is restricted to Rauthu's bedroom. Ganeshan discovers Rauthu has imprisoned other boys like him when he accidentally discovers Rauthu's "wife and children" trapped in another part of the house whose "faces have been distorted by disease" and do not share any resemblance to each other or Rauthu (Kunju, 214). On his occasional trips with Ganeshan, Singaram is particular to travel by night in separate train cabins that have been reserved for

them. On their train journeys, they “share mutual pleasures” that are greater than the times they spend alone in Rauthu’s bedroom (Kunju, 214). Rauthu ensures Ganeshan is concealed from the outside world on their travels, “On all their travels, Ganeshan was hidden from the eyes of others like veiled women” that explains Ganeshan’s later ignorance of the world he inhabits (Kunju, 215).

If the spatial and sexual regulation of Ganeshan’s able body through its incarceration and concealment enables the possibility of invoking and sustaining homosexuality, such a possibility is also averted precisely through sexual regulation. Rauthu fashions Ganeshan in his own virile body image—he encourages him to consume meat and exercise his body, introduces him to alcohol, and adorns his body with chunky golden jewelry to suggest Ganeshan’s virile power and formidable authority. Ganeshan is initially a feminized object of desire coveted by Rauthu’s close friends but the growing masculinization of his body that gradually loses all signs of effeminacy (which is equated to his boyish youth and Brahmin piety) enables Ganeshan to acknowledge his irrepressible heterosexuality. Thus the possibility of establishing a homosexual identity is averted through a narrative equation of gender with sexuality or masculinity with heterosexuality.

Ganeshan’s homosexual reputation supposedly marks his sexual accessibility to other men. He is relentlessly pursued by Rauthu’s subordinates and his attempts to escape are undermined by his sexual vulnerability. He has no choice but to compromise his bodily integrity to potentially attain freedom. He later confronts Rauthu and desperately demands his freedom. When he confesses being tormented by his desire for women, Rauthu feels sorry for ruining his life and offers to get him married, give him a job and buy him a house.

In his 1923 work *The Ego and The Id*, Sigmund Freud elaborates the centrality of melancholia in the constitution of the ego and consequently to gender and sexual orientation. The ego, he argues in the process of mourning for the loss of a loved person, is said to incorporate or internalize an idealized image of the person to sustain and preserve his/her memory through magical acts of imitation. Through a specific act of narcissistic identification, the lost other becomes a part of the ego. Freud extends this recuperative process of identification to highlight the way it crucially constitutes the formation of the ego and its “object choice”. Freud argues that the internalizing strategy of melancholia is responsible for the “character” of the ego that is nothing but a “precipitate of abandoned object-choices and [their] history” (Freud, 25). This process of internalization becomes pertinent to gender formation when we think of how the incest taboo, among its other functions, initiates a loss of the loved object for the ego that internalizes this loss through the internalization of the tabooed object of desire. In the case of a prohibited heterosexual union it is only the object choice that has to be renounced whereas in the taboo of homosexual incest it is the object choice as well as the desire itself (the sexual aim and the object) that has to be renounced and thus it is the case of homosexual incest that becomes subject to the internalizing strategies of melancholia. The “young boy identifies himself with the father.” (Freud, 45)

Freud introduces the Oedipal complex to explain why the boy must repudiate the mother and adopt an ambivalent attitude towards the father because of his inherent bisexuality and not because of an identification that is a consequence of sexual rivalry. Freud seems to suggest that the boy chooses not only between two object choices but between two sexual dispositions, masculine and feminine. The father’s threat of castration forces the boy to choose a masculine heterosexual disposition but it is not so much the fear of castration by the father but the fear of castration itself or the fear of feminization that in heterosexual

cultures is associated with homosexuality. In effect then it is not the heterosexual desire for the mother but the fear of homosexuality that must be subordinated to culturally sanctioned heterosexuality.

Although Freud earlier says that the boy's identification with his father takes place without the renunciation of any homosexual desire for the father, he later argues that everyone possesses a primary bisexuality that complicates gender formation and sexuality. Thus although the boy need not renounce his homosexual desire for his father Freud still implicitly premises his psychosexual narrative of sexual development on a normative notion of heterosexuality. But there are limits to the hegemonic and ultimately heterosexist and binary framework of Freud's and even Lacan's theories of sexuality and gender identifications. The unconscious is a source of subversion that undermines the rigid and universal determinism of the law which makes identity a fixed and fantasmatic affair without considering multiple and coexisting possibilities that conflict and converge.

The inscription of Rauthu's virility on Ganeshan's body is a clear exorcism of his 'effeminate' Brahmin past. His freedom from caste is further suggested through his marriage to Sundari a poor orphaned ex-classmate he accidentally encounters as he is trying to escape the police's attempts to quell anti-colonial riots that unsettle the town. Although Sundari is only half Brahmin she insists on observing Brahminical rituals that regulate the cooking and consumption of food. She appoints a Brahmin cook despite Ganeshan's disapproval and insists Ganeshan wear his sacred thread to gratify her sexual fantasy. Their subsequent relationship and brief marriage ends when Sundari dies of childbirth following several miscarriages. Ganeshan has an affair with the woman doctor who operates on Sundari shortly after the latter's death. He soon moves in with her only to discover he has been incarcerated again. The doctor forbids from stepping out of the house lest he is murdered by her jealous politician lovers. But he is soon abandoned by the doctor who discovers he has leprosy. From the abject sight of his disfigured appearance, the doctor anxiously assumes his condition is infectious. She lends him some money out of gratitude for their past love and sends him to Tanjavur.

Ganeshan's able body is, as we have seen so far, subject to the alternating rhythms of sexual regulation and control and relative freedom. The body that once enjoyed the social recognition and mobility of youth is deracinated and incarcerated only to become a forbidden bearer of homosexual desire. But his homosexuality is later countered by his gradual masculinization that however does not preempt his further incarceration. He still has to compromise his body to male and female desires in exchange for his safety and survival. Even the possibility of (sexual) freedom is undermined by the onset of disease that renders Ganeshan's body uninhabitable and subject to humiliation and expulsion. Disease, I suggest, constitutes the disjuncture both within as well as between the body and the psyche. There is a clear discontinuity between material and psychic (self) representations of the body; between the incoherent image of the diseased body and its healthy, able past that is invoked by (erotic) dreams, memories and longings. The opening chapters of the novel suggest the discordance between two body-images—one is that of a body no longer spatially incarcerated but corporeally imprisoned by disease and the other a body that loses its mobility and freedom to spatial incarceration. Ganeshan's bodily incoherence is foregrounded by his diseased body that continues to bear nostalgic memories and images of its healthy, mobile past. He recognizes the diseased transformation of his body in the mirror only because he still has "the same mind" that recalls and idealizes his once coherent body (Kunju, 23). Although Ganeshan interprets his experience of disease as a form of sexual redemption, such an

interpretation is belied by his sexual memories and dreams of his once healthy body and his erotic longings.

The narrator's celebration of Ganeshan's beauty and intelligence that was often focalized through other characters is in stark contrast to Ganeshan's memories of his lonely and neglected childhood. At the familiar sight of his home town Kumbakonam, he remembers the brief happiness of being the student of a kind teacher and pastor of a Christian missionary run school before losing both his parents to disease and deprivation. The sight of the holy temple tank and the free food shelter where he was raised by a family of women after his parents' deaths remind him of his neglected childhood. He remembers his life at the shelter that depended on running errands and performing various menial chores. Unlike the women's children, his orphaned status deprives him of an education and most of his childhood is spent in serving food to the poor who visit the shelter. He remembers one of the people who frequent the shelter, a poor man called Rayar—a friend of his father's—who often gave him money out of sympathy for his poor, orphaned state. Ganeshan remembers longing for Rayar's visits "not merely for the money but for his touch, his embraces, his stories about his father..." (Kunju, 11) He fondly remembers Rayar constantly expressing his anxious concern for being overworked and exploited by the women running the shelter. Ganeshan is filled with gratitude when he thinks of Rayar's concern for his future that put him in touch with a teacher from a village near Kumbakonam. We sense the narrator's sympathy for Ganeshan through Rayar who expresses his gratitude to Ganeshan's "unfortunate but blessed parents" and blesses him admiring his precocious beauty that apparently suggests his bright future (Kunju, 12).

If self-affirmation is possible only through a relational act of recognition between self and other, the relative lack of social acknowledgment is continuous with Ganeshan's self-estrangement, which is now further embodied by disease. I suggest his diseased body is a corporeal metaphor for his orphaned state that is not restricted to the fact that he lacks parents and family but includes an existential state of abjection. Ganeshan silently admits leprosy has left him feeling "doubly orphaned" and self-alienated (Kunju, 20). He associates the onset of leprosy with the loss of almost all his inherited wealth and the comforts of domesticity. He realizes his life is nothing but a shift from one form of incarceration and depersonalization to another—from his healthy, extravagant but imprisoned past to the misery and privation of disease that deprives him of personhood. He interprets his revolting and self-abnegating experience of disease as a sign of his "lost faith" in "pilgrimages, rituals of salvation, corrupt priests and fake holy men and even [exploitative and discriminatory] doctors" to cure him of leprosy (Kunju, 22). He wonders if his sickness or "his new incarnation" is a "hellish sorrow and pain" because of "his sins that were a part of his experience of heavenly bliss and pleasure" (Kunju, 23). He resigns himself to his apparently incurable disease by rationalizing his shame and suffering as necessary preconditions for self-transcendence. He is apparently indifferent to the possibility of succeeding or failing in his quest for self-transcendence as he tries to acknowledge his experience as an exercise, as "a penance" in itself (Kunju, 23).

The embodied signs of Ganeshan's wealth threaten his survival even as they negotiate potential stigma and humiliation. On the one hand his wealthy appearance makes him vulnerable to violence and theft—he considers his money and bejeweled body constant liabilities that could potentially cost him his life. But on the other, wealth empowers him with a certain degree of social impunity from the discrimination and humiliation of disease. His bodily integrity and being is thus at once compromised by the shame and suffering of disease and secured by the visible signs of social class. Although his diseased and disfigured body

preempts his entrance in most of the stores that have notices forbidding entry to people with "diseases", his elite body is read as a marker of social privilege and dignity. His presence thus evokes an ambiguous response of respect and disgust (Kunju, 18). The narrator momentarily betrays his admiration for Ganeshan's dignified bearing by assuming the amazed reaction of Vaithi the owner of one of the coffee shops at the sight of a leper "dressed in a respectable shirt and *veshti*...[with a] leather suitcase and a stylish bag" (Kunju, 18). The narrator says "the owner was probably only accustomed to seeing beggars who were afflicted by leprosy but not well dressed lepers" (Kunju, 18). Although Vaithi fails to recognize his ex-classmate his attentive hospitality consoles Ganeshan. Later however the possibility of being recognized by him only reinforces Ganeshan's fear and shame. As Ganeshan is about to reveal his identity the sight of his disfigured hand fills him with disgust and makes him lie to Vaithi about "being a friend of Ganeshan's who is dead" (Kunju, 19). He is reminded of the greedy doctors who refused to touch his diseased body that made him feel "like an untouchable" who no longer recognizes his own body (Kunju, 21). Ganeshan battles his internalized stigma; he is clearly conflicted by his desire for acknowledgment even as he is ashamed of being recognized, which only reinforces his self-estrangement. In one of the later chapters of the novel he is ashamed of being recognized by a known doctor on one of his nomadic travels. The doctor represents the rational voice of science and tries to convince Ganeshan that leprosy is contrary to popular belief neither incurable nor infectious. Although Ganeshan is particularly mortified for being recognized by someone from his youth, the doctor consoles him and encourages him to overcome his shame. He tells him people confuse the disfiguring effects of leprosy with contagiousness and puts him in touch with a Christian missionary run hospital reputed for its cure of leprosy.

Ganeshan later remembers the doctor is his childhood love Padma's husband. Ganeshan has a sensuous childhood memory of "Padma's touch and the keen awareness of their bodies when they had to stay awake and performed night long plays for their families during the auspicious nights of *Shivaratri* when there was no electricity" (Kunju, 45). He discovers from the doctor Padma died of an incapacitating sickness that the doctor suggests was a symptom of her longing to have more children. He tells Ganeshan "she died muttering his name deliriously remembering your last childhood encounter." (Kunju, 48) The doctor is presented as a Gandhian who practiced celibacy in his youth to devote himself to the struggle for national freedom. The novel implicitly valorizes a certain spiritual ideal of sexual abstinence and sublimation through the doctor's noble nationalist aspirations. And Padma is 'punished' for her sexuality even though it is expressed as a desire for procreation and motherhood.

Ganeshan is unable to suppress his erotic fantasies that constantly foreground his incoherent body-image even as they gesture at alternative possibilities of deriving sexual pleasure. There is a clear disjuncture between mental representations of his body that was once empowered by health and desirability and the image of his present body that is apparently disempowered by disease and deprived of sexual and personal value. He has masturbatory dreams from his sexual past that conjure erotic images of male and female lovers. In his dreams, the pleasure of money is equated with the pleasure of sex. Money has the same seductive allure of a man or a woman's sexual appeal. The suitcase of money that Ganeshan owns unexpectedly turns into a man or a woman. He grows ashamed of his dreams, which are seemingly unrelated to his diseased state. He is unable to distinguish his erotic dreams from reality; "from the reality of his consciousness of the wet stain on his *veshti*" (Kunju, 35). He is haunted by his obsessive fantasies even when he is awake. He

realizes his semen stains are symptoms of something real although he is unable to relate his sexual dreams to his present sickness. He admits,

dreams are not lies, complete lies...a few rumors mixed with some old experiences ...dreams of speaking to his old male friend and his female friends without moving his tongue, he saw their bodies, the pleasurable parts of their body; without opening his eyes he conversed with them and experienced the happiness of touch lying on the floor without moving his arms and legs... (Kunju, 35)

The Christian missionary run hospital where Ganeshan seeks treatment presents a Christian ethic of charity or compassion that acknowledges all individuals as incarnations of God irrespective of their sickness. Ganeshan is struck by the exotic and divine beauty of the Swedish nurses whose quiet efficiency and hospitality make him feel he is in heaven among human angels. He is entranced by their kindness and compassion that is suggested by the “youthful luster of their faces” and the touch of “their golden hands...” as they kindly accompany him (Kunju, 35). He is amazed at the sight of the other patients in the hospital some of whom are nearly cured. Ganeshan feels “he has already been cured by being in such a divine environment” (Kunju, 48). The nurses consider him an “incarnation of god” that has given them the honor and the privilege of serving him (Kunju, 51). The narrator betrays a certain desire and sympathy for Ganeshan who has not lost his dignity in spite of his disease,

Ganeshan’s disease was of a new kind. It was not just the beauty of his face but his very body that had been completely transformed by the disease. His round, beautiful face was disfigured—it spread out like a flat plate and had swollen. The long fingers of his long arms that stretched down to his knees were disfigured; they had swollen up and cracked ...otherwise his body was alright to a certain extent. Its seductive fair complexion had not disappeared. The force and depth of his ringing voice that arrested and attracted the attention of its listeners had not been affected. One could see him struggling to walk because his toes were short and swollen up and were twisted and crooked like balls and his toenails had withered and shriveled up. But he had not lost his dignity and majestic bearing. (Kunju, 59)

Like the nurses, the mother superior who is also a doctor at the hospital welcomes Ganeshan as “an incarnation of the Lord” and asks him to recount his sickness (Kunju, 52). Her compassion evokes Ganeshan’s contrition,

forgive me a thousand times and forget I ever asked you out of my foolish arrogance and ignorance to accept my petty donation...For several years before I was afflicted by leprosy, ever since my youth, my body has been an instrument to satiate the perversities of my sexual desires and my erotic frenzies... one day I suddenly felt the blood under my skin oozing out of my entire body... (Kunju, 59)

Ganeshan’s confesses his sexual involvement with a woman doctor before being afflicted by leprosy and describes his subsequent rejection by the doctor when she discovers his disease. The narrator’s sympathetic attempt to rescue Ganeshan from complete degradation is suggested, often through other characters, as Ganeshan describes his humiliation and suffering. The narrator says, “Ganeshan now became the owner of that voice that reminded one of the earlier beauty of that unrecognizably transformed face. Some of the parts of his

body attested his pure beauty. He and his disease were enigmas to them [the nurses].” (Kunju, 55) Ganeshan’s past evokes such sorrow and sympathy in the nurses that when one of them tearfully touches Ganeshan out of compassion, the “blissful” touch of “the flawless femininity of that pure body scorches like hot embers” (Kunju, 56). For Ganeshan, his longing for recognition and non-sexual intimacy cannot be distinguished from his desire for sexual intimacy. Sexual desire and nurture are correlated or mutually inseparable metaphors. Although Ganeshan longs for the loving touch of another person, the experience of being touched is invariably sexualized. The sight of his recovering body is accompanied by irrepressible sexual fantasies that eroticize the nurses’ divine Christian beauty. He is unable to reconcile his desires for them with his divine admiration for their compassion and nobility. He struggles to emulate their abstinence and dedicate himself to the betterment of humanity. Ganeshan is betrayed by his failed attempts to transcend his desires, “He was deceived by the thought of having lost the opportunity to transcend himself; of retrieving his lost soul; of polishing the filth of his old mind...that was within this new body that melted and dripped...” (Kunju, 59)

There is an untenable discordance between the sexual liberties enjoyed by the diseased Ganeshan and the moral closure of the novel. On the one hand, is the attempt to comprehend and acknowledge the involuntary and ultimately inscrutable experience of disease as a deserved punishment for sexual excess and on the other, is the failure to repress or relinquish the apparently voluntary experience of sexual pleasure that is enabled by disease. I read the apparent rhetoric of spirituality and moral piety that pervades the novel as perceivably the only means of negotiating, acknowledging and ultimately transcending the irreconcilable opposition between the involuntarily diseased body and its apparently voluntary desires or sexual agency; between an admission and a disavowal of male sexuality. These contradictions point to Ganeshan’s attempts to free himself of his diseased body that is however the only possible means of achieving sexual pleasure. Ganeshan’s nomadic journeys are literal attempts to escape at it were his own hostile and uninhabitable prison-of-a-body without actually ceasing to exist. The diseased body is represented at once as an inferior and transient entity vulnerable to the degrading effects of sensuality that constitutes and recalls its very existence and (retrospectively) as the necessary and only means of achieving moral redemption and spiritual self-transcendence. The embodied *experience* of disease, suffering, destitution and (self) alienation are read as expiatory signs of sexual excess necessary to achieve self-transcendence through a process of worldly withdrawal and atonement that includes sensuous abstinence, altruistic acts of compassion and meditation. Although the novel closes on an increasing note of moral didacticism that educates its readers urging them to learn from Ganeshan’s redemptive experience of disease and suffering, such a moral closure is contradicted by Ganeshan’s irrepressible desires and fails to contain the narrator’s own sympathy for and erotic investment in Ganeshan. Ganeshan realizes that the humiliation and estrangement of disease and the hardships of survival are instructive insofar they are not interrupted by sleep and erotic dreams that only hinder self-transcendence. The involuntary experience of disease thus acquires an ontological significance for Ganeshan whose spiritual/self-transcendental expression can only be achieved by renouncing sexual desire.

Ganeshan’s friendship with Pasupati, an orphaned policeman he accidentally encounters on one of his travels, plays a crucial role in ultimately reinforcing Ganeshan’s desire for self-transcendence. It is Pasupati’s exalted perception of Ganeshan’s apparently enlightened status that redeems Ganeshan’s shame and guilt and affirms his faith in his own spirituality. When they first meet Pasupati confesses he has been silently admiring Ganeshan’s

disciplined appearance and self-absorbed indifference to the world. He expresses his intense veneration for Ganeshan much to the latter's embarrassment convinced of his spiritual enlightenment. Ganeshan's self-deprecatory attempts to convince Pasupati of his ordinariness to his surprise, only confirms Pasupati's faith in Ganeshan's spiritual superiority. Pasupati's veneration we discover stems from his promise to his revered father who asked him to feed the poor before renouncing worldly life to become an ascetic. Ganeshan's repeated attempts to disabuse Pasupati of his mistaken devotion only raise him in Pasupati's esteem. Pasupati interprets Ganeshan's self-deprecation as a deceptive sign of his inscrutable spiritual greatness. Pasupati is certain his human fallibility preempts the possibility of truly understanding Ganeshan. When Ganeshan mentions the loss "of his old body" Pasupati interprets his statement as an allusion to the meaninglessness of life, "How long should I wander in this dead body? I'm dead without dying..." (Kunju, 74) Even as Pasupati considers Ganeshan his spiritual guru, Ganeshan ironically acknowledges Pasupati as his spiritual guide who will help him realize his goal.

Ganeshan reflects on Pasupati's decision to renounce his worldly existence for asceticism. He realizes he has never led a normal, predetermined life like Pasupati and wonders if it is possible to lead an existence that is beyond thought; a life that is spontaneous and not predetermined. Devotees at the temple where he begs throw coins at the sight of his destitute and disfigured appearance. Others assume he is a holy man when they smear sacred ash on his body. Ganeshan realizes he has unwittingly become a beggar. The narrator valorizes his indifference to the money that devotees threw at him while he suggests his disdain for the devotees' generosity that "implies their desire to acquire divine merit or redeem their sins." (Kunju, 77) Although Ganeshan tries to lead an existence that is not beyond need or indeed thought itself, he admits to his frustration that his survival prevents him from completely withdrawing from the world. He realizes his dependence on others for food and water is an unfortunate pretext for further humiliation. He realizes he is still not above hostility or discrimination for he does not identify or empathize with the other lepers and is disgusted by the sight of them greedily consuming free food at the charity food halls.

On one of his trips to a holy city Ganeshan recognizes a young woman and her husband sitting in a car. He realizes the husband is his childhood friend Kitta, "a wastrel who barely passed fifth grade" and his wife Ammu who is also Kitta's niece (Kunju, 81). Ganeshan initially mistakes Ammu for her older sister Machi with whom he had an affair. Ammu reminds Ganeshan of Machi's youthful beauty and their secret rendezvous in the mango groves where she "embraced and kissed him several times" (Kunju, 81). He is still jealous of Kitta when he thinks of Machi "who was taller than him, stroking his chest with hers" (Kunju, 82). He remembers spending hours lost in her embrace and repeatedly promising to marry her (Kunju, 81). He now gazes at Ammu's lustrous beauty adorned with golden jewelry. Her sari is wet after bathing in the river and she is not wearing a blouse. Ganeshan sexualizes her wealthy beauty and the visible signs of her married status as he admires the *pottu* glistening on her forehead and the golden bangles that clink on her arms. She secretly glances at him staring at her anxious her husband might discover her looking at him. But when Kitta sees Ganeshan staring at his wife he grows jealous and orders her to cover her wet body. He scolds her for not bringing an extra sari when she intervenes, "Who knows who he is! Did he look at you or did he look at me? Does he know your principles that beggars should never be given money but only fed or given clothes? He probably longs for money looking at our car and my jewelry. You obviously don't know when to suspect me! I am fed up..." (Kunju, 80)

Ganeshan is unable to forget Ammu's alluring beauty that becomes a metonym for Machi and is "inflamed by his desire" (Kunju, 80). He struggles to control himself but is unable to suppress his desire for Machi. The narrator equates his irrepressible and indiscriminate desire for Ammu/Machi with his desire for the nurses at the hospital. Ganeshan is again confronted by a contradiction between his desire and his diseased state. He realizes "no good can come of opposing nature. Opposition will only result in destruction and a ruined life. It seems [I] can only wait for nature's reply for the lustful frenzy it has given me" (Kunju, 83). His desire for Ammu awakens memories of his past desire for her that recalls his nostalgic longing for his once healthy body. Ganeshan is unable to reconcile the disjuncture between his voyeuristic desire for Ammu that recalls his healthy past and his diseased state that preempts the sexual consummation of his desire.

His diseased and disfigured appearance may preempt the sexual consummation of desire but it also enables the possibility of deriving voyeuristic pleasure by invoking a bodily inconspicuousness or absence that deflects social attention. For instance, Ganeshan secretly watches some women bathing at the riverfront. The sight of the partially exposed female bodies moving to the rhythms of bathing conjures a sexualized image of female movement and vitality that is lacking in Ganeshan's own body. For someone who has hitherto led a sheltered and incarcerated life, the sight of women bathing is for Ganeshan a sexual novelty.

He was relieved that he was surrounded by women. Women of all ages dived and bathed peacefully in a large crowd in the open space at the riverfront. Even if some didn't swim they immersed themselves and emerged and jumped and frolicked in the water. Their arms and legs were uncontrollable. Bodies swayed in every direction. They lay on their backs and rinsed their long hair. The bathers did not have to bother about their colorful clothes that wrapped their bodies and slipped when they dipped themselves in the water. For, there were only women. Even on that auspicious day when they immersed themselves in the holy water, some had not forgotten their soaps. Some scrubbed their legs, arms, shoulders and breasts until they were covered with froth before emerging from the river... They were dripping as they emerged from the river. The sight of city women not used to bathing in the river, struggling to wring their saris before wearing them was food to Ganeshan's ravenous eyes. He similarly consumed the rare sight of those who were familiar with the river, quickly removing their blouse and slipping on a new one like lightening. These were truly new experiences for him. (Kunju, 85)

If bodily integrity is a fiction that is produced through a relational act of misrecognized identity between self and other, such a fiction is made possible through Ganeshan's encounter with a young blind woman beggar. Her blindness that compels her to resort to a tactile form of relationality recuperates Ganeshan's wounded self-esteem and integrity. The unreturned gaze of the blind woman invokes Ganeshan's body as a visual absence that paradoxically assures his embodied self by investing him with the power of being the exclusive voyeur who cannot be seen. He notices her sitting with her young son by the riverfront begging for money. Ganeshan sees the blind woman's eyes tremble when she senses Ganeshan's presence. She accidentally touches Ganeshan that makes him feel pleasantly shocked. Even in her unkempt and filthy appearance, Ganeshan discovers signs of her unblemished beauty that for him is an index of her nobility. He realizes "her oiled and neatly kept hair, her long slender face and her elegant nose and her pierced nose and ears" belie her beggarly state (Kunju, 85). He notices she has an upright posture and the beauty and

elegance of the exposed parts of her sari clad body suggest her ideal femininity. He notices that one of her heels is shiny and smooth “like folded blossoms” without any cracks that betray her upper class status (Kunju, 85).

Ganeshan experiences pleasure by gazing at the exposed parts of her body. Her body’s beauty like the bodies of the women bathing at the riverfront is sensuously invoked only in visible fragments and never in its entirety. His desire for the beggar is metonymically related to his earlier desires for Machi, Ammu and the women bathing at the riverfront “[that] urged him to watch the women bathe at the riverfront.” (Kunju, 89) The blind woman, for Ganeshan, is an embodiment of this abstract ideal of femininity. He suddenly has the urge to help the blind woman and offers his share of money to the son to give to his mother. He asks the boy to secretly ask her to meet him at a nearby tree. The woman overhears Ganeshan and says,

You may not like this. Do you think I enjoy begging? What other way do I have...isn’t this an old convention? ...I rely on begging only because I’m struggling to hold on to my body and life...I’m not a beggar. I have never wandered the streets before...I was selling rice and other stuff...see, this boy...this flower I gave birth to...I struggle only for him...I have a lot more to tell you. You suggested we help each other. I think it’s a very good idea...(Kunju, 90)

Ganeshan learns the blind woman is an orphan who escaped from a cruel marriage and was later abandoned by a man who broke his promise to marry her after impregnating her. Strangely, neither she nor her son has names and she expresses her gratitude to Ganeshan for his protection and support. Her gossiping neighbors suspect her of having an affair with Ganeshan. When they tell her he is a leper she pretends to know but when they warn her of its contagiousness she grows anxious for her son’s life. Ganeshan later convinces the blind woman whom he names Kodai that leprosy is not infectious. When Kodai remorsefully insists on having an intimate relationship with him, Ganeshan refuses to surrender to his desire. He names her son Vanmali and teaches him English. His compassionate gestures give him a new sense of purpose and responsibility that redeems his hitherto debauched life; he even sees the disfiguring manifestations of leprosy miraculously receding from his body. His morally ambiguous perception of money is clearly suggested in his fear of the corrupting effects of money and his acknowledgment of the charitable benefits of money that could potentially enable his longing for redemption and spiritual transcendence.

Pasupati offers to support Ganeshan, the blind woman and her son. Through his proxy Pasupati the narrator attempts to rescue Ganeshan from complete degradation. The narrator sympathizes with Ganeshan’s sexual conflicts and financial hardship and admires his altruistic attempts to transcend them. Through Pasupati, the narrator insinuates his pious faith in Ganeshan’s purity and benevolence that can ultimately never be tarnished. Pasupati is convinced Ganeshan’s “eroticism; his conjugal relationship with the blind woman and his leprosy are apparent, deceptive” signs of his essential spirituality resilient to the corrupting effects of sensuality (Kunju, 290). Pasupati’s devotion for him encourages everyone in the slum to believe in Ganeshan’s divinity that finally redeems his and Kodai’s reputation in the neighborhood.

The novel’s rather persistent moral didacticism is exemplified by Ganeshan’s untenably successful sexual reformation a mark of which is his reformation of another minor character in the novel. Ganeshan helps Periasami, an unemployed youth reminiscent of Ganeshan’s pre-reformed past, earn his own living by setting up a betel nut store. When Ganeshan

discovers Periasami's attempted seduction of Kodai, he threatens to seize his store if he does not agree to marry her. Periasami is guilty but finally abandons his store and disappears without marrying her. Further, the narrative is complicit in enabling Ganeshan's spiritual self-transcendence by eliminating potential obstacles to his worldly renunciation. Kodai mysteriously dies of a sickness leaving Vanamali in Ganeshan's care. Ganeshan 'adopts' him and sends him to a boarding school, which recalls Ganeshan's own childhood. Ganeshan gradually turns into a solitary, self-absorbed man who spends his time lost in meditation. He grows indifferent to "worldly attachments and hunger...to overcome the self and become one with the world" suggesting that moral and spiritual knowledge can be acquired not through instruction but only through experience—an idea that persists throughout the novel (Kunju, 307-309).

Kitta functions as a foil to Ganeshan—his greed and sexual promiscuity serve to foreshore Ganeshan's noble suffering and victimhood. While the narrator's (and presumably the reader's) sympathies lie with Ganeshan, there is no sympathy for Kitta who is degraded beyond repair by his sexual corruption and greed. If Ganeshan is portrayed as a victim of disease and guilt who heroically strives to reform and sublimate his own desires, Kitta is 'punished' for sexually manipulating women to fulfill his reckless and unrelenting desire for financial independence and power. The narrator contrasts the town's admiration for the young Ganeshan's beauty and intelligence to Kitta's sexual humiliation when he is chastised for secretly looking at the daughters of one of the landed priests in the town bathing at the temple tank. Unlike Ganeshan, Kitta is represented as an agential man who renounces his home town to escape social disgrace and sexual humiliation. Determined to prove his own worth, his persistent efforts and (sexual) negotiations with a network of friends and relatives finally pay off. When Kitta decides to sell his mother's land to finance his medical store, his business partner Sima's wife Buma offers to sell her jewelry to rescue his mother and brother from destitution. He uses his financial authority to legitimize his affairs with other women that include his widowed sister-in-law who relies on his financial support and his business partner's wife Buma who is instrumental in his financial progress. Kitta's business partner Sima chooses to ignore his sexual affair with his wife Buma unwilling to sacrifice the opportunity of having an independent career as Kitta's business partner after years of professional subordination. Buma's and Kitta's affair turns out to be mutually beneficial: Buma offers to sell her jewelry to finance Kitta's medical store, which establishes her husband's career and improves their marriage.

But the legitimacy of his financial authority is soon undermined by a growing crisis in his relationship with his wife who refuses to tolerate his sexual hypocrisy. Kitta's sexual hypocrisy suggests at once his attempts to legitimize the sexual license he was denied as an unemployed youth with financial power and the fear of potentially losing possession of his wife that threatens his authority. Kitta suspects his wife Ammu of having an affair with Ganeshan when he sees him staring at her as they are driving back from a pilgrimage. Although Kitta does not recognize Ganeshan his memories of Ganeshan's youth suggest his jealousy of the town's love for Ganeshan. He remembers feeling helpless and resentful when his mother refuses to believe Ganeshan's secret affair with his beloved niece Machi. He resents his brother-in-law for marrying Machi to an effete/effeminate and unemployed older man.

His financial independence does not guarantee Kitta a lasting sense of self-ownership. His sexual suspicion costs him his marriage—he feels disenfranchised when his wife Ammu begins to address him in the informal singular as she did before their marriage when he was

just a close uncle rather than the formal plural reserved for a husband. His niece Machi and her husband who are his dependents decide to leave him to return to their village. Kitta's authority is temporarily undermined when his younger son who assumes some of his responsibilities at the medical store violently rebels against his authority and imprisons him. One of the crucial signs of Kitta's disenfranchisement is his emasculation that is figured through his seemingly deficient paternity. He has a mentally and physically disabled son who is entirely dependent on his family for his survival. Even his own financial independence we later discover is indebted to his mentally disabled older brother's accumulated savings as a beggar.

If Ganeshan's sexual reformation reinstates the novel's moral didacticism nothing instantiates this better than Ganeshan's reformatory encounter with Kitta. Kitta's encounter with Ganeshan at the end of the novel proves to be his only escape from insecurity. Kitta's hedonistic life becomes a moral burden that finally has to be eschewed to seek spiritual transcendence and peace. Ganeshan urges him to renounce his worldly privileges, which Kitta realizes have become futile liabilities that impede his desire for peace.

Kadukal (1992) (Ears) by M.V. Venkatram

Unlike Karichan Kunju's *Hungry Humanity*, M.V. Venkatram's novel *Kadukal (Ears)* (1992) is engaged with the figure of the disordered male outcaste whose body is a projection of an embattled (sexual) identity. Disability in this novel does not assume a visible form as disease does in *Hungry Humanity* although disease and disorder similarly foreground the self-estranging disjuncture both within and between the body and the psyche. Disability in this novel takes the form of visual and aural hallucinations that appear as ironic and reversible signs of self-affirmation and self-estrangement. I suggest that the protagonist's projected hallucination or fantasy functions as a formal narrative device that through the simulation of a certain representative reality (indifferent to its location within or without the psyche) repeatedly evokes and exorcises the desire for (sexual and religious) meaning or truth that is never definitively achieved without lack and fragmentation. I am interested in exploring the fantasmatic nature of this apparent reality that sustains the uncertainty of sexual meaning. What characterizes such an imaginary reality are the reversibility of its signs that break the referentiality of sex where sex is transubstantiated into signs; into what Baudrillard in *Seduction* calls a gestural, ritual and sensual game that alternatively evokes and disappoints religious faith and sexual desire. The male protagonist's fantasies thus repeatedly dramatize the desire to remain a lacking/desiring subject whose desire for meaning is only momentarily achieved before being frustrated again. His attempts to establish meaning is couched in an unstable rhetoric of sexual desire and religious/spiritual faith that unlike *Hungry Humanity* does not gesture at the possibility of spiritual liberation but ultimately ends in an identity crisis that resists narrative closure.

The perpetuation of the free indirect narrative that shifts between the perspectives of the protagonist and the narrator, lies in retaining the distinction between the imaginary, projected world of the male protagonist and social reality; a distinction that by the end of the novel is briefly collapsed at the level of narrative and story. The novel suggests that the only way the orphaned protagonist can counter the isolating and estranging effects of his projected fantasies is precisely through the projection of an alternative fantasy of self-empowerment: signs of self-alienation are juxtaposed to signs of self-affirmation. My interpretation of the fantasy sequences in the novel is neither a symptomatic one that tries to reveal latent from

manifest meaning nor one that pathologizes the protagonist. I am concerned with the articulation of certain unconscious desires and affects that determine the distorted form of the protagonist's fantasies. Both *Hungry Humanity* and *Ears* are related in their representation of the simultaneously disempowering and empowering possibilities of the diseased or disabled body although the form and degree of estrangement relies on the difference between a visible disease and an invisible disability.

The early part of this autobiographical narrative describes Mahalingam's childhood in a religious household. His devout parents, the narrator says, "privileged and were empowered by their simple religious faith...by their piety that was like an infectious familial disease they had inherited that redeemed their illiteracy" (Venkatram, 10). His father is a shopkeeper whose elaborate religious and ritual observances are perceived as frustrating impediments to the immediate satiation of Mahalingam's constant hunger. His illiterate father tries to redeem his own lack of scriptural knowledge by fashioning him in the idealized image of a literate, devotional singer. He employs traditional teachers of devotional music to teach Mahalingam who is however too embarrassed to sing despite his father's entreaties. Mahalingam's diffidence proves to be crippling; he is too ashamed of being with strangers and his father scolds him for his "effeminate shyness" (Venkatram, 14). His father is later reassured by his son's rather intense engagement with Tamil literature and his incipient career as a fictional writer that adversely affects his academic progress. Reading and writing romantic fiction provides Mahalingam with the only available means of expressing his romantic ideals of women he secretly desires but is too ashamed to acknowledge. The writings of spiritual thinkers like Vivekananda, Aurobindo, and Ramakrishna Paramahansa create an impression on his young mind that inspires him to emulate their celibacy. His determination to remain celibate "does not formalize but transforms his religious piety into emotional gestures." (Venkatram, 16)

The reception of spiritual literature and romantic fiction plays a crucial role in determining Mahalingam's idealized notions of celibacy, women and romantic love that can never be realized. His initial desire to remain celibate to exclusively pursue his spiritual ideals and literary ambitions is rendered uncertain by his desire to realize his sexual and romantic ideals. But both desires finally turn out to be ironic; he finally agrees to fulfill his father's desperate desire for an heir by marrying an unknown woman of his father's choice with whom he has a sexually active relationship although he is clearly not attracted to her. He later resorts to the empowering promises of religion despite his irreligious youth as a desperate measure against the onslaught of his hallucinations. Similarly, the potential consummation of a younger married woman's desire for him later in the novel is interrupted by his repulsion for her apparently malodorous body. He is even repelled by the apparent stench of his dream about her seduction that confirms his passivity.

