

**POPULAR FICTIONS:  
THE SHORT STORY IN TAMIL 1997-1999**

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This dissertation titled **Popular Fictions: The Short Story in Tamil 1997-1999** submitted by **Bhavana Krishnamoorthy**, Centre of Linguistics and English, School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies, JNU, New Delhi for the award of the Degree of **Master of Philosophy**, is an original work and has not been submitted so far, in part or in full, for any other Degree or Diploma of any other University.

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## INTRODUCTION

This study deals with the Tamil siru kathai or short story, published in popular periodicals as a regular feature, with varying frequency. The Tamil press is one of the most prolific in India, ranking among the top three after English, in terms of number of periodicals produced annually (Source: Manorama Year Book, 1998), as well as in terms of readership (40,76,030 as on 1.4.97; this includes only the top ranking periodicals based in Chennai), fourth after Hindi, English and Malayalam (Source: The INS Press Handbook 1996). The centrality of the short story in contemporary Tamil journalism is a feature of note, where supplements and issues of quotidian periodicity are deemed incomplete without a siru kathai feature. Every weekly or monthly carries a few pieces of short fiction in every issue, while the supplements of the dailies devote entire sections to them. In view of the phenomenal output of short stories in Tamil—the most conservative estimates suggest that several thousand are produced each season<sup>1</sup>—I have chosen to deal with 4 occasional anthologies of short stories, produced at fixed intervals round the year: the *Dinamalar Deepavali Malar* (DMDM), the *Kalki Deepavali Malar* (KDM), the *Mangayar Malar*

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<sup>1</sup> The weekly *Kalki*'s offices alone receive about a hundred unsolicited short stories every week; the magazine, which carries 3 siru kathais in every issue also employs staff writers: a scenario more or less the same for all magazines/periodicals, irrespective of the specific reading constituency they are oriented towards, or the specific status enjoyed (Letter, Seetha Ravi. 6.3.99; Dilip Kumar, Interview, April 1999; Vasanthi, Interview, April 1999).

*Aandu Malar* (MMAM) and the *Ilakkiya Chinthanai Anthology* (ICA),<sup>2</sup> for the years 1997-99.

The widely varying periodicity of the publications that carry short fiction poses problems of delimitation, which the present selection deals with by choosing one or two from each category. Magazines (and dailies) produce special fiction anthologies at many 'occasions' round the year - at the Hindu festival of Deepavali, the uniquely regional harvest festival Pongal, the Tamil New Year, the English New Year, and an arbitrarily selected annual issue in the magazine's calendar. The Deepavali Malars are put out by both dailies and magazines, and like their Bangla counterparts, the Pooja specials, are magazine formatted on newsprint or not very good paper issues but with the thickness of books. Eagerly awaited and read the year round, these lavishly colour illustrated annuals which may run to as many as three volumes are meant to provide an entire year's supply of short fiction and features. In almost all cases, the occasional nature of the anthology means that it caters almost exclusively to a Hindu middle class audience. Deepavali inaugurates the urban season of festivity: bonuses are announced, discounts and sales proliferate, weekly shopping holidays are abolished, and apart from the cloth merchants, hardware stores and all manner of consumer goods outlets, including those of the industrial houses, offer festival rebates. It is in such a context that the Deepavali Malars are published, and sold almost exclusively through prior booking alone, and

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<sup>2</sup> Henceforth these will be referred to as *KDM* (*Kalki Deepavali Malar*), *DDM* (*Dinamalar Deepavali Malar*), *MMAM* (*Mangayar Malar Aandu Malar*), and *ICA* (the *Ilakkiya Chinthanai Anthology*) respectively.

coveted advertising space in these issues is booked months in advance. Contributions to these festival anthologies are solicited from 'established' authors, while unsolicited material is also, though rarely, accepted. Each of these anthologies usually begins by paying full colour insertion obeisance to Vinayaka, the God of Beginnings, and possibly Shakthi, in one of her many forms; and even the Shankaracharyas of Kanchi. Pilgrimage and popular religion features are a must; the odd Christian though seldom Muslim shrine may be included, but not always. The essays take in some local history, colour, and photographs with the flourish of rediscovery. The awareness of the season is reinforced through a mandatory Deepavali story, through the features or the jokes in the interactive sections of the magazines.

Specialised magazines which target a specific reader segment (such as the *Mangayar Malar*) enjoy wide circulation figures, two of the most common categories being women's and children's magazines. The women's magazines usually have a dedicated following, and vary widely in their emphasis, though they seem to share a common format. These magazines may produce expanded issues at various times of the year, but rarely are these in the form of separate publications in their own right, unlike the Deepavali Malars. Annual issues are preferred, which are merely expanded versions of the magazines' usual format, or merely built around a single theme, or sometimes even no specific one. Since these magazines are extensively interactive, stories tend to be from unsolicited material rather than commissioned, with the exception of previously advertised series



around a single theme. The annual issues of magazines tend to take stock of the year, and the fiction they carry honours this significance.

Some anthologies produced annually deal solely with short fiction, either as supplements to the parent magazine which may itself specialize in fiction alone, or as separate publications. Of these, some (like the *ICA*) may not be associated with a parent magazine, but with the 'best' short fiction that the year has produced through the various periodicals that accept short fiction. These anthologies scan the entire year's output, making no preselection of the periodicals that will be considered.

While none of the selected publications are market leaders, (with the possible exception of *Ilakkiya Chinthanai*, but due to the specialized category it occupies rather than by virtue of circulation figures for the broader 'literary' segment it occupies), they are widely recognized urban publications with a strong urban and semi urban readership.

Since every published short story sees itself self-consciously as possessing a certain literary merit by the very fact of its existence in print, questions of the popular are forced to deal with the category of the 'literary', or at the least, that which is recognized in some way to be so. While these literary stories do not claim to be the best, their value as texts derives almost always from the contexts of their publication, or the history of the author's sites of publication, or their being the work of an established author. The borders between literary and

popular for the short story have here been traditionally porous,<sup>3</sup> with authors rising to literary fame by buying their entry through the popular press, or choosing to revert back to the periodical pages where they had once begun, or at times, financing a literary career through writing for the popular periodicals (Varadarajan, 1996; Dilip Kumar, Interview, April 1999; Seetha Ravi, Interview, April 1999).

In my delimitation of the periodicals under study, I have followed Bourdieu's classification of the literary or artistic field as a field of position takings,<sup>4</sup> corresponding to the space of possible positions<sup>5</sup> arising from a system of social relations. Bourdieu's recognition of the two principles of hierarchization: the autonomous relating to issues of literary 'excellence', prestige etc where forces of the economic production and distribution of the cultural artefact are not of primary importance in its evaluation, the autonomy of the work of art as independent of economic valorization, and the heteronomous, by which writers and artists 'are subject to the ordinary laws prevailing in the field of power and more generally in the economic field...success as measured by indices such as booksales, etc.' (*ibid*) that structure the field then points to a

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<sup>3</sup> The boundary of the field is a stake of struggles, and the social scientist's task is not to draw a dividing line between the agents involved in it by imposing a so called operational definition...but to describe a state(long lasting or temporary) of these struggles and therefore of the frontier delimiting the territory held by the competing agents' (Bourdieu, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> '...the structured set of the manifestations of the social agents involved in the field-literary or artistic works, etc...' (Bourdieu, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> '...possession of a determinate quantity of specific capital (recognition), and, at the same time, by occupation of a determinate position in the structure of the distribution of this specific capital' (Bourdieu, 1994).

possible classification that positions publications along both these axes.