Mahalingam feels responsible for ennobling his unworthy wife Kamakshi. His marriage later turns out to be a hindrance to his literary and spiritual interests that are doomed when his father's business competitors exploit his naïveté and swindle him of his wealth. With nothing but bankruptcy and debts to bequeath his son, his hopeless father ends up losing his memory and eventually dies after a prolonged illness. Mahalingam's wife abandons him when her mother rescues her from imminent destitution. Faced with the responsibility of redeeming his father's debts and supporting a widowed mother, Mahalingam's carefree dreams of becoming a successful writer and leading a spiritual life are ruined. His wife's abandonment frustrates his sexual longings and deprives him of solace. His plight finally makes him question his faith in God.

The narrative identification of Mahalingam with his father is suggested by their similar financial misfortunes—their naïve and unquestioning faith in their deceptive friends reduce them to bankruptcy and destitution. Mahalingam's relationship with his father is clearly fraught by his childhood resentment for his father's authority and religiosity that hinders the immediate gratification of hunger. The internalization of his father's humiliation and his apparently shameful inability to conform to his father's ideals only confirms his low self-worth. His father's insolvency and his consequent death I suggest, undermines Mahalingam's identification with his father's authority. The loss of the father's status and authority later mediates Mahalingam's own disempowered status. Financial constraints and domestic responsibilities make it impossible for Mahalingam to pursue his literary interests without his father's financial support; survival itself becomes a threatening liability after his father's death. Faced by bankruptcy and imminent destitution, Mahalingam realizes he can only redeem his vulnerability or even rationalize his inscrutable misfortune through his monotheistic religiosity. The question of the veracity of his religious faith is immaterial and ultimately indeterminable; what matters are the momentarily empowering and disempowering possibilities of his religious faith that has to be constantly reinforced against the onslaught of irrepressible sexual desires, poverty and hunger that are increasingly figured as psychological disorder. I suggest Mahalingam's fantasies are an articulation of his alternating faith and skepticism that evoke and exorcise his desire for meaning and self-affirmation. The initial belief in his own divine status is momentarily empowering; he interprets his aural hallucinations as auspicious signs of Lord Murugan's divine protection that are repeatedly dispelled by his own doubts. The sound of Murugan's words belie his notions about God that are determined by his readings of religious literature. Mahalingam's fantasies parody the seductive signs of God's favor,

Mahalingam had read about God speaking to great men but no book had the statistics of how many words He spoke. He knew some books said God had silently guided people but this was a contradiction. They say the devotee hesitates when God appears before him pleased with his penance and grants him a boon. But here it felt God had meditated on Mali and was blabbering in joy at his sight. (Venkatram, 31-32)

Mahalingam's religious skepticism is affirmed by multiple, unidentifiable voices that are followed by a seductive and vengeful female voice that claims to be the bloodthirsty goddess Kali. He momentarily imagines it is the divine voice of Murugan who pleased by his devotion has come to his rescue but his pious hope is overcome by disillusionment when Kali swears to destroy him and his family for insulting her. She accuses him of betraying her by shifting his loyalties to Murugan and Rama. Mahalingam defensively asserts his belief in monotheism and expresses his indifference to nominal differences between gods. Kali avows her exclusive divinity and chastises Mahalingam for denying worshipping her in his previous lives. Mahalingam's doubt about Kali's alleged divine status is confirmed by her threat to destroy his family for his betrayal. His determination to remain resilient and rational despite his hallucinations is what furthers the narrative.

Mahalingam's fantasies dramatize his self-estrangement through the imagined encounter of seemingly opposing voices and images that are composite projections of his self. Whether these voices allude to a real or discrete person from Mahalingam's life is ultimately I argue neither certain nor relevant. What concerns me is the affective significance of the correlated and reversible signs of religious faith, divinity and eroticism that are at once self-affirming

and self-injurious. The self-estranging and emasculating effects of Mahalingam's financial anxiety for instance take the form of an imaginary argument between a composite male and female voice that represent multiple characters. The female voice is an allusion to the goddess Kali whose unexpectedly malodorous body recalls Mahalingam's earlier dream about an abused younger woman who sought his protection from her mother-in-law's cruelty and her allegedly impotent and effeminate husband. She tries to seduce Mahalingam by evoking his sympathy and dresses up once she senses his relenting compassion; she even expresses a wish to have a son like his. He nearly succumbs to her sexual advances after a moment of guilt when he is suddenly repulsed by her apparently malodorous body. In the dream she visits him and implores his protection from her in laws when her brother comes in search of her and threatens her to return to her husband. She refuses and defiantly insists on living with Mahalingam. Mahalingam wakes up wondering at the sexual significance of his dream that belies his apparent indifference or even disgust for the woman. He awakens to the stench of the dream and feels the dream should have appeared to her.

The male voice claims to be the goddess/young wife's jealous husband and seemingly refers to one of Mahalingam's creditors. Mahalingam interprets his disorder as an act of divine retribution that can only be cured through devotion and worship. His determination to be resilient and his attempts to regain his lost wealth are undermined by the ceaseless chatter that seems to emanate from his ears. The male voice ridicules his hope of retrieving his lost status and demanding his dues warns him of imminent destitution. The female voice, a distorted allusion to the goddess/young wife, defends Mahalingam with her profession of wifely love. Their imaginary conversation soon turns into a violent fight between a jealous husband who demands the goddess' acceptance of his conjugal rights over her and an amorous goddess who fiercely defends her 'wifely' loyalty to Mahalingam. When the creditor ridicules her wifely devotion she severs his penis in a fit of rage that leaves him lamenting his emasculation that alludes to Mahalingam's own state of helplessness.

I read these divine and erotic hallucinations as temporary and reversible signs of Mahalingam's self-affirmation and self-estrangement. He tries to believe that his hallucinations are divine retribution for past sins that can only be redeemed through worship but the impossibility of discovering signs of divine favor only undermine and reinforce his religious faith. When he reluctantly agrees to visit an ascetic known for his curative powers he is assaulted by a hallucinatory dialogue between a male and a female actor preparing for a play. The actors do not necessarily refer to distinct or real individuals from Mahalingam's life but are ironic or parodic signs of his religious belief and faith in his own spiritual integrity. His embattled identity is dramatized in the following 'secret' conversation that ridicules his apparent sophistication and intellectualism; expresses his forbidden desires by sexualizing his piety for an amorous 'goddess' and finally suggests his identity with an effete and infantilized God Murugan.

Male voice: Mother, who am I?

Female voice: Good question. If you keep asking yourself this question you will gain spiritual knowledge.

Male voice: If I'm enlightened I won't be able to have affairs or eat whatever I like. I don't want knowledge Mother.

Female voice: You asked me 'Who am I?'

Male voice: Oh that! Mali [Mahalingam] sir is confused not knowing who I am. I feel sorry for him...I got scared when he saw my face in the light. I should tell him who I am.

Female voice: Child, you are a wild, brainless, fierce black ghost.

Male voice: You describe me beautifully. See how many words you need to describe me! You are Mali's fan. You can fluently throw words at me. I'm Ku.Pa.Ra's [a Tamil writer] fan, I can briefly describe you in four words. Do you want to listen?

Female voice: You don't need to describe me. I know who I am.

Male voice: Oh are you that enlightened?

Female voice: I'm the complete form of knowledge.

Male voice: Oh! That's why you stink so much when I come close to you. Just because you are enlightened shouldn't you bathe even when you are menstruating?

Female voice (whispers as if telling a secret): You are truly a fool. Mali is very sophisticated...no, he's very cultured. He doesn't like it if you're vulgar. Have you forgotten to speak in a civilized fashion?

Male voice: I haven't forgotten anything. Mali has forgotten he is cultured. Why should he listen to our secrets? What will happen if educated people start eavesdropping?

Female voice: Idiot! Did you forget we are speaking like this so that Mali can hear?

Male voice: Oh I completely forgot. So what? He's deaf in any case. He can't hear anything we say...why are you speaking like a college student with English mixed in her Tamil?

Female voice: Oh you are a fool! Shouldn't Mali know I'm educated you fool! Mali is an intellectual; an intellectual will only love an intellectual...you should henceforth remember to be refined in your speech. Shouldn't he know who I am?

Male voice: He should certainly know who you are. Isn't that why you're sleeping with him?

Female voice: You're again being vulgar...

Male voice: ...Mother who are you?

Female voice: I am the empress of millions of worlds. Ghosts, demons, spirits, gods, Brahma, Vishnu, Rudran, I'm them all. I'm sound, I'm the seed [The Sanskrit word *vindu* also means seed/seed], I'm art...*Aham Brahmasmi, Aham Brahmasmi*...

Male voice: You say you're sound. Very correct...where's the seed? You tempted me to come by saying Mali has a lot of it. I didn't even find a drop. Did you finish...

...Female voice: I told you so many times not to be vulgar...if you keep saying 'seed' Mali will be disgusted.

Male voice: But he sings *Naadavindu Kalaadi* [a 16th century devotional poet Arunagirinaathar whose song 'God is everywhere' was dedicated to Murugan] ...is he disgusted when he sings?

[Enter a critic] Critic's voice: ...are you performing a play? It's worse than a street performance. Plus they speak so obscenely. What does what they're saying have to do with the play?

Male voice; Hold on Hold on!...do you know Dr. Professor Mahalingam?

Critic's voice: I know the writer Mahalingam. I don't know who conferred him 'doctor', 'professor' ...he's my friend. What happened to him? He's fine isn't he?

Male voice: You fool! Dr. Professor Mahalingam is the hero, director and writer of the play!

Critic's Voice: Mahalingam may claim to have written everything that Vyasa wrote...but to be so obscene for cheap publicity...

Male Voice: Did you again say obscene?...if your parents hadn't committed an obscenity would you be standing here? Are you criticizing your mother for being obscene?

Critic's voice: I'm adding all this in my criticism of the play in next week's '*Idikural*' [The Sound of Thunder] I'll leave if you reimburse my ticket money.

Male Voice [gently] :...You fool have you forgotten the passes to the play were free? Here keep this. It's a sin to slander great people...[gives him money]

Critic's Voice: Will I betray Mahalingam, my comrade-in-arms?...[leaves]

Male Voice: I gave him three hundred rupees, he told me he would keep quiet about the obscenity. ...

Where did you find Mali?

Female voice: Mali has been crying 'Muruga, Muruga!' for some lives...how can I keep quiet if he keeps calling Muruga?...

Male voice: Oh that Muruga who was born to you after you had an affair with that Shiva fellow?

Female voice: Yes that very Murugan. Mali has been praying to Murugan for several lives. But Murugan refuses to remove his mouth from my noble breast. He's a boy who knows the taste of milk isn't it? Mali's voice hasn't reached his ears. My compassion for Mali made me rush to appear before him. Murugan is a child; he's at an irresponsible age. Can I be like that?...I'm going to make him [Mali] the transcendental...he worships Murugan doesn't he? I'm going to make a pauper first...I'm going to take away his wife's tali and nose ring. [signs of marriage]

Male voice: So you're going to turn him into a madman?...

Female voice: In this country a madman is praised for being an enlightened person, an intellectual...I'm going to unite with him. He calls himself a monist...what's cooking?

Male voice: A child's corpse is ready. A child's corpse is on its way. Mali's blood, Kamakshi's blood, their children's blood to quench your thirst..." (Venkatram, 84-85)

This is followed by a couple of conversations between members of the audience that suggest the Mahalingam's apparent love for the actress/goddess/young wife. One of the men in the audience professes his desperate love for the actress to his friend and swears to sacrifice his wealth for her love. His friend ridicules his wealth that will not suffice even a day's expenses in her life. Then, two women from the audience gossip about Mahalingam's diffidence that deprived him of an opportunity to act in a movie. One of the women admires the hero's resemblance to Mahalingam and the other chastises her for her naïveté. She tells her the actress seduced Mahalingam who then murdered her husband out of jealousy. The actress, she rumors, is known for her illusory powers and has created an imposter who resembles her husband. The other woman imagines seeing Mahalingam everywhere.

Mahalingam's unsuccessful attempts to prove the existence of God or realize his romantic ideals are articulated in a tautological rhetoric of belief that repeatedly evokes and exorcises faith and desire. That these hallucinatory voices are disembodied only result in the loss and restoration of belief in an equally disembodied and invisible God and woman. When he decides to visit an ascetic Ramdas, Mahalingam is again assaulted by voices that apparently parody and sympathize with his misery. Mahalingam tells his wife,

I shall definitely go in the morning. I cannot bear this anymore...[Hey, Mahalingam is unable to endure anymore, what did you do to him?...He gets scared even if we do nothing...he is very cowardly]

[Wife]: You are not worshipping him properly. That's why you're having these problems...[You're absolutely correct! He doesn't know who or how to worship...]

[Mahalingam]: I haven't committed any mistake. Am I asking God for money [oh why do we need money?] What's wrong in meditating for his presence? I think

Murugan may have sent his huge arrows when I called to him [what else does he have?]

[Mahalingam]: A fine punishment for believing in God...[oh did you finally discover the truth, darling? Had you listened to great people who said 'he who believes in God is a fool' and 'he who created God is a barbarian'...].I must have been a demon in my previous life. Perhaps my friends and relatives from my previous life have come to see me! [You fool! You turned *us* into demons! This is the joke of the century! Hee hee! You are the greatest comic writer of this generation Mali!](to wife) if you made me some tamarind rice everyone would enjoy having it...[I would love to bite into a piece of dried fish]" (Venkatram, 58)

Mahalingam's hopeless and self-deprecating hallucinations have destructive effects on his family. He is suddenly aroused by another imaginary and rather sexually provocative conversation that makes him rape his pregnant wife who later gives birth to a stillborn child. His young son's obstinate refusal to eat later provokes Mahalingam's violent rage and beats the boy and temporarily expels him from the house.

Mahalingam's religious faith is an empowering, albeit temporary, measure against the onslaught of sexual or incriminatory voices that undermine his self-possession. The lack of divine evidence that would convince him of Murugan's benediction questions his faith in God who he suspects has abandoned him to his misery. He suspects his disorder is a preordained punishment for sins he committed in his previous lives. He is certain he has been possessed by an evil force that alienates from others. He is prepared to bear any amount of suffering if he is assured of Murugan's blessings. His attempt to affirm his sense of self is suggested in another dream about two disembodied voices that represent Mahalingam's fragmented self. The voices sexually parody his spiritual and literary/intellectual ideals. An imaginary female friend who calls herself Chaya recalls the earlier voice of the goddess and the young wife. She tries to seduce him by praising his literary talent. She tries to poison him against Murugan whose indifference she declares is responsible for his poverty. She offers him money and sexual pleasure that "is the ultimate joy" in exchange for devotion (Venkatram, 97). She derisively remarks, "Even to achieve spiritual transcendence you need to experience the pleasures of the body..." (Venkatram, 95) This is followed by a male voice that chastises him for rejecting her advances and ridicules his impotence that he equates to Murugan, the youthful, abstinent boy-God who spurns women.

Mahalingam awakens from the dream and feels his body has become a surface; a stage where his conflicted subjectivity is being projected and dramatized. There are moments where he feels he enjoys what seem to be a radio and then a television play. He suddenly hears the deafening auspicious sound of 'Om' as he sets out with a friend to meet the sage Ramdas reputed for his spiritual powers. He hears rebellious voices preparing to battle Ramdas' spiritual powers that chastise Mahalingam for his powerlessness and ridicule his cowardly non-violent Gandhianism. When Mahalingam implores him to cure him, Ramdas tells him his ability to dissociate himself from his madness which is a divine test of his spiritual resilience is itself a sign of divine favor. Mahalingam not convinced by Ramdas' reassurance demands evidence of divine favor. Ramdas says divine protection is suggested by Mahalingam's very ability to objectify and narrativize ("tell as a story") his delusion in conversation without being overwhelmed by it (Venkatram, 97). In some sense this gestures at the very redemptive function of this autobiographical narrative that through the act of self-reflexively objectifying and elaborating a narrative of disability mitigates its estranging effects by attempting to locate blame and establish Mahalingam's status as a victim.

By the end of the novel the distinction between past and present; between reality and Mahalingam's projected, hallucinatory world becomes ambiguous. Mahalingam is overwhelmed by his financial hardships when his daughter almost succumbs to a high fever. With just enough money to take care of her medical expenses the desperate and destitute Mahalingam rushes to the temple to pray but then briefly realizes he has to be "practical" (Venkatram, 105). On his way to the doctor he is haunted by hallucinatory images of suicide. He equates the "amusing" sight of an emaciated beggar hanging from a low tree with the image of another beggar from his childhood who similarly committed suicide by hanging himself. This image is then confused with another childhood memory of a body suspended from a tree that bears sartorial signs of the dead man's elite status. He realizes that the beggar and the rich man made careful arrangements to ensure the impossibility of saving themselves or being rescued when they committed suicide. Mahalingam is reminded of his friend from college who committed suicide by strangling himself with a rope unable to support his destitute family. Even as Mahalingam contemplates suicide he is scared of the possibility of dying a painful death. He realizes the beggar and the rich man unlike his college friend "smartly used cloth rather than rope to die relatively comfortable deaths." (Venkatram, 105) He is tempted to put an end to his hunger, poverty and psychological disorder and imagines seeing his wife and children mourning his death. He is overjoyed to see images of his dead bodies from his previous lives that suggest the renewed possibility of escaping everlasting suffering and unhappiness. He imagines witnessing his daughter's funeral procession and assumes the hungry Kali devoured her and his two stillborn children. He briefly thinks his wife is dead but his resilience prevents him from completely succumbing to his hallucinations. His hopes are later realized when after worshipping Murugan at the temple he sees his wife is alive and his daughter has recovered. The novel ends with the narrator/author's autobiographical note that expresses admiration for Mahalingam's resilience and suggests that the only way of countering the representative reality of his hallucinatory world is precisely through the representation of an alternative reality that is self-empowering.

Conclusion

In conclusion, both Karichan and Kunju and M.V. Venkatram share a moral or religious engagement with disease and disorder that compromises bodily and psychic integrity. Although these texts show how disease and disability both constrain and enable alternative forms of sexual expression, their moral interpretations of disease and disorder as expiatory signs of sexual excess that ultimately favor the renunciation of desire. While the possibility of spiritual transcendence in *Hungry Humanity* functions as a means of forswearing desire and sexual abjection, the narrative of sexual irony in *Ears* sustains the tension between sexuality and religious abstinence by dramatizing an embattled sexual subject without achieving narrative closure.

If Jeyakantan, Karichan Kunju and M.V. Venkatram resort to religion and spirituality to reform and renounce desire, the four writers in the next three chapters acknowledge desire as a catalyst for personal transformation and historical development. Desire is sublimated towards work or labor, which forms the very basis for change and greater freedom from abjection.

Chapter 3

On the Transformative Potential of Desire in Tanjai Prakash's Novels

In this essay, I explore the representation of desire as a catalyst for personal transformation and historical development in two novels by a contemporary Tamil writer, Tanjai Prakash. I engage with the seductive appeal of the body whose repeated betrayals of desire reveal the irredeemable lack that structures and perpetuates desire. The body's inevitable betrayals of desire reveal the true object of desire that is not the body but the other's desire and recognition. It is the repeated failure of desire to achieve recognition and identity that is productive in its revelation of the lack that founds and reconfigures subjectivity. Desire is thus revealed in its irreducibly inter-subjective and social dimensions that in neither being eliminated nor entirely satiated, becomes the medium and instrument of self-transformation and progress. It is the experience of betrayed and dissatisfied desire that compels the protagonists of the following texts to recognize and constantly strive to overcome their abjection to potentially achieve self-identity.

The following texts enact a common scenario of desire: the sole male protagonist renounces the inauthenticity of his privileged existence in search of authenticity and change. In his deceptive sexual encounters with several abject women, the male protagonist and the women are mutually transformed by their struggle to attain the other's desire and recognition. The struggle compels them to acknowledge the impossibility of ever satiating or eliminating the abject lack, which structures and reproduces desire. The male protagonist plays an enabling factor within a system of creative labor that enables the women to sublimate their frustrated desires into action, which forms the very basis for self-transcendence and historical progress. Action in the form of creative work or labor sublimates desire to produce a shared objective validation of the (abject) self that potentially enables self-realization.

For the purposes of this chapter, I turn to G.W.F. Hegel's dialectical concept of desire that he develops in *The Phenomenology of the Spirit* and Lacan's own concept of desire, which he derives from Hegel. In *The Phenomenology of the Spirit* desire is the agent of historical development. For Hegel, historical development or dialectical change is provided by a postulate of self-consciousness, a self-identical being that constantly needs an objective validation of its own existence. It sees its object only in terms of negativity, as a thing to be used, transformed and obliterated through desire. It is only when the object of this self-consciousness turns out to be another human self-consciousness that history (as dialectical overcoming) can be said to begin: it is only from the 'moment' there is contradiction and dialectical antagonism that history and thus development and change become possible. In the section of *The Phenomenology* called 'Lordship and Bondage', Hegel enacts the struggle for recognition between two similar beings. Human self-consciousness can potentially achieve an objective confirmation of itself only through another self-consciousness fundamentally the same as itself, which requires the self-consciousness to recognize it as a subject in turn. Indeed, each must be prepared to risk its animal life and rise above its brute existence to attain the self-identity it craves. If one or both parties perish, self-consciousness does not gain the recognition of an other like itself, and thus reverts to its (mythical) proto-historical isolation and brute existence. It is only when one of the antagonists values autonomy and freedom, prestige and recognition more than animal life, when the subject is prepared to risk life itself; and when the other in turn values life above freedom—that is, when one

vanquishes the other in the struggle for pure prestige—history ‘begins’. The first becomes the master, the second, the bondsman or slave. The first now exists for himself; while the second now exists for another, for the master. The master is autonomous; the slave dependent. The master thus gains the recognition he needs to have his self-certainty objectively confirmed. The slave by contrast “binds himself completely to the things on which he depends”, thus becoming like a thing himself. Ironically, while the master is recognized as subject-for-himself by the slave, the master is not recognized by a subject that he himself recognizes or values as an equal self-consciousness. The slave’s recognition, in other words, has no value for the master, for it is a recognition bestowed by an object not by an Other.

In his introductory lectures to Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, Alexandre Kojève argues history belongs to and is made by the slave, and not the master. History is the consequence of the slave’s attempt to transcend the enslavement of that slavery by which he is bound. History is his supersession of himself as a slave. History is self-exceeding, self-transforming labor: the overcoming of the inertia of brute existence, the terror of subjection by the other or master, and the refusal of any idea of freedom and autonomy that is isolated from material self-sustaining and transforming labor, and self-productive social, political and intellectual life. For Kojève, history is the movement of transcendence, the acquisition of a lived truth of the subject in an inter-subjective and social-political world.

Kallam (Deception 1994)

Prakash’s first novel is preoccupied with the question of authenticity. The male protagonist Paranthamaraju is driven by his quest to discover the true identity of two correlated beings—woman and ancestral art—whose embodied existence is structured by deception. His attempts at discovering their authenticity only reveals the abjection that founds and potentially reconfigures subjectivity. The novel finally gestures at the possibility of an authentic life that lies in the renunciation of the very desire for self-identity and the sublimation of this desire in creative labor.

Abjection from the very opening scene of the novel functions as a temporal metaphor for historical change that interplays sameness and difference; the old and the new. The following passage correlates a ruined past with the constructive or productive possibilities of the future as simultaneous and mutual conditions. The hidden or incipient signs of vitality coexist with what otherwise appears to be the description of the ruined palace of the Tanjavur Maratha dynasty.

It was morning, it was Tanjavur; it was the palace; everything was old and dusty...centuries old... everything crumbling... The smell of bat droppings that could not be seen seemed to pervade the place...moss that from the rain had spread over the solid four foot tall, century old, crumbling slake lime walls, had now faded and blackened, and had again reemerged because of the rain and spread like a green pillow over the walls and crevices (Prakash, 25).

We also get a sense of the male protagonist Paranthamaraju’s uncertain appraisal of ancestral art on the walls of the royal palace that both evoke his awe for its once original value and identity and his awareness of its present state of disuse. The description of Paranthamaraju’s filthy and unkempt body lying in a drunken stupor in one of the dark hollows of the palace is continuous with the general mood of abject loss and destruction

invoked by the palace. Although he is apparently nostalgic for the irretrievable loss of an artistic world, he disavows its outmoded artistic values. His disavowal of the past is conditioned and confirmed by his disparaging dismissal of his father Minakshiraju's paintings, which no longer reflect the apparent originality of his ancestral heritage. Paranthamaraju, I suggest, embodies potential change from his temporal location at the interstices of his ancestral heritage and the new artistic possibilities of the future. During one of his arguments with his father, he confronts Minakshiraju with the synthetic value of his art that is neither original nor reflective of the social exigencies of the contemporary world. He accuses his father of producing imitative art although he is presently unable to offer an alternative form of contemporary art to counter his father's charge of hypocrisy.

[Paranthamaraju says] 'What artist? Have you begun your artistic practice? You cannot even draw a line by yourself. The one who drew (puttu) the jewelry for the Sita you draw was your grandfather Sitaraju. My grandfather Appalaraju...finally my father Minakshiraju sells the painting in a crafts exhibition in France for five or ten hundred thousand. And I, Paranthamaraju, scramble for money in the street, scratching my head wondering why I was born...Let's see you make a cut glass painting by yourself. Take the brush and show me you can draw a straight line...' His father replies 'Stop it! You don't have the guts to earn your own money. You have also spoiled that girl Lallu. You shameless fellow!...you ask me to draw a painting on my own, why would I say no? Like you say, let's see you draw a painting on your own. You ask me whenever you come asking for money... You aren't an artist. I'm the artist, the extractor of money. What have you achieved?...is there a town I haven't been to or artists I haven't seen...and you're asking *me* to draw a line. Hey I'll throw a mirror before you. Let's see you take the pieces of glass and stick them together to form a figure. I must have seen so many useless men like you....we have willingly given you so much...we have sacrificed the wealth we have saved over ages....' Paranthamaraju says, 'Why this unnecessary talk? I have already told you a thousand times. You don't have to accept me as an artist. You be the artist. That's enough. But the things you take abroad: Rama's corpse, Sita's corpse, Alilai Kannan's corpse and so on. For how long do you think they will continue buying these dead corpses?... They will buy the last *yon*i from India. Not because it's a *yon*i but because as you said just now, it's a *yon*i that belonged to your forefathers. If you want you can write your name below. You may think you have *deceived* the foreigner...it isn't as though they don't know that your paintings are merely glass pieces stuck together. It's all craftwork. You asked me to stick glass; I can do that in poetry, father. Do you know poetry? You have carefully preserved everything you learnt from your forefathers just like the way you brought Sarala from Rajapalayam and kept her. Don't be surprised that I said this. Everyone knows she is your kept woman...yes, she's sitting here. She says both you and I are her kept men. What's her age? Why have you kept her like this?...She sends seven or eight thousand rupees home. You make her sleep with you wherever you go. Don't misunderstand me, but there's an age even for her to sleep with you. *Have you thought of her merely as a body?* She says she is also keeping me. Do you know what this means?...Who besides me can tell you your mistakes? Who is there to show you the errors of your tradition and age?...Your unoriginal art, your soulless music, your disfigured sculptures; the painting that does not reflect your age will gather like a heap at your feet. You will not be there to see that disgrace, we will...' His father says, '...If you can earn for yourself that's enough for me. There's no need for you to talk about Sarala and her mother. Let's see you earn a few rupees on your own. Ever since your mother died I have given you everything you asked for. Forget all this art. Just study well....I know

someone everywhere. I said I would somehow make you a collector. But you refused. I asked you to become a doctor and offered to pay a lot and send you abroad to study but you said no. You said you would finish your BA but it ended up with no use and you refused to find a job...finally you said you would paint. You said you would join a painting school but did you finish that? You ran away in the third year. Then you scribbled some modern art and had an exhibition. Did anyone buy a painting? Just one. ...you said you would write a poem in the painting...you said you would make a collage and asked me what I knew...are you wondering what your father knows? Create modern art, I'm not saying no. Let's see you sell your art. Okay, you don't have to sell your paintings. Can people at least appreciate your work? Do those people understand your work? You just scribble a drawing and some poetry in a large canvas and say its painting-poetry or poetic painting. If asked you say it's existentialism or some nonsense...' (Prakash, 89-90)

The argument between father and son presents a challenge to the derivative authority of certain fetishized notions of tradition and history that constitute their apparent self-identity by excluding other artistic possibilities. Paranthamaraju's refusal to recognize the authenticity of his father's art poses a threat to a linear trajectory of traditional art that has hitherto posited its own *telos*. For Paranthamaraju, the future existence of his father's paintings is threatened by their inherent lack of value—they only apparently bear traces of the originality and life of their ancestral heritage but are now nothing but lifeless and obsolete objects whose value has been corrupted by commodification. Their indifference to the exigencies of the contemporary world threaten their ruinous end but their abject status is precisely what conditions the possibility of producing new forms of art that will challenge and reconfigure the fetishized authority and identity of the past. Paranthamaraju insinuates, and this becomes significant later in my discussion of the novel, the contemporary reinvention of traditional art and aesthetics to embody and symbolize the existential dimensions of the very sources of abjection that otherwise resist representation—hunger, desire, disease, poverty and death. Later in the novel, when Paranthamaraju trains a group of women flower sellers to produce art that symbolizes their own abjection, they are transformed by their creations that provide objective validations of their abject status. Thus the objective validation and shared recognition of abjection enables the possibility of self-remaking and social transformation.

Paranthamaraju's desire to recast ancestral art to reflect the more pressing urgencies of the contemporary world, which threaten the world's very existence, initially emerges as a reaction against traditional aesthetics' exclusive engagement with mythical and immortal subjects (Hindu deities and mythological figures in different postures) that are apparently resistant to change. But a more positive formulation of a contemporary form of art emerges first in the form of Paranthamaraju's abstract paintings and poetry that are deceptive inasmuch as they acknowledge (sexual) deception as a necessary precondition for the recognition of the irredeemable lack that structures and perpetuates desire. The following poem engages with adultery as a formal expression of the inherently social nature of human desire that is mediated by the other's desire in its direction to the same object. To desire an other's desire is to substitute the desiring subject for the value desired by this desire so that the value that the subject represents becomes what the other desires. Paranthamaraju suggests authenticity is paradoxically made possible by assuming the deceptive identity of a prostitute who seduces the world by embodying or simulating the desirable values she is imputed with precisely to rid the world of deception.

My job isn't to write poetry.

Adultery.
 Days of adultery.
 What else?
I don't have the seductive ways of the living world
 The subtle waves and tunes of poetry are not in my heart
 I am always a stranger to
 The brilliant light of the dream
 The talent of writing.
 I don't have the skills of sculpture making
 That drains the imagination
 Conquers dreams and achieves grace.
 To live and work
 To work and live
 The law of the world is for me something insignificant.
 Even then
 Sticking to the world
 Leaking,
 As a licking dog
 As a burdened mule
 Every day I sell myself,
I'm not ashamed of being the deceptive prostitute of the street who sells her body,
Because today in this society no job can exceed or redeem this standard.
 My job,
 Yes!
 Poetry, Adultery. (Prakash, 200-202)

Minakshiraju's artifice is not limited to his artwork but includes the refashioning of his secretary Sarala, once a poor, emaciated woman from his caste who "suddenly descended like a sculpted statue in a temple hall" (Prakash, 45). She is transformed, to Paranthamaraju's contempt, to a deracinated "body" whose suave and sexy self-fashioning is just another one of his father's synthetic creations and a mere advertisement for his art in international markets.

... she who had (first) come clad in a thin, coarse cotton sari was now refined, travelling abroad with his father. She had cut her hair and taken hot steam baths in beauty parlors abroad, she had her hair styled, had body massages and developed greater self-confidence that had made her body all the more curved and muscular giving it a look of suave indifference and complacency. Whiskey, pork, beef and foreign mushrooms had transformed her tastes...Paranthamaraju knew she had discarded her bodily needs before working there. Sarala was a man among men and a man among women; she wore a skirt and a sleeveless vest as she sweated exercising with her maid servants on the terrace at dawn; she swam in the evenings, did some gardening, bred fish and as if that weren't enough, owned several domestic cats. She did *poojas*. She called Brahmins and conducted *homas*. Without skipping any religious festival she observed fasts, rituals and so on. The only thing she never did was get intimate with Minakshiraju or Paranthamaraju (Prakash, 69-70).

Sarala's transformed appearance embodies the apparent integrity of masculinity at the cost of suppressing its abject femininity. Her sexual abstinence only legitimizes and reinforces her masculine integrity and authority. Her apparently unified appearance frustrates

Paranthamaraju's initial attempts to compel her to recognize her own artifice. In his later attempts to discover the 'true' Sarala beneath the embodied semblance of integrity, he resorts to sexual assaults and slander to foreshore her (sexual) vulnerability. He assaults her and insults her derivative authority when Minakshiraju entrusts Sarala with his finances and authorizes her to control Paranthamaraju's profligacy. He intentionally slanders her sexually innocent professional relationship with his father out of resentment for her pretense. He helplessly realizes he is unable to make his father and Sarala understand the deception that structures their relationship; the "falsity of their relationship", which is "the very reason for their relationship..." (Prakash, 89) His provocations to make Sarala confirm the truth of his sexual allegations elicit, to his initial shock, her defiant affirmation, "I'm his kept woman...just as you and your father are my kept men" (Prakash, 90). But the apparent truth of Sarala's confession actually confirms the fiction of self-identity. Paranthamaraju's triumphant and derisive laughter at her confession is a sign of his perceived success in dispelling Sarala's sexual dissimulation. The thought of being "easily stripped naked" by the exclusive power of "his rapid paintbrush" makes her momentarily feel vulnerable (Prakash, 75).

Paranthamaraju again threatens Sarala by challenging Minakshiraju—the source of her power and authority. When Paranthamaraju undermines his father's apparent authority, Sarala is threatened by the possibility of losing her own authority and security. Minakshiraju and Paranthamaraju are amazed by her emotional outburst that for the latter only reiterates her inability to recognize her own deceptive and embodied femininity. Paranthamaraju says,

Sarala, how will I make you understand that you aren't merely a woman? Are you going to prove that you're a woman too by crying? She could've defeated you earlier, father! You could have handed over your business to her earlier like the way you chose her for your work. How many disguises! How many masks! What's all this? A pretense to deceive me? (Prakash, 89)

Once Minakshiraju leaves the studio, Sarala turns to Paranthamaraju for recognition. She is confronted by the threatening dissolution of her own dissimulation that she had anticipated now embodied in Paranthamaraju. She is rendered vulnerable even as she is inexorably fascinated by his spectacularly abject presence as she literally embraces her abjection by embracing Paranthamaraju, an act that momentarily frees her of artifice and renews her. The following description captures the apparent suspension of time and the erasure of the spatial limits of their bodies in that 'purificatory' moment of renewal that collapses her identity only to remake it. While Sarala is provisionally transformed and authenticated by the recognition of her own lack in/through Paranthamaraju, he is confronted by his own self-alienation. Through their encounter, he acknowledges his longing to discover the truth of his own being.

That which she had *anticipated* for twenty years now stood before her, terrifying. That which had weakly hit her and fallen a little earlier; that which she had *for so many years* indifferently trampled and pushed far away; that with which she had become familiar now overturned on her like a massive form; a huge Meru. She struggled to rise. She wasn't prepared to fall and cry and slide again and again...the merciful darkness that had fallen on her; the smell of alcohol, the stench of sweat, dirt; *Paranthamaraju who lived in that moment*; she rose to push and turn him away with disgust...how did that happen? *She spewed that desire and became purified*...how did her fragrantly perfumed body sink in that sewage? How did she

swallow the dirty ball that she has pushed away? How did her feet, her arms, her sari, her breath and her life betray her? Sarala, how did you cut and sacrifice yourself? ...Who was defeated in those three minutes? Who knows? He did not expect her to rise and embrace him tightly. It was a blinding moment that everyone experiences—*when these shes who could vanquish everything were unable to defeat themselves...Will it never happen to me?*...He emerged as he was reminded of Sarala's sweat impressed on his chest and dirty hands. He had to separate Sarala's hands from his and separate her from him...the dust of the red earth from his body defined her face, breasts and shoulders as though her skin had been cut and molded. (Prakash, 91-92)

Paranthamaraju considers his mercenary father more estranged from his art than Babi—a prostitute he accidentally encounters at the palace—is from the body she sells. However Babi, like Sarala, still embodies the sexual pretense of (prostitutional) femininity that can potentially never be self-same without recognizing its constitutive history and historicity. His first perception of Babi traces the misfortunate historical demise of her ancestors—a lineage of courtesan-dancers who danced for the Nayaka rulers—from when they fled the Konkan following the defeat of the Vijayanagara Empire to Babi's sexual decadence. There is a clear disjuncture in his perception of Babi's adorned body that like the paintings on the broken palace walls conjure a rather idealized and seemingly organic royal world and her sexual indulgence that infuses this ideal with sexual artifice. The narrator further echoes Paranthamaraju's disparagement of Babi's self-indulgence that represses her victimhood at the hands of a violent husband. Her courage and resilience, the narrator remarks, is forgotten once she comes to Tanjavur to earn her living as a prostitute. There is a suggestion of contempt for her sexual arrogance and apparent integrity that undermines any admiration that the narrator may have had for her former fearlessness and pride. Note that the following passage echoes the earlier description of Sarala's seemingly virile autonomy.

A couple of glasses of foreign whiskey helped her [tolerate] the actions of two effeminate politician thugs tugging at her blouse and skirt all night long before putting them back on...men were not new to Babi. She kn[ew] the scents of different kinds of men over the past ten years. First Maratha, then Brahmanan, then Tamil, and then someone else—it was just this arrogance that was left (Prakash, 25-27).

Babi is initially alarmed to see the inebriated Paranthamaraju lying on the floor of the palace and threatened by the possibility of jeopardizing her livelihood as a prostitute. But when she discovers he is the son of an internationally renowned and wealthy painter, she turns apologetic and tries to seduce him. But he interprets her attempt as a dissembling and corrupting sign of greed and insults her beauty before dismissing her. Later in the novel, we see a more explicit staging of Babi's attempt to seduce Paranthamaraju that becomes a violent struggle to achieve self-identity by overcoming the other; a struggle that confirms the impossibility of having a sexual relationship that is not based on some necessary but imaginary notion of sexual identity. Although Paranthamaraju tries to resist Babi's sexual advances, he is betrayed by irrepressible signs of bodily pleasure while Babi's disappointed efforts to overcome and consummate her desire for him mark her failed femininity. Paranthamaraju perceives his inability to control his bodily desires as a sign of his self-alienation and lack of self-control, "He saw a long milky white stain run down his trousers" (Prakash, 108). He wonders "if he is deceiving himself when he is repelled by Babi's stinking body when his own body is defiled" (Prakash, 108). Babi is later possessed by

insecurity when she secretly witnesses her servant Jamna seduce Paranthamaraju without “stripping naked or making sexual advances” (Prakash, 110).

He laments his inability to definitively dispel Sarala and Babi’s sexual artifice to his dead mother, “Lochana! The mother who gave birth to me! I’m unable to unearth and give you what women like you are waiting to get from my body...” (Prakash, 74) Paranthamaraju’s recurrent longing for his dead mother Lochana represents the fantasy of the abject mother who constitutes a seductive and unattainable source of desire and pleasure that determines and sustains Paranthamaraju’s insatiable desire for (her) recognition and change. Later in the novel, Paranthamaraju admits to Sarala, it is his mother’s “impossible love” that “made him desire every woman which is something he cannot make anyone else understand” (Prakash, 200). Paranthamaraju’s suspicion of Sarala’s and Babi’s sexual artifice is contrasted by his indeterminate desire for Jamna who seemingly symbolizes his abject mother.

her peaceful, sympathetic and fearless face...*She could be two years younger than Babi.* But she was a servant. She worked in the Tanjavur palace. His eyes dulled in tears; *she looked ten years older* than Babi; with her hair slightly graying and her breasts hanging, she looked like an unwed old woman who served royalty; a poor woman; some kind of a slave. Woman has always been subordinate. *In any country. In any age.* Paranthamaraju *didn’t need to know Jamna’s history...* he stared at her. The several crumpled folds of her black skirt that spoke to him *for centuries*; the old floral printed cotton sari stained with dirt; the end of her sari that veiled her face; her fingernails all dirty. The smell of cloves from her body and her arms and feet that had paled with work. For no reason his eyes moistened...he finally made a mistake—he tightly embraced Jamna to his chest, leaned her against the wall—his head burned—*without any reason or interest*—all unkempt—he kissed her in several places...was this Paranthamaraju’s first experience of a woman? With a dirty servant woman? This isn’t experiencing a woman. She could appear worse than Babi or Lallu. Or she may have a vital pulse that is clearer than Jamna’s. Jamna! *Which century do you belong to? Aah... It seems Jamna and my mother, were among the many dissembling women from any century.* It’s disgusting. A beastly union that disturbs the relationship between man and woman, and has been shaved bare; completely stripped naked. Jamna doesn’t have Babi’s happiness, her tricks, her commerce. *But the prostitute called life had sucked Paranthamaraju dry.* Paranthamaraju looked at his body in disgust...when he hugged Jamna, her sweat, the fragrance of cloves and the body that had hardened with work and was prepared to do anything was missing in her breasts. *When he embraced her, her breasts were cold and hanging emptinesses making him shrink. What provoked him to hug her and kiss her? He had never kissed anyone else except his mother which is why Jamna was bitter* (Prakash, 44-50).

Paranthamaraju’s perception of Jamna’s betrays a tension between her actual person, and what she apparently embodies, which is the universal state of abjection that has historically characterized the lives of women everywhere. Unlike Sarala and Babi, Jamna’s degraded and laboring body for Paranthamaraju, embodies change and transformation, which, like the Tanjavur palace, correlates youth and old age, degradation and sinewy vitality, identity and difference, authenticity and deception. She is as embodied in her historical particularity as she transcends time and history to evoke a disembodied and indeterminate sense of universality that resists interpretation. Although she is identified with the deception that supposedly structures female embodiment, it is precisely her deceptiveness that betrays desire and reveals the irredeemable lack that structures identity. The touch of Jamna’s

laboring body disillusion his desire that is not really directed to her body. The desirable quality of Jamna's body eludes him and there is a suggestion later in the novel that Jamna is never the object of Paranthamaraju's desire but the potential of desire itself to affect change and create history.

Paranthamaraju's desire is repeatedly evoked and betrayed by Jamna's touch—on the one hand, he surrenders to the pleasurable sensuality of her selfless and submissive devotion that seemingly substitutes his idealized mother, and on the other, he is suspicious of her sexual deception. Although he is convinced of Jamna's artifice, her touch conveys her authenticity that is confirmed by her sexual victimhood at the hands of violent male clients. For Paranthamaraju, her abject existence ennobles her and signals the possibility of renewal. He associates Jamna's abject body with images of ancestral loss, suffering and poverty when his ancestors fled the Vijayanagara Empire following its defeat to the Bhamini Sultans only to be forgotten when India won its independence from the British. The intoxicating *paayas* Jamna feeds him at the palace and the sound of female workers speaking his mother tongue Telugu, trigger delirious fantasies of his mother's abject life, first, as the daughter of a sculptor who was one of the many ancestors who died of disease and then as a poor, subordinate palace worker. Jamna's presence invokes the irredeemable destruction and loss of a royal world in the form of an ancient painting, "Tanjavur's Serfoji Maharaja, Jamna's mother, grandmother, tabla, sarangi, that age, a century" (Prakash, 106). Paranthamaraju perceives one of the moss covered broken walls of the palace as a symbol of the abject past that threatens the disillusionment of all desire, meaning and identity. Jamna's imputed authenticity confronts him with the realization of his own self-deception.

That wall called out to him cruelly. The cushioned wall exposed to heat and covered with moss seemed to open its mouth wide open and its thickness stirred within him a cloud of sorrow and pain. He clearly saw in triangles, the world's stupidity, which had been deceived by man about the meaning of life; *his stupidity that had deceived Jamna* and pushed and rolled her aside" (Prakash, 107).

Jamna secretly witnesses Babi's attempt to overpower Paranthamaraju. The involuntary loss of his self-control to Babi's sexual overtures reminds Jamna of muscular Maratha pole climbers (*malkambam*) who consume meat and abstain from sex to devote themselves exclusively to their sport. She remembers hearing stories about the pole climbers' inability to have sexual intercourse with their smaller Tanjavur Maratha wives because of the enormity of their muscular thighs (Prakash, 122-123). Jamna identifies the apparently abstinent pole climbers with Paranthamaraju who, the narrator suggests, was a pole climber whose muscular "body ha[d] been fed with marijuana, *paayas* and liquor but was unblemished by sex...he ha[d] never had a sexual relationship with a woman." (Prakash, 123) Jamna takes advantage of the contradiction between Paranthamaraju's passion for her and his apparent abstinence to realize her own freedom from Babi. She discovers he is indispensable to her and willingly surrenders herself as a "faithful subordinate *dasi*" (Prakash, 124). She postures self-effacement to win his faith and seemingly reassures the loss of his integrity with apparent pleasure, "Who said you're useless? *Maharaj*, when you kicked me today it hurt for three hours, do you know? How amazing, when you pull my hand the pain just disappears. *I know, don't deceive me*" (Prakash, 125). She realizes she has to be strategic like the pole-climbers who "have to become poles themselves until they strike the right balance with the oiled poles they climb...[like] a husband and wife attaining an equitable balance before they grow intimate." (Prakash, 124)

Jamna, unlike Babi, wields a seductive power over Paranthamaraju that is encoded by her willed enactments of powerlessness. She is certain of securing with his protection, her freedom from Babi in exchange for her own body. Her seductive attempts to pleasure him, “the smell of her body that smells of cloves, sweat and dirt” and “her faint voice asking him to be sympathetic to her” arouse and sustain his violent passion (Prakash, 128). His desire is only intensified by her apparent protests that suggest her potential freedom lies in her body’s ability to work and labor, “Leave me. I’m a prostitute. I have no one—I’m an orphan. Anyone can do anything to me. I have to work to survive, if I lose my hands and legs it doesn’t matter. Don’t do anything to me Maharaj. Babi is standing at the staircase, leave me” (Prakash, 126-127). She seemingly relinquishes her body to his violent desire even as she claims her body is her only means of survival.

Jamna’s apparent impotence both reassures and undermines Paranthamaraju’s integrity. Her semblance of transparency and her insinuation of his ingenuity only compel him to recognize his own inscrutability. He is suddenly seized by an impotent impulse to destroy the dissimulation of the world to discover ‘the truth’. In his “fury, anger and helplessness”, he is determined to “break the painting”; dispel the “conspiracy of this age” by “tearing Jamna, break Babi’s triangle, crush Sarala’s essence, and remove Lallu’s phlegm...crush and carve out father’s, god’s and his own essence” (Prakash, 106-107). The following quote reiterates Paranthamaraju’s faith in the ability of art to represent the ultimate forms of abjection—hunger and death—that historically divide and identify humans across time and space.

How many triangles are burning in Sri Lanka, Angola, Nagasaki, East Berlin, Pretoria and Congo? How many helmets cover the overturned milestones? How many crosses on the side? A heap of crosses that cannot be buried. Like ants, like germs, how many triangles of corpses? Am I Paranthamaraju? I have to say all this in my paintings! Oh Man of tomorrow! Why do you hide your selfishness? You know where your heart is. You have more reasons to die than live. I today experience the sorrowful pains of your age that take me ahead. Do you think my inert sorrow will not reach you? My voice will sound throughout the ages. My art will sing of this. My poem’s poverty will reflect this. My disguise will prove this. I’m not a body. I’m not a mind. That reason. An only soul. Don’t tease me. Don’t threaten me with hunger. Don’t kick me with food. *I and you are one in any age. One within one. One mixed with the other. When separated we are within each other.* Just a palace. Fearful poverty... (Prakash, 100)

The artistic representation of the inherently unrepresentable quality of abjection resists meaning or interpretation. Paranthamaraju’s artistic creations share an obsession with abstract signs like the triangle that I suggest, symbolize the inexorable rhythms of destruction and creation that characterize the transformative possibilities of abjection. The triangle of abjection traces the recurring regeneration of the world; the constant renewal of self and meaning to undo their ideological fiction. With a nail, he draws on the wall

white, brilliant, long triangles on the mossy wall that transcend time...his aggressive lines and furious meanings spread over the ages as echoes in triangles of the questions of humankind that repeatedly died and birthed. (Prakash, 108)

He ends up furiously drawing a picture of courtesans dancing in the palace hall. When the other prostitutes emerge from the dark corners of the ruined palace to see the drawing, they

are, unlike Jamna's innocent excitement, terrified by what they immediately interpret as a sign of the complete annihilation of the world; as the absolute existential crisis of abjection that will visit them in the form of death.

terror, a terror that destroys everything, tries to destroy everything...[they] disappeared muttering in the dark corners with the embarrassment of seeing a stranger and the fear of approaching death, scolding Jamna in Marathi and looking at Paranthamaraju in panic. (Prakash, 110)

The novel stages a series of disillusionments that ultimately gesture at the possibility of authentic life through the renunciation of the very desire for self-identity. Jamna and Paranthamaraju move to a locality of poor flower sellers, a space where the transformative possibilities of abjection are realized through creative forms of labor and art. Jamna immerses herself in the potentially self-divesting rhythms of labor to possibly transcend her desire for Paranthamaraju. While Jamna spends all her time making flower garlands and dolls, Paranthamaraju eschews alcohol and food in order to constantly realize the irredeemable lack that structures and perpetuates human desire and existence; a lack that Jamna symbolizes. He is unable to renounce his desire for Jamna "whose thought is intoxicating..." (Prakash, 134) because she "is his hunger, his fasting, his food" (Prakash, 227). His sensual abstinence enables him to recognize the possibility of remaking an abject world characterized by poverty and starvation. When a poor artist discovers he is Minakshiraju's estranged son and refuses to accept his offer to make a cut glass painting of the goddess Kali, Paranthamaraju welcomes this disappointment as an opportunity to transcend his body and shed his hitherto privileged status by embracing abjection. He acknowledges the potentiality of abjection to internally reconfigure an abject world.

No use. Nobody gave him anything. It had become dark. Hunger...starvation...ate yesterday. What an ordeal? He laughed. What's a bigger ordeal than this? *Hunger...he really needed this. He clearly knew his father was the reason for the life he lived until today. I cannot live anymore because of him.* I should not. His eyes darkened. He discovered an ordeal through Jamna. The next thing was not the dust of his body. *The body had to be split. Its cloud had to be split. The reason for living had to be discovered and torn in another way. If that wasn't possible, a new meaning for life should be created.* Or it should be buried in absence. *Everything has been created out of nothing after all. There is nothing that has been created from the beginning. Something can be scientifically created from something else. Something cannot be created isn't it?* Hunger...darkening eyes...so many hundreds of thousands of starvation deaths in our country...on the African coast, how many black children from how many countries in skin and bones stretching their arms to the sky... (Prakash, 146)

Paranthamaraju initially idealizes the seemingly transparent and hardworking lives of the flower selling women whose embodied struggle for survival even preempts the possibility of acknowledging their wretched lives, "they don't have the time for it...the fire of hunger dissolves in it." (Prakash, 139)

Later he is disillusioned during his conversation with one of the flower sellers, Rajalakshmi. Rajalakshmi is incredulous when he claims to have known Jamna ever since she was thirteen. When she suspects him of lying, he accuses her of not telling his friend Natarajan with whom she had an affair, of her husband's elopement with another woman. He

confesses he has known her from the time she was a teenager who was romantically pursued by a taxi driver. Paranthamaraju idealizes the unconditional freedom of his honest and open relationship with Jamna that exceeds the ideological identity of marital monogamy and fidelity.

It is usual for a bad time to turn into a fortunate one only to turn to loss and destruction. Jamna didn't run away with me. Did you know that I brought her here? I'm fine with the way she is. Do you know how I brought her here? I'm fine with her going wherever she pleases or being the way she wants. I'll not be sad if she decides to go with someone else. She is happy no matter what I do. The reason why I'm telling you all this is that you don't start blabbering about how well you know Jamna. Let's be happy as long as we're together. 'Tying the tali', 'cohabiting', 'my husband', 'my wife', 'don't go here and there', 'I saw you there', 'I saw you here', 'she was his kept woman today or yesterday'—Jamna is not one to succumb to all this. We have come away knowing all this. Jamna will not be jealous or upset if you sleep with me now or if I elope with you. *She will never hide anything or lie or secretly keep a man and marry someone else. I'm telling you this because I like your lives. You eat when you are hungry. You work hard all day. Why lie? Why lie in this community of yours that lives transparently without masks or disguises with anyone they want and separate whenever they want?* How does it matter who you live with? Natarajan is my friend. He has told me a lot about you. I told him to live with you for as long as possible. He became a coward thinking of his mother and sister. So what if your husband ran away? You could've told him everything. Not just you, people like you have only one solution for those who conceal things; those who hide and deceive loved ones. When they return one day someone will chop someone's head off. (Prakash, 142)

In his interpretation of one of his paintings, Paranthamaraju expresses his anxious hope that humanity is never deprived of the power of desire to affect change and create history. His enormous glass painting depicts an all powerful demon that represents the world consuming and regenerative power of human hunger that can neither be gratified nor destroyed. His painting embodies the insatiability of desire that constantly reconfigures meaning and subjectivity. Whereas Paranthamaraju recognizes the possibility of transcending abjection through his sensual abstinence, the women flower sellers' attempt to embrace and transcend abjection through labor that conditions the possibility of their self-remaking.

the guardian of the world that constantly dies and is reborn...the guardian of birth!
The guardian of destruction! ...he was a symbol of the poor people who are living now...it's not just hunger. The destruction of hunger lies in its subduing. The suffering of desire only fades with the subduing away of the demon. *Devi Mahamayi stays within us in the form of desire, in the form of hunger; oh hunger! Never recede. Oh poverty! I have not come to defeat you.* The demon flies with outspread hands and legs because poverty can no more be destroyed as the engagements of these superstitious people who cannot know my knowledge and the affection in my heart. A million universes—ending swirling ignorance—how many differences? All forms of hunger. Moving motion—hunger...I salute you always. *Burn in me always everywhere and remove my ignorance.* Oh demon! I stopped in search of god...I touched Shiva...everything, a dream. The ocean of erotic desire swelled into the cauldron of sewage. When women opened their cauldrons to me I drowned in my cauldron. ...Jagadeeswari your hips aren't enough for me...your erotic desire isn't

sufficient to suppress me...my lust is sewage...a fecal heap...*when they are hungry and have nothing to eat... they sleep with their husbands or with their neighbors or with someone they don't know... without any desire, they knowingly or unknowingly stoke the fire of their desires.* A mouthful of food is enough. The next day another mouthful or even half of that is enough, no morality for them. If this day passes they are supremely happy. *The only difference between me and them—I understand these things but still wander while they wander without understanding this. Is it good for them to understand this? Or is it good not to understand this? 'Being—Nothingness'—this is the eternal tune...* (Prakash, 184-185)

Like Paranthamaraju, Sarala is equally transformed by her first encounter with Jamna. The sight of Jamna's slender beauty makes her conspicuously stand out from the other slum dwellers. She is amazed to see her wearing a *tali*—an apparent sign of her married status that she is forced to wear by one of the flower sellers, Ramalakshmi. The seductive appeal of Jamna's abjection is recalled by the sight of her body that instantly threatens Sarala's sense of self. Sarala assumes Jamna is married to Paranthamaraju and is momentarily transformed into an embodiment of contrition. She is filled with a sense of personal loss and realizes only alcohol can "remedy" the possibility of losing her identity. She tells Paranthamaraju, "I want you. I need you. Why should I lie? I have lost my self. I'm going to leave this country soon. I have lost my identity. Raju, where am I? My life has collapsed like a mud *gopuram*" (Prakash, 205). Paranthamaraju claims "he has lost himself in Jamna" and "only has to get rid of his body before potentially attaining freedom from meaning and identity." (Prakash, 205) His affirmation of the destructive and constructive power of Jamna's abjection is suddenly confirmed by a sign from nature—a swirling storm raises a blinding cloud of sand and tosses a stack of hay in the air only to build a pillar. Sarala loses her former contempt for the poor slum dwellers and her decision to live with them arouses Paranthamaraju's fear of possibly never renouncing desire and identity. Sarala confides in Paranthamaraju about Jamna's fearful entreaties to take him away before he threatens her attempt to transcend her own desire for him.

Through her experience of Jamna and Paranthamaraju, Sarala discovers the impossibility of entirely satisfying desire. Desire and longing, Sarala realizes, have to be merely experienced and endured if one has to constantly be aware of the fiction of self-identity that necessarily structures social reality. It is the constant striving to redeem the lack of identity that makes change and progress possible.

...she is even ready to lose you. But she can no longer lose you. In fact she is experiencing you from a distance. Do you know why? She can never lose you. She is never the Jamna who is not merged with you. She is not divine. She is not living in the imagination. Without you, she, that small girl Lallu, Ramalakshmi and I—none of us would be. We are not your concubines. We are not your lovers. But we are certainly yours—the ultimate—ten days earlier I wouldn't have understood this...this is something Jamna taught me. This cannot be understood; it can only be felt if souls merge. I don't have words for this phenomenon. But this is an infinity that any person can easily achieve and end happily. I no longer have any worries. Henceforth, even if you—Raju—and everyone cease to be I'll ceaselessly, solitarily, immortally live like a god...no one else can experience you the way Jamna and I have. Raju! You are an ordinary artist. But these people—all these women—no matter how cheap their lives are, they are excellent artists even if they are otherwise useless. If you and Jamna are unable to understand and experience each other completely it's because of your excellent artistic knowledge. If I hadn't come here or seen you again, I would have

borne burdens that I don't have in my heart and cried, 'I'm alone. I have been thrown into a muddy island for no reason'...I would have been burned by the fire of my growing sorrow and struggle had I lamented like you on the roadsides, in the Maratha palace and by the sewers, 'Everything is false, everything is a disguise, deception, nothing will last'. Now everything is one for me. I have reached you. I will not lament or cry out for you because I have found Jamna...I cannot leave Jamna...if you measured the sky with your finger it means the demon (of hunger) is pulling us up... I haven't experienced hunger. I have not been burnt by fire. But I know all that. I understand that...You, I, the demon and Jamna ...are not different...if you think I'm just standing in a place, wandering and singing without knowing how much further I've to go, you're my Raju. (Prakash, 215-216)

Paranthamaraju is the enabling factor in a regime of artistic activity that enables the women to sublimate their desire in the shared production of an objective validation of their abject selves. He deploys seduction to evoke and sublimate their betrayed desires towards the self-transformative production of art. The generalized simulation of his desire for all the women, including Jamna, reduces them to substitutable objects of his hypothetical desire, compelling them, in the process, to recognize their own self-alienated and abject status. This recognition crucially conditions the possibility of embodying and remaking their abject existence through art. Art, I argue, is the sublimation of a certain collective crisis in subjectivity that forms the basis for all re-creation.

Sarala turned and scared, went to the courtyard of the hut. Ramalakshmi kept looking at him; Sarala and Ramalakshmi had understood each other very well. With the wetness of Sarala's lips still on his (Paranthamaraju) lips, he slipped near Ramalakshmi and touching her lips with his sucked her saliva as though he were sucking her breath and life. Although that insolent act enraged Ramalakshmi, his lips that smelled of the morning's meat crushed her anger like small sour grapes. Although Sarala's betrayal shocked Ramalakshmi, Raja Paranthamaraju had from the very beginning imprisoned her. What kind of a man was he? What was his worth? That was Ramalakshmi's long asked question. Although he had said he would give her a child some day, there were no signs of it. *He is deceiving everyone. But still no one could stop getting deceived.* Because everything that those women were supposed to get in every period of their life had been denied. The women there had no faith in their men. The men there would quickly push the women into a pit. The pit would cave them in. Within four days or a month at most of their marriages, their husbands would not be there. Paranthamaraju tried to train the men in Tanjavur painting but they were only slightly willing. But the women were not like that. Paranthamaraju bonded with them very easily. He familiarized Sarala with painting. Within six or seven months the women were ready. He provoked the feelings of all the women. He confronted them separately and troubled and provoked their femininity that had been rendered lifeless by poverty, hunger, disease, social control. Of the upper caste Maratha women he had seen at the Tanjavur palace—their artistic sensibility—the lust that naturally rises in the blood of every subordinate caste—had not been expressed as artistic sensibility. Paranthamaraju isn't merely an expert at painting. He isn't a womanizer. No one in any age will ever understand that *he has created them by keenly using their sexual desires as a means of expressing the ancient, aggressive but wonderful art that they don't know is in their blood.* Everyone including Sarala was scared of him but could not know him. Paranthamaraju was like a snake in a pit when it came to revealing himself. Because she knew this, Jamna is never trapped by him. Sarala anticipating an opportunity fell for it...that the women's

provoked lust was the reason for their new art that shattered old, ancient traditions and customs was unknown to the French, German and English critics who praised their art to the skies...if one looked up at the ceiling (of the temple) one would be aroused by the apparent feeling of being embraced by a woman. But if one looked close, one would realize from the stripes of blue and red glass pieces that the woman one saw isn't a *gopi* and suddenly realize it is Krishna himself. If one looked sharply, signs of very modern art like the sight of every woman entering Krishna and countless overlapping *yonis*, would remind one of the problems of the modern age. The deep red colored and hairy testicles of masculinity made of dark black glass prevented them from being discovered easily. (Prakash, 245-246)

The frustration of their desires for Paranthamaraju compels the flower selling women to internalize him. On one of his trips back from selling paintings, he is accompanied by one of the women Sippi Vellai, who secretly longs to bear his child as a sure sign of her internalization of him. But he disappoints her and tries to make her understand the essentially deceptive nature of the body and desire whose sexual consummation can never really affect the absolute identity of two individuals without reinstating their fragmentation. Desire, Paranthamaraju suggests, is structured by an insatiable lack that reproduces desire. He advises Sippi Vellai to practice abstinence and suggests only sexual or romantic fantasies can truly liberate her from certain ideological forms of exclusive desire and identity like marital monogamy and motherhood.

You're beautiful now. You play with me. If you have a child all this will disappear. It's a disguise. It's a disguise everyone puts on...you know the happiness that is got from a man and a woman sleeping together is all a disguise. The moment the disguise is removed they separate and hunger on their own...all the women say you are my kept woman...' [Sippi Vellai says] 'It's alright if you don't marry me. But if you leave me I'll die. I'm a low caste dog, a stinking prostitute...' Paranthamaraju hugged her and wiping her eyes, with a shaky voice said in her ears, 'I'm keeping you, you dog!...but I cannot keep you like this forever, not just you...but all those who wished to be kept by me...they all want me for themselves and are stripping and dragging me to a dark corner...it will take me just ten minutes to lie and roll with you in bed. But I've already stripped you completely. Everyone may not understand this like you...*it's enough if you think I can give you anything you ask for...having a child is just an identification mark...the disguises will all disappear one by one in thin air*'... [Paranthamaraju quickly kisses Sippi Vellai in the crowded bus before anyone can notice them]... [Sippi Vellai realizes the truth of Paranthamaraju's words as she thinks of all the men in her life who desire her] 'Marriage, children, desire, love—these were only suited to cinema. (Prakash, 236-238)

Similarly, another flower seller Ramalakshmi asks him for a child in return for the money she lent him to make a glass painting of Kali, a desire that he apparently promises to fulfill. He encourages her to substitute her desire with the ultimate fantasy of love where the desire for anyone can be potentially satisfied.

Ramalakshmi, forgive me. I cannot give you what you want. But there's one thing. I'm greedy for you; not just you. My dear calf! My golden princess! I'm greedy for Sippi Vellai, Subramani Kutti. What's her name? I've forgotten. The one who helped me all night sticking golden threads. Karuppi. I desire everyone—Karuppi, that Nachi girl, everyone who comes to string flowers. I'm crazy about you. You have

confessed your desire to me darling! If they hear this the men on your street will rush to kill you. But let me tell you something. The child you asked for, do you really want a child or do you want to sleep with me? Do you know what Rajalakshmi asked me the day I arrived? Am I a *Manmatha* [The god of love]? Or am I a womanizer? I will not leave without fulfilling your desire someday. You will naturally desire all those men who look at you with desire. If you desire everyone and love everyone it's like sleeping with everyone. In my dreams, we always lie together and I embrace you... (Prakash, 179)

Sippi Vellai and Ramalakshmi are unable to avoid Paranthamaraju who overworks them “like slaves” despite the latter’s forthcoming marriage to her maternal uncle. Ramalakshmi claims he is her savior who “bought her freedom”. It is her internalization of the creative force of “Paranthamaraju’s virility” that enables her to construct a statue of Valmuni, one of their gods, that leads to a rediscovery of their “forgotten mythology...their inherent, forgotten artistry.” (Prakash, 260) The massive statue of the deity with a tall horn on his head reaching the sky seems to suggest “the liberation of her mind” (Prakash, 260). Valmuni is a shared objective validation of their community’s abject status. Sippi Vellai and Vellaamma are amazed to discover they have both imagined the same form of Valmuni. The people realize Valmuni embodies their longings and is a formidable representation of their suffering and indignation.

Jamna is unsettled and deceived by Paranthamaraju whose seductive behavior towards the other women belies his professed abstinence. She longs to discover ‘the real Paranthamaraju’ in all his vulnerability and secretly hopes one of the flower sellers discovers the truth of his desire in their moments of intimacy. She internalizes Paranthamaraju in her longing and is compelled to admit the impossibility of fulfilling her desire for him. She realizes “the happiness of being consumed and possessed by him is not to be got from the body...although Paranthamaraju’s nerves could give her the demonic strength and this happiness only through the body that was under his control”, she is “happy like him with his careless, effortless, meaningless sorrow like a bird wandering the town; the danger of all women desiring him, the asceticism of speaking about everything with everyone or saying nothing at all; his needless lamentations; his hunger, starvation...” (Prakash, 189-190) Jamna realizes she can ‘possess’ Paranthamaraju only by transcending her longing for his exclusive desire and recognition. She tries to excise her femininity to free herself of her bodily existence by “sleeping on her chest” to “destroy her breasts” until she could “remove them from her body” (Prakash, 217). She tries to suppress her sensual memories of Paranthamaraju. Her liberation from bodily existence becomes possible precisely when she sublimates her desire in the embodied rhythms of work and labor. “She achieves liberation” even as she is “subordinated” by her body (Prakash, 217).

Artistic activity becomes instrumental in symbolizing and reconstituting the women’s abject subjectivities. Through the collective objectification of art, the women flower sellers symbolize the existential dimensions of abjection that otherwise resists representation. The artistic installations that Paranthamaraju and the women create formalize the inevitable power of abjection to repeatedly destroy and reconfigure social reality. Paranthamaraju’s realization of the inexorable force of abjection to remake the world is formalized by his insatiable longing for his abject mother.

life will not spare anyone. Decline and progress are its destiny. Development and decline are its rhythm....such foolishness to be in the grips of the hope for an

unending existence. What is going to last? Which painting, which poem, which sculpture, the tune of which song, will surpass this? Mother! The mother who gave birth to me! Tell me mother, where are you? (Prakash, 90)

He tells his father of the futility of the efforts of the present generation to exist in an abject world. He claims his modern art is an expression of this struggle for survival. He suggests his art is a simulation and not a copy of ancestral art. His art is a reconfiguration of traditional art that not only attacks the obsolescence and futility of temples and gods but addresses the possibility of “curing hunger and sexual desire.” (Prakash, 264) The following passage suggests the future of art lies in acknowledging the modern subject’s struggle for survival and recognition. He reduces his father to a diminished figure of impotence, and the traditional past that he represents is discarded. He tells his father,

You and your generation will not understand our sorrows. Our life is a struggle. Your lives are the wonders and specialties of a bygone generation. I cannot make you understand. We who swim in bottomless depths with our dreams unable to reach the surface, our weight wait to bury us in the earth. We only have our arms and legs to slash our weight in our art. We cannot swim to the surface without reducing our weight. If we want to reduce our weight we have to cut our own heads and legs. We have to cut ourselves and discover new heads, wings and legs for ourselves. Even if we reach the surface of the ocean we have to swim and even if we swim we cannot reach the shore. Even if we reach the shore we cannot climb up. We have to fly. We need wings. Sky...sky...blue...blue...even if we flap our wings, they will break in the sky and we will fall back down to the ocean’s waves ... (Prakash, 269)

The novel ends with Paranthamaraju’s departure to an unknown place. He realizes authentic self-identity is an unattainable fiction that one can only strive for and that true autonomy lies in realizing the interrelatedness between individuals that never promises absolute identity. When he conveys his decision to leave them, Sarala and Jamna resist their impulse to stop him and “tear their stomachs and bear him children” as a confirmation of his desire for them (Prakash, 284). A huge storm anticipates Paranthamaraju’s departure following a series of crises. Sulochana, one of the flower sellers commits suicide out of her inability to win Paranthamaraju’s exclusive love while Vellaiamma, another flower seller, elopes with a man to Madras to the chagrin of her family and the slum. Paranthamaraju decides to leave for an unknown place realizing the impossibility of personal authenticity and self-identity.

Unlike the other women, Sarala and Jamna potentially transcend their abjection and set up an art school where they dedicate themselves to teaching art to children. Towards the end of the novel, Paranthamaraju tells Sarala,

Sarala, this is something I’ve told you several times before. *This world isn’t enough for me. I don’t have enough time* not just to know, learn and experience but to also transform this world into art and fully embrace it. *Happiness isn’t important for me. Peace isn’t necessary and bliss isn’t needed.* The great wise people and sages of the world end up with: peace—order—sleep—yoga—tantra—rhythm—subordination and oppression (Islam)—uprising—in ascending scale (Aurobindo)—for everyone everything is collapsed and founded—straightening (communism)—whatever there is, is enough, what is left of whatever is, is enough, nothing else is needed (existentialism)—there’s nothing in everything—there’s nothing in anything, even you don’t know what I, a fool don’t know (skepticism). I don’t want answers to

questions. I don't want to be happy when I discover an answer to the question. Sarala! *I don't want to even understand anything. It's enough if I turn into 'that'. 'I' has to become 'that'. Is it possible to mix into everything and become everything?* This entire struggle is only to discover a way to do that. No one can turn the world away from its foolish course. The mind is the only ancient asset, only man has a mind, and if you ask where it is scientists would say it's in the head. Big shots say that's the ultimate fact. But they still haven't completely discovered the mind. Nerves haven't been fully discovered. Facts relating to the mind are still amazing. It's funny to see white men fussing and getting excited reading their own books on metaphysics. It's not possible to escape as long as we make the wrong moves; as long as we think education is copying and memorizing, working is fate, woman is an object we enjoy, man is some big shot; as long as we dance possessed by god listening to some foreigner tell us about our own philosophy—that yoga is exercise, the Kama sutra is sexual knowledge and Tantra is enjoyment. *In short, every man has to discover and experience anything on his own.* I think it was a mistake to have brought all of you through my way. But I will bring those who are still buried beneath the ground. I will bring them to my painting and with their hands, can and will arrive at a new world through those paintings. But selfishness alone will not help. I have tossed and turned over this for days. *But I still cannot teach you. I cannot show you the place we are going to. You have to go on your own...* some glass pieces, glue and colors are all I need. When I searched for someone for that I found Jamna. But now even Jamna is beyond me. It is very difficult to live with me. I'm not justifying myself Sarala. *You women cannot get rid of your virginity and go with a man or live with him. I see nature's deceit as an artistic creation. A woman can never escape from herself.* Will a man let her be? But I let go of Jamna...if Jamna and I had a normal family she would have had children...from now on if Jamna wants me I can't go in search of someone for myself...I can't tell Jamna this. We can't play together anymore, Jamna escaped with me because she was disgusted by men. I have leaped at her *yoni* like a womanizer. Unable to bear my own absurdity I've deeply suppressed myself with my own rules and subjugated myself by starving and staying hungry. *I saw my own form only in hunger. By hunger I don't mean starving. I learnt that it was fasting from desire.* I understood that the body wasn't just a triangle; there were a hundred and eight triangles inside the body. No one can escape from this no matter if you're an intellectual or Christian or Shaiva or socialist—the body will overpower man at every stage. *It will defeat you in different ways at every age. The only way I had of escaping from this was fasting...* Jamna! It's your patience that constantly transformed me. Now we are in a state of colliding with each other. In fact you already knew all this. But you're a woman. *Yoni-womb—you are an animal that cannot be liberated. But I've still freed you.* I don't know where I'll be tomorrow. *I got all my freedom from you. I created a life for you that a woman would desire.* Whenever I pick up paints, stone, lime and bits of glass I will remember you. Not just your body and mind. But beyond that I have made your postures into a means...I showed you the freedom that you showed me. Not just you but everyone—Vellaiamma, Ramalakshmi. Living according to and experiencing that freedom depends on their conditions...by bringing them all to art they will develop into independent artists. Jamna no longer needs anyone's guidance. It's some journey that somehow began and ended like this. I didn't know it would end like this a little earlier. Life can no longer deceive me. Financial dependence can't tear my insides. Women will from now on be my noble friends. *I'm not going to discover and bring up anymore Jamnas. They will liberate themselves.* My bits of glass and lime and glue are enough for that... (Prakash, 279-283)

For Paranthamaraju, the possibility of freedom and an authentic life lies in enduring lack and desire and renouncing the longing for self-identity. Since perfect self-identity is impossible without impeding one's immediate awareness of existence, the quest for perfect self-identity is a ceaseless striving that ends only with death. Paranthamaraju further suggests that the quest for perfect self-identity is a strictly individual enterprise to an undeterminable destination that can only be facilitated by artistic creativity. Artistic creativity I argue has to be understood here not merely as constitutive of an object of art but as a practice that is equally constitutive of subjectivity. If the process of artistic creation constitutes subjectivity, it enables the possibilities of remaking the abject self. The individual pursuit of perfect self-identity is undermined by abjection where the structural distinction between subject and object no longer holds and where subjectivity is still an unformed potential that can be (re)configured. In that sense, the space of abjection is a creative one full of possibilities where dominant or normative configurations of subjectivity can be repeatedly challenged and rearticulated. Paranthamaraju suggests women can never escape their abject sexual embodiment but can only instrumentalize their bodies to attain potential freedom through creative work. Artistic production, he suggests is the only means of reconstituting and possibly redeeming the abject world ridden with poverty, disease and hunger. Paranthamaraju realizes the impossibility of transcending his own bodily needs—hunger and desire—render them as the very medium and instrument of potential freedom and self-remaking.

Karamuntar Vutu (Karamuntar House) (1998)

Like the previous novel, Prakash's second novel *Karamuntar House* is engaged with the transformative potential of sexual and social abjection. The novel explores inter-caste sexual relations as a threat to the integrity of caste patriarchy. If caste here is understood as an apparatus that regulates sexuality primarily through women's bodies, inter-caste sexual relations between upper caste women and lower caste men are interpreted as a violation of the patriarchal sexual codes of the dominant caste. The sexual relationships between the major female characters of the novel and their lower caste male counterparts becomes the pretext for a crisis in social identity that has fatal consequences for two of the adversarial caste groups in the novel—the kallars and the pallars. The later chapters of the novel stage an abject scene of massacre that nearly decimates all the men of the two castes, but the massacre also conditions the possibility of reforming inter-caste relations and even altering the very institution of caste. The novel ends on a note of rebirth and progress: the survivors of the caste war are mostly women belonging to the two castes whose desires for the seductive male protagonist are betrayed and sublimated to serve the collective purpose of remaking their destroyed world through an act of land cultivation. The women potentially transcend their social difference through the act of cultivation.

Like the earlier novel, this novel poses the question of historical change as a product of the dialectical relationship between a glorious past and imminent ruin. The novel is structured around two temporal metaphors for the transformative possibilities of abjection: the female protagonist Kathayamba and her ancestral home Karamuntar House (that I shall henceforth call KH), a fortified mansion on the banks of the river Kaveri. KH, an erstwhile symbol of kallar pride and self-identity, is now undercut by history; the first chapter of the novel suggests the loss of KH's former glory that is now on the brink of bankruptcy and dissolution.