This study examines notions of the popular as constructed across a spectrum of occasional anthologies and special issues focusing on short fiction, as put out annually by newspapers, magazines and publishing houses. Given the phenomenal output of short stories and anthologies, identifying a spectrum of selections involves engaging with circulation figures, prices and consumer-indexing. To begin with, rather than use popularity and circulation as interchangeable, I have made a selection from each category of periodicals in the circulation slabs accepted by the INS: small (circulations of less than 25,000: the *ICA*, for example), medium (circulations of upto 75,000: the *KDM*), and large (beyond 75,000: the *MMAM* and the *DMDM*). The *Kalki Deepavali Malar* seems to be specifically subdivided into sections for women, young people, and a 'general' section - a seemingly succinct catering to the usually, visibly important market categories. *Mangayar Malar* then merely expands one of these categories, and seems to follow as a corollary, as does the *Ilakkiya Chinthanai* anthology: the bio-data of each author mentioned in the *DMDM* anthologies invariably mentions a 'milestone' as the author's selection for the *Ilakkiya Chinthanai* or the Sahitya Akademi awards. *Mangayar Malar* and *Kalki* are owned by the same group, one of the pioneers of Tamil magazine publishing, Bharathan Publications Private Ltd., and are widely visible and popular among certain groups; *Dina Malar* has one of the largest circulations of Tamil figures, which boasts not inconsiderable

figures countrywide, and *Ilakkiya Chinthanai* is a non-profit literary trust established in 1970 involved in identifying and promoting literary values. *Dinamalar* established in 1951 and owned by Brahmins is daily put out from eight cities in Tamil Nadu; *Mangayar Malar* and *Kalki* are weeklies; *Ilakkiya Chinthanai* is closely associated with book-publishing and as a hoary 'arbiter' of literary quality and craftsmanship. With the exception of the *ICA* which do not figure by virtue of being books rather than periodicals, all the publications selected are represented in the INS, the biggest national body of newspaper/periodical proprietors; in Tamil these represent the urban, metropolitan publishing empire interests—all publications in the selection are produced from Madras, the print capital of Tamil Nadu.

The grouping can then be systematised according to the different variables at each level of indexing, thus allowing a more complex picture to emerge. It is then not only the circulation pattern that changes one way along the formation—the *ICA* (April release print run of 1,000 copies to begin with, though sales continue round the year), *KDM* (presubscribed circulation: 40,000. The weekly parent periodical has a circulation of 54, 492. Source: *Kalki* Office), *MMAM* (circulation, 1,81,100 according to the ABC figures for July to December 1996) and *DDM* (8 lakh for the year 1998, twice the 4 lakh circulation figures the daily enjoys. Source: *Dinamalar* office, Delhi), which are figures for the anthologies, but also figures for the parent publications (not applicable in the case of the *ICA* and *MMAM*, where figures are not distinct for the two categories, by virtue of their status as a separate book for the

former, and expanded edition for the latter's end of February issue). The decrease in figures is accompanied by a simultaneous inverse movement: a certain 'specialization' as well, which merely inverts the order (*KDM* has the highest per copy readership of all magazines in Tamil. Letter, Seetha Ravi, dated 6.3.99). The grouping also moves from occasional to annual to a retrospective annual (the *ICA* which collects some of the 'remarkable' stories of the year, one for each month, is published and released on Tamil New Year's day of the succeeding year) - Deepavali, New Year, an arbitrary calendar date, (*KDM*, *DDM*, *MMAM*, *ICA*), with the parent publications moving from daily to weekly to occasional (*Dinamalar*, *Kalki*, *Mangayar Malar*), and the publications from extended normal editions to supplements to anthologies to full-length books in their own right. The field of possible publication also widens and changes, and the solely Tamil fiction with full colour illustrations, essays, photos and snippets on exotic places and times (*DMDM*), slowly allow translated fiction and devoted detail to the practicalities of lived urban existence accompanied by brush or line-drawings (*KDM*, *MMAM*), to pages of black-and-white prose mediated by a literary voice that introduces and frames the selection (the *ICA*). Interestingly the periodicity of the associated parent publication decreases as the temporal value of the occasional anthology increases: though based on a definite and common period, the years 1997-1999, the number of stories show fluctuations, and the value of the anthology is perceived differently. The *DDM* in as many as three volumes priced at Rs 50/- in 1997 and Rs 65/- in 1998 ends up in the used paper mart to be recycled as wrapping paper; *KDM*, Rs 100/-, both years, by virtue of its large size and irregular and

better quality paper unsuited to wrapping usefully demanded quantities, resists, and persists more often than not down the years to be sold off by weight. *ICA*, being in book format is usually shelved with 'literature'.

Beyond the immediate realm of the printed word lies the world of Tamil filmdom: and any discussion of the short story without reference to Tamil films, the newspapers and 'literature' is to ignore the complex dialogues between the written and published word and the moving image. Short stories often become movies; writers are often scriptwriters; and news has the unsettling habit of leading back to the movies (Jeffrey, 1997). The texts discuss filmic and printed reality obsessively, but do not address the implications of modes of fictional representation or the transparency of the totality they pretend to convey, except obliquely.

The aesthetics of popular texts require a critical syntax that can only adapt the literary, as Sontag has pointed out (Sontag, quoted in McCracken, 1998), using it for the development of a critical consciousness that exists on the fringes of literary discourse. While self-representations of the authors, editors, periodicals may still rely on the established codes of the literary, the texts themselves suggest a syntax that repudiates and rewrites the language of literary exegesis and aesthetics.<sup>6</sup> In my study, I will attempt to trace tropes that recur

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<sup>6</sup> The struggle in the field of cultural production over the imposition of the legitimate mode of cultural production is inseparable from the struggle within the dominant class (with the opposition between 'artists' and 'bourgeois') to impose the dominant principle of domination (that is to say—ultimately—the definition of human accomplishment' (Bourdieu, 1994).

in the popular siru kathai's positioning of itself in the field of cultural production.

While attention to contemporary detailing is one of the distinguishing features of the form (Adorno, in Bernstein ed, 1994), the need to reemphasize normative categories in times of disturbance which interrogate the structures underpinning them poses a crisis of representation for the form. The burning headlines of the years 1997-99 which coincided with a momentousness that the centre sought to promote, and the state government was obliged to be a part of, and celebrated endlessly in the media—the golden jubilee of independence, have then to find the fictional space that renders them accounted for within the totality the form claims to reduplicate, while at the same time leaving the final analysis unchanged. These manoeuvres occasioned by the need to be indisputably contemporary often produce tensions that the form cannot resolve, or contain.

Adorno seems to suggest that ‘...these stories in magazines in different price ranges depend not so much on subject matter as on classifying, organizing, and labelling consumers. Something is provided for all so that none may escape; the distinctions are emphasized and extended . . . ’ (Adorno, quoted in Kellner, 1994); and this systematisation in categories that are ultimately imposed ones can only be effective when the consuming subject actively invests herself in the space offered her in the publications, fictional, textual, pictorial, and in many other ways. The study attempts to examine these spaces, and the modes of self-inscription that they validate and

promote, and the possibilities of reversal, contestation and participatory dialogue the multiaccentuality of the popular makes possible.

Chapter One deals with the cultural economy of the siru kathai, mapping it through its birth in the context of the nationalist and Self Respect Movements, drawing on conventions rooted in the political and cultural movements in Tamil Nadu in the closing years of the last century. The structural homologies (Bourdieu, 1994) between the literary and artistic fields and the fields of economic/political and social power are delineated through the construction of categories central to the self-representation of the Tamil identity, both institutionally and culturally, in the modern period. The popularization of certain forms of culture such as the cinema and the periodical press through their harnessing to the projected goals of the Dravidian cultural project has meant a reformulation of artistic, literary and historic models, allowing a new print culture to emerge by the 50s. The conditions of production of the siru kathai in the context of its home in the popular periodicals has necessitated an engagement with the political changes sweeping the state in this period, which the chapter examines.

Chapter Two begins with the consolidation of cultural regimes in the late 90s. I trace the reformulation of categories such as maanam, honour, viram, valour and karpu or chastity that informed the Dravidian project, which have in their new refigurations lent themselves to appropriation by interested



groups in ways that resonate through their fictive mobilization in the siru kathai. In referring back to folk, 'non-classical' and 'non-Aryan' elements of culture, the Dravidian project constructed a historiography originating in a Dravidian Golden age with a telos of its reclamation and institutionalization in the modern context. By drawing on remnants of late medieval folk culture, the Dravidian cultural imaginary resurrected an idiom of power and infinite possibility at the root of its political rhetoric. I analyze the implications of such representation coded in class, class and gender terms in the context of the twin trajectories of state and national history, in the siru kathai form.

Drawing on the typology of narrative elements analysed by Barthes, I attempt to discuss the generic conventions of the popular siru kathai as amenable to a strategy of reading that uses its familiarity with conventions to focus on detailing rather than plot. The potentialities of such a detailing for a reading practice that interrogates dominant symbolic systems is reinforced by the shifting hierarchisation and valorization that different siru kathais endorse. The sustaining of a continued dialogue between the siru kathais, facilitated by their collection in an anthology and mediated by the actively engaged reading subject, opens up a multiplicity of possible subject positions implicated by the text. The resistance to fixed hierarchisation that the multivalent stories are permissive of is informed by the self consciously persistent valorization of an 'impure', 'unruly' popular fictive aesthetic that uses its positioning between 'high'

literature and popular cinema to validate itself. I close the chapter with an analysis of the narrative modes preferred by the popular and the literary-popular siru kathais.