From the corridor upstairs, Kathayamba bent down to look at the street. The verandah met the corridor on either side below. Heaps of paddies were once left to dry in the verandah like fortresses that spread out like a vast ocean. The enclosed house rose like a fortress. The street was empty. Silence filled the verandah...in the good days the storeroom was filled with paddy up to the windows making it dark. The paddy would be carried upstairs and poured through each and every window...now the storeroom is empty! Not just the storeroom, even the Kaveri is dry. Not just the Kaveri, even the people are empty... An eight storied house! On both sides of the house were four courtyards, each lined with passageways and covered with canopies for the wind. Beneath the canopy in every courtyard were jasmine plants growing everywhere. What was the need for such a big house now? The back aches to just sweep the house...the eight storied house was full of people, even now! A house that has experienced and ruled. A house whose floors are full of depressions and obtrusions from years of walking. The middle and youngest uncle are bargaining with someone in the third verandah. People seem to be lying and leaning all over the verandah. Father lies in the courtyard....the verandah would be filled with people everywhere. Now!?!... (Prakash, 1-8)

A constellation of interrelated factors are responsible for the imminent destruction of the Karamuntar family and the village of Anjini that once relied on the family's largesse for its own survival. Kathayamba's father, and the patriarch of KH, Chandraas Karamuntar, never works for a living, his impulsive extravagance quickly depleting the immense ancestral wealth that was supposed to last generations. His generosity to the farmers and peasants of Anjini only precipitates the imminent bankruptcy of the Karamuntar family. He is blissfully indifferent if not oblivious of the administration and regulation of his ancestral resources having delegating all such duties to his brothers and accountant while he spends most of his time either doing nothing or visiting temples. He is also indifferent to the changing economic climate of the world outside Anjini with his indiscriminate expenditure on political campaigns and temple rituals. The future of the Karamuntar family is also threatened by the absence of a male heir; Chandraas lavishes money on countless religious sacrifices and rituals to propitiate the gods for a son. A constant sign of KH's imminent destruction is its precarious location by the banks of the river Kaveri. We get a sense of KH's mythical glory through Kathayamba's grandmother Thorachiyappayi's memories of the house's resilience, which protected her family from the flooding waters of the Kaveri that apparently submerged the entire village.

The Karamuntars did not build the house in the river. Yes! All the people were scared that a flood had come to wash away Karamuntar House. The Kaveri that surrounds Anjini flooded and washed away the entire village!...the floods arrive every year. Once in ten years it rains heavily and stormy winds arrive. Once fifty years ago, during the month of Malgali, the entire village of Anjini is said to have been completely submerged by the floods that arrived amidst the cold rain and storms... (Prakash, 10)

Her memories of the house and her youth are laced with an unmistakable sense of pride and resolution. Her gratitude to the pallars (a largely landless agricultural caste of dalits that have relied for generations on KH for their own survival) for rescuing the family's belongings from the rising waters of the river recalls a past that was once characterized by harmonious

inter-caste relations. She praises her husband's courageous attempts to resist the government's threats to demolish the house if the house is not shifted from the banks of the Kaveri. Her husband later fortifies the house from the river by planting rocks that fails to completely secure the house's existence.

Even the apparent integrity of the large family that include Chandraas, his brothers, their multiple wives and several cousins, aunts and uncles, is internally threatened by signs of rebellion and estrangement. Kathayamba, as the only and therefore much loved child of the patriarch's family, is the only unifying factor in a huge family divided by poverty and patriarchal authority. Through Kathayamba's perspective, we get a sense of the estranged silence between members of the Karamuntar family,

Father had an old fashioned name, Chandrahas Karamundar! Not a single bad habit. Mother would say you can't find a kallar like your father in all the five districts. But the moment father took over, all the land disappeared! The oldest of the younger uncles Ramu, the middle uncle Rajavelu and the youngest Subbu never spoke to each other. Never seen them talk!...(her) mother's name was Thirisi. She was called Thirisiamba. She would look at everyone with her eyes. Doesn't speak. Cooks. Doesn't say a word. (Prakash, 2-3)

Chandraas's younger brother Subbu rebels against the former's illegitimate authority; Chandraas forbids his brothers from being educated and prevents them from working lest their financial independence threaten his absolute power and authority over the family. While Chandraas is oblivious of the ruinous consequences of his extravagance and fails to compel his brothers to defer to him, his brothers struggle to be free of Chandraas' illegitimate authority. While Ramu has an alleged affair with a pallar woman and Subbu gambles at horse races to stay away from the oppressiveness of the house, the women of the house helplessly turn to religious worship to prevent the complete annihilation of the family.

A flashback in the novel refers to another event in the family's ancestral past that threatens KH's future survival. Chandraas's father Raghunath Karamundar's third wife Mangalam, once known for her beauty and ancestral wealth, drowns herself out of shame when she discovers she has been unwittingly photographed by Wesley, an Englishman who is struck by her exotic beauty. On one of their regular trips to the forest surrounding KH, the Karamuntar family visits the astronomical observatory where Wesley works when they are shocked and suspicious to discover Mangalam's framed photograph. Neither Mangalam nor the family has ever seen a camera. Mangalam equates her photograph with the shameful loss of her reputation. When, the pallar men who work for KH later discover Mangalam's corpse floating in Wesley's swimming pool, they brutally murder Wesley at Raghunath Karamundar's order. The loss of what may have been KH's only male heir with Mangalam's suicide is a lasting source of regret among the women of the family. Kathayamba's grandmother Thorachiyappayi does not believe Mangalam was necessarily unfaithful although the mere suggestion of infidelity was sufficient to tarnish her reputation forever. Mangalam dies a young adolescent woman disowned by her much older husband and the village. Thorachiyappayi laments the loss of all their wealth on temples and religious worship for a male heir. She is convinced the men of the Karamuntar family are not sleeping with prostitutes and hopes the women regain control of KH.

The burden of preserving the integrity of KH is borne by the women of the household, a burden they exploit to their advantage. The novel attributes their authority and power over

the men to their piety and sexual abstinence. One of Kathayamba's uncles wonders if KH's integrity and uninterrupted existence is because of the women's control of their husbands' profligacy and illicit sexual affairs with pallar women. Like the other women of the household, Kathayamba is represented as an embodied metaphor for the integrity of KH. Her swimming lessons in the river with her father account for her transformation from a prepubescent girl to a virile and proud representative of the Karamuntar clan. She is later promised in marriage to her father's sister's son, Telakaraju. Over the years, she internalizes her family's imperative to marry him and develops an exclusive longing for Telakaraju. But when her aunt, Vadivamba, demands her share of the ancestral land as dowry, Kathayamba is reluctant to marry Telakaraju at the thought of precipitating KH's ruin and losing her own identity that is tied to it.

Kathayamba is trapped between her desire for Telakaraju and her imposed identity as the sole representative of KH. The impossibility of realizing her desire for Telakaraju without compromising her, and consequently KH's integrity, compels the possibility of self-transcendence and freedom from the social regulations of caste. The novel opens with brief descriptions of Kathayamba's childhood relationship with Telakaraju. She once rescues Telakaraju from drowning in the river much to his shame. He is transformed from an urbane and refined youth to a virile, aggressive and provincial hero who embraces and seeks Kathayamba's reassurances of his masculinity. To Kathayamba, his sexual advances contradict his prepubescent innocence; she is secretly aroused even as she is intimidated and openly scornful of his sexual aggression. She is compelled to acknowledge her sexual vulnerability and her exclusive, albeit inadmissible desire for him that supposedly makes her sexually inaccessible to other men.

Telakaraju returns years later as a highly qualified doctor with a marriage proposal that is contingent on the transfer of her share of the ancestral land to his mother. His sudden return after a long absence, reminds her of his supportive presence when she attained sexual maturity and his sudden departure during her coming of age ceremony. She re-experiences the pleasure of longing for his presence. His return only rekindles her secret desire and admiration for Telakaraju's virile beauty that she incorporates and identifies with the pain and blood of sexual maturation. But his renewed sexual attempts to possess her are ironically rebuffed with angry indignation and accusations of sexual promiscuity, "Keep all this for the pallar quarters! All this will not be allowed in this house. Mama! Don't touch me..." (Prakash, 45) Telakaraju is repeatedly deceived by Kathayamba. His memories of Kathayamba suggest the hypothetical nature of Kathayamba's desire that really has no effective cause or object and whose only expression is freedom from her incarcerated existence.

Dissatisfied desire crucially conditions the possibility of Kathayamba's self-transcendence. She spends several years of her adolescence tortured by her longing for Telakaraju during his absence. She is initially incarcerated in an old and empty wooden box used to store paddy when, possessed by the goddess Mahamayi, she threatens to kill everyone with a sword. The family arranges an exorcist-priest whose violent exorcism of the goddess from Kathayamba's body compels her to recognize her self-alienation. Although her possessions gradually disappear, her now voluntary self-imprisonments coincide with her weekly ritual observations that mark her sacred obligation as an incarnation of the goddess. She initially hides in the box to seek temporary refuge from the sexual advances of men, particularly her father's lecherous accountant and later the young Telakaraju. Now the solitary endurance of her longing for Telakaraju within the enclosed space of the box ironically figures her desire

to transcend the confines of her bodily identity as the privileged daughter and sole heir to a kallar family, whose inevitable and inescapable destruction is her only hope of freedom.

The box smelled of rat droppings. This is what Kathayamba wanted to escape and run away from. Once she entered the box, no one else could come in whether it was day or night. That was Kathayamba's temple. She wouldn't come out all Friday. She would lie in that dusty box. No one knew why. No one knew who she was angry with. No one understood if she was happy with someone. She would emerge like the great and auspicious goddess Nachiyaar with *kungumam* on her forehead after rolling in the dust of the empty box without any food or water. No one would approach her when, not having slept all night, she appeared with red and teary eyes that seemed to drip with blood. (Prakash, 149)

Kathayamba's longing for Telakaraju undergoes a certain permutation from the desire for his recognition, to the desire for his desire for the pallar women who work for the Karamuntar household. When Selli and Sevathe, two loyal pallar women who work for KH, inform Kathayamba of Telakaraju's sexual affair with Selli's sister Manji, Kathayamba is unable to bear Telakaraju's apparent rejection of "her very existence" (Prakash, 149). She compensates his loss by incorporating him. She imagines Telakaraju is the cool box that cools the burning longing of her body. Then she has the sudden urge to deprive Telakaraju of Selli and Manji by claiming exclusive possession of them. Her passionate and aggressive intimacy with the pallar women is mediated by her assimilation and projection of Telakaraju's desire for them. She tries to reenact Telakaraju's intimacy with Manji. She is later determined to protect the helpless Manji whose father is wrongly arrested for her mother's brutal murder, which is actually committed by her brothers' political rivals during an election campaign. She further orders the reluctant and embarrassed Selli to sleep with her. She is amazed by the "firmness and silkiness" of Selli's "bronze body" as she lies on her "oil smeared body...grasping and pulling her hair" (Prakash, 90). Selli is equally struck by Kathayamba's body that is "shaped like a block of sandalwood" (Prakash, 90). Their sensuous intimacy temporarily reverses the hierarchy between mistress and worker. Selli reassures the insecure Kathayamba of her exclusive ownership of all the pallar women who work for KH.

Kathayamba's is equally determined to secure Selli from her uncle Ramu whose pallar henchmen discover her and forcibly bring her back when she tries to escape with a pallar man. Ramu later imprisons her in a cell where she has his illegitimate children until she is possessed by Ayyanar, a local deity, and acquires the supernatural strength to terminate her third pregnancy. Selli's possessions gradually become less frequent before they are miraculously cured by Kathayamba's healing touch and who "takes care of her like Ramu did when she was imprisoned in his cell." (Prakash, 91)

Kathayamba's self-transformative desire for the pallar women is conditioned by her intimate relationship with her young aunt Uma who internalizes her absent husband Subbu and seduces Kathayamba with her secretive "masculine" advances and passion. Kathayamba remembers Uma telling her, "they had been deceived that (sex) was something dirty, sinful and bad" (Prakash, 92). Kathayamba is seduced by Uma's pleasurable body "[t]eaches" her "a way of discovering and domesticating her own body's pleasures." (Prakash, 92) She wonders if she has Uma's courage to avoid a miserable marriage by having a secret 'affair' with a pallar man. Despite their initial shame and guilt, their desire for each other turns out to be potentially transformative. Their mutual passion consumes and transforms each other, in

the process enabling them to transcend themselves. Uma's husband Subbu becomes superfluous.

Umamaheswari would embrace Kathayamba with her long whip like arms. Then it was an illusion...it was as though the snake's venom had risen to her head, and gradually spread through her body, blue, to the tips of her fingers like drops and again entered Uma's body like fire. This was initially an enjoyable game! Then it was a hungry need. The two women twisted and turned like two snakes, like a man and woman, not like two snakes but like a snake and a cobra. Subba Karamuntar was no longer needed..." (Prakash, 152)

For Kathayamba, her body that initially stands in for sensual enslavement later becomes the essential precondition and instrument of freedom. Although she is initially ashamed of having sexual relationships with women, she later realizes her body is not merely "a mistake" or a hindrance to the possibility of freedom, but the only available means of liberation (Prakash, 153). She realizes her shared intimacy with Selli and Manji is the only way of securing the pallar women from the sexual advances of kallar men and preserving the integrity of KH from the threat of imminent dissolution. Her sexual unions with the pallar women transcend caste difference and possess a self-transformative and empowering significance that prepares her for future destruction. Kathayamba is drawn to Selli's strong body that, having withstood the violent desires of kallar men in the past, embodies the power of human action to transcend destruction. Kathayamba realizes neither of them can unlike Uma escape KH's dissolution. Although she feels responsible for upholding the integrity of KH, she anticipates the inevitable destruction and renewal of KH. She compliments kallar women for having upheld the integrity and reputation of KH over the past. She like the other Karamuntar women knows only their sexual inaccessibility can make their men heroic and tough.

The sensuous intimacy between the women symbolizes their solidarity that cuts through social distinctions of gender, caste and class. While Kathayamba embodies and openly praises the sexual pride and integrity of kallar womanhood, she secretly envies and eroticizes the youthful and sinewy bodies of the pallar women who seem relatively free of the moral or social constraints on kallar female sexuality. Her possessions suggest a longing to be free of her entrapped and doomed existence in a house whose destruction is inevitable. During her encounter with Sevathe, another pallar woman, Kathayamba discovers her uncle Ramu along with some pallar men murdered the pallar man Sevathe eloped with and brought Sevathe back after briefly incarcerating her. It is not clear whether Ramu sexually assaulted Sevathe but she confesses he gave her some money. The sight of Sevathe's voluptuous body evokes Kathayamba's admiration and desire. She momentarily recognizes her abject femininity in Sevathe for her body suddenly attains sexual maturity when she starts menstruating.

Chandraas' younger brother Ramu warns Telakaraju of the apparent integrity and loyalty of the Karamuntar women to KH that suppresses their human vulnerability and makes them appear as goddesses,

A woman should laugh, get angry, should cry, should scream, should leap and kick. Karamuntar women are beautiful and shapely; like Amman, like Perunthirupirattiyar in the temple, Ankalamman, Ulaganayaki, how many gods!...You're a small boy! You're KH's only son-in-law, you shouldn't later lament you've been

deceived!...Karamuntar women may desire, they may forget to control their desires but they will never leave Karamuntar House. (Prakash, 48)

Ramu boasts to Telakaraju of his infamous affairs with pallar women and his exceptional courage to break free of “the [oppressive] women” of the Karamuntar household (Prakash, 48). He later suggests kallar women unlike pallar women are purely functional wives and mothers “rendered sexually inaccessible by their assumed and exclusive responsibility of securing the future of KH with their wifely loyalty and piety” (Prakash, 48). He introduces the hitherto abstinent and sexually inexperienced Telakaraju to alcohol and encourages him to satisfy his sexual desires with pallar women now that he is destined to a married life without the pleasures of sex. But Telakaraju’s seductive experience of Manji, one of Ramu’s kept women, turns out to be one among a series of disillusioning encounters that attack his ideal notions of “equal justice, socialism, gender equality, communism” that bear no resemblance to the lived reality of their lives (Prakash, 51-52). Manji’s seductive enactments of powerlessness undermine Telakaraju’s belief in equality. Her subservient appeals to his mercy and protection from Ramu who “keeps her sister, her mother and her aunt” provoke his helpless indignation at an unjust world that inevitably implicates both of them (Prakash, 52). He is uncontrollably seduced by her professions of exclusive love and devotion even as is struck by the absurdity of seeking exclusive assurances from a woman who is not sexually exclusive. He is unsettled when she questions his sexual experience that reminds him of his failed attempts to sleep with prostitutes. She entitles him to the exclusive ownership of her body to preempt the possibility of being violated by other men, “Sempattu pallan Kattiri kept pestering me to marry him. I didn’t know a prince like you would come to take me away. My sister told me I would struggle if I married a pallan. I’m always a kallar man’s pallar woman.” (Prakash, 52) She wishes not to suffer like her mother who was brutally murdered by her husband and some kallar and pallar men for her illicit sexual relationship with Ramu.

Manji deploys abjection to secure Telakaraju’s protection in exchange for her body. Her assurances partially compensate Kathayamba’s apparent indifference even as her seductive enactments of deference and powerlessness are self-divesting—Telakaraju realizes he is unable to resist his fascination for Manji’s “defiled and sensuous body” even at the risk of “los[ing] his self”. His transformative sexual union with Manji momentarily enables the exchange and dissolution of caste identities without marriage and the potential birth of a new self. When Manji appeals to his protection Telakaraju cries,

‘You are my pallar woman. I will not leave you.’ He cried, ‘I’m your pallar’ as he leaped and embraced her and slid down. For a long time...a very long time...*that kallar woman and pallar man were man and woman, crumbled, and mixed in the event of creation that was centuries old*. Telakaraju grew scared. With what speed Manji had tossed and turned him. Manji had avenged the entire world. Even when Telakaraju was spent...Manji did not leave him, ‘What Karamuntare? Is that all?’...which kallachi will give me [him] this? Can they give him [such pleasure]?...he turned the empty bottle upside down. ‘Wait ayya [sir], I’m coming.’ Manji went into the darkness and immediately returned. She gave him a cup of alcohol that she had distilled. ‘You drink ayya and leave some for me. A black embryo shrunk in his throat... ‘Manji!’ ‘ayya’ ‘Don’t call me ayya!’ ‘Then what shall I call you?’ ‘Say ‘hey fellow’’ ‘What ayya, are you drunk? I will not call you that.’ ‘I’m a coward’ ‘Who said? You’re a hero!...’ ‘I can’t tie you a tali [marry you] devadiya!’ ‘What are you saying?! You’re my husband in this hut.’ ‘No one will accept it’ ‘Who has to accept it?’ ‘My caste people’ ‘You foolish man! That you say

I'm your pallachi is enough. No fellow can do anything to me. This is above the tali. Just bravely say Manji is your pallachi. All kallar men visit the prostitutes' quarters. Who doesn't? But the pallachi's story is different! Pallachis only go to kallar men.' The world revolved above his head like an *appalam*. 'I studied! I competed with ten fellows. I earned a degree Manji. I had to compete there too. They said 'the Karamuntar woman was for you'. Again I had to compete with eight prospective grooms. That's the story everywhere. You say some fellow called Katiri is competing for you?!...Can any Karamuntar woman accept me the way you have? Call that a house? Chey!...Now I've to marry an Amman with sacred ash smeared on her forehead...but she...(Prakash, 55-57)

Although Telakaraju imagines he has been freed of his privileged, caste status and fulfilled through his union with Manji—"He realizes that for the first time Manji had showed him what it means to be a woman and a man"—she betrays him by reinforcing her faith in a sexual and caste hierarchy (Prakash, 57). Manji swears her loyalty and allegiance to Kathayamba and KH—she claims her body does not belong to her but to the Karamuntar family and attributes her existence to the Karamuntar household that nourished her (Prakash, 74). She identifies herself as an embodied extension or metonym for Kathayamba who has been solely responsible for generously feeding and healing the female pallar workers of the household and their children with her auspicious curative powers. Manji later informs the Karamuntar family that she is "Telakaraju's kept woman" before their 'affair' is discovered and punished (Prakash, 80). She refuses to escape with him to Tanjavur for fear of incurring the wrath of their caste men. When he complains about Kathayamba's lack of love, Manji says "kallar women only respect and love men as husbands." (Prakash, 81)

On his regular visits to the pallar quarters with Ramu, Telakaraju is seduced by another young pallar woman called Sonai whose visible loyalty to Ramu's authority and patronage makes him insecure and indignant. The sight of Sonai's youthful and voluptuous body in the dark reminds Telakaraju of "bronze and copper statues from the Chola period" (Prakash, 118). When Sonai abruptly leaves Telakaraju to answer Ramu's authoritative calls, he is shocked and insulted but she is soon replaced by her mother Nachi, another pallar woman equally loyal to Ramu who placates Telakaraju,

Karamuntar has kept her since she was twelve. She is his palli. You're a man from the town. You'll not understand all this. If he calls her she will get up and run even if she is sleeping with her husband. He is after all the one who took her virginity, gave her a child and made her wear a sari! (Prakash, 120)

Telakaraju wrestles with her trying to resist her attempts to seduce him but he eventually surrenders to her passionate desire that frees him of his urbane trappings and undoes all his political knowledge and beliefs leaving him with a sense of nothingness. But it is precisely this experience of nothingness, of negativity, that threatens all his political ideals that conditions the possibility of renewing himself to strike a new ontological relationship with the world.

Telakaraju cried, 'If he [Ramu] calls you will run away too, won't you?'...Nachi relentlessly tried to enter him. He had already read political books that had illustrations of different forms of slavery in different countries. But even in this modern age, although this thing that leaped on him was terrifying, he didn't stop. He

wanted to climb completely. He wanted to understand everything. He had to learn this from her. Wasn't this needed in sex? Economic subordination was being harvested here too...she transformed him into a man by happily and completely loving him; by completely awakening and squeezing him with desire...This was new to him. She had made him new. (Prakash, 121)

Sonai mockingly compares his moral indignation at social inequality to the hypocritical claims of political parties that promise to destroy caste and class when they actually entrench social differences in exchange for power. She attacks his moral indignation that she remarks is a veil that conceals his insatiable sexual desire. Telakaraju feels his political ideals slipping away through his transformative experiences of Nachi and Sonai. Suddenly he imagines the dissolution of the social differences that separate them from the world until they are no longer material. He grows uncertain about his desire for Kathayamba whom he realizes can never belong to anyone. He compares her to the ancestral land his mother is to inherit that can never belong to anyone.

While Telakaraju imagines his self-assuring encounters with Manji, Nachi and Sonai have erased the reality of caste; his argument with Kaliyan about social inequality truly transforms him, enabling him to disown his privileged caste status. Kaliyan, as the illegitimate son of Chandraas' father and a pallar woman, represents a threat to the integrity of caste. The intimidating sight of Kaliyan's rather strong and muscular body that reminds Telakaraju of the bronze statues from the Chola period, symbolizes the potential of human action to affect change. Unlike most of the other pallar men in the village, Kaliyan is an educated man and a member of one of the local political parties. Telakaraju notices his speech betrays no sign of his caste identity. He suspects Kaliyan's political credentials and his professed dissolution with his own political beliefs. While Telakaraju feels caste does not exist in Anjini, Kaliyan suggests Telakaraju's elite social status affords him the privilege of being oblivious or immune to the unchanging reality of caste that structures KH and Anjini's existence. Electoral politics, he argues, grants the lower castes suffrage and the freedom to speech without investing them with the political power to represent themselves. He berates Telakaraju for his naïve egalitarianism that is contradicted even in his informal address to Kaliyan, which reinstates the structural hierarchy of caste and class that inevitably separates them.

For Telakaraju, Kaliyan's "flawless" words index his authenticity. He silently admires Kaliyan's affair with Uma whose courage to pursue her illicit relationship with a lower caste man is similarly interpreted as a sign of her authenticity. Kaliyan is one of the few pallar men who no longer work for the kallar families. He realizes education will not guarantee him a job because of his low caste status. No one is willing to marry their daughter to him because of his political reputation of exhorting the pallars to rise above their hunger and corruption. He has no hope of an egalitarian future and he expresses his disillusionment at his earlier ideals of "socialism, communism, the rule of the proletariat, food for everyone, everything for everyone..." (Prakash, 132) He refuses his mother's entreaties to work for free for KH that disavows the reality of caste and prides its harmonious and supportive relationship with the pallars by conveniently forgetting the legacy of its own ancestors' illicit affairs with pallar women.

Telakaraju urges Kaliyan to escape with Uma before they are killed. He admires Uma's courageous and genuine love and pities her entrapped bodily existence that may be threatened by the kallar men of her household. He confesses he has realized from his own body that his "mind, his intelligence and his body pull him from different sides" so that he no

longer has a moral sense (Prakash, 133). From his own experience with Kathayamba, Telakaraju realizes he is trapped by the growing impossibility of their marriage. But Kaliyan refuses to elope with Uma lest his mother and sisters are murdered. Uma refuses to leave and wants to be discovered and killed with her unborn child by her husband Subba. Kaliyan knows they have no hope of surviving outside Anjini without the support of KH. He even confesses he and Uma do not love each other and does not want to be the cause of an internecine war that may destroy the pallars and the kallars. He does not want to escape to the city for its capitalism that by privileging the individual and family preempts the possibility of a socialist world. Kaliyan dismisses Telakaraju's accusation of 'spoiling' Uma and sympathizes with Uma's miserable, "enslaved" existence,

You will not understand. What does it mean to spoil someone? Is she an ordinary slave who still loves her husband? What to do, the world is full of female slaves!...her body couldn't bare it, it hungers! No one knows it burns!...Subba Karamuntar fed her, adorned Umamaheshwari with jewelry and locked her up in the house for ten years! Didn't he know Uma was a human being then!...he roams around the village on his motorbike. Why can't he take his wife along with him when he roams? (Prakash, 136)

Uma represents the universal subordination of women in the world who lead entrapped lives incarcerated in their homes, in their inscribed roles as wives and mothers and in their own sexualized bodies. Kaliyan questions the sexual double standards that overlook the affairs of kallar men while any illicit form of female sexuality is punished. He realizes no one has the sexual or moral integrity that entitles them to judge others. He berates Telakaraju for the sexual hypocrisy of the kallar men in his family whose moral reprehension about sexual infidelity is belied by their own affairs with pallar women. His relationship with Uma is not the function of love or sexual desire inasmuch as it is a mutual desire for recognition that transcends caste difference. When he rescues Uma from drowning herself, they instantly discover "their need for each other regardless of their caste difference." (Prakash, 138) Telakaraju imagines Uma's longing for Subba's beautiful and strong body that arouses his own implicit desire for him. He realizes Kaliyan has disillusioned all his ideals and beliefs. He feels he has been freed to become an "ordinary" man of "the earth" who "has descended to breathe the air" (Prakash, 139).

Telakaraju's disillusioning encounters with Manji and Kaliyan transform his perception of KH's apparent integrity. He notices the oppressive and violent lives of some of the young wives and mothers of the Karamuntar household contradict his egalitarian ideals. He notices that disillusion its apparent integrity. He is initially baffled by Kathayamba's inscrutability and the unchanging archaism of KH. He experiences the urge to strip Kathayamba of her divine integrity to discover her authentic being but her persistent opacity only leaves Telakaraju with a sense of self-estrangement, "she exceeds all his learned notions of femininity and the female body...he is intimidated by her formidable presence that he wanted to humble" (Prakash, 79). His displaces his frustrated desire for recognition to Manji with whom he has a violent and aggressive relationship. But Manji appears equally opaque like a "bronze statue...that burned his body like a fire" (Prakash, 79). Through his disillusioning encounters with the pallars he realizes "man, woman, pallar, kallar, I, he/she" are (necessary and inescapable) notions that structure the self without ever guaranteeing identity. He realizes he can neither transcend nor achieve identity through his inter-subjective relationship

with Kathayamba and KH. Kathayamba's repeated betrayals only sustain his desire for recognition ultimately enables him to displace and sublimate his desire to transform and renew KH.

Mayi, Kaliyan's schoolmate and lover returns to Anjini from Tanjavur as an educated woman determined to abolish casteism and make education accessible to everyone. Telakaraju's self-transformation is suggested when Mayi mistakes him for Kaliyan. Telakaraju no longer has a privileged upper caste bearing and his strong body betrays his transformation to a rural youth who has lost his urban finesse and political idealism. She experiences the loss of her urban refinement, her education and her professional authority and reputation in his presence. She grows jealous and insecure when she discovers Kaliyan's 'affair' with Uma and unconsciously substitutes Kaliyan for Telakaraju. Their encounter becomes a violent struggle for identity and recognition; a struggle that is described in terms of the larger struggle between pallars and kallars (Prakash, 180). Telakaraju is seduced by her ability to give herself up to him in all her transparency and Mayi renounces her very desire for identity. The sexual difference and the social hierarchy that separates them, is seemingly dissolved—she no longer formally addresses him and they momentarily lose their gendered identities.

Anjini's and KH's transformation begins when Kathayamba is kidnapped by Kaliyan to avenge Ramu's rape and murder of Selli and Mayi's alleged elopement with Telakaraju. Ramu who has been missing is discovered murdered for his affairs with the pallar women. KH's ancestral lands are never transferred to Vadivamba now that Ramu who administered the land is dead. There are rumors about Uma's secret affair with Kaliyan. Anjini too undergoes demographic changes—the Brahmins depart to major cities while certain Muslim businessmen buy what used to be the old Brahmin quarters.

Kaliyan kidnaps Kathayamba when she is hiding in the box and 'rapes' her in the very forest where Mangalam drowns herself in shame. Kathayamba is transformed by her violent encounter with Kaliyan that ironically frees her of her identity as an embodied metaphor for KH's integrity. She initially hopes he will free her from her shame by killing her. But when he assaults and "spoils" her determined to eliminate her deified sexual integrity by reducing her to "a pallachi", she "understands the secret of the body, the death of caste" (Prakash, 189, 205). Kathayamba begins to enjoy his "flawless strong body", his "valor" that only a "valorous woman" like her can enjoy (Prakash, 205). Her visible pleasure evokes Kaliyan's surprise and guilt. He apologizes for violating her but she swears her exclusive loyalty and gratitude for rescuing her from her oppressive existence. Their union echoes Telakaraju's sexual encounters with the pallar women in the way it affects the exchange and dissolution of caste identities. When Kathayamba claims pallar status, Kaliyan is surprised to see her "fall from her kallar standards" (Prakash, 205). Kaliyan is transformed by the touch of Kathayamba's virgin body that dissolves their social difference and creates identity. She expresses her willingness to either be united with Kaliyan "as a man and a woman" shorn of their caste identities or be killed by the pallar and kallar men pursuing them (Prakash, 205). She realizes he has always desired her in the past. He, fearing the fatal consequences of his rape, tries to escape but Kathayamba insists on accompanying him and they swim through the powerful currents of the river.

The internecine violence and destruction that follows Kathayamba's kidnapping is so chaotic and complete that it erases traces of its own origin. Pallar and kallar women commit suicide, Muslims and Brahmins are nowhere to be seen. The pallars within and without Anjini are killed in their internal war. Pallar and paraiyar huts are burned and innumerable

pallar and kallar men of KH are massacred while most of the survivors of the bloodshed comprise kallar and pallar women who take refuge in KH. KH is the only mute witness to the war that stands apparently unaffected by the chaos and destruction. Chandraas's indelibly disfigured body is discovered floating on the river while his brother Ramu's dismembered body is retrieved by some pallar men. Ramu's dismemberment is interpreted as an act avenging the mysterious dismemberment of a pallar woman. Chandraas' dead body is reduced to an abject state; wives are reluctant to touch him or organize his funeral rituals. His corpse is as neglected as his body was respected when he was alive. Anjini is incinerated by exploding tins of tar. In the bloody massacre and mayhem, bodily distinctions of caste no longer hold. Uma is discovered and forcibly brought back and tortured by Subbu. But the abject dissolution of Anjini becomes necessary for its future remaking. The destruction coincides with the birth of KH's male heir—one of Ramu's wives Radha gives birth to a son.

The annihilating effect of the war erases traces of any incriminating evidence that makes it impossible to locate culpability. Several men and women confess to the killings making it impossible for the police to identify the guilty. The kallars are thanks to their upper caste status never suspected while the pallars and the paraiyars are potential suspects. Although official reports of the massacre accuse kallars of caste prejudice, the police are unable to prove any of the kallars or pallars guilty. Multiple and contradictory interpretations emerge of Chandraas's and Ramu's murders. No one confesses to murdering Chandraas suggests the respect and prestige he once enjoyed in the village. Thorachiappayi tells the police Chandraas murdered Ramu for betraying a pallar girl, to uphold the pride and integrity of his kallar ancestors. She is the only person who openly accuses Subba of murdering Uma for having an affair with a pallar man. She challenges the police to find witnesses who would confirm charges of casteism. She blames the political parties of fueling the destruction with their hypocrisy of preaching social equality while entrenching caste differences.

When the pallars attack Telakaraju, he swirls his knife to confront the men who are transformed into metaphors for social injustice, "he turned the society around him, the enemies around him into metaphors for the enemies to his thoughts..." (Prakash, 233) When Sonai tries to warn him of the pallar men he confesses to murdering Ramu. He now expresses his wish to be killed by the pallars to prove the hypocrisy of those who actually win political power and claim there is no caste. He is sure Ramu would have killed him if he had not. He interprets his murder as an act of liberation from his internalization of Ramu and from his kallar identity. He is convinced the pallar women do not desire him because he is of a higher caste. He does not believe Kathayamba eloped with Kaliyan or that she was kidnapped. There is a realization once the violence ends that there was a mistaken assumption of inter and intra-caste enmity, which was collectively simulated by the two caste groups. Although the kallars and the pallars accused each other of casteism they do not accuse anyone in particular. The internecine strife is mediated by political parties that preach caste equality.

Telakaraju affirms Kathayamba's decision to 'abandon' KH that is an opportunity for him to assume her status as an embodiment of KH's resilience. Telakaraju's dissatisfied desire for Kathayamba conditions the possibility of sublimating his desire towards the social reconstruction of Anjini and KH. Through his generalized simulation of desire for every woman he provokes and betrays the desires of the pallar and kallar women only to sublimate them towards the renewal of Anjini and KH. His vision of collective reconstructive labor unifies the people across castes with the intention of dissolving social difference. Telakaraju is transformed into a hard working man who labors with his pallar peasants. He is perceived as the savior and god of KH and Anjini as he incorporates the hopes, beliefs and fears of their

people. His scarred body embodies the hypocrisy of caste regulations. He fortifies the now disused KH from the flooding waters of the Kaveri with a concrete wall. He claims he is no longer a free individual and represents the collective spirit of an abject community.

Minin Sirakukal (The Fish's Wings) (2002)

In line with the previous two novels, Prakash's third novel *The Fish's Wings* is also engaged with the seductive appeal of the body that in its repeated betrayals of desire reveals the abjection that structures and potentially renews desire, meaning and subjectivity. The male protagonist in this novel, like his earlier counterparts, embodies an ideology of desire that inevitably evokes and disillusions competing female desires only to compel their desiring subjects to recognize the irredeemable lack that structures and perpetuates desire. The novel suggests that the possibility of transformation lies in embracing and potentially renouncing the irredeemable desire for recognition and self-identity that can never be definitively achieved.

Like the male protagonists of the earlier novels, Rangamani belongs to a relatively wealthy family when compared to the families living in Perumal Stores, a poor *agraharam* or Brahmin neighborhood enclosed by the boundary walls of the ancient Perumal temple in Tanjavur, which is the only extant witness to a history of Muslim conquest in the Deccan. As a child, his status as the son of an influential and powerful man named Mahadeva Iyengar, inspires fear in the poor children of Perumal Stores who exclude Rangamani from their activities. Rangamani is represented as a sexually precocious boy infamous among the daughters of Perumal Stores for his promiscuous reputation. But they are unable to complain about his seductive advances for fear of incurring social stigma and his father's anger. More importantly, they are unable to disavow their uncontrollable desires for Rangamani despite their knowledge of his sexual pretense. The impossibility of having an exclusive relationship with him does not deter their longing for one. Through their unfulfilled fantasies of Rangamani, the women internalize him. The novel opens with Rangamani's unexpected encounter with Krishnaveni, a poor and emaciated Brahmin woman from Perumal Stores who works at a typewriting institute to support her debt ridden family. Unlike her friends and younger sisters, Krishnaveni is to the shame and embarrassment of the neighborhood, sexually immature at nineteen. But when she does attain sexual maturity, she associates the blood and pain of menstruation with the pleasurable memory of her first painful sexual experience with Rangamani.

Krishnaveni is unable to disavow her longing for Rangamani despite his sexual disrepute. She is convinced Rangamani is "not like the other men at Perumal Stores" (13). She is compelled to acknowledge her irrepressible longing for Rangamani that is sustained by sexual jealousy and rivalry. His rumored affair with her voluptuous friend Kamakshi only enhances her "burning" longing to be exclusively possessed by him. The narrator suggests Krishnaveni's late maturation preempts the possibility of being trapped in oppressive marriages like her friends who are married the moment they attain puberty only to suffer or abandon their husbands. With Krishnaveni's financial support, her younger siblings manage to complete their education and find professional jobs.

Kamakshi is grateful to Rangamani for kidnapping and incarcerating her to prevent her early marriage and later helping her complete her education. Her uncontrollable longing to be exclusively possessed by Rangamani is structured and sustained by the recurrent betrayal of her desire for identity and recognition.

In the college, under the neem tree, Rangamani and Kamakshi looked at the college as they again *looked inside each other...they grew blind*. Even now they were separate, withdrawing...although seven or eight years had passed *she still burned from when he split and burned her...is this what they call sex?* He would choose her from so many people, so many millions. She was shocked that she was his no matter how much time passed. Even then in her innocent age after she was split with a chisel, there was so much time lying in his hands. He is touching her only now for the first time after that day. What terror! How many people! How many women! He...Withdrawal! She constantly felt, 'What worthlessness!' Kamakshi would withdraw. 'Beast!' she would cry. He too withdrew and kept running. Their distance over the past ten years helped them healthily. They were able to search for each other...If this is sex what could have happened to Krishnaveni? It was scary...Why won't he ask me, 'What's this? Aren't you going to college?'; Won't he say, 'Don't go, come with me!' and drag me away? Won't he bite, taste, suck and eat me? Will he not carry her? Will he not grind me against a block of sandal? Rangamani, what kind of a man are you? You did that to me once, do I have to cry to you to take me? Rangamani, whether or not you take me, no one else can take me! Come quickly! Come quickly! (Prakash, 55-56)

The impossibility of seducing women without being seduced confirms the irreducibly inter-subjective relationality between self and other. Rangamani, despite his attempts to appear self-identified, is no more autonomous than the women he seduces. In fact, I suggest he postures autonomy to evoke and betray the women's desires but not without being self-estranged. He repeatedly fails to achieve self-identity without identifying himself through the women's longing for him. He suspects even as he is inevitably seduced by any self-recognition he derives from them. His determination never to be deceived by their desires is belied by the reassuring pleasure of being a coveted object of desire. He is inevitably seduced by his image in the mirror although he is apparently determined not to "trust anything" (Prakash, 28). He "is bored by his body that is nothing new." (Prakash, 28) even as he is assured by an illusory sense of identity. He postures innocence and transparency to reverse and counter the women's accusations of deception, "I have never deceived any woman with promises of love as I do not believe in love...I cannot help it if they are willingly deceived by me." (Prakash, 30) But his claimed authenticity and autonomy is impossible without relying on an illusory but necessary notion of sexual identity that mutually implicates Rangamani and the women in a collective, inter-mediated structure of desire.

A symptom of their longing for Rangamani's exclusive recognition is his incorporation by the women. His internalized image mediates the mutual and collective seduction of the women setting up an essentially mediated and social structure of desire that simultaneously divides and identifies the women. He witnesses Lalitheshvari being intimate with Karthyayini, one of the married women of Perumal Stores who after some years of marriage abandons her absent husband and in-laws in Kerala. As they ridicule the sense of entitlement that men seem to derive from their financial independence, Karthayini suddenly forces herself on Lalitheshvari despite the latter's disgusted protests. But when Rangamani unexpectedly interrupts their passionate intimacy and discovers Lalithesvari's apparent integrity compromised by desire, she becomes vulnerable.

If someone saw Karthyayini and her rolling in the verandah...Karthi was not scared or ashamed. But Karthi was a terrifying woman. She let the fire spread over her body

and set Lalitheshvari's body on fire woman to woman, like a man he twisted her and it would take a lot of time before the burning fire died...[Rangamani accidentally witnesses them] A woman after all, would she know her own body? Somehow they thought everyone can do anything. For the first time Lalitha thought of the breadth of Rangamani's chest and wept with fear...Is this sex? When Rangamani came out he saw Kamakshi easily carrying a pot of water...white blouse, no bra...he had asked her not to wear bra...she's my girl. Even then something kept troubling him. Has she grown up or grown old? He stared at her like the primal man who wanted to take her into an ancient cave. (Prakash, 65-66)

Krishnaveni, Kamakshi and Karthyayini are potentially transformed by their insatiable desire for Rangamani—they attempt to transcend their sexual embodiment by renouncing certain bodily and sartorial signs of femininity. Krishnaveni sublimates her longing for Rangamani and grows emaciated in her struggle for survival. Kamakshi's breasts are no longer contained by bra and Karthyayini loses her sexual appeal as a virile Malayali wife to an asexual and hardworking Iyengar/Tamil Brahmin woman clad in a nine yard sari. Karthyayini is threatened and transformed by Rangamani's seductive and rather aggressive overtures; she is reunited with her husband and with his help gets a job as a teacher in a mat weaving school where she transcends her sexual embodiment through work. Lalithesvari who is also an Iyengar woman is betrayed by Karthyayini's transformation to an asexual Iyengar woman who realizes the insatiability of desire. She no longer reflects Lalithesvari's desire for self-recognition. Lalithesvari's betrayed desire evokes her longing for Karthyayini's once exotic beauty; a longing that threatens and disillusions her integrity and political intellectualism.

The Karthyayini who saw Lalitha, who peeled and understood Lalitha, had disappeared. She [Karthyayini] was the teacher who had taught Lalitha to reach out to touch and split her own body. Lalitha didn't like the Palakkad woman who had now become an Iyengar woman who turns her face like a cat that looks at milk and twirls its tail to hit its own head. But Karthyayini's fragrance; the fragrance of distilled ghee was arousing. The fragrance of coconut oil on her body. The wonder of the cool weight of her body. Karthyayini was enough. The heat, insolence, strength and amazing joy and inexplicable happiness of her terrifying body that conveyed masculinity without a man...Lalithesvari had been seduced in the past couple of months by the pressure of a cruel happiness that kept rising. She understood she had for the past few days lost the incomprehensible mystery that was Karthyayini...Jeyaraman [Karthyayini's husband] was a weak fire...[Karthyayini] entered her body and played, and with her chisel like fingers carved, scratched, drawn, risen and leaped over her curves and turns; pressed her depressions, her excessive breasts and carved a sculpted beauty that Lalithesvari had not read about or seen. She had taught her to at once break and unite her solitude and assimilate that solitude for herself and had revealed to her the secret that the great beauty that was woman was always a joy to herself. But now for the past one week, Karthyayini has not come to control Lalithesvari, to embrace her, to kiss her, to push and destroy her solitariness and enjoy her bit by bit. Lalithesvari was crying and hungry in her solitude and agitating, a body searching for the body and simply remembering the wonder of the body. Lalithesvari did not know Rangamani had taken Karthyayini. Who needs to understand that Rangamani had squeezed out and shown Karthyayini her madness, her bag of venom? She wiped her tears. She had no other way. She had to beg...She did not know her body was such a thirsty, terrifying underground passage of joy...She had lost the insolence of her education...her intellect that

believed that she could change anything by analyzing anything with her intelligence and discovering the result...women are being deceived. Men deceive. Man drops women into pits. His objective isn't to bear children. He subordinates women and through them takes their blood and sucks dry female society. Lalithesvari had learnt and thoughtfully practiced the only way of escaping by stepping aside, denying and throwing man far away. And so no one could near her...the stupidity that woman was a separate class had been changed and femininity had to be reduced to nothing. The womb had to be severed and thrown away. The *yonis* had to be chopped into bits and femininity itself had to be freed of *yonis*. Ah! Lalithesvari had received a new intellectual history that a free life was possible to achieve. (Prakash, 86-88)

Rangamani's autonomy lies in his recognition of the interrelatedness between individuals that can however never achieve complete identity. Through his repeated betrayals of female desire, he compels every woman's recognition of desire as an irrevocable and ultimately insatiable force that can potentially affect change by subverting and remaking subjectivity. Sexual deception is thus a necessary precondition for the recognition of the concealed truth of desire, which is nothing but the lack that structures and reproduces the desire for identity and recognition. Rangamani's attributes his own discovery of the absent truth of desire to his initial deception by the women he desired. He unsettles Lalithesvari's self-certainty by refuting her accusations of disingenuousness and 'accuses' women of deceiving him. I suggest deception is the only means of realizing the inter-subjectivity that dialectically relates and constitutes self and other. He confesses to Lalithesvari he has "lost his self in Shanta maami [who] spoiled him when he was twelve...she gave him and provoked a frenzy called sex" (Prakash, 102). His initial identification with Shanta, an older maternal figure, is disillusioned when, to his dismay and anger, he discovers her being intimate with a holy man at an ashram. He is later shocked to see the aged Shanta years later as the trustee of the ashram. He remembers being "spoiled" by Kamala, a young, dark skinned servant girl who worked for his mother. He eroticizes her dark complexion and they explore each other's bodies out of curiosity. Kamala 'deceives' him by accusing him of "spoiling" her but his father makes sure she no longer works for them. Kamala's 'betrayal' arouses his "aggressiveness" and he impregnates her. But later he is unsettled by his own insecurity and starts exercising his body when the children of Perumal Stores ridicule and shame him. He is made to realize that his privileged status separates him from the other children.

Rangamani dismisses Lalithesvari's charges of "spoiling" women by suggesting that the very notion of 'spoilage' and deception presumes the prior existence of a self-identified subject that is not (always already) constituted by its inter-subjective relationship to the other. He refuses to believe that anyone can 'spoil' anyone.

Lalithesvari and Karthyayini are transformed by their internalization of Rangamani. Lalithesvari is threatened by the subversion of her internalized notions of sexual morality and integrity; notions that were instituted by her dominant mother's imperative never to trust men including her father. But now she identifies with her submissive and weak father as she realizes her "body, mind and intelligence" are not one and can never be one for women.

When Karthyayini suffered Jeyaraman who wasn't enough for her she found Lalithesvari. Lalitha and Karthyayini understood what they wanted. When Karthyayini turned into Rangamani, Lalithesvari did too. They both turned into Rangamani, entered, held, shook, embraced and turned each other, falling ahead trying to climb the mountain. (Prakash, 98)

Lalithesvari struggles to disavow her desire for Rangamani but his status as a coveted object of desire notwithstanding his betrayals compels her to acknowledge her own desire for him. Rangamani suggests no one can avoid the essentially inter-subjective and mediated or social nature of desire that can never be entirely satiated. Although desire threatens the possibility of self-identity, he suggests it is precisely the human striving to fulfill desire that conditions the possibility of personal transformation. His apparent desire for all the women sustains their desire without ever fulfilling the promise of sexual identity. But he is left with a deceptive sense of identity through the women's desires for him. He is convinced Lalithesvari desires him,

don't lie to me...you don't know the problem with the body...we say hunger is the problem for those who don't have anything...hunger isn't a problem. They are a problem. If I am surely determined to satiate my hunger my hunger isn't a problem. I can somehow solve my hunger if I destroy it...hunger in Jagada's house. It was hunger that drove Kamala away...The Brahmin controls hunger. Not just today or yesterday. His Veda is to control hunger for the past ten thousand years from the time of the Vedas...but now the Brahmin is no longer there. Just hunger remains. Not just the Brahmin, everything. Lalithesvari, you and I have grown up without knowing hunger. It was hunger that made Bagavati feel like running away with me. Why does Krishni run away from me when she sees me? Why the taste for the body? ...everyone thinks they can live if hunger is subdued. But if hunger is subdued it is hunger again...people think everything is destroyed if poverty is destroyed. You say my intention is to spoil everyone. They know that themselves. They come to me although they know that. No one thinks of destroying their hunger...when do you think it should have appeared to me that I've made a mistake?...everyone provokes my hunger...none of the women subdued me, they embraced me. *At least one of them should have rejected and thrown me away and denied me and condemned me like you do now and buried me.* But they have the same fire, the same hunger. How can they experience me when the fire of lust is burning within them?...My desire for you is irredeemable. You may say this is all a lie, a strategy to spoil you as a thing to be experienced...[Lalithesvari] what filth is this?...Doesn't it strike you as absurd? Women are so despicable for you, isn't it? Will you marry me? No. You will not marry anyone. (Prakash, 121-122)

Lalithesvari seems to be a reflection of Rangamani's aggression. She is described in ambiguous terms,

A big officer, a good salary, a good education, a noble lineage's beauty and youth; Rangamani never had the time to look at her. Lalithesvari was aggressive like him. She grew on her own like a wild tree. She had studied all the Alvar poets. A long Srisurnam streak shone across her broad forehead without anxiety. An ordinariness could be seen in her arms and legs that could not have been silkier if they had been molded and if touched gave joy to the fingers with the toughness in their softness. (Prakash, 95)

Rangamani's is asked to retrieve Kamakshi's sister Sundari after she disappears with a man named Sankar. He discovers Sundari in a lodge but she initially refuses to let him in. The room in the lodge betrays unmistakable signs of sexual intimacy that arouse Rangamani's resentment against the world that reduces women to "objects of pleasure" who are complicit in their own sexualization (Prakash, 89). He is unable to reconcile to her being the sister of a woman like Kamakshi who has potentially transcended desire. When

Rangamani finally barges into the room after a long wait, the door gives way to a dark room where Sundari begs innocence. She takes sole responsibility for disappearing and spares Sankar of any blame. She claims he neither “destroyed” her virginity nor did he offer to marry her (Prakash, 91). Her sexual deception provokes Rangamani’s fury, initially for being humiliated and then for being openly deceived. But he is involuntarily seduced by her deceptive enactment of innocence and powerlessness. He imprisons her in the room and proceeds to ‘punish’ her to disillusion her fantasy of love. Sundari likens his sexual aggression to that of Sankar’s and yet realizes there is something different about Rangamani. But when his violence only evokes her desire for him he is deceived by her seductive advances. When her family refuses to take her back, she turns to Rangamani who is involuntarily seduced by her sensuous passion. In the process of trying to violently strip Sundari of her sexual deception and reduce her to ‘nothing’, Rangamani is betrayed by the failure of his own desire for her recognition.

Rangamani was shaken yesterday as Sundari’s arms encircled and embraced him when he lifted and laid her on the bed in the darkness of Kent Lodge. This was the merciless consequence when he tried to punish her unable to bear his irritation and inconsolability; when he decided that he wished to strangle her out of fury not knowing what to do with her. Rangamani didn’t expect her to embrace him. Rangamani was unable to stop her attempts to enter him when he tried to brush her away and rise. How did this happen? It escaped his mind. What is she doing hugging him upside down with the faces of her breasts pressing down against his face? Amazing! Sundari’s body completely pressed and buried itself beneath his feet. With the swiftness of a secretive relationship, her two lips pressed against the two lips on his face and tightly grasped them. Rangamani was unable to control his mind. He tightly joined her and buried himself in her. He felt sorry when he turned the light on and looked at her. Rangamani was ashamed to look at Sundari who was almost naked. He felt he should regret having done this. But he was in a frenzy to reduce her to nothing again and again by leaping on her like a beast. He gently sat close to her, pulled her to his lap and embraced her with his fingers. Very, very difficult. What can be said about the cheapness of the body? This is the state everywhere. She looked him askance and her eyes moistened as she muttered and hugged the sinful Rangamani again as if she had taken revenge instead of scolding him. ‘Forgive me Sundari’ he said in a shaky voice. ‘Keep quiet Mama!’ she said to his ears. ‘I made this mistake without knowing...From now on...’, Rangamani blabbered. ‘Never mind. I’m wrong. You didn’t do anything wrong’, Rangamani bit and closed her red flowing lips. ‘Turn the lights off Mama. Turn them off!’ she said. After a long time, when he had tightly kissed her for the third time, ‘Appa! What passion is this!’ she said as she showed her lips. The inner rounded part of her lip had reddened and swelled with clotted blood. Sundari was a younger Kamakshi. Her legs, her face, her shoulders, her thighs, everything. I didn’t know you knew so much Sundari with your courage and undaunted swiftness unlike Kamakshi. [The furious Lalithesvari is shaken by their intimacy and unable to suppress or understand her impulse to drive her out] What is this suffering when I know all of Rangamani’s cheats? [She is determined never to spare Rangamani] (Prakash, 113-114)

Rangamani’s violent seduction compels Sundari to acknowledge the deceptiveness of her embodied semblance of integrity. She confronts Rangamani with the abject truth of bodily desire that renders Rangamani vulnerable and defensive. Rangamani realizes none of the

women have ever acknowledged the deception that structures desire. Sundari wonders at the truth of the body and expresses her fear of being inexorably betrayed by her own body and desire. She tries to force herself on Rangamani who in his fear is unable to resist her advances. Once his violent passion is aroused, Sundari again confronts him with her body and his own desire that is suddenly betrayed. She wonders if all women are unable to resist or escape any man's sexual advances. Rangamani is enraged and rendered vulnerable by her open confessions of sexual abnegation that disappoints his own irrepressible need for recognition and reassurance. She berates his masculinity and the sexual modesty and submissiveness of women. Rangamani is transformed by her. He begins to question the body and admits the 'nothingness' that structures bodily desire. He begins to hate himself and is revolted by his own body that again betrays his integrity by embracing the crying Sundari who begs his intimacy. The fragrance of the flowers in her hair again arouses his passion as he momentarily experiences the merging of their beings. They seem to lose their identities in that transcendental union and this time Rangamani confesses he cannot answer Sundari's desire to know the truth of sex. He realizes like everyone else he has been escaping sex as though it were a "dirty secret" (203). Her constant demands of his sexual attention compels him to acknowledge the inexorably promiscuous nature of desire and the potential of desire to create social and political change.

When Lalithesvari ridicules Rangamani's promiscuity and anticipates his sexual affairs with t will not change Lalitha. You say man and woman are equal and that they can do as they please. That's what it is like there with nothing wrong." (Prakash, 124) Rangamani valorizes Karthyayini and Kamakshi for their ability to suffer poverty and hunger has heightened their awareness of their own bodily existence. He criticizes western culture whose notion of freedom is destroying their very beings by having synthetic relationships and bodies. Lalithesvari argues their synthetic bodies are because they have been reduced to commodities by men. Rangamani replies, "How is it different here?...woman has never been controlled by anyone anywhere. She cannot be controlled. It is wrong to say men try to control them. Women always keep ruling. Even when they were controlled, the intelligent ones were true in saying they were not controlled and subordinated. There is nothing like man or woman in this." (Prakash, 125) He accuses society of 'spoiling' women like Kamala and Jagada by getting them married. Even their attempts to free themselves are futile. He accuses Lalithesvari and Kamakshi of being selfish and complacent because of their financial independence and professional success. He realizes people like him and Lalitha have the freedom but are unable to exercise their own choices because they are trapped in their own comfortable lives. He points to Jagada, Komali and Jaya and Seeta, women who have returned to their homes unable to live with their husbands. He reminds Lalithesvari her determination never to be spoiled by him is only a sign of her conformity to social norms. He says, "female liberation cannot be won or lost by getting rid of the vulva." (Prakash, 126). He realizes neither of them can refuse to marry the person of their parents' choice and opt out of their society. "The destruction of femininity on both sides, the irrecoverable destruction, the horrifying decline of time would again and again trap woman and the ignorance of women and the bareness of the inability of femininity to understand itself and the irrecoverable illusion buried Lalithesvari." (Prakash, 127).

When Rangamani finally coerces Lalithesvari, she realizes her own feminine vulnerability and discovers sex had been a preserved by society as a dirty secret. She identifies him with Karthyayini even as she feels herself being transformed into her. She feels his fingers "sculpt her" like Karthyayini and protests at his attempts to 'spoil her'. Rangamani stops short of

violating her before releasing her. Lalithesvari is confronted by the 'nothingness' of sex that blurs sexual difference and never promises identity. She realizes sex is not the 'dirty secret' that she had been raised to believe, but a sheer lack that can never fulfill desire.

Krishnaveni's avoidance of Rangamani's attempts to talk to her only evokes his anger. Her aged and emaciated appearance only reminds him of his indigent brother-in-law's transformed appearance and his sister who had their children when she was fourteen. He thinks of life as a "carefully structured selfishness" (Prakash, 134). He is reminded of his desire for self-identity through his relationships with Kamakshi and Krishnaveni.

Rangamani was scared at the thought of himself. Earlier, this fear would never come. 'Everything I do is for the good'—who lives by making this a part of his everyday life? Morality. Everyone speaks. Everyone longs. But who will be left? Can life not be changed? It can be done. Doesn't everyone know? No one is prepared to change their existence because this can be destroyed and a new and good life can always be formed. No learned person has thought of this. All those who searched for a reason have found one. But you need a new mind, a new body and a new awakening to make a transformation. Rangamani was scared. He had never thought of such a transformation. He can change it if he just thinks of it. Turn over. This Perumal Stores can be turned over to make another decisive new world. Is it possible? Not just him but will anyone be prepared? He was tired of hunting down every woman. Adultery was the need of life. Why do they deny this? Attraction is supposedly used as a weapon for woman. It appears that this is what prevents women from thinking. Rangamani wants female liberation. To be as one wishes. To be without a man's companionship. The body is an obstacle...Rangamani clearly understood. Do animals have this struggle? Science says man is an animal. Women have to achieve liberation. Does anyone understand the fear that she cannot be freed of man and herself? An absurdity called love. A fetter called marriage. A disease called husband. Does it appear to anyone to deny that wife is a wound with puss dripping? Can man escape from the species of animal called woman, when he realizes that woman cannot attain liberation? In fact in this age, why do women happily accept that their attractiveness is their danger and become made up ornaments? They are their own sacrifice. A verdict of 'enmity'...he [Rangamani] was fed with all the good things of the world...is this a day's food for everyone? Who worries that this is not for everyone? Rangamani was scared. His fear scared him. Would anyone be scared of his own fear?...Now everyone talks with apparent moral passion about how everyone should get everything. But when it comes to woman everyone says she is his property. You think of 'My friend! Your younger sister, your older sister, your mother, your lover, your wife', isn't this selfishness? Shouldn't there be your universality, humanitarianism, reciprocity and sharing in all aspects? This is the injustice that society delivers. Even if it is true that society is a group of individuals, it is the individual who mostly advances. Needs split separately and dominate. If one is hungry the other doesn't understand. So for ages people are societies living in lonely wells without any relationship to each other. Rangamani was born with the excellences of life. He cannot leave them and arrive at the wholeness of society. He will not give up for others. The terrible truth that he cannot recover Vasanta shook him. He loved every living being in Perumal Stores. He needn't have grown closer to Jagada. He needn't have seduced Bagavati. When he realized he could've stepped away from every woman and lived as a 'good' man, he remembered Shanta Maami. She is a woman who lived a very superior life in this society. He remembered her as a woman who at all times spoke with all justice and knowledge. (Prakash, 73-76)

Lalithesvari like Kamakshi is transformed by Rangamani; she no longer accuses him of ‘spoiling’ women. They are both grateful to him for making them realize that sex is not “a dirty secret; a transgression”. With his help, Kamakshi gets a job as a college professor and Karthyayini is reunited with her husband Jeyaraman. She is transformed into a “Tanjavur woman” with no traces of once having been a “Palakkad woman” (Prakash, 88). He admits her as a teacher in a mat weaving school. She becomes an active, hardworking and financially independent wife whose estranged relationship with her husband is renewed. She is no longer the flirtatious, gossipy woman but a busy and engaged woman. She grows scared of Rangamani’s initial visits at night that divest her of her very being. She is transformed and remade through her abject encounters with Rangamani.

Rangamani is unsettled by Sundari’s constant thrusting of her vulnerability; she feels she has no control over her body that she fears she will relinquish to any man who desires her. She is unable to understand herself when she thinks of how Sankar ‘spoiled’ her and later her willing desire to sleep with Rangamani. She wants to know her body and sex is but Rangamani says he would “have long escaped” had he known what they meant; he is scared and excited by her passionate touch. He is unable to resist her advances; his sexual advances make Sundari wonder why sexual pleasure is so self-divesting and unrepresentable. She feels all women unlike men are unable to be freed of their bodies or control their bodies. She claims Vasanta unquestioningly slept with her husband and bore him several children although she is now a sick widow. Rangamani feels betrayed by her; and by his earlier attempt to ‘punish’ her. He realizes even he has not been able to get rid of his body. He realizes the nothingness of sex, he realizes he cannot escape either from moral notions of sexual desire.

I am one who slips off and falls on my chest because of women. If I knew what it all was I would have escaped. I may have gone with them when they pulled me but I didn’t know what that was. I can see it like a slight shadow for the first time in you. It’s scary. I’m scared to even say I can see it. I too have been running away, scared, from what everyone says is dirty. Like everyone I have been saying, ‘This is wrong!’ ‘This is a sin!’ ‘This is bad’ ‘This is a crime!’ but still doing it ceaselessly. I have been kidnapping many women. Don’t stand here!...I want everyone. I want you too. I don’t know why no one understands that...You may think this is crazy, even selfish on my part. Whether or not you wish this, no one has told the way to or escaped from what this is. Even if I knew the way I couldn’t tell you. Even if you understood you wouldn’t act accordingly. Even if you did they wouldn’t let you. Lalitha and Kamakshi are fishes flying in the sky. Do fishes have wings? Sundari your wings have sprouted. You will fly too. You’re all fishes. But you’re trying to fly. Can fishes fly? Here all fishes swim. Only that which swims is a fish. But my wings sprouted and I began flying when I was very young. I pulled all the fishes with me and made them fly...first, understand that you’re a fish then your fins will wither and your wings will sprout and grow...everyone’s down there. If they want to climb up they’re scared they can’t. I’m keep going down too. So I flew climbing up. I keep climbing. I desired everyone. I searched for everything I desired. All that I searched for fell down. When I pick up everything that fell I discovered that everything has been dragging me without searching for them. A black baby called Kamala. A black fish! It swims in the water. Then Seethi next to it. Poor thing, she doesn’t even have fins to swim...do you understand? Are you asking me, ‘Where do women have fins?’ Then wings have to sprout too. Bagavati’s wings had already sprouted. But she’s a fish. She can neither swim nor fly. An eagle snatched a cat fish called Vasanta...is there a

fish that walks on land? There is. Did you know? Maithi maami! Has to swim! Has to fly but also wishes to walk. She begged she was happy with walking. I made her run. Then I threw her into the water. The fins separated. The moment she swam she went down to the depths...no desire to rise up...a shiny red fish called Karthyayini who everyone needed. Everyone threw a net to capture her. But she slipped away. Dirt and moss is enough for it. That fish was finally caught in a net...Sundari I'm the one who showed them the sky after separating their wings from every one of their bodies and lifting them made them fly while flying with them!...No matter what your fate is, you'll have wings. Because you have practiced flying with me. When lust subsides and a man spoils you your fins will spread and wither and sprout into wings with this very lust! Only then will you understand this is not just a body...but fish's wings! When you spread your wings and fly, you will kick everything else—your body, your femininity, and all the world that spread out from it as you fly up towards the sky ocean and swim like a golden fish! Desire, kindness, lust and want are this fish's wings. These are all sinful, bad, dirty and absurd. You need to fly above this. These have to sprout into wings...I've never told anyone what I understand...Hunger will always chase us everywhere. Hunger is petty. One shouldn't run even if hunger is chasing us. Starvation isn't hunger...*hunger is lust too. Lust cannot be destroyed. It's foolishness to try and destroy hunger...lust is power! Hunger is our essence...only with hunger is creation possible...hunger is our education. Lust is our art...lust is man. Hunger is the ember that awakens man. There is no beginning for him without hunger. Hunger is motivation. Lust is kidnapping. Hunger is man's history. Lust is his literature...hunger is his god. Lust is his god's seat. In Perumal Stores hunger is god. It is also the demon. It is survival. It's everything. If the day is hunger, the night is lust. You can only reconcile them. But you can't destroy them. Make them your wings and fly. They will both 'help'...don't salute them. Feed them and make them grow and make them rise with you.* (Prakash, 204-205)

Rangamani's seductive appeal is the source of his transformative power over the several women who are inexorably drawn to him. One of the poor women from Perumal Stores, Bavani embraces her abjection when her desire for Rangamani is betrayed. She internalizes Rangamani and is empowered in her relationship with her violent husband Chandran who is mutilated and loses both his legs during his career in the army. She embraces her abjection and discovers the seductive powers of the body in her ability to initiate sexual encounters with her helpless husband. His presence also guarantees her safety from the sexual attention of other men. Bavani who is drugged and inebriated before being raped by her husband and another youth at night, is empowered by her betrayed desire for Rangamani. She embraces her potential disrepute and secretly murders her husband and the youth. There are no witnesses to her murders. She later pretends to be mad to avoid suspicion. She realizes the impossibility of women to escape their sexual degradation and embodiment. Rangamani is the only man in the locality who believes she did not commit a murder. There is an instant affinity between them when she discovers he is from her home town and belongs "to her blood" (Prakash, 238). He is struck by her apparent "purity, her nobility, her fiery integrity" and her beauty intimidates him. When they embrace Rangamani realizes unlike the other women, her touch does not give him pleasure and his touch does not seduce her. She feels she is being stripped of her deception as she embraces him, "he was firm and strong, like a man from the ancient Stone Age who deceives herself into believing she is a modern woman with a scientific mind." (Prakash, 240) She reduces R to nothing when she resists his advances, she offers herself to him although she is unsure of offering her body. He is struck by her uncompromised integrity not affected by sex, by violation,

Rangamani realizes the truth of sex is nothing and yet it is a necessary fiction for self-identity. He desires everyone precisely because “sex is nothing” unlike women who cannot love everyone because they are trapped by their bodies. Lalithesvari is insecure by Rangamani’s free sex/love, now that she is completely surrendered to him. She thinks she can be united with him by incorporating him. She identifies Rangamani with Bavani’s “beauty, her strong giving body, her appreciation of L’s beauty” (Prakash, 245). Their intimacy is conditioned or mediated by their mutual internalization of their desire for Rangamani. They struggle to be freed of their bodily existence. Bavani tells her she can never be spoiled. She pities Lalithesvari for assuming every woman desires Rangamani and thinks Lalithesvari has been ruined by her education. Lalithesvari, she feels, cannot see the truth because she is educated. Bavani claims Rangamani has never ‘spoiled’ anyone, “he is as deceived by women as they have deceived him” (Prakash, 260). She is the only one who escaped Rangamani when she realizes sex is nothing. Lalithesvari is initially drawn to her apparent sense of identity and integrity and thinks she is the only one who has not transcended the body. R desires everyone and thus lets them free, Bavani pretends like Rangamani to seduce the lawyer who helped exonerate her. She thus realizes the truth of sex through experience and not understanding. She feels Vasanta killed herself because she could no longer protect her body from Bavani’s husband who pimps her and the youth Ramalingam. She confesses Rangamani ‘spoils’ Vasanta before she was pimped by durai.

Rangamani rescues another woman, Jagada from Bavani’s father-in-law’s sexual exploitation and prevents her from drowning herself. Krishnaveni is shocked to discover Rangamani still desires her aged body that has nothing to offer. She realizes the irony of being unable to offer herself to him in her youth when she was sexually immature and her present inability to refuse him when she is emaciated and poor. She credits him with her sexual maturity, and feels her body has been renewed and redeemed of her sexual disrepute. He helps her question her denied desires and body; her own assumptions of her aged disgusting body. Rangamani says he has never cheated anyone and that there is only one moment of complete union in sex, which can never be exclusive without revealing the impossibility of sexual gratification or identity. Rangamani admires the lives of animals that are beyond the deceptions of marriage and human affections. Krishnaveni longs to internalize him and reproduce him by bearing his child despite the possibility of social censure but Rangamani never fulfills her desire.

Conclusion

The recurrent and irrevocable betrayal of desire in Prakash’s novels, reveal the abject lack that structures and perpetuates desire. Desire is thus disclosed as an irreducibly intersubjective and dialectical force that through its repeated evocations and betrayals enables personal transformation and historical development. The next chapter engages with the transformative and liberating potentials of female labor as a reworking and sublimation of desire.

Chapter 4

The Renewing Potentials of Female Labor in S. Tamilselvi's Novels

This chapter traces shifting representations of the figure of the female laborer in the works of a contemporary novelist, S. Tamilselvi. Tamilselvi's novels valorize the empowering possibilities of labor that offers rural women some reprieve from domestic violence and abject poverty. This is not to idealize female labor—Tamilselvi clearly draw attention to the sexual and economic exploitation of women within the spaces of the household, the factory and the field. Instead, Tamilselvi foregrounds the ability of the female body to potentially resist abjection and affect change through its capacity to work and labor. Although all her novels trace women's struggles for survival, Tamilselvi's earlier works end with the female protagonist's defeat and death while her later works are more hopeful and affirmative in their depictions of female life and agency.

Manikkam (2002)

Like some of her following works, Tamilselvi's novel *Manikkam*, takes the form of a flashback that traces a woman's growing sense of self-affirmation through her attempts to embrace domestic violence and abject poverty. Although this novel ends with the female protagonist's death, her death by no means discounts the significance of her struggle for survival; on the contrary, her death gains retrospective significance in the light of her abject past. The protagonist of this novel, Sellayi, is married to a violent drunk, Manikkam, who appropriates her savings to buy toddy and gamble. When his authoritative mother Thangathachi forbids his marriage to a poor woman called Sakkubai, Manikkam mourns Sakkubai's loss by drinking and gambling, which nearly costs him his ancestral wealth and medical store. When his mother threatens to disinherit him, he agrees to marry Sellayi, a woman of his mother's choice. Manikkam's forced marriage to Sellayi soon turns miserable and violent—Sellayi is shocked to discover Manikkam's love for another woman, and her attempts to stop Manikkam from drinking and gambling are violently resisted. Manikkam's defiant profligacy only hastens their descent into poverty. His misery and deprivation does not deter Manikkam from drinking and gambling and it is only when his drunken assaults cause Sellayi's death that he is potentially reformed.

Tamilselvi's female protagonists often break into lament songs to express their vulnerability and accuse their husbands of injustice. When Manikkam asks Sellayi if he can marry Sakkubai, Sellayi is hurt by Manikkam's confession, and breaks into a lament song that expresses her anguish at his betrayal. To Sellayi's relief, Manikkam relents and decides not to marry Sakkubai.

Wasn't I playing under the *karuvai* tree,
 When I forgot I was playing and garlanded this Karnan?
 Wasn't I playing under the neem tree
 When I forgot I was playing and garlanded this *Veemar*?
 Didn't I say a pit in which an elephant had fallen
 Wasn't a good sign? But you, saying it was alright,
 Brought me and garlanded me?
 Didn't I say a pit in which a horse had fallen
 Wasn't a good sign? But you said it was alright and garlanded me.
 I raised my hands with a box full of cardamom
 But people didn't tell me you were a man of two hearts.
 I bought a hand full of chilies
 But people didn't tell me you were a cheater. (Tamilselvi, 70).

Sellayi is considered a liability to her in-laws who humiliate her for being poor and not bringing any dowry into the family. Manikkam finally decides to leave his family at Sellayi's behest at the risk of losing his inheritance. Their departure becomes an opportunity for Manikkam to assert his independence. In what follows, the narrative traces the alternating rhythms of relative comfort and poverty that characterizes their lives. They become itinerant travelers in their search for work. Manikkam first takes Sellayi, who is now pregnant, to Manali, a neighboring village, to live with her older sister Sarasu. While Sellayi is under her sister's care, Manikkam finds work as a wage laborer. But they soon leave to another village called Madukur to stay with his cousins. Manikkam opens a medical store and over time his medical services grow reputed, earning the trust and respect of the villagers. But his prosperity and reputation is soon threatened by his renewed alcoholism and gambling. He learns to perform tricks on his bicycle from a friend whose only source of income are his

regular shows for rural audiences. Manikkam spends all the money he earns from his performances on toddy and gambling, which threatens his medical business. During his longer and more frequent absences, the pregnant Sellayi has no one take care of her. They are finally forced to return to Manikkam's parents with no money but Thangathachi refuses to let them in. They have no choice but to live with the cows in the cowshed. Manikkam contracts chickenpox and nearly dies when his parents take pity and occasionally send him food. Manikkam, determined to be independent, starts growing and selling his own vegetables and occasionally prescribes medicines to a few patients. Being the only doctor in Manavari, his home town, his medical services are in great demand. When he miraculously cures the dying son of a wealthy landowner he is fed and handsomely rewarded. But any signs of comfort are soon dispelled by tragedy and death. Sakkubai kills herself when Manikkam fails to fulfill his promise to marry her. Her death fills Manikkam with guilt and he disappears for a long time. In his unexpected absence, Sellayi finds work as a farmhand to support herself and her child. Her in-laws exploit Manikkam's absence as an opportunity to slander Sellayi's sexual reputation by falsely accusing her of having an affair with a man who delivers bread sent by her father who sympathizes with her hunger and misery. When Manikkam returns two years later his parents accuse Sellayi of infidelity and convince Manikkam to abandon her. Manikkam assaults Sellayi for her apparent looseness and throws her out. Sellayi's helpless lamentations again take the form of a song that accuses Manikkam's parents of poisoning him against her. This song also symbolizes her vulnerability.

On the Mayavaram road—I
 A peacock descended to feed
 When they who did not care the peacock was feeding
 Shot it with poisoned arrows
 I hid by a wall hearing the shots
 But you kept shooting poison...
 On the road to Kumbakonam—I
 A cuckoo descended to feed
 But they did not care the cuckoo was feeding
 And shot it with bullets
 And hearing the sound of bullets I hid by a water tank
 But you shot bullet after bullet
 You shot me too with poison. (Tamilselvi, 163)

But Sellayi returns and Manikkam is convinced to take her back by a friend who assures him of Sellayi's innocence. In a later incident, Thangathachi falsely accuses Sellayi of setting fire to the house and asks a soothsayer to support her claim. Manikkam, convinced of the truth of his mother's accusation sets fire to the hut in the cowshed determined to burn Sellayi alive. But Sellayi manages to escape and jumps into a well with Manikkam in pursuit. Manikkam nearly drowns Sellayi when the other villagers intervene and a meeting with the village elders is organized. The council of elders orders Manikkam and Sellayi to move into his parents' house while his parents are sent to live with one of Manikkam's married sisters. But Thangathachi soon returns with the intention of disinheriting Manikkam of her property, which she sells to her brother and daughters. Her relationship with Manikkam suffers when he relinquishes the house to live in the backyard with his family.

Manikkam's relationship with Thangathachi is briefly renewed when she is dying of a sickness. He fulfills her dying desire for a seasonal fish and ironically dies as she is being fed

by Sellayi. The novel suggests Thangathachi's death is a form of retribution for her cruelty and humiliation, while Sellayi's compassionate gesture of feeding her dying mother-in-law is consistent with the novel's rather noble representation of Sellayi.

Following his father's death, Manikkam sells his ancestral inheritance but again spends the money on gambling and toddy. Sellayi is assaulted when she tries to stop him. She realizes she has to find work if she has to survive without the support of an unreliable husband and becomes a wage laborer planting paddy. But the possibility of surviving as a wage laborer on a paddy field is constantly threatened by the erratic monsoonal rains. The desperate need for other sources of income interrupts her daughter Mani's education, who is ordered to take care of her father's betel nut store. But she accidentally drowns in the water tank of the local temple. Despite his profligacy, Manikkam raises some money following a successful harvest and marries his older daughter Vani. But his success is short lived; soon there is no work for the farmers, peasants and laborers when the water levels of the river Kaveri fall following the shutting of the Mettur dam. Several acres of agricultural land on either side of the river are taken over by the state government forcing the farming communities to resort to fishing in the sea to make their living. Her family's desperate survival compels Sellayi to emerge from her daughter's loss. Manikkam decides to join the fishermen's union that offers fishermen loans and financial insurance against the uncertainties of the fishing trade. Manikkam's popularity among the other fishermen grows when he discovers a new way of making fishing nets more efficient. His son Nanji is not a successful fisherman which only adds to his parents' financial plight.