Chapter Three examines the implications of reading subject positions for strategies of reading. The 'male' narratives of the cultural/political establishment are contrasted with the ambivalently gendered popular narrative, that by virtue of its intervention in the productive economy of the siru kathai sustains a debate potentially interrogative of gender stereotypes. The recuperation of gendered agency in the form of a reading memory potentially actualizable in praxis is facilitated through a reappropriation of dominant social positions for the gendered reading subject, as my analysis of selected siru kathais attempts to show. The illustrations that accompany the fictive text destabilize accepted constructions of gendered identity, forcing the texts to acknowledge fears and anxieties that focus on the sanctity of borders. By articulating borders as the forces of reason, holding back social and moral chaos, yet sanctioning male access across and beyond them, the siru kathais code class, caste and community identities into a gendered economy, naturalizing stereotyped group identities that resonate with the cultural/political projects of the fundamentalist right. Dismantling the constructs of gender that inform such an economy may also point towards the disavowal of such stereotyping. The stories in the women's magazines under study implicate reading subject positions resistant to the demonizing

of the different Other through a reductive representation constructed of cultural, rather than social/political stereotypes. The 'literary' periodicals provide lesser opportunities for such strategies of reading, favouring as they do a linear mimetic realism that enforces this tyranny of the 'transparent' fictive totality on the passive reader. My analysis of the stories concludes by relating dominant conventions of representation in the contemporary siru kathai to the cultural economy of the 80s, selectively appropriating, reformulating and rejecting them.

I conclude by focusing on the popular siru kathai's harnessing of extremes as a technical device that liberates submerged anxieties, anticipating a number of solutions that are not contained by the story. The vocalizing and acknowledging of anxieties draws attention to processes of identity formation and boundary policing, potentially oppositionally recuperable in praxis. Such a reading of the unruly, polyphonous popular text sees it as enabling resistance, rather than merely complicit with the dominant symbolic order.

# CHAPTER I

## THE HABIT OF READING FICTION

### FICTIVE BEGINNINGS

All branches of the Tamil mass media, particularly film and print, have been inflected by the prevailing political situation to a degree uncommon in the rest of the country (Jeffrey, 1997). The early sophisticated mobilization of popular cultural forms<sup>1</sup> by the Nationalist and Dravidian<sup>2</sup> movements at the turn of the century has meant that the play of political power necessitates, and is accompanied by, cultural paradigm shifts as well. Forms of popular culture map these shifts in complex (and contradictory) ways, dealing as they do with an ostensibly private interior world. The cultural shift noted at the end of the 60s coincided with the momentous coming to power

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<sup>1</sup> Films and printed periodicals rather than books are the dominant cultural forms, a position they have come to occupy through their sustained use by the pre-Independence early nationalist project, and until recently, the Dravidian movement. The expansion of literacy and the democratization of Tamil expression urged by Dravidian cultural nationalism created early on, a politically oriented constituency of primarily rural, neo-literate readers and film-goers, and even today, the periodicals are the only printed matter that many Tamils read.

<sup>2</sup> The Dravidian Movement is here used as an umbrella term that includes the many calls enunciated from different quarters since the 1880s for a separate Dravidian culture in opposition to the imposed, Aryan, Brahmin-dominated social and cultural systems. Crystallized in the demands of E.V. Ramasami Naicker or Periyar as he was called, who led the Self Respect Movement, for a separate Dravidian homeland, the movement emphasized atheism, rationalism, and a return to a casteless 'pre-Aryan' culture through the retrieval and resurrection of a past golden age. Later incorporated as the Dravidar Kazhagam (DK), the new avatar of the Justice Party taken over by Periyar; the formation of the breakaway DMK in 1949 under the leadership of C.N. Annadurai sounded the knell of the movement envisaged by him.

of the DMK in 1967, the first electoral triumph of the Dravidian parties in post-Independence India (Ashokamithran, 1997).

Signs of an upheaval in the culture industries inaugurated the decade of the 90s. The pre-eminence of the Tamil press, which rivalled Hindi and English, the nearest competitors in the 50s and 60s, seemed to have recovered from the slump of the 80s and the arrival of television (Jeffrey, 1997). A new era in filmdom, lacking identifiably political overtones and obeying the dictates of 'pure entertainment' imposed by commercial cinema was well into its stride: technically sophisticated Tamil films rewrote cinematic and semiotic codes.<sup>3</sup> The comparatively monolithic Dravidian mandate of the 60s was replaced by a field of smaller players, whose constituencies comprised regional, local, sharply contextualized interests. A new kind of journalism, upstart, impudent, undermining the authority of politician and bureaucrat enjoyed runaway success, and a multitude of periodicals appeared on the market, exploiting once again the expansion of literacy in the district towns and villages.<sup>4</sup> Establishment criticism of these periodicals echoed the upper caste nationalist distaste of the 1940s: they were vulgar, sensational, and catered to the semi-educated (Jeffrey, 1997). The Dravidian ideology that underwrote much of the popular cultural forms, both filmic and print, in the 50s,

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<sup>3</sup> Although MGR acted in his last film in 1978, his publicly anointed film successor K. Bhagyaraj's *Rathathin Rathame* (1989) released after MGR's death strove to stem the tide by resurrecting the idiom that had given the AIADMK an uninterrupted 10 years in power (1977-87), with negligible results (Pandian, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> Perhaps the most 'notorious' example of the power of the new journalism is the role of the editor of *Nakkeeran* as independent interlocutor in the Veerappan saga.

60s and 70s found itself adrift in a world where metaphors of the global marketplace effortlessly replaced it.<sup>5</sup> The new cultural emphasis on feelings, new ways and states of being portrayed as urban life style choices in the slicker films was paralleled by the sudden eruption of romanticized rural existence in the sub-text, and in the lower budget mofussil blockbusters,<sup>6</sup> and in print by the 'sensationalism' of the new journalism: "...the rural reader has not as yet completely got out of the 50-year habit of reading fiction," as Cho Ramaswamy put it (Jeffrey, 1997).

Central to an understanding of the shifting cultural paradigm of the 90s is the relatively down market periodical. Tamils have been avid devourers of newsprint, and the most popular format by far was the weekly (up to the 80s), with a generous supply of essays, features and short fiction.<sup>7</sup> While dailies now lead with their numbers, the emphasis has since moved away in all Indian languages to monthlies from weeklies, while the combined strength of weeklies and monthlies far outdoes the dailies: as on 1.4.1997, there were 15 dailies, 9 weeklies and 10 monthlies in Tamil, with a combined circulation of 46,94,077, the fourth largest reading public in the country language-wise after Hindi, English and Malayalam (Source: The

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<sup>5</sup> 'While important changes to the industrial economy are traced to 1991, many other changes in the direction of liberalization and the compression of the state occurred during the 1980s well pre-dating the foreign exchange crisis.' (Harriss-White, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> It is no wonder that the hip Prabhu Deva and Rajnikanth with his immense ideologically unsecured vote bank are the reigning gods in the two categories.

<sup>7</sup> 'The weekly magazine was cheaper than a daily newspaper; it had a life of at least 7 days, so distribution was less urgent; and its format of fiction, and a little fact, matched the story-line of films and was simpler and less expensive to produce than the news of a daily newspaper.' (Jeffrey, 1997).

INS Press Handbook 1996).<sup>8</sup> The annual growth in readership has not kept pace with the percentage of previous decades, and the multiple avenues of entertainment available in the last decade have resulted in shrinking hours devoted to reading, especially among the younger generations. This realization in the early 90s unleashed a price war, attended by format changes in all the major periodicals. While the bigger dailies often own weeklies and monthlies as well, a concerted effort in recent years to attract subscribers away from independent magazines has led to the dailies mimicking the format of their weekly and monthly rivals, especially in the supplements and pull-outs which are given over entirely to entertainment aimed at specific target audiences. Short fiction and cinema based features have traditionally been the staple of weeklies and monthlies, and recently introduced dailies' supplements, as many as twice a week, focus on the family, children, literature, cinema, etc.