The novel ends with Sellayi's death following her violent altercation with Manikkam. As she lies on her deathbed, she has delirious fantasies of her dead daughter Mani that beckon her. As she goes in search of her dead daughter in the salt field where she once worked, she slips and fatally injures herself. Her death initiates Manikkam's guilty reformation. Old age and the advent of modern fishing boats and techniques threaten Manikkam's fishing career. When he loses his net to a sailing ship, he realizes his life as a fisherman has come to an end and decides never to return to the sea.

Kitari (Goat Herder) (2003)

Tamilselvi's *Kitari* is preoccupied with the abject lives of goat herding women and the larger marginalization of their community. Largely ethnographic in form, the novel draws attention to the deleterious effects of modern development on the lives of the Itaiyars, a goat herding caste community from the north eastern districts of Tamil Nadu. Being nomadic and landless, the survival of the Itaiyars relies on the availability of grazing pastures and the material support of other agricultural caste groups. But the incursions of modern development and the expansion of agricultural lands increasingly limit the availability of grazing pastures. As a result of the growing claims of agricultural caste communities on land and resources, the Idaiyars are deprived of any sense of belonging. The novel tracks their constant flights and displacements as their escape exploitation and state persecution.

Ramu, one of the older and respected goat herders, rescues two orphaned brothers, Periyasami and Vellaisami from their unfortunate lives as bonded laborers. The brothers' father, Sethu, is an exploited goat herder who leaves his village in search of work. As he is unfamiliar with agriculture, he offers to graze cattle for a landlord in exchange for money and food. Sethu borrows money from the landlord and buys a few cows of his own to secure his own future survival. The landlord makes sure Sethu spends his nights guarding his cows

from the crops while he has an affair with Sethu's wife. Sethu ignores rumors about their affair, but when Sethu's wife gives birth to a child that resembles the landlord, he grows suspicious. His suspicions are confirmed when he accidentally discovers his wife sleeping with the landlord. He murders his wife and the child in a fit of rage but is powerless to act against the landlord. He decides to sell his cows when the landlord demands repayment of his dues but when his cows mysteriously disappear, he kills himself. The landlord orders his orphaned sons to redeem their father's debts. His orphaned sons are nearly condemned to a life of bonded labor when they are secretly rescued by Ramu who trains them to become skilled goat herders. The older brother Periyasami is sent to Chidambaram to assist Ramu's brother-in-law's herds while the younger one Vellaisami is entrusted with the responsibility of taking care of Ramu's herds. He is later given a share of his goats.

Ramu's wife Irulai helps a 'mad' beggar woman give birth to twin daughters. Ramu and Irulai are sorry for the helpless girls and adopt them too despite the additional burden of raising the orphaned brothers and their own daughter Muthammal. The twins are raised together for the first six years of their life before the older one Sivappi, is adopted by Sambasivam, a village elder, who prefers her relatively light skinned beauty to her darker sister. Karicha, the younger one, is raised by Ramu and Irulai until she is separated from her adoptive parents by their daughter Muthammal's husband who envies her parents' apparent partiality to their foster son Vellaisami. Following their separation, Karicha spends her adolescent years with her "uncle" Vellaisami.

Unlike Karicha, Sivappi initially enjoys a more privileged childhood in Sambasivam's comfortable home until his first wife stops her education out of jealousy and resentment. Sambasivam's younger wife is the only person in the family who encourages Sivappi to continue her education. But over the years, Sivappi is neglected by Sambasivam and his wives and ordered to do all the household work while Sambasivam's own children are sent to school. Once she attains sexual maturity she is perceived as a potential burden and danger to the family's reputation. She is periodically segregated from the rest of the family during her menstrual period and humiliated. She is forbidden by Sambasivam's first wife from leaving the house. Her life comes to a tragic end when Sambasivam molests her in one of his drunken stupors, "When your uncle [Vellaisami] who raised your younger sister [Karicha] can marry her, can't I who raised you, touch you?" Sivappi tearfully replies, "You're my father" to which Sambasivam says, "Why is the daughter of a mad woman bothered with convention? Was your mother married before she had you?" (Tamilselvi, 112) Sivappi hangs herself out of shame.

Ramu and the other goat herders are powerless to punish Sambasivam,

No fine or punishment was decided. No one ordered Sambasivam to even slightly convey sorrow for his mistake. Karicha's heart cried looking at all this...Ramu was an intelligent man. Although he could be clever, he was cowardly like all goat herders. The goat herders, who moved from town to town like nomads to survive, were always dumb. They never for a moment thought of their dignity and disgrace. Even if they were forcibly brought and beaten and kicked, they will never protest. Their nature was to be patient and not open their mouths no matter how cheaply they were insulted. If anyone felt sorry for their pitiable state and inquired, their reply would be even sorrier, 'No one will beat us without a reason. Our goats must have grazed their crops last year, which is why they are beating us. They are right to beat us isn't it? We are wrong, we have to suffer it' they would normally say. (Tamilselvi, 111)

Karicha is stigmatized for her dark complexion, which hinders her marital prospects. Ramu finally receives a marriage proposal from a disabled man but the engagement is cancelled when the suitor's father discovers Karicha lives alone with Vellaisami and suspects Karicha may be pregnant with Vellaisami's child. Ramu is enraged by the father's demand to inspect the clothes Karicha was wearing when she had her period as proof of her chastity. Ramu decides to get Karicha married to Vellaisami to preempt any further slander to Karicha's sexual reputation.

The novel is not restricted to the lives of its protagonists but includes detailed descriptions of the social lives of the goat herding caste community and the community's threatened existence in a world constantly transformed by modern development. Their nomadic status deprives the goat herders of the right to claim any place as their own. When one of the goat herders dies, the goat herders are forbidden to bury the dead man in the town of his birth. Signs of modern development like roads, buildings, and the expansion of cultivable lands increasingly limit the availability of grazing pastures for the goats. With the limited availability of grazing pastures, the goats become an increasing threat to crops. The goat herders are unable to even settle temporarily in a village without being stigmatized or driven out and their only source of income from goat manure grows uncertain. With no money to buy spices or borrow cooking accessories from local settlers, Ramu and the other goat herders approach a landlord who gives them paddy in exchange for manure. The goat herders convert their paddy into rice for later consumption but, as they are traversing a bridge that connects two districts, they are mistaken for rice stealers by the police. While the other goat herders escape, Vellaisami and Ramu's son-in-law are captured and tortured by the police.

The novel also draws attention to the crucial importance of the goat herding community to its members who need each other if they are to survive at all in a changing world. When one of the goat herders Athappan's eldest son dies, he orders his middle son Muthusami to marry his widowed daughter-in-law as per the norms of the community. The son implicitly accuses his sister-in-law of being responsible for his brother's death and refuses to marry her for fear of his own death. The sister-in-law, who cannot return to her father, is desperate to marry him or his much younger brother. Ramu, who is respected by the other goat herders for his wisdom, intervenes and threatens to disinherit and excommunicate Muthusami if he does not marry his sister-in-law. Muthusami realizes he cannot survive without his caste community's support and agrees to the marriage.

Following Sivappi's death, Karicha and Vellaisami decide to move to Paramakudi to live with Vellaisami's older brother Periyasami. Following Ramu's advice, Vellaisami sells the old and infirm goats in his herd and gives Ramu money to purchase a plot of land in Paramakudi. Vellaisami's growing success as a goat herder attracts Periyasami's brother-in-law's attention who secretly plans to get him married to his youngest sister. The brother-in-law manipulates Vellaisami and sets him against Ramu and Karicha. He maligns Ramu's reputation and generosity and urges Vellaisami to assert his own independence. He suspects Karicha may be sterile for failing to bear a child for some years, which raises Vellaisami's own suspicion. Unable to tolerate his insults, Karicha leaves Vellaisami to return to her foster parents and sister where she realizes she is pregnant with Vellaisami's child. But Karicha is determined never to return to Vellaisami. The novel ends on a note of death and hope. Following Irulai's death from sickness, Ramu decides to relieve his poor son-in-law's financial burden and leaves with Karicha and her baby for another neighboring town in search of pastures for his goats. Karicha and Ramu survive on the little money they are paid by landlords for goat manure. They are in turn allowed to graze their goats on the open

pastures of the village. Karicha suddenly dies like her sister when she is accidentally bitten by a snake. Her death evokes Vellaisami's guilt. Ramu decides to raise her orphaned son.

Alam (Salt Field) (2002)

This novel, unlike the novels discussed so far, is an affirmation of female life and agency. The women in this novel embrace abject poverty to exercise whatever little agency possible in their struggle for survival. The female protagonist of this novel is a poor woman named Sundarambal whose abusive husband appropriates her meager savings for toddy. He later abandons her and their three daughters when Ramaiya Pillai, a respected man from the village who is now a wealthy landowner in Singapore, offers to hire him as a gardener. Ramaiya Pillai is reputed in the village for his generous financial support to poor men with families. For Sundarambal's husband, Subbaiyan, this is an opportunity to renounce his familial responsibilities and pursue a comfortable life in Singapore. Subbaiyan adamantly insists on accompanying Ramiah Pillai to Singapore, despite the latter's entreaties to await the birth of a son who would shoulder his financial responsibilities. Subbaiyan promises to send his wife regular installments of money and return after some years but he disappears on his arrival at Singapore never to return.

With no land or livestock to fall back on, Sundarambal has no steady source of income to support her daughters. For Sundarambal, the survival of the family is further threatened by her growing daughters and their future marriages that would potentially entail unaffordable dowries. Her only source of comfort and protection is her brother-in-law Ganeshan who takes care of the family after his brother's disappearance. But even Ganeshan is unable to marry Vadivambal, Sundarambal's oldest daughter, because of her dark complexion. While Sundarambal is devastated by Vadivambal's misfortune, Vadivambal struggles to embrace her stigma and validate her hitherto abject self. She initially wishes to die but her childhood memory of nearly dying of cholera only strengthens her resolve to transcend her abjection. Her past survival makes her determined to support her family. Another memory of her unrequited desire for a young man who spurns her for being dark skinned suggests the power of Vadivambal's speech to avenge those who stigmatize her. She unwittingly curses her aunt's brother Govindan for ignoring her and flirting with her fairer skinned cousins. The curse, to Vadivambal's remorse, comes true when Govindan dies a few days later of small pox.

May a snake bite you
May the parai drums sound
May the stretcher [in a procession]...
May tens and tens of wooden poles be heaped,
A hundred and sixty of them [for cremation]
May disease infect your intestines
May there be a tumor on your leg... (Tamilselvi, 146)

Vadivambal berates her mother for wasting money on rituals and astrologers to ensure her marriage but she secretly hopes her marriage promises her happiness and freedom from abject poverty. The initial impossibility of marriage becomes an opportunity for Vadivambal to potentially transcend abjection through work. The narrator betrays her admiration for Vadivambal's tireless efforts to help her mother support the family. Early in the novel, we

get a sense of Vadivambal's compassion and vitality as she responds to an elderly neighbor's request to draw water from her well to water her tobacco fields,

Kalithanpillai's wife blew her nose as she sat down with the intention of somehow asking them [Sundarambal and Vadivambal] to draw water. No one offered to draw water after Kalithanpillai fell...if a man were asked, he would have to be paid a higher wage. If it was Sundarambal and her daughter, fifty paisa would be enough. Tobacco had been planted in hundred and thirty pits. Sundarambal did not offer to do this work thinking, 'Can women water so many tobacco plants?' But Vadivambal felt sorry and insisted on going.

"Sundarambal drew seven or eight buckets full of water when she began panting. Her hands were tired...When she saw her mother shrugging her hands, Vadivambal left the spade in the canal and came to the well...She rapidly drew water." (Tamilselvi, 56-57)

The family's survival relies on the erratic monsoonal rains that after a long absence floods and ruins their newly planted paddy fields. Their village is among several other flooded villages neglected by the state government and deprived of their supply of food grains. But Sundarambal is still convinced of her husband's return and refuses to accompany Ganeshan and his brothers to a neighboring village in search of food and work. The floods are followed by a storm that irrevocably transforms their lives for the worse. They can no longer work on the fields now that everything is destroyed. Sundarambal's youngest daughter Anjammal secretly finds work at a salt field. The prospect of working with her male friend Poochi and the other workers fills her with joy. For the young girl Anjammal, labor is not primarily an exploitative and exhausting activity but a potential opportunity to temporarily forget her boredom and misery. She disguises as a boy and helps the other salt workers dig a well when she is discovered by the company agent who fortunately takes mercy on her and ensures she is paid higher wages by the manager of the ex-colonial salt company. But she is no longer allowed to work when she attains sexual maturity. Once the floods recede, Sundarambal and Vadivambal, desperate for food, collect and sell salt deposits in exchange for food grains.

When her uncle Ganeshan finally approaches her with a proposal from a much older and disabled man named Ponnaiyan, Vadivambal is relieved at the thought of being freed of the stigma of being an unmarried woman although she is secretly unhappy about marrying an older man. She is later disillusioned by her marriage that does not bring her the comfort and happiness she had anticipated. She is ill treated by her widowed sisters-in-law who begin to live with her and her husband. Her marriage is short lived when Ponnaiyan accidentally dies and she is disinherited by her sisters-in-law for apparently killing Ponnaiyan. Vadivambal again embraces her widowed and disempowered status and entreats her mother to buy one the several plots of land in the village that are being leased to landless salt workers. The village initially does not offer Sundarambal one of the plots as salt production has traditionally been a male preserve. When Sundarambal offers to buy her share of land, the village authorities agree to her demand on the condition that she finds a man who is willing to convert her land to a salt field. Anjammal offers to work to pay the worker, but no one volunteers to work for Sundarambal.

Vadivambal's middle sister Rasambal is also married to a man named Vedappan, a salt worker, who offers to support his wife's family. Sundarambal reveres her son-in-law who, in Ganeshan's absence, is her only support, but Vadivambal refuses to rely on Vedappan's

generosity. She is determined to be independent and urges her mother to sell her ancestral land to buy the salt field belonging to one of the independent owners, Kakkar Kuppusami, whose son's sudden death leaves him heirless. Sundarambal initially refuses to sell her ancestral land without her husband's permission, but Vadivambal chastises her blind faith in Subbaiyan and indignantly demands a guarantee of her future survival.

Kuppusami gives Sundarambal his salt field for free soon after he falls sick and for the first time, Sundarambal and her daughters enjoy a relatively secure and independent life. The possibility of working on her own field brings meaning to Vadivambal's destitute and widowed life,

[Vadivambal tells her mother] 'Amma, even if I was asked to starve without food and water, I feel I can stay in this salt field all my life without getting tired or bored...

[Sundarambal] 'It's night now. That's how you'll feel. When the sun rises high you will feel the pain of standing on the salt field...

[Vadivambal] 'Amma, Even then I'll say the same thing. What means more to me than this salt field?'...

Although Vadivambal understood the truth of what Sundarambal had said, her heart seemed to feel blissful and relieved standing on the salt field. She has come so many times to this salt field at night. But her heart has never felt as happy as it does today. It was probably because it was her own salt field that she felt like this. 'From now on, for all our lives, this salt field is our support. This salt field is going to give us our clothes, food and hair oil' she thought. She developed an attachment to the salt field. (Tamilselvi, 214-215)

The novel ends on an image of hope as Sundarambal and her daughters are finally independent and free of exploitation. Vadivambal refuses to compromise her independence when her uncle offers to remarry her to another disabled man. Her middle sister Rasambal abandons Vedappan when she discovers his affair with another woman. And Sundarambal's youngest daughter Anjammal refuses her childhood friend Poochi's marriage proposal when his mother openly slanders her reputation to her mother and blames Anjammal for her son's refusal to marry a woman of her choice. Anjammal indignantly rejects Poochi's plan to elope out of pride and concern for her mother's reputation. In the end, Sundarambal and her daughters are shown working on their own salt field.

Kattralai (Agave) (2005)

Like *Alam*, this novel also gestures at the potential of female labor to transcend sexual abjection. The title of the novel is significant as the agave, an arid plant, becomes a symbol for female resilience. Although the women in this novel are clearly exploited for their labor, labor is still the only available means of self-empowerment. By the end of the novel, all its major female characters are united by and potentially transcend their abject pasts through the creation of a self-sufficient commune that protects and supports abandoned and abused women/wives.

The novel is largely a flashback that traces the female protagonist Manimekalai's growing sense of self-affirmation as she embraces her hitherto abject life. Her past experiences of misogyny, conjugal violence and exploitation becomes crucial resources that enable her to potentially transcend abjection. Even her attempts to empower other abject women are determined by her own abject past. For instance, she urges her father Sanmukam to admit

Valarmati to a boarding school for destitute and abandoned women to ensure she is not trapped like her in a miserable marriage. She is similarly determined to protect her young daughter Sathya from her violent husband and dedicates her to the local goddess, a ritual act that preempts marriage and enables Sathya to complete her education. Manimekalai's interventions reflect her own troubled childhood as the daughter of an unemployed drunkard who appropriates the little money his hardworking wife makes selling buffalo milk and dung. The young Manimekalai's aspiration to join a boarding school in Kumbakonam is disappointed by her jealous older sister Poornam. Once she attains puberty, Manimekalai's mobility is restricted to the house where she is obliged to help her mother and sisters in various household chores and errands.

Marriage in Tamilselvi's novels represents a disillusioned possibility of happiness and freedom from abject poverty and sexual scrutiny. For Manimekalai, marriage is initially perceived as a welcome, albeit imposed means of escaping domestic restrictions on her mobility. Her consent is never considered when she is promised in marriage to Sankaran, a childhood friend she has not seen for years. She fantasizes about her future husband when she has a premonitory dream of being chased by a snake, which anticipates an unfortunate end to the potential marriage—her family receives news of Sankaran's suicide following a humiliating dispute over some ancestral property. His death shatters Manimekalai's dreams when she is again proposed to a cousin. But this time her mother refuses to marry her to the son of a woman who eloped with another man. Several other potential suitors refuse to marry Manimekalai because of her aunt's dubitable sexual reputation. Manimekalai's younger sister Valarmati tries to secretly facilitate her marriage to their cousin Udayakumaran when she discovers Manimekalai's secret feelings for him. She conveys Manimekalai's 'love' to Udayakumaran but their potential marriage is ruined when Manimekalai's father Sanmukam promises to marry Manimekalai to his friend's son Selvarasu.

Neither Manimekalai nor her family is aware of Selvarasu's affair with another woman. His family disapproves of his illicit relationship and he is compelled to marry Manimekalai with the hope that she will "civilize" him. Like her father, Selvarasu turns out to be a violent drunkard who steals money and tortures her. Manimekalai is determined to embrace her misery even at the cost of sacrificing her happiness and decidedly vows never to return to her parents. But she does escape to her sister-in-law's village with the hope of seeking her help to resolve her relationship with Selvarasu. On the way she accidentally encounters her disgraced aunt Jagadambal who was ostracized for eloping with her lover. When Jagadambal urges her to abandon Selvarasu and marry her son, Manimekalai is conflicted by her longing for love and freedom and her internalized ideals of wifely chastity and honor. She is disabused of her prejudice against her aunt when she discovers her aunt's husband is unfaithful like Selvarasu. Her uncle refuses to have sexual intercourse with her aunt and falsely accuses her of being sterile to abandon her for his lover. Jagadambal is disappointed with her husband's apparent sexual indifference and develops a secret affection for her milkman. Despite her husband's infidelity, Jagadambal is reluctant to ruin her mother's honor by eloping with her lover. She confesses her love for him but initially resists his sexual advances. When she later gets pregnant with her lover's child, she has sexual intercourse with her husband to conceal her child's paternity. She soon has another child whose paternity is unknown. She has violent quarrels with her husband following the birth of her children. She foils her lover's attempt to poison her husband and later elopes with him only to be abandoned when she insists on being reunited with her children. She finally decides to raise her children singlehandedly and opens a roadside fruit store.

Jagadambal's past does not compel Manimekalai to abandon her own husband but she begins questioning her own desires and sexual morality. She acknowledges her desire for Selvarasu is the only reason for tolerating his violence. She suspects her mother Bagyam's sexual needs made her endure her violent and worthless husband.

[Jagadambal says] '...my mother married me to a bald headed man.'

[Manimekalai] 'Was uncle old, aunty?'

[Jagadambal] 'It's alright if he's old. But he was really a sack of tamarind [distant]'

"She did not understand what Jagadambal was trying to say. She kept quiet waiting for her to say more.

"[Jagadambal] 'I need to take care of the house. I need to take care of the goats and the cows. I have to serve tasty food to that sack of tamarind. This has been all I do ever since I got married. Won't a man have the slightest desire to have his own child after looking at the world? The moment the sun sets, he would carefully spread the mat and lie down on his stomach.'

'The idiot would not even roll on to his back till dawn.'

"Manimekalai understood Jagadambal's problem. She thought of Jagadambal's state with the experiences she had acquired over three months. As far as Selvarasu was concerned, Manimekalai was an undesirable wife. And if that were not enough, the Ambujam he desired was in the same village. He keeps visiting her whenever he thinks of her. But he has never dissatisfied Manimekalai in this respect. Manimekalai's mother-in-law had isolated her from the house for five days during her period. She could not sleep during the last two days. Manimekalai now clearly felt she did not sleep because of the absence of Selvarasu's support. Even now she had left home with the thought of asking her sister-in-law to help solve other problems he had created and live with him. Manimekalai had often thought, 'Why should I stay awake to feed someone who is so cruel? Why is it necessary to wait for him to eat before I eat?' She realized she desired him because he had satisfied her bodily needs without a lack. For some reason she now thought of her mother Bagyam. She realized her mother was more attracted to these matters than she was. That is true. Otherwise how was Bagyam able to tolerate and serve a destructive force like Sanmukam who despite being the head of the family, regularly ruined and troubled the family without helping in the slightest manner?" (Tamilselvi, 134-136)

In her conversation with a couple of unmarried women laborers, Manimekalai questions the social valorization of female sexual virtue that ensures women internalize and perpetuate patriarchal ideals like chastity. Through a story that illustrates the internalization of female chastity, Manimekalai suggests social ideals like chastity make women accountable for regulating their own sexuality that can potentially go astray in a marriage to an unfaithful husband. Truly chaste wives, she suggests, are made responsible for preserving their marriages by protecting their husbands from their adulterous desires,

[Manjula says] 'Women are like this. Why akka?'

[Manimekalai] 'A chaste wife may lend rice but will not lend her husband...Only then can she remain chaste. A chaste wife may begin to ask why she should remain faithful when her husband can be with any woman he likes. Once she has that thought, her words will never come true again.' (Tamilselvi, 203-204)

Female labor is despite its exploitation, the only available means of self-determination for the women in this novel. For Manimekalai, the possibility of financial independence is

limited by her meager wages. Selvarasu extracts her wages to gamble. She even loses her unborn child to Selvarasu's resentment. But her desire to work is undeterred by her misery. She and Mamani, her mother-in-law, who is no longer able to earn her living selling dry fish, are recruited by their friend Janaki as peasant laborers. Manimekalai discovers her own potential through the act of cultivating the land with other women. The shared experience of labor provides a source of joy and relief to the women, who temporarily forget the pain and misery of their poor married lives,

Anjammal's song kept growing longer. The women who had grown brisk with the song, quickly planted rows of saplings before creating some more...Manimekalai also sang with the women. She liked standing in the rains with more than twenty other women and singing as they pleased. She did not feel the cold or the pressure of working. She thought of how enjoyable it is to work laughing and playing, singing and teasing. She thought she shouldn't stop coming to the nursery even if she isn't paid. (Tamilselvi, 165-66)

The joyous and liberatory significance of working together overrides any monetary incentive to work. The narrator emphasizes the sincerity of the female laborers that is not compromised by mercenary interest. Even when another landlord who desperately needs their services offers them higher wages, Janaki, insists on honoring their informal agreement with their current landlord before accepting the former's offer.

Visayakumari only said she wanted to go home but none of the women who came to plant saplings [merely] worked for money. Those who worked without any dishonesty received the wages they were given. They may accept any bonus the landlords give them but will never open their mouths to ask, 'We have done so much more work, pay us for that too'...they would never climb the bunds of the field even if they had a single sapling left in their hands. The belief was if they had a sapling left and they rose from the field, the field would be destroyed by a whirl wind and the harvest would be affected. Kulla Janaki checked to see if any of the women had carelessly risen with a sapling in their hands thinking, 'Are we planting saplings for ourselves? Will the destruction bite our hands?' No one had done that. (Tamilselvi, 167)

Their ability to work enables the women to exercise a greater sense of agency in negotiating the price of their own labor even at the risk of losing their own lives. When the women decide to work for the other landlord, their current landlord refuses to pay them their due wages and his henchmen try to prevent them from leaving by destroying the wooden bridge over the river that would take them to the lands of the other landlord. The women have no choice but to embrace the possibility of death by swimming across the river. They attribute their miraculous survival to Padamuniamman, a deified woman who sacrificed her life to save the town of Perumalai from the flooding waters of the river by blocking a breach in its bank with her own body. Padamuniamman, I suggest, is a potent symbol of faith in the ability of the female body to protect lives and resist exploitation. The women's prayer to Padamuniamman demanding retribution is miraculously realized. Heavy rains swell the river that floods its banks to destroy the fields of their former landlord, immersing Perumalai and its neighboring towns.

Selvarasu abandons Manimekalai when he is punished by the village elders for stealing coconuts. He disappears until years later Manimekalai hears of his alleged reformation

following his marriage to a disabled woman named Indira. But Selvarasu suddenly returns and demands Manimekalai accompany him to Mallipatnam, a port town where he works for a shipping company. When Manimekalai refuses to come, he assaults her and accuses her of having an illicit affair with his friend. She has no choice but to accompany him. There, she is shocked to discover Sathya's rumored affair with a local politician's son, Nandakumar. She fears Sathya has become sexually depraved like the women of Vadiyakattu, her in-laws' village—a space she has come to associate with 'loose' women like Ambujam, Selvarasu's lover.

Sathya is a threatened symbol of Manimekalai's future hope and happiness. Manimekalai is dismayed at her failure to protect her daughter from an "aggressive" man like Nandakumar (Tamilselvi, 268). She is determined to rescue Sathya from a potentially unhappy marriage and takes her back once she completes her school education at Kumbakonam. Valarmati and her husband, who take care of Sathya's education, ask Manimekalai to admit Sathya to her cousin's boarding school for abandoned women, where she can work at the school's press. On the way, Sathya accompanies Manimekalai to meet her older sister Poornam, who openly expresses her anxiety about Sathya's rumored disrepute potentially ruining her daughters' future marriages. Manimekalai bitterly renounces her sister and with Sathya moves to the industrial town of Sivakasi where Valarmati helps them get jobs in a garment factory.

The novel addresses the exploitation of female labor but also gestures at the potential of female labor to achieve a greater degree of agency and self-determination. In a small but significant gesture of rebelling against an inequitable system, Sathya steals clothes from the factory when the owners refuse to pay them the agreed rate. Manimekalai is shocked and indignant at Sathya's theft that suddenly reminds her of Selvarasu. But the novel focuses more on the immaterial or social rather than the material benefits of female labor. The female workers live in a colony that functions as a secure and empowering space for the women, many of whom have been sexually disgraced and abandoned. It is within the space of the colony that the women, through the mutual recognition of their abject status, create powerful solidarities that potentially cut through social and sexual hierarchies. Of the several workers is an older woman named Payamma who escapes with another man when her husband abandons her and mysteriously dies abroad. Her idea of marriage is transformed following her bitter experience—she no longer believes in the patriarchal ties of marriage and never marries her lover who lives and works with her. To her, her lover embodies an ideal of masculinity that lies in physical strength and work ethics, a man who is "a reliable protector and provider." (Tamilselvi, 386) Another worker, Sivagami's husband is an unemployed man who borrows money to gamble. He secretly sterilizes himself without Sivagami's knowledge, to raise the money he owes someone for losing a game. When Sivagami fails to bear children, she bears the stigma of infertility when she discovers the truth. Her husband disappears with the money and later kills himself leaving Sivagami debt ridden. With no financial support and her parents dead, Sivagami works at the factory to redeem her husband's debts. The narrator suggests her frugality and her impulse to constantly save money is a compensatory symptom of her deprived past. Another woman named Jensila is abandoned by her husband for another woman. But the birth of a daughter becomes a symbol of Jensila's hope and future happiness. The novel thus ends on a note of hope and affirmation. Sathya, whose marriage to Nandakumar fails, returns to live with Manimekalai and her fellow workers who now offer shelter and financial support to abandoned women.

Aarukattuthurai (The Aarukattu Harbor) (2006)

This narrative is structured around the sea (The Bay of Bengal) and the lives of a fishing caste in the small coastal town of Aarukattu in north eastern Tamil Nadu. From the very opening of the novel, the sea is characterized both as a symbol of maternal solace and belonging and as an inscrutable figure of female omnipotence and death. The sea's deified status as a goddess to be feared and worshipped suggests the reigning importance of the sea to the community. The novel focuses on the life of the daughter of the headman of the village who is named Samudravalli after the goddess of the sea, Samudradevi. Samudravalli is perceived as an incarnation of Samudradevi—her much awaited birth is attributed to the generosity and benediction of Samudradevi who miraculously saves Samudravalli and her mother from a complicated pregnancy.

The headman's hope wasn't in vain. His wife became pregnant the very next month. The people were overjoyed at the thought of Mother Sea's mercy. Samudradevi was dissolved in the headman's and his wife's life and feelings and became a goddess. He spent most of his time fishing in the sea. His pregnant wife waited for him on the shore... Having cut the umbilical cord, everyone carried her and said, 'This isn't our child. It's your child. We shall give her your name and call her Samudravalli.' (Tamilselvi, 43-44)

The novel extends the metaphorical equation between the boldness and resilience of the sea and Samudravalli's courageous love for Samuel, a man who is raised by her father following his parents' death. Samuel has an ambiguous relationship to the sea, which is his only source of livelihood and 'responsible' for his parents' death. His parents flee to Aarakattu to escape their disapproving families, where they have a church wedding and are given refuge and financial support by the village headman's family. But they both die young—Samuel's father is killed as he is fishing and his mother accidentally dies as she is selling fish. The orphaned Samuel and his younger brother Aruldas are raised by the headman.

Samudravalli anxiously insinuates her concern and love for Samuel when she tries to prevent him from fishing during the annual performance of the town play, which is considered a bad omen and a violation of the town council's authority. The narrator implicitly valorizes Samudravalli's unprecedented courage despite the fear and shame of being potentially discovered. She is not overtly concerned by the caste and religious differences that could potentially inhibit her relationship with Samuel. In fact the novel suggests that their religious differences are only apparent and do not pose any significant risk of social stigma. Samuel's parents no longer exclusively identify as Christians following their arrival at Aarukattu,

Arogyamary and Savarimuthu had changed a lot ever since they had come to Aarukattu twenty five years ago. They did not do anything that would identify them as Christians besides going to the Velankanni church once a year like the others. And they also never missed going with the people of Aarukattu to the Karuvattamman temple or to the worship at the Nadukattayya Savuriya temple or to the temple of Maduraiveeran who protected them whenever they went to sea. (Tamilselvi, 45)

Samuel claims his ancestors were originally dalits whose occupation was to pull the god's chariots during temple processions before they converted to Christianity. He remembers

worshipping Hindu gods from his childhood. His hostile perception of the sea is transformed by Samudravalli's love for him that helps him reconcile to his father's death. When he confesses his love for Samudravalli to Subbu, an uncle, Subbu is incredulous. He suspects Samuel's sincerity and warns him of the danger of incurring Samudradevi's wrath if he disgraces Samudravalli.

The novel explores the historical origins of the padaiyar fishing community, which is a story of social marginalization and social mobility. The padaiyar fishing business is founded by a few palli padaiyachis who turn to fishing from being poor and largely unemployed temple car pullers. They are first introduced to manual fishing techniques by the chettiers, a caste generally known for their commercial skills. There is initially a greater availability of fish because of the relative absence of commercial fishing. The padaiyars initially dive to capture fish before they gradually settle along the coastal regions of north eastern Tamil Nadu. Their migration to the coast is accompanied by the loss of their lands that were once gifted to them by the temple authorities to the wealthy, upper caste vellalas. The coastal town of Aarukattu is leased to the padaiyars whose fishing business gradually reduces their dependence on the financial and institutional support of the temple. They end up intermarrying as none of the padaiyachi families outside Aarukattu want to marry their children to those who belong to the padaiyachi families involved in the fishing business, which is an occupation that is stigmatized and considered financially unreliable.

When the headman discovers his daughter's love for Samuel, he decides to renounce his position to honor the integrity of his position and the town's convention that forbids marriages between those who belong to Aarukattu and outsiders. Samudravalli, however, is undeterred by the possibility of social ostracism and decides to abandon her family to be with Samuel. She goes to Samuel's house determined to live with him but Subbu, fearing the town's accusations, takes her to a Kali temple that provides temporary refuge to abandoned and distressed women. However Subbu gets her married to Samuel at the risk of being ostracized by the village. He constructs a boat for Samuel to fish now that they no longer have access to the town's resources or to the mechanized boats that are leased to the more reputed fishermen. Samuel's and Samudravalli's ostracization reduces them to a state of deprivation and poverty. Samuel blames Samudravalli's love for their miserable plight and begins to have misgivings about his marriage that he assumed would promise power and social mobility. When Samudravalli becomes pregnant, Samuel is determined not to have a daughter in case she turns out to be a source of shame like her "sexually bold mother." (Tamilselvi, 152)

The recurrent symbolic equation between Samudravalli and Samudradevi suggests her powerful status as a divine incarnation. Samuel is 'punished' by the sea for insulting Samudravalli when his boat is shipwrecked and he nearly drowns when he is rescued by some Indonesian fishermen. He loses his memory and does not return for several years. In his absence, Samudravalli has no one to turn to but Subbu and his wife and her sister-in-law who is the only person in her family who acknowledges her by secretly sending her food through Subbu's wife. But the birth of a daughter reunites her with her family. Although the town and Samudravalli's family assume Samuel is dead, Samudravalli never loses faith. She refuses her family's support when they insult Samuel for ruining her life and returns to his house to wait for him. Samuel's absence becomes a pretext for Samudravalli's gradual self-realization. She embraces her poverty and sells firewood along with some other women in a nearby city to support her brother-in-law's college education. The city's anonymity temporarily relieves her from the stigma of the provincial town. But her livelihood is

threatened by the state's anti-poaching laws that render the forest inaccessible. One of her women friends resorts to selling dry fish bones that are valued for their medicinal properties while the others sell fish leftover from the wholesalers who sell most of their fish to large fishing companies.

Samudravalli's brother-in-law Aruldas offers to marry her out of gratitude and concern. He is indifferent to their age difference and the stigma of marrying a sister-in-law. He is relieved when her family does not oppose their marriage. Samudravalli agrees to marry him but refuses to accompany him to the town where he works, convinced of her husband's return. Subbu helps Samudravalli sell fish to support her child. The prospect of working to support her child has a redemptive and rejuvenating significance for Samudravalli that enables her to partially overcome her longing for Samuel. But when Samuel returns four years later, he is furious to discover Samudravalli's marriage to Aruldas that for him reconfirms her sexual disrepute. Samudravalli is remorseful when he drives Aruldas and his son out of his house. He tricks Samudravalli into accompanying him on his fishing trips and tries to drown Samudravalli despite her protests. She tries to defend her sexual virtue and fidelity as she struggles to free herself. But in the final dramatic scene, she is miraculously saved and in an act of divine justice and retribution that reinforces the feminine power of the sea, Samuel 'accidentally' drowns.

Kannaki (2008)

Tamilselvi's novel *Kannaki* retrospectively traces the attempts of its eponymous heroine to embrace and overcome social and sexual abjection. Although the novel begins on an affirmative note of female independence, this sense of independence becomes meaningful only when it is located within Kannaki's body that over the course of her life becomes a site of power and resistance. Her embodied experiences of conjugal violence, marital rape and imposed pregnancies, economic exploitation and caste discrimination, condition and constitute the possibility of her agency and subjectivity.

In the opening chapter of the novel, the narrator observes Kannaki's transformation from an innocent rural woman to an "experienced, smart and dignified woman" (13) selling fish on the streets of Pondicherry,

She doesn't fear anyone. She doesn't care about anything. Anyone who saw her sitting majestically with her upright chest selling fish were made to look again at her face that always had a fascinating charm. If she had this cleverness and this ability to speak when she got married at thirteen she would not be selling fish like this. (Tamilselvi, 13)

If there is a tone of regret in the narrator's observation, there is also a retrospective acceptance and validation of Kannaki's hitherto abject past that constitutes her present independence. Kannaki is not just independent but also the source of livelihood for a group of women who help her clean and cut the fish. There is a salutary sense of power and solidarity to their inter-dependence and their collective struggle to survive that structure their very existence.

Kannaki's childhood curiosity exposes her to certain sexual realities that she is initially unable to interpret. As she wanders the streets of her village, her curiosity is piqued by the first image of female exploitation in the novel—the sight of prostitutes quarrelling and haggling with their clients. She is particularly fascinated by one of the prostitutes whose

beauty she wishes to emulate. Then she witnesses to her shame, her male classmates fondling and caressing the unclothed idol of the goddess and the nude female sculptures on the pillars and walls of the local temple. These incidents acquire retrospective sexual significance when her embodied experience of menstruation marks her self-conscious entry into womanhood. She experiences the loss of her childhood freedom. Her sexual precocity and the village's admiration for her deific beauty only enhance her mother's fear of the sexualized danger that potentially threatens Kannaki's sexual integrity and reputation. Kannaki is suddenly subject to her mother's anxious supervision and control. She is forbidden from going to school and her mobility is restricted to the house. Her mother's fear is realized when Kannaki is seduced by Aasaithambi, her father's friend's son, and elopes with him. She refuses to return despite her family's threats and entreaties, determined I suggest, to be free of her mother's authority.