The sudden expanded market for the siru kathai in the 90s as a trusted filler has reintroduced the complex problematic of the nature and role of popular cultural forms in new and unexpected ways. Any discussion of the cultural politics of periodicals in Tamil leads unfailingly to "the habit of reading fiction". As various critiques have pointed out in response to the argument that the unmediated consumption of the fictional ('non-real') paradigm precludes the interrogation of lived contradictions, or at best provides a leisure catharsis in the

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<sup>8</sup> Kerala enjoys the highest literacy rate in the country, at 89.81%; Tamil Nadu has a literacy rate of 62.66%; the country-wide average stands at 52.21%.

necessary reproduction of labour, the 'structural, historical and ethnographic' analysis of the 'ritual act' of consumption (Hall and Jefferson, 1977, quoted in McRobbie, 1997), and the constellation of affects that underpin pleasure in cultural forms, can, in their provision of an institutional 'memory' (Sunder Rajan, 1999), prefigure complex strategies and levels of engagement on the part of the individual reading subject.

The earliest daily of mass circulation, the *Dina Thanthi* (estb 1942 by S.B. Adithyan, a Dravidian sympathiser and member of the DMK in the Assembly), with the British tabloid the *Daily Mirror* as model,<sup>9</sup> won grudging praise from its staid adversaries of lower circulation for "one of the most important breakthroughs in Indian journalism" (C.G.K. Reddy, quoted in Jeffrey, 1997): a mass format that that used fictional narrative conventions to present fact.<sup>10</sup> The explosion of the political mobilization of narratives, and their evident enjoyment by the majority of people hitherto beyond the pale of polite, amenable communication had reiterated the fact that the primary job of the newspaper was to tell a 'story'. The paper used local detail, lavish illustration and the lively, prying tone of the inveterate street corner gossip to tell its tale in screaming banners. This founding instance of fact imitating fiction produced a fruitful and enduring problematization of the act of representation.

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<sup>9</sup> For a reading of the transgressive 'transcoding' combining both radical and conservative elements effected by the tabloid press, see McCracken's analysis of an article in the British tabloid the *Sun* (McCracken, 1998).

<sup>10</sup> A similar appropriation of the narrative techniques and mobilization of popular forms by the literary establishment has been recorded in recent years in the genre of the American/British published autobiography (McCracken, 1998).



Periyar's widely known and spectacular retelling of the Ramayana, begun in the late 1920s, was premised on the treatment of 'the myths as if they were historical accounts', whose irrationality revealed itself when examined in the light of contemporary facts-as-everyone-lives-them: the gods, it was then abundantly clear, were "obscene, stupid, and immoral" (Richman, 1992). Such a reverse discourse played on the mutual intercontamination of fact and fiction, elevating the quotidian to the status of spectacle, and collapsing the mythical into the prosaic. The enabling political possibilities of such radical play hinged on their enjoyable dramatization and the investment of work-a-day fact with the thrill of the momentous. This fluid relocation of text and world along the axis of fact/fiction is presumed on the giving and withholding of consent by the reading subject.

The potentially disorienting effects of such literalizing and anachronizing, and the 'half-guilty pleasure' in the recognition of the familiar object of piety in a 'new and somewhat ridiculous light' are tactics that have been used widely in colonial India as radical mass mobilization techniques (Richman, 1992). The undoubted power of Periyar's reading of the Ramayana influenced the course of all future Dravidian rhetoric. The 'hyperliteral' strategy of reading called attention to the language of exegesis, and the finished allusive, alliterative, assonant style of the movement (associated with C.N. Annadurai and M. Karunanidhi as its finest exponents) drew on the Saiva Siddhanta religious revival and the Pure Tamil movement which had steadily gained ground since the 1880s (Ramaswamy,

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1997) to forge a rhetoric that revolutionized the press, political debate and film in its day. The Dravidian movement thus fashioned a language that wrote its predominantly newly literate, predominantly middle or lower caste, middle or low income subject, the Tamilian,<sup>11</sup> into a new history as the heir of Classical Tamil literature, drawing heavily too, on the symbolism of popular religion (Price, 1996). The constant need to refer back to high literature, dictated by the cultural nationalism of the Dravidian project, resulted in a privileging of the new 'non-Aryan' literary canon, and a premium on literary scholarship,<sup>12</sup> while at the same time mindful of the Everyman whose emergence was implicated. It was primarily through print that this new constituency was created; and extensive pamphleteering through a plethora of newly sprung periodicals in the period beginning with the 20s produced a standard print dialect, never far from the oral, closely imitative of the literary, an amalgam of elements from epics, legends, folk-theatre and poetry.<sup>13</sup>

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N9



- <sup>11</sup> This is not to ignore other regimes of Tamil subjectivity pioneered for example, by the nationalists, such as Subramania Bharathiar's Tamilian who was however, foremost an Indian. See Ramaswamy, 1997.
- <sup>12</sup> The close links between the literary and the popular in the Dravidian movement have been well documented (Ramaswamy, 1997; Richman, 1992). The leaders of the movement often assumed titles such as Arignar (The Scholar) Annadurai, Kalaignar (The Artist) Karunanidhi, Naavalalar (The Eloquent) Nedunchezhiyan, etc. Note the alliteration and assonance here, as well. Lyric writers were often called Kavignar (poets), as even today, Kavignar Vali, predominantly film lyric writer and poet is called.
- <sup>13</sup> While the prose of Periyar had the pungent, witty power of his oral art that drew even the Brahmins in their indignant numbers, it was with the coming of film in the early 30's that the euphonious quality of the new Tamil was fully cultivated. The undoubted mnemonic uses of the ornately assonant, alliterative filmic scripts studded with Dravidian slogans soon replaced in popularity the nationalist mythologicals with their Gandhian flavour. While these films used courtly prose, in the Dravidian films, 'poetry replaced dialogue', as has been pointed out ( Lakshmi, 1995).

By the 20s, radical dissidents in the Congress whose critique of the limited scope of the party's essentially paternal, reform approach to caste-based inequality met with resistance and ostracization regrouped under Periyar's Self Respect Movement, announced in 1925.

The siru kathai or short story made its appearance in 1831 in the very first periodical to be printed entirely in Tamil<sup>14</sup>: *The Tamil Magazine*, published by the Madras Christian Tract Society (Sambandan, 1987). As elsewhere, in the other languages of colonial India, it was the missionary effort that first introduced the priced periodical as an important component of the evangelical project. The double benefit of authority and accessibility that print conferred on the frankly didactic stories, poems and essays found a serviceable ally in the news magazine format, a combination that has continued to characterize the Tamil press to this day (Jeffrey, 1997).<sup>15</sup> Within the forty years it took for the first Tamil novel to be published in 1879 (Mayuram Samuel Vedanayakam Pillai's *Pratapa Mudaliar Charithiram*), and with the legalization of Indian ownership of presses in 1835, a number of periodicals had established themselves to accommodate a growing readership, such as the

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<sup>14</sup> All banners, headlines and titles were however, carried in both Tamil and English (Sambandan, 1987).

<sup>15</sup> The siru kathai and the newssheet by virtue of their inseparable origins have traditionally been pilloried for the same reasons: pandering to the low with their unbridled sensationalism, their lack of culture and refinement.

*Dinavarathamani* (estb 1852, edited by Rev. P. Percival, Professor of Sanskrit and Vernacular Literature at the Presidency College) which printed more than 784 copies, and the *Jana Vinodini* (estb 1870), known for its true stories (*Javanthiammal Kathai*, etc.), among others. By the closing years of the nineteenth century, several emerging constituencies had their own periodicals: the *Penmatibodhini* (estb 1891), one of the earliest women's periodicals; the *Sarvajana Nesan* (estb 1886, edited by A.S.C. Mohiudin); the *Maharani* (estb 1887, run by V. Krishnamachariar, and named for Queen Victoria, to commemorate fifty years of her reign); the *Hindu Saadanam* (estb 1889, edited by S. Atchilingam, a neo-Saiva ideologue) and the nationalist *Lokopakari* (estb 1895, run by V. Nataraja Iyer) with arguably the largest circulation, 2,500 subscribers. Children's periodicals emerged in the 1840s; and the first periodical focusing entirely on politics, the *Udaya Tharakai*, in 1841 (Sambandan, 1987). Most if not all carried stories in one form or the other, parables, 'true' stories, incidents, and possibly translations as well.<sup>16</sup>

The received history of the siru kathai, however, betrays an ill-concealed unease in tracing its unashamedly pragmatic

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<sup>16</sup> It is possible that the pioneering missionary effort set much of the tone, style and substance of the periodicals, aimed at the upper echelons of society, but with the next and lower strata as the characters.

antecedents.<sup>17</sup> The weeklies, and the later arrivals, the monthlies, were associated ever since their appearance in Tamil with the siru kathai, and indeed, many periodicals began as magazines of stories and serialized novels, later enlarging their scope to include news and features.<sup>18</sup> The origin of the form in the context of a mass audience whose predilection for narrativized 'education' had been apparent as early as 1862,<sup>19</sup> and the subsequent mobilization of print behind the emerging causes of the 20s coincided with the inauguration of two loose

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<sup>17</sup> The founding moment of the form seems to have required an anthology, to begin with; Rev. Beschi's *Paramartha Guru Kathai*, a series of archetypal stories about a simpleton guru and his likeminded disciples is categorized as a collection of 'small', not 'short' stories, though based on Western models (Varadarajan, 1996). This nationalist literary history emphasizes the abundance of 'stories' in 'native' literatures, either as essential features of the puranas and epics, or as part of an informal oral legacy, but prefers to originate the short story as an essentially modern form, Western, but happily enough, refracted through nationalist freedom fighter-litterateurs. The accent is less on the modernization of a narrative tradition, than on the infusion of a new form, indianized in the context of a national literature called to serve an emergent cause. The first short story then, is Va Ve Su Iyer's *Mangayarkarasiyin Kadal* in the anthology of the same name (Varadarajan, 1996), or Subramania Bharathiar's *Tulasibai Endra Rajaputhira Kannikaiyin Charithiram*, carried in the *Chakravarthini* in 1905, a rousing nationalist paper devoted to women's issues, also named for the Queen whose shining example was to be emulated by Indian women, but later anthologized (Maalan, 1996). Inspiration was then traced through Tagore, who wrote his first short story only in 1884 (Radice, 1995), via Edgar Allan Poe, O. Henry, Gogol, among others. The later imputation of literary value instanced through legitimation of the anthology in an age of pamphleteering, and its implications for a history of the genre are evident enough in chronologies that ignore the continual use of the short story over the previous 70-odd years at the very least, to entertain, and 'not only teach, but educate' (Winslow, 1862).

<sup>18</sup> Magazines such as the *Malai Mathi* still continue to devote their pages to serialized full length fiction and short stories.

<sup>19</sup> 'As, however, the natives are exceedingly pleased with any thing in the shape of poetry, or song, a preacher who would address them with most effect, should be able sometimes to quote from the songs, and poetic sayings, of the "wise men" among the Hindus.' (Winslow, 1862).

styles of rhetoric, the nationalist and the Dravidian, whose differing political compulsions emphasized specific reader coalitions. Both however, vied for the same grassroots constituencies, playing out a unique *pas-a-deux* in print. While Periyar's rousing drama troupes presented his extensively reinterpreted *Keemayanam* through the length and breadth of the Tamil speaking areas, it was their many journals and pamphlets that gave the Self Respect Movement the advantage of numbers, and a headstart over the nationalists. The siru kathai was now pressed into service with renewed enthusiasm; and the idiom of platform speeches, transcribed frequently in their entirety in print, gave tongue to a quickening political pulse. The nationalist press, replete with Gandhian symbolism and the upliftment of women and Harijans, saw itself as above the language of demagoguery that passed for the journalistic style of the parvenu, and dialogue between the two was limited to potshots and thinly veiled sallies of supposed wit in the siru kathai.<sup>20</sup> Some of the most enduring popular magazines were established in the decades from the 20s to the 40s: the staunchly nationalist *Ananda Vikatan* (1924) associated with media luminary S.S. Vasan and editor 'Kalki' R. Krishnamoorthy, the comparatively frivolous daily *Dinamani* (1934) belonging to the Indian Express group, *Kalaimagal*

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<sup>20</sup> See Kalki's short stories of the 30s for examples, especially *Veenai Bhavani*.

(1932), *Kalki* (1941), edited by the indefatigable Krishnamoorthy who popularized nationalist expression and the short story in the 20s after he parted ways with the *Ananda Vikatan*, and the *Dina Thanthi*, discussed earlier, being the most notable. While discussion of these pre-Independence high visibility publications tends to focus on their easy readability and appeal to women, it is often dismissive of the revolution in reading practices achieved by the Dravidian press.<sup>21</sup>

The methodology of Periyar's reading of the Ramayana established the set of discursive practices that would inform Dravidian print for the next five decades. As has been pointed out, the use of the hyperliteral, and earthy, coarse wit were intended to shock and rouse, and perhaps not meant to be taken too literally. The tantalizing, titillating possibilities of the word made act (and flesh) were never however, far from the surface, and the literalizing and translating of metaphors into the lives of the Tamilians,<sup>22</sup> while characterized as 'excess',<sup>23</sup> are not located in the specific discursive practices that interpellate the 'Tamilian', as opposed to the 'Indian' under the Dravidian

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<sup>21</sup> See Vasanthi, quoted in Jeffrey, 1997.

<sup>22</sup> The self-immolation of anti-Hindi agitators in 1964 is a case in point, and the earliest instance. For the mythology leading up to, and constructed after the event, see Ramaswamy, 1997; Pandian, 1992 for similar instances when MGR's life was in crisis and at his death. The 'voluntary' tattooing of Jayalalitha's image on the bodies of loyal AIADMK supporters in recent years, while reinscribing the old folk practice into a new quasi-religious political domain, is a literal inscribing of subjectivity on the body.

<sup>23</sup> For a discussion of the inscription of excess on the lower caste body in elite representation, see Pandian, 1995.

regime.<sup>24</sup> The complex, simultaneous transactions across the storeys of myth, exegesis and daily life referred to earlier were rendered in a code hailing even the most barely literate Tamilian, composed of key words and images of Dravidian ideology and symbolism, which even little children parroted with glee.<sup>25</sup> The reading subject's pleasure derived from the recognition of the passwords, as it were, in the fictional and polemic text that essentially ratified his sense of community. The rupturing of institutional belief called for by the text, couched in still familiar terms reclaimed from a supposedly shared golden age, by making possible alternative, empowered, subject positions, in its turn familiarized a practice of reading that provokes multiple fluid, simultaneous assumptions of time, space, and subjectivity.

The fictionalizing of news and the evangelical use of the siru kathai which purported to reflect fact transparently served to keep alive debates on facticity and representation, and the all important nebula of audiences' tastes developed a mythology that teetered on the brink of control. Such self-consciousness however uncrowned the incontestable singularity of fact, and

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<sup>24</sup> One of the indices of the changed circumstances of the 90s was the reception accorded to the Mani Ratnam blockbuster *Roja*, a slickly produced Tamil rehash of the Kashmir-to-Kanyakumari secularism of the Nehruvian project. The outlying village to capital-of-country trajectory of the film climaxes in the emotionally charged song, *Tamizha, Tamizha*, when the hero flings himself on a burning national flag to save the honour of the country. While the urban Tamil audience did not fail to be moved to tears, the rural audiences booed loudly at this elision of the Tamilian into the Indian.

<sup>25</sup> See Pandian, 1992 for extensive examples of such coded art.



the phantasmatic improbability of fiction.<sup>26</sup> The uses of 'gossip' and 'rumour' by the early periodicals served (and still serves) to cement the 'print-constituency' as well as to establish a guilt-free, since shared, voyeurism that as I shall later argue, orients the reader of the 'interior' world of popular fiction.

The achievement of Independence in 1947 was followed in 1949 by the birth of the DMK (the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam) from the parent DK (the Dravidar Kazhagam) lead by Periyar. In time, the splinter group lead by C.N. Annadurai eclipsed the parent party while appropriating and fine-tuning its cultural strategies.<sup>27</sup> The coming to power of the DMK in 1967 resulted in an across the board standardization of the Dravidian style of prose nurtured by the early years of the movement. The years of stabilization saw an attenuation of the stridency of early demands, and the original atheism of Periyar was replaced by an emphasis on reform focused on promoting rationality in ritual observances, and the idea of 'One God, One Caste' in

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<sup>26</sup> The self-conscious cultural form interrogating and legitimizing its own authenticity has consequently remained a constant feature. Kalki's short stories frequently played on the constructed, yet valid epistemology of the short story, and the popularly ratified legitimating function of the author.