But her marriage to Aasaithambi does not promise the happiness and freedom she had anticipated and she realizes the futility of having misgivings about being shamed and disowned by her family now that she is trapped in a violent and miserable marriage. She braves her husband's abuse and torture and attributes her body's resilience to the meat she was fed as a child (Tamilselvi, 52). His assaults terminate her imposed pregnancies resulting in the premature loss of two of her babies. Kannaki's stillborn babies emerge as she is planting saplings on the fields of her upper caste landlord. In contrast to her mother-in-law and the other female peasants who lament her loss, Kannaki's remarkable indifference, I suggest, denaturalizes the social equation between woman and motherhood. She initially has misgivings about her loss moved by the sight of her female co-laborers and mother-in-law lamenting. Her mother-in-law's consolatory myths about the fatal curse of a bereaving mother and the vital power of the river, which runs through the village of Karkudal to ensure the survival of unborn babies, serve to glorify and perpetuate motherhood. Kannaki initially wonders if she longs for children or has been wronged by god. But when Nagammal, her mother-in-law, urges Kannaki to bear a son to secure her future, Kannaki refuses to mother the children of a violent and unfaithful husband.

Although Nagammal cares for Kannaki who financially supports her, her greed ruins Kannaki's marriage. She tolerates Aasaithambi's secret marriage to Sudamani, his wealthy coworker's sister, anticipating a handsome dowry. Neither Sudamani nor Kannaki are informed of the other's existence until Sudamani moves into their house. Kannaki is jealous and hurt by her husband's infidelity and sexual indifference but is forced to share her husband with Sudamani without her knowledge. When Sudamani discovers Kannaki's true identity she laments her betrayal but even she has no choice but to settle for a compromised relationship with Aasaithambi. Unlike Sudamani who is selfish and greedy, Kannaki is portrayed as a noble woman who suffers pain and humiliation and sacrifices her own hunger to support her husband's family. She momentarily considers abandoning Aasaithambi and marrying her educated uncle who has long wished to marry her. But she is unable to challenge her internalized chastity and soon dismisses the idea lest Nagammal and Sinnavedai, Aasaithambi's aunt, misunderstand her sexual virtue.

Nagammal, Sinnavedai and Kannaki are abject women who are variously discriminated along overlapping axes of caste, gender and class. The novel betrays instances where they embrace their abject status and challenge sexual and social hierarchies in subtle but significant ways. Nagammal exhorts the reluctant Kannaki to bathe in the river to be blessed with a child but she fears she will be accused by the upper castes of polluting the river. But Nagammal defiantly believes in the salvific value of the flowing river that unlike a still lake has the power to redeem ritual pollution. When Kannaki questions the existence of casteism,

Nagammal reduces caste to a myth that only possesses a psychological reality to the dalits insofar as they internalize their own inferiority. Nagammal attributes dalit deference to upper caste authority to their survival. Through their conversation, Kannaki realizes caste discrimination is not merely a ritual and social problem but also an economic one that is related to their lack of education, unemployment and landlessness. Later in the novel, Kannaki, driven by her family's desperate attempt to survive hunger, secretly and openly violates caste norms by stealing crops from upper caste landlords.

Kannaki is always shown in the midst of nature, exploring it, in her longing for freedom from the ideological constraints of motherhood and wifehood. The narrator implicitly valorizes the innocence of nature that transcends distinctions of class and caste and her relationship to nature that is constituted through agricultural labor. She accompanies Sinnavedai on her daily trips to a neighboring village to plant saplings in the fields of her upper-caste padaiyachi landlord. Sinnavedai believes her form of paid labor is more dignified than performing domestic chores in upper caste pillai and padaiyachi households or treating their farmlands with manure. She berates dalit women like Nagammal who comprise their dignity out of greed and hunger.

For Kannaki, working or laboring on the land is the only reprieve from a miserable marriage and ultimately the only form of self-realization. Although the land she works on does not belong to her she, unlike its upper caste owners, shares a productive and intimate relationship with the land—a relationship that is more rewarding and self-fulfilling than motherhood. In her conversation with Sinnavedai,

‘Why do you keep lamenting for a child? Why are you so concerned when I don’t desire a child?’ [Sinnavedai] ‘You say you don’t wish for a child, what kind of a woman are you?’ ‘Say whatever you like. I cannot have a child and sit at home’ [Sinnavedai] ‘You think you’re some big collector [Indian administrative officer]? As though you’re going to lose your government salary!’ ‘Is a government job the only kind of job? That which feeds us is what is great to us. I can’t spend even a day sitting at home without going to the forest. I feel hungry only when I look at greenery.’ [Sinnavedai] ‘You talk as though you’re the owner of twenty *kanis* of land’ ‘Whether or not I’m the owner of the land, will the green crops know if I’m the owner or the worker? Digging the field, planting and touching every green crop and tilling the earth are all done with these hands. If those crops had mouths and could speak they would call us their owners. Once harvested, they would wish to come to our house. Do you know they would ask the landlord who sits on the bund and pays us, ‘Who are you to take us?’’ (Tamilselvi, 106-107)

Kannaki finally escapes her miserable marriage to return to her mother who disowns her. She goes to Pondicherry where a youth named Divyanathan offers to help her and introduces her to his sister Mariyapushpam, a fish seller. The narrator idealizes Mariyapushpam whose independence and cleverness enables her to run a successful fish business and support her unemployed husband. Although Mariyapushpam and her husband long for a child, the narrator suggests that the lack of one favors her independence and commercial success. Kannaki is inspired by her commercial acumen and renews her hope of survival. Mariyapushpam employs Kannaki and takes care of her but she discriminates Kannaki's dalit status. She thoroughly washes the fish Kannaki brings from the fishermen to avoid ritual pollution and makes arrangements for Kannaki to sleep separately in the verandah outside the house. Divyanathan is silently determined to reform his sister's castist attitude although he

openly tolerates her castism. But Kannaki's unexpected pregnancy threatens her livelihood and sexual reputation. She fears her pregnancy could betray Mariyapushpam's trust and concern and potentially ruin her relationship with Divyanathan. Her fears are realized when her confession undermines Divyanathan's cinema inflected ideals of marrying and supporting a disgraced woman. He no longer has the courage or integrity to marry Kannaki and to her disappointment, abandons her for fear of being dishonored by his sister.

Kannaki is offered an opportunity to independently raise her son when she is informed by Mariyapushpam's neighbor Rani of a maid's job in Singapore. Rani and Kannaki are tricked by Rani's husband who is bribed by his boss Ansari in exchange for Kannaki's sexual services. Rani and her husband urge the unsuspecting Kannaki to relinquish her newborn son to a foster home before going to Singapore where she spends many miserable years in sexual enslavement. Ansari initially tortures Kannaki and incarcerates her without any food to make her fulfill his sexual fantasies. He assumes she is sexually experienced from the visible signs of her married status. Kannaki gradually overcomes her misery when she is rewarded for her attempts to satisfy Ansari's desires and actually begins to enjoy a comfortable life for the first time. She is given enough money to send back to her family and pay for her son's education. Her financial support transforms Aasaithambi's desire for her. Her sexual humiliation is retrospectively redeemed by Aasaithambi's and Ansari's desire for her.

Aasaithambi is determined to bring Kannaki back and manipulates their son Barati to write to Kannaki expressing his longing for her. Kannaki is deceived by her son's apparent affection and at her family's entreaties decides to return to Aasaithambi. Ansari appoints her son as his driver but he returns when to his shame he discovers his mother's illicit relationship with Ansari. Once Aasaithambi spends most of Kannaki's accumulated savings consolidating his professional success, he again neglects Kannaki now that she is of no financial consequence. She is stigmatized by her mother-in-law and brother-in-law for abandoning her husband for another man.

The novel closes on a note of moral redemption and justice. Rani informs Kannaki of her husband's sudden death that she interprets as a deserving punishment for ruining her life. Aasaithambi is also 'punished' for his misery—he is 'accidentally' electrocuted and paralyzed as he is installing an electricity pole. He has no one to take care of him now that he is neglected by Sudamani and her sister with whom he has another affair and grows completely dependent on Kannaki to take care of his needs. Kannaki's caring attention makes Aasaithambi remorseful and he atones for his mistakes by bequeathing Kannaki his pension. Before dying, he asks her to promise she will never be unfaithful to him even after his dies. But Ansari continues to be Kannaki's benefactor and protector. With Ansari's support, Kannaki redeems Barati's debts although he resents her. In the end, Kannaki finally overcomes her sexual disgrace and in open defiance of her disapproving son, decides to resume her relationship with Ansari.

Conclusion:

Tamilselvi's novels are structured around the ability of the female body to potentially transcend abjection through labor. Tamilselvi is careful not to idealize labor by drawing attention to the sexual and economic exploitation of female laborers, although female labor is still the only available means of renouncing the patriarchal ties of caste, family and marriage to achieve a greater sense of self-determination. The next chapter explores the power of female labor to resist sexual as well as caste and class exploitation.

Chapter 5

The Shifting Marginalities of Gender, Sexuality and Caste In the Works of P. Sivakami and Bama

This chapter explores caste as an apparatus that regulates sexuality primarily through women's bodies. I look at the writings of two contemporary Dalit women writers, P.Sivakami and Bama, from the late 1980s to the early 1990s. I begin with a discussion of Sivakami's three novels that engage with symbolic and material forms of dispossession that operate together to constitute caste. These include the regulation of gender and sexuality, the social demarcation of rural spaces like the village and economic exploitation. For Sivakami female labor is one of the crucial ways of resisting sexual abjection even if it results in further exploitation. The second half of the chapter deals with two autobiographies by Bama, a Dalit Christian, which critique the institutional complicity of religious institutions like the Church that perpetuate castism and preserve the integrity of caste by policing female sexuality. Bama also addresses the economic vulnerability of Dalit women that subjects them to a culture of (sexual) violence and exploitation at the workplace and at the home. Her works again urge collaborations between lower castes in the struggle against castism and female education and independence as the only means of resisting castism and patriarchy.

Palaiyana Kalithalum (The Grip of Change) (1989)

Sivakami's first two novels are sequential ones although they were written and published eight years apart. The first one *Palaiyana Kalithalum (The Grip of Change)* (1989) draws attention to the raped Dalit woman as a rhetorical figure for the fraught relations between caste and gender and sexuality. The novel centers on the exploited and supposedly violable body of the Dalit woman, which is inscribed with inter-caste struggles for power even as it is constituted as a site of power and resistance. The female protagonist Thangam's battered body frames the opening scene; her past is constituted by her widowhood that in some sense makes her a 'surplus' woman; the harassment by her brothers-in-law when she refuses to submit to them; the exploitation by her caste Hindu landlord and the assault on her by caste Hindu men owing to her apparent sexual/social misdemeanor only reinforce her social and sexual abjection. Even the struggle for land is linked to her body and fertility—she does not have children and so her brothers-in-law refuse to give her a share in the family land. When she is sheltered by Kathamuthu, a dalit patriarch and ex-village headman, her vulnerability is exploited; she is forced to physically yield to his desires. However, the same body, through which she is oppressed and subjugated, also grants her the power to gain ascendancy in Kattamuthu's house granting her dominance over his wives. But, as we shall presently see, any access Thangam has to power is ultimately compromised by the violation of her bodily integrity and being.

Something dark loomed in the corner of the verandah. Slowly, as Kathamuthu's eyes grew accustomed to the shadows, he could make out a person crouching there, groaning in pain.

'Who is it? What...?' Kathamuthu asked fearfully.

'Ayyo...Ayyo...They have butchered me...Ayyo...'. The figure cried like a wounded animal and finally fell down...

'You woman...you...why are you here wailing so early in the morning? What is the matter? Get up and explain your problem without such a fuss.' Flanked by both his wives, Kathamuthu recovered from the shock he had experienced and questioned the shrouded figure.

'What can I say? May they be hanged. May they go to hell. The ground will open up and swallow you. You'll eat mud. Bastards! You abused a helpless woman. You curs! Come now! Come and lick...'

What should have been an explanation turned into a torrent of abuse against those who assaulted her...

Weeping she removed the sari wrapped around her head. The whole of her torso, visible because she was not wearing a blouse, bore terrible bruises. Dried blood marked the flesh of her back.

[Thangam] 'Sami [Lord]. Not only this, Sami. Look at my arms.' She showed her swollen arms.

'Look at this Sami.' The woman lifted her sari above her knees.

The skin of her thighs and knees was scored and shredded as though she had been dragged over a rough surface.

[Kathamuthu] 'Where are you from? What is your caste? And your name?'...

Kathamuthu took her to be in her thirties, tall and well built. Though her face was swollen from crying, it was still attractive...

[Thangam] 'Sami, I come from the same village as your wife Kanagavalli. Kanagu, don't you recognize me? You know Kaipillai from the south street who died? I am his wife.'...

'Oh, where shall I begin? You know Paranjoti from the upper caste street?' she appealed to Kanagu.

[Kanagavalli] 'I don't know anyone from the upper caste locality...'

[Thangam] 'True. People like you living in towns don't know much about the villages...Paranjoti from the upper caste street is very rich. His lands go right up to the next village, Arumadal. After my husband died I began working in Paranjoti's farm. My husband's brothers refused to hand over his share of the family land as I didn't have any children. How could I fight them? I couldn't go to court. Who can spend that much money? Even if I had won, I wouldn't be able to take care of my share of land in peace, not without everyone hating me. I am a single woman now...But at least I have a thatched roof over my head.

'My husband's relatives spread the story that I had become Paranjoti's concubine. That's why Paranjoti's wife's brothers and her brother-in-law, four men, entered my house last night. They pulled me by my hair and dragged me out to the street. They hit me, and flogged me with a stick stout as a hand. They nearly killed me. No one in the village, none of my relatives, came to help me...They abused me and threatened to kill me if I stayed in that village any longer. They called me a whore.'...

[Kathamuthu] 'Okay, okay.' Kathamuthu studied her, 'Now tell me the truth. What did you do? Nobody would have assaulted you like that unless you had done something first.'

[Thangam] 'I didn't do anything wrong...'

[Kathamuthu] 'That's enough. Take your story to someone else who might be fool enough to believe it.'...

[Thangam] '...How can I hide the truth from you? Paranjoti Udaiyar has had me...true,' she said, with a mixture of fear and shame.

[Kanagavalli] 'Why do you have to spoil someone's marriage? Is that good? You've hurt his family,' Kanagavalli stressed the last part for the benefit of Nagamani

[Kathamuthu's second wife] who had come to the verandah with hot water. Nagamani directed a scornful look at Kathamuthu.

[Thangam] 'Sami, is there anywhere on earth where this doesn't happen? I didn't want it. But Udaiyar took no notice of me. He raped me when I was working in his sugarcane field. I remained silent; after all, he is my paymaster. He measures my rice. If you think I'm like that, that I'm easy, please ask around in the village. After my husband's death, can anybody say that they had seen me in the company of anyone, or even smiling at anyone? My husband's brothers tried to force me, but I never gave in. They wouldn't give me my husband's land, but wanted me to be a whore for them. I wouldn't give in...I'm a childless widow. There is no protection for me.'

Kathamuthu interrupted her, 'All right, it happened. Now tell me, why didn't you go after someone of our caste? It's because you chose that upper caste fellow, that four men could come and righteously beat you up. Don't you like our chaps?'

Hesitating at the crudity of his remarks, she answered, 'Sami, how can you ask me such a question? I didn't go after anyone. I am not a desperate woman. I feel so ashamed. It was wrong, horrible...I gave in to Udaiyar...You should abandon me in some jungle. I never want to go back to that village. But before that I want those men who beat me up to fall at my feet and plead.' She angrily grabbed some mud from the front yard and spat on it. (Sivakami, 3-8)

The novel opens dramatically with Thangam's battered body—a spectacle to be witnessed by Kathamuthu and his two wives. She is initially shrouded but then removes her sari to expose her mutilated body. She claims she has been raped by her upper caste Udayar landlord Paranjoti and assaulted by his brother and brothers-in-law for her rumored affair with him. Her brothers-in-law, who are responsible for the rumors, deprive her of her dead husband's share of his ancestral land as she does not have any male heirs. They even demand that she satisfy their sexual desires. Although she swears she never desired or encouraged Paranjoti, Kathamuthu is incredulous and suspects Thangam's sexual reputation while his wife Kanagavalli accuses her of ruining a married man's family. Kathamuthu insinuates her 'sexual affair' with an upper caste man violates the sexual integrity of caste that forbids sexual relationships between upper caste men and lower caste women. The above passage also suggests Kathamuthu's own desire for Thangam.

Thangam's rape is interpreted as a punishment that Thangam seeks and deserves for being 'a whore'. Her alleged sexual indulgence effectively fictionalizes the rape by making her complicit in the loss of her own sexual integrity and reputation. She is deemed an unreliable witness to her own rape, which is invalidated by her presumed sexual consent to what in reality is an exploitative relationship. In other words, her past acquiescence to her landlord's sexual advances now legitimizes her sexual exploitation. Kathamuthu interprets her sexual relationship with an upper caste man as a threat to the integrity of caste patriarchy—a threat that has to be regulated and controlled. The double standard that governs the caste regulation of female sexuality is made evident by Kathamuthu's marriage to his younger wife, Nagamani, a poor upper caste widow he took under his care. A sexual hierarchy thus coincides with a caste hierarchy when Thangam's alleged affair with an upper caste man preempts any claim to her own desire and bodily integrity. Her widowed status is further interpreted by men as a sign of her sexual availability, which justifies potential threats of rape.

What is of particular interest and this becomes the focal point of the novel, is the elision of sexual violence by caste violence. Although both these forms of violence are implicated in Thangam's raped and battered body, it is the visible signs of physical assault that are privileged over her rape. Her battered body is perceived purely as an instance of castist violence and not as a rape, which in any case, is an unverifiable event invalidated by her past acquiescence and presumed consent. Kathamuthu dictates a petition to his daughter Gowri on Thangam's behalf that is addressed to the police. In the petition he overlooks Thangam's rape and distorts her account of her brutal mutilation by upper caste men in the dalit locality and accuses her assailants of assaulting her for walking through their street. The misrepresentation is thus not merely the elision of what was also the sexual violation of an individual dalit woman, but the politicization of Thangam's battery as an incriminatory instance of upper caste aggression. By relocating Thangam's body from the secret confines of sexual assault to a caste encoded space like the upper caste street, Kathamuthu's distorted petition strategically diffuses Thangam's victimhood to implicate the entire dalit community. Thangam's sexed body is thus displaced by her caste body that materializes the brutal effects of an unsolicited expression of upper caste violence. In what follows, Thangam's caste body becomes the site where the inter-caste struggle for political power plays out.

At the police station Kattamuthu urges Thangam to tearfully remonstrate at the inspector's feet. Kattamuthu has faith neither in his own caste community that lacks the solidarity to confront upper caste violence nor in the impartiality of the upper caste police. He tries to win the inspector's trust and sympathy by strategically drawing attention to his own status as a

perpetual victim of castism. Kattamuthu bitterly recounts his past as a bonded laborer who against all odds got educated to become a village elder. He claims he would have become a member of the legislative assembly had it not been for the jealousy of his own community. The inspector is quick to assert his and by extension, the law's indifference to social distinctions of caste in the delivery of justice. Kattamuthu immediately switches strategies to remind the police inspector of the contradictory role of the modern democratic state that on one hand has to arbitrate social conflict while remaining above all forms of partisanship and on the other, has to intervene by introducing affirmative measures to ensure equal access to all resources. Kattamuthu warns the inspector of the possibility of ruining his career if he is accused of colluding with upper caste culprits and fails to arrest them. Caste, Kattamuthu says, is both pervasive and invisible, "it is something that exists even if they do not recognize its existence." (Sivakami, 22) The ideological presence of castism is so pervasive that it cannot always be recognized even by the law and its representatives, particularly when they are potentially implicated. The inspector, as Kattamuthu anticipates, is provoked into opening an enquiry and prepares an arrest warrant lest the investigations prove the veracity of Thangam's complaint.

During the police investigation, the attack on Thangam gives rise to further fabrications, which become the pretext for new inter-caste feuds. The police inspectors appointed to carry out the enquiry interrogate Thangam's in-laws who first spread rumors of her illicit relationship with Paranjoti. One of Thangam's in-laws corroborates Kattamuthu's distorted version of Thangam's assault to ensure the dalit quarters are not accused of being complicit in the attack. He claims he saw Thangam waking up to a stomachache and walking to the village tank behind Paranjoti's house where the Padaiyachi street begins. She is spotted by Paranjoti's wife Kamalam who abuses her by her caste name for entering the upper caste street. She is later assaulted by Kamalam's brothers. The Chakkiliyars, another untouchable laboring caste, confirm the rumors to the police believing them to be true and accuse the Padaiyachi men of assaulting Thangam for her affair with Paranjoti. While one of the investigating constables assumes Thangam's rumored affair is true the other dismisses the possibility that Thangam may have coerced Paranjoti into a sexual relationship when his wife Kamalam is clearly "not being smart enough to keep her husband" (Sivakami, 29). Both the constables blame the women for Paranjoti's infidelity.

Paranjoti is shocked to discover Thangam's police complaint. He is embarrassed by the possibility of his affair becoming public knowledge. He realizes he is unable to use his financial power to turn the case to his advantage now that he has been accused of a criminal assault. He silently curses Thangam for being ungrateful to him,

Ungrateful whore! Even if she was hurt, she was hurt by the hand adorned with gold!
A Parachi could have never dreamt of being touched by a man like me. My touch was
a boon granted for penance performed in her earlier births! And then the dirty bitch
betrays me! How can I face the world with my name thus polluted? (Sivakami, 31)

Paranjoti's patronizing reaction reflects his anxiety with caste pollution and the consequent loss of reputation rather than his rape.

During the enquiry there is a meeting of laborers and farmers at Kattamuthu's house. Kattamuthu announces his decision to constitute a *panchayat* or village council of elders to punish Paranjoti, his wife and his in-laws if they are proven guilty. His intention is to charge Paranjoti with castism that would lead to the loss of his Dalit voters and undermine his

political power. Kattamuthu is convinced Paranjothi will neither confess his relationship with a Dalit woman nor permit his wife to be taken to court and consequently beg him for mercy. When the police inspectors give Paranjoti a copy of the complaint, he realizes the complaint has been framed as a caste related assault that has nothing to do with his rape. Paranjoti appeals to the inspectors and offers to pay them if they promise to rescue him. One of the policemen suggests he lodge a counter-complaint against Thangam by secretly planting a transistor and a large sum of money in her house and accuse her of theft. He encourages Paranjoti to file a complaint before Kattamuthu files a report.

But Kattamuthu spots one of the inspectors at a toddy shop getting drunk on arrack. He discovers the inspector has been bribed by Paranjoti. The inebriated inspector reveals Paranjoti's plan to press charges against Thangam. Kattamuthu immediately sends his men to guard Thangam's house through the night as she convalesces at hospital. Paranjoti's men fail to place the transistor and money in Thangam's hut although they manage to escape from Kattamuthu's guards. Paranjoti, anxious that the counter-charge of theft against Thangam may backfire for lack of evidence, decides to accuse all the Dalit men of attacking his brothers-in-law when they entered their street to recruit laborers. Soon, there are rumors of the Paraiyars' (Dalits) attack on the Udaiyars (Padaiyars). The Paraiyar women laborers who work for the Udayars discover to their anger and desperation that they have been replaced by Chakkiliyar women. Paranjoti is determined to let the Paraiyars starve to force them to relent and withdraw Thangam's complaint. He threatens to burn the Dalit locality if she refuses to take back her charges.

The attempt by wealthy upper caste farmers to entice workers from neighboring villages with higher wages fails because of the political support that Kattamuthu enjoys in these villages. Other smaller farmers desperately in need of workers to plant their crops before the end of the planting season direct their rage towards the Paraiyars. A large part of the Paraiyar slum and some huts on the Chakkiliyar street are set on fire by some Udaiyar men. The moment the Dalit locality is set on fire the wealthy Reddiars join forces with the Udaiyars, the two castes being equal in status. They are also united by their shared allegiance to the ruling political party to ensure that no land reforms are implemented or land holdings registered under false names. The Paraiyars, the Chakkiliyars and the Padaiyachis are divided not just by caste but by their struggle for survival, which preempts any solidarity in the face of caste aggression. Kattamuthu tries to prevent the Paraiyars from potentially destroying themselves by controlling their desire for revenge. A gathering of the *tahsildar* (the revenue officer), the inspector, Paranjoti Udaiyar and some of his men, and Kattamuthu is organized to settle the dispute.

What was initially a case of rape and exploitation becomes an issue of caste and class oppression. At the gathering, Kattamuthu argues that the Dalits have been relatively underpaid for the time they spend planting paddy when laborers in the surrounding villages are paid much more. He accuses Paranjoti of burning the *cheri* or Dalit quarters as the Dalits refused to work for lower wages. The Udaiyars and the Reddiars are embarrassed by his accusation and as per Kattamuthu's demand are made to compensate the Dalit victims with money and clothes. Kattamuthu is clear that the Dalits and the upper castes need each other for their own survival and negotiates an agreement with them "I have been telling you from the beginning that the relationship between us should not break down. You have to take care of the Harijans (Dalits) as if they are your own children." (Sivakami, 69) Generously quoting from the Hindu epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and Gandhi's autobiography *My Experiments with Truth*, Kattamuthu urges the upper caste men to cooperate with the dalits

and foster a mutually beneficial relationship. He assumes the Christian/Gandhian position of expiating caste prejudice by internalizing its pain and suffering to spiritually transcend the bane of caste. He tries to convince them that their conflicts can only be resolved and their solidarity renewed if they “bear their suffering in patience...[for they] will ultimately rule the world” (Sivakami, 73).

Unable to settle on a suitable compensation for the affected Dalits, Paranjoti begs Kattamuthu to settle the dispute in a *panchayat* meeting. When Kattamuthu informs everyone of his decision to join the Ambedkar Association’s protest against police inaction in the Thangam case, Paranjoti grows anxious that his relationship with Thangam may be settled in court. Finally Paranjoti and Kattamuthu agree on an out of court settlement and Thangam receives monetary compensation. Thangam gives Kattamuthu her compensation out of gratitude and offers to cultivate and harvest his land in return for his protection. Kattamuthu’s desire for Thangam empowers her over his wives. Her disputes with his jealous wives often end in violence. Thangam is transformed from being a poor and emaciated widow to an adorned and healthy woman who enjoys Kattamuthu’s patronage (Sivakami, 87). She assumes the responsibility of paying the laborers who work on Kattamuthu’s land and receives people who come in search of him (Sivakami, 93). She gradually becomes a part of the family and the household. Kattamuthu’s wives who are initially hostile and jealous later have no choice but to befriend Thangam. But Kattamuthu’s protection and his sense of responsibility for Thangam come with a price—the compromise of her bodily integrity. She acquiesces to Kattamuthu’s sexual advances and continues to work for him even after she wins the case in court and regains her land from her in-laws. That she is represented as a victim of caste rather than sexual violence enables Thangam greater access to public spaces of legality like the court and the village council of elders that are exclusively occupied by men who possess legal authority and political power.

Towards the end of the novel we see the emergence of a new generation of educated young men and women of different castes who are united in their attempts to transcend social and sexual hierarchies—Kattamuthu’s daughter Gowri refuses to get married and becomes the first Dalit woman in her village to complete her college education. Her cousin Chandran becomes a worker at the rice mill and joins the workers union that unites Padaiyachi and Parayar workers whose shared labor concerns enables them to potentially overcome their caste differences. When he gets married, he has a secular ceremony that does away with the Brahmin priest and rituals. He promises “his wife would be an equal partner in the marriage” (Sivakami, 117). Rasendran, a Paraiyar youth who is entrusted with the responsibility of guarding Thangam’s hut, protests Kattamuthu’s conciliatory attitude towards the upper caste Udaiyars and Reddiars at the gathering of elders. Elangovan, a young Parayar banker has an open affair with an upper caste woman, Lalitha who defies her mother’s injunctions.

Aasiriyar Kurippu: Gowri (Author’s Notes: Gowri) (1997)

Sivakami’s second novel *Author’s Notes: Gowri* is the author’s re-visitation of her earlier novel, *The Grip of Change*. This novel initially sets out as a revisionary critique of the earlier novel and explores the tension between the fictional world of the novel and the author’s social circumstances that enabled the creation of the novel. The novel dramatizes the author’s anxious urge to constantly question and justify the premises of her earlier work. But the more she tries to eliminate the disjuncture between social reality and the representational claims of her earlier work, the more she is confronted by the irreducibly simulative quality of fiction

that is neither false nor representative of any absolute or inclusive notion of truth. She discovers fictional writing is a deliberate process of selection and omission that is always already informed by experience, which is itself not innocent but socially and politically constructed. Her conflicted identification with her earlier autobiographical character/self, Gowri, for instance, enacts the author's attempts to question and legitimize the truth of her fictional representations. The author returns to visit her home town Puliur where she meets among her several relatives, her mother's cousin whom she calls uncle. In her conversation with him, he reminds her of something she had done as a child,

[Uncle] 'Do you remember, during school break you would come and ask for five or ten paise? Once you got the money, you'd leave bright and happy, playing with the coin.' Such petty memories. What else was he going to trot out?

[Uncle] 'Your Kalimuthu periappan once said that you had stolen a four anna coin from his pocket. His wife went around announcing that to everyone in the street. I told them, she's just a child.' Is that why Gowri, the girl in the novel, had such a poor opinion of Kalimuthu periappa? The novelist and the character in the novel, Gowri, must be one and the same person.

[Gowri] 'I don't recall that. Did I take money from Kalimuthu periappa's pocket?' she asked in a shocked voice.

[Uncle] 'You can't remember that, you were too young. You know, your father Kathamuthu liked me a lot. He would insist that I sit next to him and tell him stories. He had so much love and respect for me.'

In the novel, Gowri's father was never shown expressing respect to elders. In describing Kathamuthu's character, why had she paid so little attention to rudimentary truth?

...If Kuttaippan could enthusiastically narrate stories without ever questioning their premises, why did she have to try so hard to justify her work? Look at her! Here she was, analyzing her novel trying to fit all the pieces into logical patterns. To whom did she owe explanations? (Sivakami, 133-134)

Sivagami devotes most of the novel exploring her ambivalent relationship to her oppressive father. She acknowledges her father's fictional representation is informed by her bitter memories of her father's sexual insinuations and authority. Like her autobiographical character Gowri, she remembers being humiliated by her father who accuses her of dressing up like a whore and attributes her arrogance and rebelliousness to her college education. She is rendered impotent by her father's financial support, which is an unfortunate necessity for her to potentially attain any kind of freedom. Although her initial impulse is to offer a more dispassionate perspective of her father, she ends up presenting literature as a way of challenging and trivializing paternal authority and as a form of self-empowerment. Fiction for the author redeems her memories of her violent and abusive father; her father's fictional representation is "a revenge of sorts...[that] at the end...reduced her father to a counterfeit coin...she and her cousin had been transformed into revolutionaries. Family squabbles made for restricted politics." (Sivakami, 144-145)

She is particularly put off by two of her father's qualities—his polygamy and his coarseness.

...She had to provide answers to some questions. Was a polygamous man a sex addict? What was the novelist's opinion on fidelity and morality? Why were her male

characters betrayers of women? Disgust seemed to inform her attitude to sex. What was the truth? (Sivakami, 147)

But she also acknowledges certain facts about her father's life had been deliberately omitted. She betrays her admiration for her hard working father who "worked on his farm with enthusiasm" even when he was well off. He even established the first women's hostel in their town to encourage female education and employment (Sivakami, 148). He had also helped the poor and fed them. Sivakami realizes "The author of *Grip of Change* had constructed an effigy of her father and burned him in her novel. It was the author's perspective rather than the whole truth. She wanted to prove that there was no such thing as the full and complete truth" (Sivakami, 148).

Although Sivakami begins by reevaluating the premises of her earlier work she ends up reasserting them. She admits a writer can never avoid "subjective conclusions" that invariably determine any fictional work (Sivakami, 148). She affirms her literary representation of the contradictory dynamics of castism not only disfavors lower castes but is endemic to the lower castes. She argues castism and corruption are so constitutive of inter and intra-caste relations that they have to be acknowledged if a democratic ideal of equal opportunity is at all possible to achieve. By making such a claim, Sivakami anticipates potential criticism from Dalits who may accuse her of betraying their cause.

What does the *Grip of Change* reflect for its readers? It wasn't simply that the upper castes exploit the lower castes. A lower caste leader might exploit his own people. It is not only upper caste men who prey on lower caste women. Men like Kathamuthu are perfectly capable of taking advantage of vulnerable women. The overall picture presented by the novel is that rich or poor, upper caste or lower caste, the seeds of corruption exist at all levels.

Did the novelist have to write about the caste system to prove this? If she had really attempted to write about the caste system, she should have talked about equality of opportunity rather than the universality of corruption. She had acted like a self-appointed judge delivering a verdict.

Could the two aspects—her father's polygamy and his coarseness—alone give her the right to judge and condemn him? In the novel, her father intervenes on behalf of a widow. Once he has sorted out her problems he forces her into having sex with him, though she pleads, 'You are like a brother to me.' Did the novelist witness this scene? Or did she hear someone narrate it to her? (Sivakami, 149)

Sivakami puts herself through intense self-examination as she explores her own identity in relation to the text. She considers the possibility of being criticized for protecting her own identity as a Dalit writer and betraying the Dalits by attacking the Dalit leadership. She dramatizes such criticism through a series of imaginary conversations where she alternately occupies the position of author and critic. In a series of rhetorical moves, Sivakami both submits to and resists her critics' charge of hypocrisy and social elitism. She is accused of reinforcing the stigma of being a Dalit while pretending to be sensitive to castism. She resists such accusations by exhorting all castes to join forces in the fight against castism. More significantly, she draws attention to her critics' impulse to collapse the social world of the text with social reality as though the text were an unmediated reflection of the world. She continues to justify her representation of the ethical ambiguities that characterize the fraught relations between caste and gender and sexuality. Sivakami seems to be suggesting that the text's claim to truth lies precisely in these ambiguities that resist any notion of absolute truth.

For instance, she recounts an incident she heard from an aunt who was raped by an upper caste landlord, following which, the author's grandfather threatens to punish the landlord. The incident, Sivakami, suggests may only partially explain Kathamuthu's motivations in the novel where he interprets Thangam's rape merely as a caste related atrocity that demanded revenge and justice. Thus Sivakami's fictional representation of Thangam's rape not only does not correspond to her aunt's rape, it complicates any understanding of rape by situating the rape within the power dynamics of caste that underwrite competing and contradictory interpretations of the rape.

Sivakami poses certain crucial questions that address the function of literature. Unlike her readers and critics, she is particular to emphasize that literature is neither a direct reproduction of social reality nor therefore restricted to a realist or moral function. She is also sensitive to her own present position as an English educated professional and the resultant sense of estrangement from her family. She poses questions that are ultimately unanswerable.

When I believe in monogamy and refinement does my emancipatory modernity then seek to civilize Kathamuthu? In doing so what are Gowri's prejudices? On the other hand hasn't modernity been always taken up as an issue by upper caste women? Or when Gowri refuses to get married is it because she is a victim of her mother's experience? Or is it a brave assertion that she is walking away from the victimhood of her mother? Or is it merely independence? (Sivakami, 189)

There are no clear answers to these questions and Sivakami does not bother to answer them. But she does acknowledge the need to contextualize certain cultural values that determine notions of gender, sexuality, independence, modernity and so on. Although Kattamuthu and Gowri are antagonistic characters, Sivakami suggests that they embody competing ways of addressing to the same vexed question of castism, "They fight on the same side and are prepared to fight the same enemies... Kathamuthu may dislike communism or Gowri detest his manipulation and weakness but they both envision a common end to atrocities against Dalits. (Sivakami, 177)

Anantayi (1992)

Like Sivakami's earlier novels, *Anantayi* is a critique of the structural inequities that underwrite the systemic exploitation of women depriving them of any claims to their own sexuality, bodily integrity, reproductive choice and economic worth. The eponymous female protagonist Anantayi is the oppressed wife of a wealthy and politically influential contractor Periyannan. For Periyannan, his political power and financial authority legitimize his violent subordination of Anantayi and his open affairs with other women. But his apparent integrity and omnipotence is undermined by his suppressed insecurity and hypocrisy that characterizes his relationships with women—he makes unsolicited accusations about Anantayi's supposed affairs with random strangers and challenges her to stop his affairs with women. To ensure his mistresses are faithful to him, he pleases them with money and expensive gifts in exchange for their reassurances of his power and masculinity. Periyannan's patriarchal authority extends to his terrified children; any perceived failure on their part to defy his authority either results in violent punishments or Anantayi's torture for failing to control their children. In one of his violent encounters with his older daughter Kala, Periyannan beats her for riding a cycle and dressing up, which he interprets as threatening signs of female assertiveness. He delegates the responsibility of supervising Kala to his son Mani who by the

end of the novel turns out to be a near replica of his violent father. The children are often victims of their parents' displaced rage and misery.