<sup>27</sup> See Pandian, 1992. The DMK remains the only party, perhaps in all India, which early on established a literary arm that continues to be vigorously active. All DMK chief ministers, and many party functionaries continue to be litterateurs and prolific authors, poets, scriptwriters. As late as 1987, Karunanidhi published an interpretation of Sangam poetry in easy Tamil for the lay reader, first serialized in a periodical and then in full length book format.

place of the earlier telos of abolition of caste, among others (Lakshmi, 1984; Price, 1996).<sup>28</sup>

The 30s and 40s saw the emergence of film as the nationalist medium par excellence.<sup>29</sup> The mythologicals drew on a hybrid nationalist bhakthi set to a popularized Classical music;<sup>30</sup> it was not until 1947 that MGR bagged his first hero's role in *Rajakumari*, fortuitously at roughly the same time that large scale rural electrification was undertaken under Congress rule: possibly the single greatest contributing factor to his cinematic success. M. Karunanidhi scripted *Parasakthi* in 1952, a film that catapulted him to scriptwriter stardom, and signalled the frontal assault of the Dravidian film. Screen stars and DMK political platforms were soon axiomatic, and by the 50s and 60s, no movie could succeed without reference to the DMK (Dickey, 1993).

By the end of the 60s, politics largely disappeared from the films, and 'family films' replaced the earlier adventures of 'the people's hero'. It is telling that by 1969, in *Nam Nadu*, Gandhi and Annadurai (the 'Southern Gandhi') both appeared

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<sup>28</sup> The decision to enter electoral politics was taken in 1956 at the Trichy party convention of the DMK. The call for a separate Dravida Nadu enunciated originally by Periyar in 1939 was last publicly reiterated in the 1951-52 general elections. Some observers have cited the first post-Independence decade as progressively tracing a major shift in stance towards moderation (Manivannan, 1992).

<sup>29</sup> 'Film should be made to comprise a purposeful part in Indian Renaissance.' *The Mail* of 26.12.36, Madras, quoted in Baskaran, 1994.

<sup>30</sup> To begin with, Tamil lyrics were beginning to be set to Carnatic music in place of the customary Telugu and Sanskrit, and the use of Tamil song that could be integrated into the narrative allowed the candid display of nationalist sentiment and symbolism in ways that subverted colonial censorship. See Pandian, 1992.

displayed prominently on the cover of a book MGR is shown to be holding on his first appearance, dressed in the by now cinematically ubiquitous red and black of the party's flag (Pandian, 1992).

The immediate decades after Independence saw a proliferation of periodicals, the most important of which were *Dinamalar* (1951) and *Kumudam* (1947), among others. The post-Independence periodicals, irrespective of ownership, were inserted into a print mainstream that spoke a standardized dialect imposed by the compulsions of print capitalism, that drew largely on the democratization of the language achieved by the Dravidian movement (Vasanthi, quoted in Jeffrey, 1997) and the development rhetoric of the Nehruvian model. The 70s saw the birth of unprecedented numbers of periodicals in a print explosion reminiscent of the 20s, and most importantly, the second season of 'the woman question', after the pre-47 years. Cinematic techniques and representational stereotypes had since the 50s informed reading practices and the generic configuration of the siru kathai (Lakshmi, 1994). The movement away from all vestiges of agitational politics necessitated a redeployment of the male semiotics of protest, now located on the female body. The increasingly normative working woman was constantly refigured in the siru kathai, as this new female print constituency read on indefatigably.<sup>31</sup> It has been pointed out that the shepherding of women back into the home was the

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<sup>31</sup> It has been estimated that the largest consistently growing readership segment comprises readers of women's magazines, outstripped only by film magazines, which tend to appear and disappear, where the exploitation is of subject matter rather than brand names.

accepted print disseminated norm for women even in the heyday of nationalist sentiment: 'goddess-like, educated, intelligent, home-loving' (Lakshmi, 1994). The compulsive figuring of the polity of the independent nation and the Dravidian devout as a family converged on the mutually conflicting loci of Bharatamata and Tamilthaay respectively (Ramaswamy, 1997; Pandian, 1992; Ashokamithran, 1997). The undeniable desirability of a voting constituency that votes as it is entertained provided arguably, an expansive cultural imaginary where the overlapping national-Dravidian concerns could play, their contradictions reconciled, yet resonant. The loosening discursive constructions in the styles of the 60s and 70s however opened up avenues of mediation and compromise, allowing a range of often contradictory subject positions in fiction. Old metaphors were yoked imperceptibly to new patterns of consumption, and the siru kathai, while losing accepted tropes of sub-texts, collapsed and reformulated the earlier storeys. The distinct Dravidian and nationalist streams soon ran into each other, and the blurring allowed a rich explosion of semiotic codes in fiction. The print constituency was now increasingly composed of loose coalitions of reading subjects organized in nuclear families, city based and entertained primarily by film, whose leisure was increasingly pure entertainment, rather than politics.

The formation of the ADMK (the Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, renamed AIADMK, the All India Anna DMK, during

the Emergency)<sup>32</sup> in 1972 by MGR who broke away from the DMK marginalized the concerns of the DMK in cinematic representation, forcing them back to print. The popular periodical *Kungumam* (1978) owned by the family of Murasoli Maran, aimed specifically at the younger generation and with a political axe to grind established a quick readership, and continues to hold its own. The decade of the 80s brought home the effects of the aestheticization of politics: the policies of the MGR lead regime taxed the poor to benefit the rich through public spending, and while the gap between rich and poor widened considerably, it was the poorest of the poor who overwhelmingly supported MGR (Dickey, 1993; Pandian, 1992).<sup>33</sup> With his death in 1987, paradoxically, the spectacular vacuum could not long be staved off by his resuscitated image.<sup>34</sup> The DMK was returned to power between 1988 and 1991 (when the government was dismissed in the wake of the Rajiv Gandhi assassination), after a short interlude between 1988-89 when Janaki, MGR's wife and once film heroine and co-star held power when the ADMK split; Jayalalitha's faction of the ADMK was returned to power from 1991-96.<sup>35</sup> The decades of the 80s

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<sup>32</sup> I will refer to the AIADMK by its popular shortened form, the ADMK henceforth.

<sup>33</sup> On the repression unleashed on the media during ADMK rule, see Pandian, 1992.

<sup>34</sup> The collapse of the referent, rather than set the sign free, reduced its complexity, and hence its aura.

<sup>35</sup> The war over MGR's cinematic and political legacy was mobilized along party fault lines as much as representational lacunae; Jayalalitha's dramatization of the role of wronged woman reversed and rewrote the traditional Kannagi role held up by the movement, and replayed her into the centre of power of the family/party.

and 90s have seen a profusion of cultural and political histories.<sup>36</sup> Emergent political constituencies and the 'compulsions of national politics' have rewritten cultural policy, and the loose cannons of cinema and siru kathai have parted ways with overt politics, and with each other (Dilip Kumar, Interview, April 1999).<sup>37</sup> Attempts to return to public memory old, well tried symbolism have not met with popular success.<sup>38</sup> The implications of such a sea-change for the siru kathai point less to a complete transformation, as a subtle shift in values, unlike the cinema, where cultural and financial control of production and distribution until the late 80s lead back directly to a political patron (Pandian, 1992; Jacob, 1999). While many modes of representation within the siru kathai can be traced back across the decades to specific political and business compulsions,<sup>39</sup> it is their redeployment in the 90s to resonate in

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<sup>36</sup> While true multi party rather than bi-party politics has been observed to be an 80s feature, the late 80s and 90s have seen the resurgence of regional and national parties: the PMK, MDMK, Puthiya Tamizhagam, various factions of the Congress, the BJP. etc.

<sup>37</sup> In fact, Jayalalitha's early consolidation of political power and fealty saw an unrelenting use of her filmic rather than political association with MGR. Later there was a definite shift to delink her political avatar from the ghost of the assiduously resurrected MGR image. The family has also been replaced by the dyad of divinity and devotee, with Jayalalitha figured not as Tamilthaay, or even Bharatamata, but as Shakthi, and the Virgin, with the traditional iconographic paraphernalia. For a reading of the circuits of desire between male devotee and goddess see Ramaswamy, 1997: and the construction of Jayalalitha's political masculine impregnability, see Jacob, 1999.

<sup>38</sup> The coming to power of the DMK post-Jayalalitha was accompanied by the release of *Puthiya Parasakthi* (1996), meant to jog public memory of the unfinished task of *Parasakthi* (1952) that heralded the Dravidian takeover of film and votes. The film sank without a trace.

<sup>39</sup> See Williams, 1997 for a similar reading of the novel form in England..

newer ways that will be the focus of my reading. The preceding enumeration of the broad contours of the political and cultural contexts of the emergence of the form and the periodicals that carried them attempts to gesture at the multiplicity of levels that the siru kathai itself inhabited simultaneously: education, politics, entertainment. The compulsions of production of the siru kathai within journalism as a feature of the periodical<sup>40</sup> points to a shared cultural history in some ways, and while this would be true of the dominant socio-political concerns of the originary contexts of the particular periodical, a few tentative speculations may be put forth. Irrespective of the cultural politics of the individual founding moments, their synchronic shared habitation of the entertainment continuum and their status as competing commodities dictates that the favoured representational modes of the day find expression in ways that are remarkably similar. That accepted, it must be qualified that the periodical's particular orientation in every case produces fictional variants that may show patterning over time, while differentially amenable to editing.<sup>41</sup> These variants are often

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<sup>40</sup> Rarely are book length anthologies, even of 'serious' short fiction produced of previously unpublished material, self-published or star authors excepted. While the single author anthology at various levels of the continuum can sometimes represent cultural value, it is the reception accorded the author in periodicals, and the nature of the periodicals the author publishes in that determine respect. In this context, publishing in a well circulated periodical is sufficient recognition of literary merit.

<sup>41</sup> While stories in issues of normal periodicity may not be extensively edited/scrutinised, the occasional anthologies invite much editorial intervention in the selection of authors and treatment of themes. While authors for these special issues are normally invited to contribute, the particular needs of the periodical and format are automatically deemed to be communicated; there is no 'briefing' involved.

contradictory to the received characterization of the periodical's fictional latitude, and may or may not be followed up; but it is unlikely that a new technique or mode of representation will not have been noticed, or followed up, by others. The numbers of short stories involved and the community of potential writers that comprise the urban, semi-urban, middle class segment of the readership are quick to spot and capitalize on any novelty, a point that I shall return to later.

While the spatial configuration of the axis of fact/fiction, reality/myth seemingly suggests a movement away or towards one or the other, it is their simultaneous inhabitation of both these cognitive categories that characterizes their reception; the unwillingness to characterize/evaluate in terms of the less fiction and more fact in real life, the better, is at the bottom of Cho's allegation referred to earlier. This seeming inability to distinguish fact from fiction has often been read as naivete on the part of the unsophisticated audience of cultural forms;<sup>42</sup> I believe that this is not an instance of 'naturalist supernaturalism' or 'disoriented agnosticism' as Adorno suggests,<sup>43</sup> but the production of a complex institutional 'memory' of possibility that may be activated by the reading subject in association with unpredictable constellations of affects, whose very 'irrationality' of deployment in reality may

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<sup>42</sup> See Pandian, 1992 for such a reading.

<sup>43</sup> "...the culture industry blurs the distinction between fact and fiction maintaining a content level of overrealism while giving that content an irrational metaphysical aura in terms of its source." and "...the demand for strict belief appears as not required, agnosticism appears as legitimate. The reader is never asked to evaluate the claims being made." (Bernstein, 1991).



produce unforeseen results. The entertained may not always march to the ballot box, and possibly not all together. While these moments of deployment, most potentially disruptive since non-ordinary, may not always have radical potential, their possibilities of empowerment for the reading subject lie precisely in their unpredictability by the institutional supplier;<sup>44</sup> and their opening up of the space of possibility. The multiple semantic possibilities of 'story' as incident, fiction, news and history point to the complexity of cognitive orientation that is implied; and some of these categories, rather than any one, are always simultaneously at play. The siru kathai form started out as true, as description of an incident, and as transmitting fact in a causal sequence: the implications for an act of reading fiction thus point neither to the naively credulous, or the dismissively imaginary.

While all mainstream narratives advance through a certain symptomatic disequilibrium that is tamed into order, specifying their effects as narrative functions, it has been pointed out that marks of generic specificity do not inhere in particular and exclusive elements, but in particular, exclusive combinations of elements (Neale, 1997). The use of melodrama in South Asia in times of social and ideological crisis has been

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<sup>44</sup> A similar mis-conception of the consumer in advertising campaigns, and the book-buyer in the bookselling trade in the country results in hit-or-miss sales strategies that work with patently re-constructed tailored subjects who do not correspond to the living complexity. While these campaigns are almost always aimed at middle class audiences conversant with the life styles that advertise the products and vice-versa, rural campaigns work on the supposed benefit to consumer. The results of such campaigns in terms of actual sales have yet to be correlated to other socio-economic variables. See Rajagopal, 1999.

often remarked on (Dickey, 1993).<sup>45</sup> Bhabha, delineating the deployment of stereotypes as indicative of cultural anxiety suggests that this arrested, fixated form of representation denies the play of difference which the negation through the Other permits (Bhabha, 1994). The discursive production of excess through the techniques of reading referred to earlier and their historical use to 'shock', rouse, provoke, while hailing a political subject, however, simultaneously interpellate through amplification, magnification. The necessity of political praxis<sup>46</sup> that underwrote the originary discursive formulation however was soon stabilized in the 60s while retaining the 'excess' as an ungovernable representational faultline which in praxis the state strives to control. The overthrow of the Congress despite its anti-colonial legacy within two decades of Independence rewrote the print constituency within a nationalist-Dravidian representational regime that inherited the double burden of the rhetoric of excess.

The emergence of the siru kathai in the context of the anti-colonial and radical Dravidian movements saw the development of these generic features in typical ways. This

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<sup>45</sup> The radical ambiguity attached to melodrama can function subversively or as escapism; archetypal melodramatic situations activate audience participation very strongly, focusing on the victim's position according to Elsaesser (Dickey, 1993). I would suggest that the persistent return to melodrama is not mere escapism, or continual subversion. The function of melodrama is premised on the acceleration of normal time-space emotionally, while built on structural deceleration.

<sup>46</sup> '...in the act of representing politically, you actually represent yourself and your constituency in the portrait sense as well...collapsing the two meanings - mistaking the aesthetic or theatrical sense of representation - as re-staging or portraiture- for an actual being in the Other's shoes - leads to the fundamentalist mistake : assuming that always imagined and negotiated constituencies based on unstable identifications have literal referents...' Spivak, in Landry and MacLean eds, 1996.

politically deployed oppositional mass artefact through its effects 'created' narrative functions that continue to frame the representational parameters.<sup>47</sup> The claim of such representations to reflect empirical reality creates a visible tension when residual representation persists: culture no longer reflects reality, but reflects itself.<sup>48</sup> It is this legacy of the siru kathai which any contemporary text and reading invokes willy nilly, and rewrites.

The disturbing ever-present excess, which is the literal with its fundamentalist discursive implications when staged in real life cannot be contained by the siru kathai, whose specific formal requirements force a continued redeployment of these narrative functions.

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<sup>47</sup> The persistence of such narrative functions in popular artefacts well into social/political periods when they have lost much of their oppositional value can arguably be characterized as a feature of such forms. As Raymond Williams remarks with regard to the thorough analysis of eighteenth century popular fiction by Dalziel, "...we are reminded of the extent to which popular fiction retains older systems of value, often through stereotyped conventions of character." (Ashley ed, 1997). See also Orwell, 1960.

<sup>48</sup> 'Inasmuch as [art] now appears itself as reality, which is supposed to stand in for the reality out there, it tends to relate back to culture as its own object...any and every product refers back to what has already been preformed.' (Adorno, in Bernstein ed, 1991).

It is against the complexities of a reinforced deployment, where life and art uncannily imitate, and take their cues from each other, in the changed, diffuse urges of the late 90s that I attempt my reading.