With her parents dead and no income of her own, Anantayi has no choice but to submit to her authoritative husband who is the family's only source of financial support. Anantayi's body is repeatedly subject to her husband's torture and sexual assaults that often result in unwanted pregnancies. Like her older mother-in-law whose body is ruined by the obligation to bear a child every time she loses one, Anantayi's body betrays the brutal marks of several imposed pregnancies, besides the torture and rapes that debilitate her and restrict her mobility to the confines of the house. But with nothing more to lose, Anantayi embraces her abjection and abuses Periyannan for his violence and sexual hypocrisy. Some of the significant signs of her resistance to Periyannan's assaults are her enraged arguments and rebuttals of his sexual aspersions. When she discovers she has again been raped and impregnated by Periyannan, she tries to get sterilized at the nearest hospital when she realizes Periyannan has not paid her any wages for cultivating his fields. So she secretly aborts her pregnancy with a midwife's help. In the opening chapter of the novel she even expresses her impotent anger and frustration at one of her husband's lovers. She is later shocked to discover her midwife Muttakka has not only been responsible for finding Periyannan women but also has a sexual relationship with him, "...she is related to him like a sister, but is that how she behaves? Being bashful, smiling, teasing him as though he were her *mama* or *machan* [maternal uncle or cross cousin]...that's when I was suspicious." (Sivakami, 6)

The novel contextualizes Periyannan's political power against the backdrop of a larger dispute over water between Ayyakannu, a small rival farmer, and the *kankaani*, a prosperous landlord. Largely precipitated by rumors and gossip, the dispute becomes a source of caste conflict and violence that divides the village and nearly destroys Periyannan's family. We are never privy to the actual scene of the dispute, merely overhearing the details of the dispute in the conversation between the landlord, his son and his peasants. The dispute first begins when the landlord refuses to irrigate Ayyakannu's wasteland, which is located between a lake and the landlord's paddy fields. Ayyakannu retaliates by blocking the canal that irrigates the landlord's paddy fields and refuses to relent until the landlord agrees to irrigate his wasteland. The landlord's peasants overhear Ayyakannu telling Periyannan of his plan to ruin the landlord's reputation by spreading rumors of his son Manikkam's affair with Nilaveni, his second wife's unmarried sister. Manikkam's sexual profligacy and Nilaveni's dubious sexual reputation makes the landlord particularly anxious to thwart Ayyakannu's plan. He also resents Periyannan for winning three road contracts that were supposed to be given to Manikkam.

Everyone in the village envies Periyannan's material progress as a Dalit contractor while some suspect him of political corruption. At the behest of the local police commissioner, he prepares a petition addressed to the district collector and the local member of the legislative assembly that includes an overpriced list of modern amenities, which do not reflect the villagers' basic needs. The commissioner and Periyannan anticipate a share of the handsome profits if the petition is sanctioned. The commissioner urges Periyannan to compete with Manikkam who being the landlord's son could potentially rob him of all the contracts. Periyannan tricks the unsuspecting and illiterate villagers to thumb print the petition and promises to redress their needs. The landlord and his son also prepare a similar petition demanding the construction of a water tank to relieve the villagers of the shortage of water and the leasing of land to landless people living by the lake. No one knows that the landlord is responsible for dispossessing them of their land and secretly registering the land in his

name. Ayyakannu prepares a few petitions that demand the construction of a well, accuse the landlord of depriving him of water and demand that his son Anbuselvan be punished for assaulting him. He also accuses the landlord of illegally seizing ownership of the land around the lake and his son Manikkam of having an affair with Nilaveni. But when the district collector turns out to be a north Indian who does not speak Tamil, the landlord and Ayyakannu are disappointed. But when months later there is no sign of any promise of development, Ayyakannu and the rest realize they have been betrayed by the government. But Periyannan, thanks to the police commissioner, is offered a lucrative contract to build a bridge.

Periyannan's power and prosperity is a function of his patronage of a local politician. Whenever the politician wins the local elections, Periyannan is rewarded with money with which he buys gifts for his family. But his relationship with Lakshmi, one of his mistresses, precipitates the gradual loss of his self-worth and financial independence. Lakshmi, unlike Anantayi, is empowered by her unconditional relationship with Periyannan and exploits his constant fear of losing her. He asks Lakshmi to live with him while he supervises the building of the bridge. Lakshmi, who is disowned by her wealthy landowning family for her illicit relationship with Periyannan, agrees to move in to his house to Anantayi's rage. Her presence in the house only reinforces Periyannan's violent authority over his family that often ends in bloody encounters. But Lakshmi gradually manages to win Anantayi's sympathy and her children's grudging acceptance.

But violence soon erupts between Lakshmi and Periyannan's second daughter Tanam when Lakshmi accidentally discovers Tanam's secret affair with her Christian neighbor, a man named Daniel. Anantayi who already knows of her daughter's secret rendezvous with Daniel warns her to stop before she is discovered by Periyannan. But when Lakshmi confronts Tanam with her affair, she is defiant and refuses to submit to her or her father. She uses her affair as an opportunity to defy her father's authority. Her misogynistic rage is mediated by her hatred and resentment towards her father as she slanders Lakshmi's sexual reputation,

[Lakshmi] 'Tanam...how dare you! Meeting like this in broad daylight when I'm at home...'

[Tanam] 'Yes. You're fit to speak.'

[Lakshmi] 'Let your father come, I'll tell him.'

[Tanam] 'Yes, my father runs a family with a woman who has been with a thousand men. Let him lay a hand on me, I'll humiliate him.'

[Lakshmi] 'You're a small child so I thought I should tell you for your own good. All those who are born women don't have to be chaste.'

[Tanam] 'Now what have I done for you to shout like this? If you like tell your husband. Don't you dare talk to me! Worthless whores come and advise me!'

[Lakshmi] 'Thoo...is this how an educated girl talks? You said you would tear my hair, even your mother hasn't spoken to me like this.'

[Tanam] 'It's because she is a simpleton that stray dogs like you have entered the house. Had it been me I would have hit you with a broomstick!'

Tanam grabbed Lakshmi's arm and bit it with a crunch! Unable to bear the pain she shook her arm, grasped Tanam's head and struck it against the wall. (Sivakami, 222-223)

Their heated argument soon turns to abuse and physical violence that for Tanam is clearly directed to her father. She refuses to be submissive like her mother and insults her for being indifferent to her children and merely "longing to sleep with her husband" (Sivakami, 224).

Later however, Lakshmi discovers she is being subject to Periyannan's anxious supervision. His baseless suspicions of her alleged affairs with men who visit the house and his coercive and often violent attempts to extract sexual assurances of his masculinity compel her to escape. Her multiple attempts to escape only end in her violent retrieval and imprisonment and she realizes her desirability no longer protects her from Periyannan's assaults. The family never intervenes in their violent encounters; her maternal affection for Periyannan's son Mani is betrayed when he furiously assaults her for injuring Periyannan with the very sickle he uses to kill her. She realizes she will never be protected or accepted by a family that desperately needs Periyannan's financial support and will suffer any degree of violence to survive. But unlike Anantayi who rationalizes domestic violence as an unavoidable expression of conjugality, Lakshmi is undeterred by Periyannan's violence. Lakshmi's plight wins Anantayi's sympathy, who realizes a woman's beauty is not sufficient to protect her from a man's violence.

When Lakshmi manages to escape the second time, she flees to her parents' village. Anticipating Periyannan's persecution, Lakshmi makes sure she never reveals her true home town. Periyannan files a police complaint against Lakshmi accusing her of injuring him and manages to track her down with the help of his politician friend's police networks. The search for Lakshmi, which lasts several months, costs Periyannan a lot of money that includes bribes and rewards to policemen and inspectors. The cost of retrieving Lakshmi threatens his financial success—he neglects his contracts and loses his laborers who decide to quit in search of more lucrative work. Lakshmi's third attempt to escape again costs him his wealth, this time reducing him to a near state of penury. She is discovered living with one of the lorry drivers who work for Periyannan's timber company. She is again brought back and assaulted by Periyannan and his son Mani before being locked up.

She has secret encounters with Manikkam on her daily trips to Periyannan's fields. With Manikkam's help she again escapes but is discovered and forced to return. This time Periyannan treats her with care and respect lest he lose her again. Lakshmi is finally defeated and realizes the futility of her attempts to escape. She betrays bodily symptoms of her longing for freedom in her mysterious possessions by what Periyannan believes is the spirit of his recently deceased mother. Her possessions evoke his fear and reverence and he promises unconditional love and freedom if she denies her relationship with Manikkam in court. But Lakshmi defiantly refuses in spite of his threats to kill her. Unlike Anantayi who is proud of her chastity and fidelity to an oppressive husband, Lakshmi, in a final act of defiance, consumes poison and kills herself to put an end to her humiliation.

Lakshmi's alleged affair with Manikkam reignites the existing rivalry between Periyannan, Ayyakannu and Muthulingam, both small farmers, on the one hand, and the landlord on the other. Periyannan dissuades Ayyakannu's from his decision to violate Nilaveni and setting fire to the landlord's cowshed for fear of being incriminated and imprisoned. They finally decide to steal the landlord's corn and his goats. When the landlord discovers the theft, his henchmen dismember Ayyakannu and murder Muthulingam. Periyannan miraculously escapes with an injured shoulder. By the end of the novel, the power equation between the men is transformed when a new member of the legislative assembly comes to power ushering modern developments in the village that threaten the landed wealth and authority of the landlord. The landlord later dies consuming illicit liquor and with the end of his politician friend's political career, Periyannan loses his only source of political power and is forced to auction his house to redeem the debts he had incurred trying to find Lakshmi. Although the

end of the novel does not bring any change or hope to Anantayi's life, Periyannan is humbled by Lakshmi's betrayals that nearly reduce him to a state of bankruptcy.

***Karukku* (1992) by Bama**

In this section of the chapter I discuss two autobiographies by the Dalit writer Bama. The first Tamil autobiographies to be written by a Dalit woman, they are crucial in their exploration of what it means to be a woman from a particular caste of Christian Dalits, the Paraiyars. Like all works of Dalit literature, Bama's autobiographies are not so much about an individual Parayar woman as they are about the Parayar community that she represents. The author in her first autobiography *Karukku* like many other Tamil writers uses the convention of writing under a pseudonym that as we shall presently see adds to the work's strange paradox of reticence and familiarity. She eschews a 'confessional' mode in her work and the protagonist remains an anonymous metonym for the Parayars. The events of her life are not chronologically arranged but reflected upon and repeated under different themes like Work, Games and Recreation, Education, Belief and so on. It is Bama's driving quest for integrity as a Dalit and Christian that shapes the book and gives it its polemic.

Her story refuses to be her own but that of others too. *Karukku* does this through a number of textual strategies. Firstly, Bama's narrative, to a great degree does not deal with herself, but with the context of Dalit life in which she grew up and acquired a certain self-awareness. Her descriptions of her childhood and the exploited world of Dalit labor, which constitute a significant part of her narrative, are marked for the most part by a compelling absence of herself. Bama's childhood comes to life in a series of cameos on collectivity—childhood games which *they* played and left behind at different stages of their lives, the festivities of the Christian calendar in which *they* partook year after year and so on. Secondly, this absence of 'I' gets its further affirmation in the polyphony of other voices from the Dalit community that saturates *Karukku*. Bama is mostly a spokesperson for her own community even as she occasionally betrays her own narrative voice and perspective. Thirdly, the narrative is shrouded in anonymity; in a deliberate refusal to name people and events that potentially enables a politics of collectivity. By erasing specificities and masking them in a veil of anonymity, the narrative is not restricted to the local but becomes a statement of universal oppression. The village in *Karukku* goes unnamed, the upper caste Chaliyars who attacked the Dalits in her childhood days go unnamed; the dalit headman, who hid himself in their house to escape the raiding policemen, goes unnamed; the schools and college where she studied and suffering caste oppression; the nunnery and its residents once again steadfast believers in caste go unnamed (Pandian, 135).

However, the very life trajectory of Bama is one of drifting away from the world of Dalits. Access to modern education, salaried employment and the material comforts of the nunnery, which take her away from the world of physical labor and struggle for livelihood, are some of the moments of this deep alienation. In narrating these events, *Karukku* is suffused with a deep sense of guilt and a yearning to reunite with the community and share its pains and pleasures. This sense of remorse only withers and gives way to meaningful freedom when she discards her job and returns to her community. Bama looks for a future that is shaped by the will of the Dalits themselves. The very word *Karukku* signals this desire. *Karukku* is the saw-like double-edged stem of the palmyra leaf that can perform other functions besides firewood, "Dalits like me are fired by the desire to construct a new world of justice, equality, and love. Like the double-edged *karukku* they keep the oppressors slashed." (Bama, ix)

Karukku, in other words, is a symbol of the transformative potential of abjection for it signifies both, the oppressive present and the struggle against it, a metaphor that connects the present with the future.

Conversion by no means resolves castism. On the contrary, caste hierarchies are reinforced as the lower caste converts are made to do menial jobs for the church in the promise of attaining divine merit. Towards the end of her autobiography, Bama stresses the importance of vocational training and education that caters to the lives of rural Dalits if they are at all to achieve freedom and independence. She is also aware of the problems of being a single Dalit woman in a town or city where education still does not guarantee freedom from castism and sexism. She experiences difficulties in finding accommodation in a town or city because she is Dalit and a single woman whose sexual reputation consequently becomes suspect.

Bama's re-reading and interpretation of the Christian scriptures as an adult enables her to carve out both a social vision and a message of hope for Dalits by emphasizing the revolutionary aspects of Christianity, the values of equality, social justice, and love towards all. Her own life experiences urge her towards actively engaging in alleviating the sufferings of the oppressed. When she becomes a nun, it is in the stubborn hope that she will have a chance to put these aspirations into effect. She discovers, however, that these perspectives of the convent and the Church are different from hers. The story of that conflict and its resolution forms the core of *Karukku*.

The argument of the book has to do with the arc of the narrator's spiritual development both through the nurturing of her belief as a Catholic and her gradual realization of herself as a Dalit. We are given a full picture of the way in which the Church ordered and influenced the lives of Dalit Catholics. Every aspect of the child's life is imbued with the Christian religion. The day is ordered by religious ritual. The year is punctuated by religious processions and festivals which become part of the natural yearly cycle of crops and seasons. But parallel to this religious life is a socio-political self-education that takes off from the revelatory moment when she understands what untouchability means. It is this double perspective that enables her to understand the deep rift between Christian beliefs and practice.

The protagonist's early experiences of untouchability crucially constitute her Dalitness. She is humiliated by her school headmaster for apparently stealing a coconut "true to her nature as a Paraya" (Bama, 16). She remembers her grandmothers' servile gratitude to their Naicker landlords who treat them as untouchables not worthy of respect. She witnesses Dalits being offered leftover food from a distance by their landowners to avoid pollution. The dehumanization of Dalits is so complete and presumed that when her brother returns to her village after completing his college education he is perceived as a threat to upper caste authority. One of the Naicker landlords is affronted by her brother's "arrogance" when he openly declares his Paraiyar identity.

The socially promiscuous space of the Christian high school hostel is one where caste identities are clearly entrenched. The protagonist realizes her own identity as a poor Dalit woman as she is surrounded by rich upper caste children and the warden's allocation of menial tasks to Dalit children only reinforces castism. Even her bus trips back home become occasions for stigma and humiliation when upper caste women discover her caste identity and refuse to sit next to her.

She later leaves her teaching post and becomes a nun in a religious order with the intention of helping Dalit children who were being humiliated by nuns and teachers. But she is soon disillusioned by the castist reality of the Church that turns out to be a far cry from the

Church's professed faith in equality. There are moments when the protagonist feels compelled to conceal her caste status from the other nuns in the order.

A major portion of the book is devoted to describing inter-caste skirmishes and riots between men of different Dalit castes including the Paraiyars, the Chaliyars and the Pallars that dismisses any presumed unity between lower castes. The riots between the Paraiyars and the Chaliyars for instance, begin when the Chaliyars claim ownership of what has historically been a Paraiyar graveyard by the church. The Chaliyars are more powerful than the Paraiyars as they have more wealth and land. The Paraiyars retaliate when one of their men is stabbed to death by beating a Chaliyar man. The Chaliyars fabricate a story to the police holding all the Paraiyar men in the village guilty of assaulting one of their men. They use their wealth to bribe the police with a lavish meal and money that turns the police in their favor. Soon several Paraiyar men are rounded up and arrested and the ones who are hiding are tracked down and tortured. Paraiyar women and children are the true victims of the riots as they are trapped trying to save their husbands from the police. Some of the men who do manage to escape the police escape the village to hide from the police with their wives informing them of the police's moves. But the Pallars who are anxious to about their own safety refuse to shelter Paraiyar men and bribe the police informing them of their secret whereabouts. The police assault and arrest several Paraiyar men including the headman who hides in the protagonist's house. Even the priest of the local parish informs the police of the men hiding in the parish. The Paraiyar women are helpless to retrieve their husbands so they collect and divide their money to bail their husbands out of prison. When the son of one of the Paraiyar men who escapes the police dies in the riots, some of the women dress the man in a sari so that he may attend his son's funeral. He is introduced to the suspicious police as a ritual mourner. The riots end when the court's verdict favors the Paraiyars' ownership of the graveyard.

The protagonist describes her grandmother and mother's struggle to survive as bonded laborers to their Naicker landlords. She draws attention to the uncertainty of their livelihoods as agricultural laborers and construction workers. During the off season they are forced to sell firewood or collect wild roots to survive. Even then they are exploited by their Naicker landowners and Nadar tradesmen. Her mostly absent father who is a soldier in the army only adds to her mother and grandmother's financial misery. Her parents and brother, however, encourage her education. A nun pawns her earrings to admit her to college since her parents have no money and are reluctant to threaten her marital prospects by educating her. But once in college, she realizes she has no money to fulfill her basic needs. The luxury of the convent where she studies, and its wealthy inmates, are in stark contrast to her poor life as a Paraiyar woman. She leaves the convent disillusioned by its indifference to the reality of caste and poverty. She feels weakened by her insulated life in the convent, which becomes clear when she returns to her village.

The very life trajectory of Bama is one of drifting away from the world of Dalits. Access to modern education, salaried employment and the material comforts of the nunnery, which take her away from the world of physical labor and struggle for livelihood, are some of the moments of this deep alienation. In narrating these events, Karukku is suffused with a deep sense of guilt and a yearning to reunite with the community and share its pains and pleasures. This sense of remorse only withers and gives way to meaningful freedom when she discards her job and returns to her community. Bama looks for a future that is shaped by the will of the Dalits themselves. The very word *Karukku* signals this desire. *Karukku* is the saw-like double-edged stem of the palmyra leaf that can perform other functions besides firewood,

“Dalits like me are fired by the desire to construct a new world of justice, equality, and love. Like the double-edged karukku they keep the oppressors slashed.” (Bama, ix) *Karukku*, in other words, is a symbol of the transformative potential of abjection for it signifies both, the oppressive present and the struggle against it, a metaphor that connects the present with the future.

Sangati (Events) (1994) by Bama

Bama's second testimony *Events* focuses on the economic precariousness of Dalit women that leads to a culture of violence. Dalit women are doubly oppressed along axes of gender and caste—they are sexually and economically exploited by their upper caste landlords and by their husbands, fathers and in some cases, even brothers. The women in Bama's testimony however do not merely submit to violence and exploitation—their bodies become strategic sites of struggle and resistance. The opening chapter of the testimony betrays the author's admiration for her resilient grandmother, who suffered a stigmatized existence as a poor Paraiyar woman. She renounces her husband following their separation and struggles to singlehandedly raise her two daughters. The author also suggests that her caste community's conversion to Christianity neither promises them any relief from castism or poverty nor grants them access to the state's affirmative measures.

In those days, there was no hospital or anything in our village. Even now, of course, there isn't one...Confinement and childbirth were always at home. In our village it was my grandmother who attended every childbirth. Only the upper castes never sent for her because she was a *paraichi*...

Paatti [grandmother] was good to look at. They said that as a young woman she had been even more beautiful. She grew quite tall. She never had a grey hair, even to the day she died...

Nor did I ever see Paatti wearing a *chattai*, a sari-blouse. Apparently, in her times, lower-caste women were not allowed to wear them. My Perimma [aunt] didn't wear a *chattai* either. In fact, my mother started wearing one only after she got married. Paatti had a fine, robust body. She never had a day's fever or illness until the time she died...

It seems Paati waited and waited for Goyindan [grandfather] to return, and at last, when there was a terrible famine, she shook off her tali [marriage necklace] and sold it. After that she never wore a tali or geeli ever again. She told herself she had become a corpse without a husband, and struggled singlehandedly to care for her two children.

When my mother and Perimma were little children, the Christian priests came to our village. When they promised that if our people joined their faith, their children would get a free education, it seems that all the Paraiyas became Christians. None of the other communities, Pallar, Koravar, or Chakkiliyar did so. All of them remained Hindus. Why on earth Paraiyas alone became Christians, I don't know, but because they did so at that time; now it works out that they get no concessions from the government whatsoever.

Even though the white priests offered them a free education, the small children refused to go to school. They all went off and took up any small job they could get. At least the boys went for a short while before they stopped school. The girls didn't even do that much. They had enough to do at home anyway, carrying the babies

around and doing the housework. My mother studied at least up to the fifth class. My Perimma didn't know anything. (Bama, 3-5)

Although Paati acknowledges the systemic exploitation of women, she, like the other women in the autobiography, is resigned to the unfortunate state of women. She even legitimizes certain patriarchal ideals simply on the basis of their mythical past. The author remarks on her grandmother's subtle partiality towards her grandsons and her strong belief in female chastity. She is proud of her own wifely fidelity and chastity as a single woman that has thus far deflected male attention. When Bama's teacher, noticing her growing sexual maturity, asks her grandmother to make her wear a half-sari to school, her grandmother anxiously urges her mother to marry her once she attains puberty. For her grandmother, marriage is a necessary precaution against potential threats to a virgin girl's sexual integrity and reputation. Her faith in marriage is surprising when her own daughter, Bama's aunt, died at the hands of a violent husband.

Even the tales her grandmother told her as a child are in retrospect a confirmation of the subordination of women, particularly, Dalit women. She examines two of her grandmother's tales that corroborate the loss of a woman's freedom once she attains puberty. The first tale is about a female ghost named Esakki who possesses one of the women in the village. According to her grandmother's tale, Esakki was a Paraiyar woman who was brutally murdered by her brothers for eloping with a man from another low caste. The village believes Esakki is a wandering spirit because she did not die naturally. And since she was pregnant when she was killed, the only way she can be appeased is by fulfilling her demands for a cradle and a winnowing tray. The second tale is about a wandering troupe of female ghosts who overheard a woman ask another woman's jewelry for a wedding. One of the ghosts impersonates the woman and tricks the other woman of her jewelry but her husband later scares the ghosts away and manages to retrieve her jewelry. From her examination of the tales, Bama wonders why lower caste women are the only victims of possession. She realizes these tales perpetuate the (self) representation of women, particularly Dalit women, as powerless victims of caste patriarchy. She interprets possession as a symptom of the fear and vulnerability of Dalit women that has to be embraced in order to achieve any kind of freedom.

Once a girl comes of age she has no more freedom. They tell us all these stories, take away our freedom, and control our movements. And we too become frightened, we gaze about us in terror, we're afraid of every little thing, we shiver, and die. It isn't for nothing that they say to one who is terrified, that anything dark is a *pey* [ghost]. If there isn't courage in our hearts, we lose our strength and become good for nothing. If we are brave enough, we can dare to accomplish anything we want.

As I listened to more of these stories and thought about it all, I was convinced it was all false. But all the same, I thought about the fact that only women—and Dalit women in particular—become possessed.

And when I examine the lives of our women, I understood the reason. From the moment they wake up, they set to work both in their homes and in the fields. At home they are pestered by their husbands and children; in the fields there is back-breaking work besides the harassment of the landlord. When they come home in the evening, there is no time even to draw breath. And once they have collected water and firewood, cooked a kanji [millet porridge] and fed their hungry husband and children, even then they can't go to bed in peace and sleep until dawn. Night after night they must give in to their husbands' pleasure. Even if a woman's body is

wracked with pain, the husband is bothered only with his own satisfaction. Women are overwhelmed and crushed by their own disgust, boredom, and exhaustion, because of all this. The stronger ones somehow manage to survive all this. The ones who don't have the mental strength are totally oppressed; they succumb to mental ill-health and act as if they are possessed by *peys*.

Our men don't have the same problem. Even if they work really hard, they still have their freedom. They still control their women, rule over them, and find their pleasure. Within the home, they law down the law; they word is scripture.

"I decided then that it is up to us to be aware of our situation, and not fool ourselves that we have been possessed by *peys*. We must be strong. We must show by our own resolute lives that we believe ardently in our independence. I told myself that we must never allow our minds to be worn out, damaged, and broken in the belief that this is our fate. Just as we work hard so long as there is strength in our bodies, so too, must we strengthen our hearts and minds in order to survive. (Bama, 58-59)

The author's cousin Mariamma is nearly raped by her upper caste landlord as she stops by his fields to drink some water from his irrigation canal. Her friends warn her not to tell anyone of the attempted rape lest she is accused of being a whore and convince her she will never be believed. The landlord fearing the loss of his reputation approaches the Dalit headman and claims to have witnessed Mariamma being intimate with a Dalit man named Manikkam. He pretends as though he is concerned for the reputation of the Paraiyars. He claims he had earlier spotted Manikkam walking by his fields along with the firewood he had gathered,

[Landlord] 'The way some of the youngsters from your streets carry on when they go out to gather firewood is beyond everything. They always come and lurk along my fields. I've been watching them for a long time, and really I have to speak out now. Just today that girl Mariamma, daughter of Samudrakani, and that Mukkayi's grandson Manikkam were behaving in a very dirty way; I saw them with my own eyes. And it's a good thing it was I who saw them. I've come straight away to tell you. Had it been anybody else who saw them, they would have been in bad trouble. Anyone else would have strung them up hand and foot to the banyan tree, then and there. You would have been told about it only after that.' (Bama, 20)

The senior and the junior headman of the Paraiyars (a Dalit caste) call a meeting of the entire village. At the meeting, the headmen assume the landlord is telling the truth and perceive the alleged affair as a shame to the entire community. There are a few protests from some of the villagers and both Manikkam and Mariamma deny the landlord's allegation. Mariamma's friend who was with her before the attempted rape confirms Mariamma's innocence. But the women are soon silenced by the men who suspect them of fabricating stories. Mariamma's father Samudrakani is ashamed of his daughter and following the headmen's decision orders Mariamma to beg the landlord's forgiveness. The junior headman promises the village will forgive Mariamma and mitigate her punishment with a small fine. But Mariamma resolutely accuses the landlord of misbehaving with her, "'Ayya, [Sir] I never did any of that. It was the *mudalaali* [landowner] who tried to misbehave with me. But I escaped from him and ran away.' She began to weep loudly." (Bama, 23-24) Some of the men at the meeting slander Mariamma's sexual reputation. The patriarchal significance of the village council becomes clear in the way Mariamma's friends are considered unreliable and suspected of spreading rumors because they are women. There are some arguments between

Mariamamma's friends who question the double standards for men and women and another woman who suspects Mariamma may have acquired her sexual looseness from her promiscuous father's mistress.

Anandamma said, 'It was the *mudalaali* [landowner] who tried to rape her. She was scared out of her wits, refused him, and ran away. Now the whore-son has turned everything round and told a different tale. I actually went with her that evening to fetch the firewood she left behind.'

'What can you say to these men,' Susaiamma replied, sadly. 'There's no way of convincing them of the truth, even when we are sure of it. They will never allow us to sit down at the village meetings. They won't even allow us to stand to one side, like this. But it's only to us they'll brag. Ask them just to stand up to the *mudalaali*. Not a bit, they'll cover their mouths and their backsides and run scared.'

But Muthamma disagreed. 'You seem to know such a lot. Her own father keeps a mistress, everyone knows that. She could be a bit of a slut herself. Just last week when we were weeding the sesame fields, she was ready to fight with me. She might have done it, who knows?'

[Susaiamma] 'Everybody in the village knows about her father's kept woman, even a baby who was born just the other day. Did anyone call a village meeting and question him about it? They say he's a man: if he sees mud he'll step into it; if he sees water, he'll wash himself. It's one justice for men and quite another for women.' (Bama, 24)

Mariamamma refuses to beg forgiveness and stands still even as her father beats her. A woman protests the council's partiality to the landlord and demands Manikkam be punished too. Another woman fears punishing upper caste men like the landlord may lead to riots that would destroy the Paraiyar community. The Paraiyar headmen stick to their decision to fine Mariamma fearing the potential loss of their livelihood if they questioned or punished the landlord. The headmen hold Paraiyar women responsible or even accountable for the loss of their own sexual integrity and reputation,

The headman finished the proceedings by saying, 'It is you female chicks who ought to be humble and modest. A man may do a hundred things and still get away with it. You girls should consider what you are left with, in your bellies.' (Bama, 26)

Her father and grandmother get Mariamma married to Manikkam to redeem her sexual disgrace despite her protests. She ends up trapped in a violent and miserable marriage. Bama is enraged by the injustice meted to a Dalit woman who is always made the scapegoat of an upper caste man's desire.

When I thought of Mariamma's life story, I was filled with such pain and anger. Because of some upper caste man's foolishness, she was made the scapegoat, and her whole life was destroyed. If a woman is slandered, that's always her fate. People won't consider whether the accusation is true or not, nor will they allow the woman to speak out. They'll marry her off to any disreputable fellow and wash their hands off her, not caring in the least whether she lives or dies. I was disgusted by it. I wanted to get hold of all those who had brought her to this state, bite them, chew them up, and spit them out. (Bama, 42)

Bama reflects on some of the strategic ways in which Dalit women counter domestic violence from her observations of some of the couples from her village. She notes how Raakkamma, anticipating her husband's assaults, openly shames her violent and abusive husband Pakkiaraj by uttering sexual obscenities and transgressing social definitions of feminine modesty and bodily comportment. Bama suggests these verbal obscenities could be a symptom of a sexually dissatisfying marriage. She perceives the drunken and violent behavior of Dalit husbands as a compensatory symptom of their wounded self-esteem and powerlessness as Dalits. Dalit women for her are the worst victims who have to suffer their husbands and their upper caste employers.

Even before his hand could fall on her, she screamed and shrieked, 'Ayyayo, he's killing me. Vile man, you'll die, you'll be carried out as a corpse, you low-life, you bastard, you this, you that...'

[Pakkiaraj] 'Listen to the common whore shouting, even before I touch her! Shut your mouth, you whore! Otherwise I'll stamp so hard on your stomach your guts will scatter everywhere!'

But Raakkamma wouldn't leave him alone. 'Go on, da, kick me, let's see you do it, da! Let's see if you're a real man. You only know how to go for a woman's parts. Go fight with a man who is your equal, and you'll see. You'll get your balls burnt for your pains. Look at the fellow's face! Thuu!' And she spat at him.

Pakkiaraj's fury was beyond everything. 'Is she a woman, to talk to me like this! The savage munde! Keep all your arrogance in your parents' house in Kuppacchipatti. Don't try all that here or I'll crush you to pieces with a single stamp. Remember that!' Then he dragged her by her hair, pushed her down, and kicked her lower belly.

Raakkamma got up after that kick and wailed out aloud. She shouted obscenities; she scooped out the earth and flung it about. 'How dare you kick me, you low-life! Your hand will get leprosy! How dare you pull my hair! Disgusting man, only fit to drink a woman's farts! Instead of drinking toddy everyday why don't you drink your son's urine? Why don't you drink my monthly blood?' And she lifted up her sari in front of the entire crowd gathered there.

That was when Pakkiaraj walked off, still shouting. All the women began to speak among themselves. 'Is this a woman or what? That Chinnayyan Mudiappan, the teacher, and all our brothers are standing around. So casually she lifted up her sari in front of them all. Shameless donkey! Children from school are coming and going along the streets. What an uncontrollable shrew she is!'

Immediately Raakkamma rounded on them. 'Why don't you lot just go off and mind your own business? It is I who am beaten to death every day. If I hadn't shamed him like this, he would surely have split my skull in two, the horrible man.'

At first I saw what Raakkamma did, I too was disgusted, and I thought to myself, 'Chi, how can she expose herself like that?' But later, I realized that it was only after she screamed and shouted and behaved like that that he let her go. I realized that she had acted in that way because it was her only means of escape. (Bama, 61-62)

Bama is particular to draw attention to the castist misogyny of some upper caste women who are contemptuous of their lower caste counterparts. Upper caste women define themselves against Dalit women who are perceived as quarreling wives lacking in self-respect and refinement. Bama dismisses the superficial impression upper caste women convey of themselves as happy wives when they actually have to submit to their husbands. She wonders at the sheltered lives of upper caste women who unlike Dalit women are not compelled to

work and thus do not have the same degree of mobility and financial independence. Of the positive images of Dalit women that the autobiography creates is the comforting sense of solidarity that arises from collective activity. She describes them bathing or singing together during marriages, puberty ceremonies or while cooking or working together on fields. As their houses lack the amenities that upper caste households have, they are forced to violate caste boundaries by occupying certain public spaces that may belong to the upper castes. Bama recounts the defiance of an old Paraiyar woman named Sammuga Kilavi who was punished for bathing in a well that belonged to a Naicker landlord. She witnesses the landlord beating a Parayar boy for touching and polluting his water pot and avenges the boy's humiliation by secretly urinating in the pot. She then tells the village of what she did and badmouths the landlord. Bama admires her courage that she reads as a step toward self-affirmation that comes with embracing shame and humiliation.

A positive image is created as well of relative freedoms enjoyed by Dalit women: no dowry is required of them—according to Paraiyar customs the groom is required to give the bride a '*parisam*' or a bride-price meant for the bride's expenses—and widows remarry as a matter of course without having to undergo any of the indignities suffered by some orthodox upper caste widows. One of Bama's friends feels lucky to be a Paraiyar woman as Dalit women have to work to support themselves and their families. She feels there is as a result greater equality between men and women among Dalit communities. Bama envies Hindu Dalit women who are potentially allowed to remarry unlike women of her own caste, the Paraiyars, who seem to have lost that advantage once they converted to Christianity. The author's childhood friend Pechi, a Chakkiliyar woman—a Dalit caste that traditionally works with leather—remarries to escape her violent and drunken husband who appropriates her earnings and has an affair with another woman. Bama is sorry Paraiyar Christian women like their upper caste counterparts have to suffer violent and abusive marriages with no resort to divorce or remarriage. But she also acknowledges separations and remarriages can potentially render women vulnerable to an uncertain future.

On the question of inter-caste marriages, Bama crucially addresses the patriarchal sexual regulations of caste that forbid women from marrying outside their own caste. Women's desires, Bama suggests, are attached to the honor and pride of the caste community in a way that male desire is not. Even the Church Bama points out belies its own professed encouragement of inter-caste marriages by punishing those women who marry men of other castes. Bama addresses the institutional corruption of the church that misuses its social and political authority to materialize caste divisions. When a Paraiyar woman from the village falls in love with a Pallar man, she is imprisoned and assaulted by her brothers. She fears losing her job as a teacher in the Christian missionary run school if she has a civil wedding. She knows she cannot get married in any church in the village and she would need written permission from her own church's priest if she had to get married in a church from a different parish. She eventually loses her job and the priest who initially promises to help her marry betrays and humiliates her by broadcasting her love and sexual disreputability to the village. The lovers finally escape to another village where after much pleading, the woman obtains a letter of permission to marry from a priest of another parish. But their marriage is never accepted—they are disowned by their families and ostracized by the village.

Conclusion

Possibly because of the formal differences between a novel and a testimonial narrative, Sivakami and Bama have markedly different ways of addressing Dalit female subjectivity. Sivakami's novels are not unambiguous, strident critiques of caste patriarchy; on the contrary, her critical re-visitation of her first novel questions and legitimizes the complex moral ambiguities of being a Dalit woman. The Dalit woman in Sivakami's works embodies the fraught intersection of caste and sexuality where sexuality has to be subordinated to the politics of caste. The Dalit woman can attain some kind of justice or survive only at the cost of overlooking her sexual violation or compromising her bodily integrity. Sivakami like Bama also points to the importance of labor and education to secure the Dalit woman's future independence even if it results in her cultural alienation.

Bama in her testimonies focuses more on the institutional corruption of the Church that under the pretext of spreading equality perpetuates castism and assumes the moral prerogative of regulating female sexuality. Bama remarks on the loss of sexual and marital freedom for Dalit Christian women who unlike their Hindu counterparts can no longer divorce their husbands or remarry. Bama also crucially dismisses any monolithic notion of 'woman' or 'lower caste'. She clearly underlines the economic and cultural differences between upper and lower caste women as well as the lack of unity between lower castes, which is to a certain extent, is created and exploited by the landed upper castes.

Conclusion

This dissertation engages with the potential of abjection to affect personal transformation and social and political change. The first two chapters are invested in individual subjects who embrace abjection to exercise their limited agency, even at the risk of reinforcing the structural constraints that constitute and limit such agency, to resist regulatory norms of sexuality. Jeyakantan's *Ganga* parodies by literally enacting the patriarchal equation of female chastity with marriage in spite of the possibility of incurring social censure and stigma. She retrospectively characterizes her 'rape' as consensual and simulates an exclusive or marital relationship with Prabhu to openly defy social norms and validate her abject past. But by not marrying *Ganga* to Prabhu, Jeyakantan resists the equation of heterosexuality with violence or marriage. The last novel gestures at *Ganga*'s religious redemption and death that seemingly promises her freedom from sexual abjection.

My second chapter is similarly invested in the ambiguous religious and spiritual redemption of the male protagonists in the texts under consideration. Although the protagonists interpret their experience of disease and disorder as expiatory signs of sexual excess, such a moral interpretation is belied by their irrepressible sexual longings and fantasies and their diseased and disordered bodies that enable alternative sexual possibilities. The protagonists are transformed by their striving to achieve self-identity or even be freed of their abject existence.

My last three chapters gesture at more collective expressions of agency or power through labor. For Tanjai Prakash, the frustration of desire is an occasion for the empowering recognition of the irredeemable lack that structures and reproduces desire. Desire emerges as an inter-subjective and mediated agent of dialectical change and development that can never

be entirely satiated or eliminated. Prakash's novels stage the power of abjection and longing to repeatedly collapse and reconfigure meaning and subjectivity. The male protagonists are as imbricated as the female characters, in a web of inter-mediating desires that are eventually sublimated in collective activity. Art and agricultural labor produce objective validations of their abject selves.

Tamilselvi's novels are also concerned with the potential of labor for poor, lower caste women in their struggle for survival. Greater financial independence and the creation of powerful solidarities between female laborers become crucial for the women in their attempts to resist domestic violence and exploitation at the home and at the workplace. Her works abound with female characters who embrace their abjection and work for meager wages even in the face of oppression and death.

Sivakami and Bama further extend the possibilities of collective action against sexual violence and exploitation. Bama in particular explores the opportunities that dalit women have if they overcome their (internalized) misogyny and unite in their fight against patriarchy and exploitation. These writers are less interested in their individual characters' psychologies and appeal to social forms of protest that rely on the power of collaborations across social distinctions, in altering the very institutions that perpetuate social inequities.

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