## CHAPTER II

### ECONOMIES OF IMBALANCE

The political scenario of the 90s opened with the advanced disintegration of the older 'national', 'secular' parties, the advance of overarching political formations of the fascist right and a simultaneous splintering of the regional polity along caste and religious identity based formations. The underwriting of political power at the Centre by purely pragmatic unstable coalitions of a host of regional parties, and the particularly important role of the southern states<sup>1</sup> as the key to national power in the 90s has meant a rewriting of the cultural codes of Indian citizenship from multiple centres in the politically understated south. The 80s and 90s in Tamil Nadu have seen many variants of the Dravidian legacy emerge: the vociferously pan-Tamil, and until 1991, pro-LTTE PMK (Pattaali Makkal Katchi, formed in 1989) and the breakaway MDMK (Marumalarchi DMK, formed in 1993/4), in addition to the older DK, DMK and ADMK. The unrest and politicization of the Dalits has led to an unmistakable stridency epitomized by the Puthiya Tamizhagam (the New Tamil Homeland) led by Dr Krishnaswami, with its bastions in south Tamil Nadu. The break-up of the Congress into the Tamizhaga Rajiv Congress and the Tamil Maanila Congress, and the continued existence of the CPI and CPI (M) has resulted in a complex scenario where

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<sup>1</sup> The 130 Lok Sabha seats from Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu (39) and Kerala have since 1991, been decisive in government formation at the Centre. See the *Sunday*, 7-13 February 1999 for an analysis.

the shifting votes have become crucial, and the pull of originary identities, undeniable. An electorate known for its anti-incumbency mandate dealt with the LTTE question post the Rajiv Gandhi assassination, the absence of MGR, and the Jain Commission's sweeping indictments of Tamils in ways that belied opinion polls and informed surveys.<sup>2</sup> The spectacular corruption, open state support of powerful landed castes and business interests and progressive ghettoisation of Muslims under the ADMK regime of Jayalalitha (1991-96) paved the way for the resurgence of a competitive populist vote bank politics, and voter disaffection.

The years 1997-99 have seen fundamentalist urban terrorism on an unprecedented scale, and the incidence of caste clashes: Dalits against higher caste Hindus: has monopolized headlines with a regularity that still belies the proportions of the problem: the Dalit per-capita income after two decades of Congress and three of Dravidian rule is substantially lower than what it was in 1947.

The consolidation of the representational economy of the nation recorded in the immediate Nehruvian decades after 1947 (Tharu and Lalita, 1997) were however the heydays of DMK cultural nationalism.<sup>3</sup> The construction of the Indian citizen,

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<sup>2</sup> See Frontline, March 6, 1998.

<sup>3</sup> The period 1949-67, to be precise. The originary impulse pioneered by EVR is associated usually with atheist, rationalist principles, impatient of both Tamil patru and its overweening language devotion or a historiography that posited a Dravidian Golden Age, and in its earliest phase, vociferous in its advocacy of complete sexual autonomy for the woman (Anandhi, 1991). The DMK version did away with the atheism, substituted the equality of castes and elements of popular Hinduism, reconstructed an elaborate Dravidian history, and reinscribed the woman into chaste motherly and wifely roles (Pandian, 1991).

never very popular or well-circulated even in the immediate years preceding Independence (Price, 1996) was overshadowed by the urgent political deployment of the Tamilian, who appropriated the national in his reframing of the sub-national manqué. The films created, for the first time, a Tamilian who drew on a parallel but vitally different geographical-cultural orientation. The ubiquitous film song, by breaking the musical classical-folk dichotomy, and by mobilizing regional nuances (Baskaran, 1991) in the service of a larger, but now participative community, provided the nascent citizen with an emblematic subjectivity.<sup>4</sup> The centralized media disseminated the national representational regimes in the 40s and 50s, which in Tamil, were mimicked and circulated anew. The search for alternatives documented for the rest of the nation as a whole in the 60s and 70s (Tharu and Lalita, 1997) marked the shift towards the nationalization of the Dravidian to coincide with the collective reimagination of the nation anew post 1975.

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<sup>4</sup> A typical example was the hit song in the then DMK activist Sivaji Ganesan starrer *Makkalai Petra Maharasi* (1958), one of the slew of 50s films that invoked a Dravidian wife/mother in the eponymous title (Ashokamithran, 1996), who gives birth to and nourishes the community, and the legitimate/legitimated object of desire on whose body the community is mapped. (See Lakshmi, 1990 for the representative importance of the mother-community.) The song is sung by Shengodavan, an agricultural holder and the mainstay of his mother, who staves off destitution and educates his sister in the far-off city by dint of his hard work. Set amidst toiling farmers, the song embarks on an itinerary of the nascent business and trade centres of agriculture in the length and breadth of the state, following the provenance of the seed, and the sale of the harvest through various mediating centres to the towns. This redrawing and reaffirmation of the borders of the cultural entity in geographic, political terms along the circuits of nascent entrepreneurial capital, was reinforced by the emphasis on the earthy, shared community life which was shown to sustain the modernity of the city-centre. The repeated reference to the soil, sanctified by the blood of past heroes and marked for posterity by the *veerakkals* or hero stones that dotted the land, another favourite trope, served to reinfuse familiar landscapes with non-Aryan folk myth and legend.

While post-Independence Tamil Nadu, or the then Madras State recorded its first communal blood-letting in the 1948 Tiruvannamalai Hindu-Muslim riots, the history of modern caste based mobilization goes back farther than anywhere else in the country, and caste based preferential quotas were instituted by the colonial administration here in 1885. The current strength of caste associations is particularly high in Tamil Nadu, superceding near rival Kerala, and Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Bihar (Subramanian, 1999), and as is well known, the state has, since 1980, the highest percentage of caste based reservation in the country. The persistence of caste based patronage, rarely recognized as one of the most important organizational features of Tamil politics, has seen the competitive populism of the parties matched by competitive hierarchisation of the polity along caste and communal lines. The Dravidian parties have historically been associated mostly with the propertied, intermediate (Constitutionally the OBCs or Other Backward Castes, usually called the BCs, backward castes other than the SCs) and upper non-Brahmin castes,<sup>5</sup> the rising agrarian strata, ascendant tenant farmers. In the crucial

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<sup>5</sup> Periyar's definition of the Tamilan/Dravidan was demarcated along an exclusionary axis: "He is Dravidan, or Tamilan, who is neither Brahmin, nor Hindu, nor Muslim, nor Christian, nor Adi-Dravidan (SC): the 'S[h]udran'." (Periyar, quoted in Subramanian, 1999) (translation mine). The place of the SC's (commonly called Paraiyars, Untouchables and Gandhi's Harijans) in Periyar's scheme was never completely beyond the Dravidian pale, and he envisaged a tactical alliance with them against the Brahmin hegemony. While some sections of the SCs, notably the poorer strata and white collar workers, have tended to rally around the pro-poor image of the early ADMK and its comparatively non-caste restricted largesse (most memorably MGR's Nutritious Noon Meal Scheme, which benefited unmistakably large numbers of women and children and the dispossessed), neither the larger or the newer Dravidian parties have courted them systematically or through state measures. It has been pointed out that electoral/campaigning expenses cutting across parties tend to dip considerably in comparison, in the SC dominated areas (Subramanian, 1999).



50s and 60s, the years of growth, the DMK allied itself with some sections of the Nadars, Vanniars and the Mukkulathor (classified as martial but problematic marauder/peasant castes by colonial anthropology, comprising the Kallar, Maravar and Ahamudaiyar with distinctive surnames such as Thevar, Pandian, Nattar, etc.). All these groups have however at various times been involved in caste clashes against the SCs, presided over by a lenient or even abetting state (Pandian, 1992; Subramanian, 1999). Caste and farmer's associations, with their history of mobilization (which began to quicken perceptibly in the 80s like the Vanniar Poraattam) formed interest groups that no political party could ignore,<sup>6</sup> and the ongoing need to articulate demands in terms of legitimate, historical caste identities focused on the reclamation of a lost honour, and ritual and social status. Money now demanded social recognition in a supposed restitution of lost rights.<sup>7</sup> The violent expression of these forces in the forging of an exclusive identity has drawn on a past tradition of valour, and contemporary

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<sup>6</sup> The DMK and the ADMK have both been known to crack down viciously on non-party organizational nodes that could potentially threaten party organization as the primary loyalty (Subramanian, 1999). However, the ADMK soon allied itself selectively and pragmatically with caste and religious-political organizations, or farmers' and other organized interests; the competitive politics of the relief fund and subsidies too reached unprecedented levels in Tamil Nadu. The benefactors have tended uncannily to be allies of the ruling party. The phenomenal amount disbursed through subsidies increased by 380% in the decades 80s to 90s (Ambirajan, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> See Rao, Shulman and Subrahmanyam, 1998 for a similar portrayal of social identity in the Nayaka period, where the presence of money in an increasingly fluid entrepreneurial economy and culture demands the throne as an axiomatic right: in an age where individuals were largely portrayed as responsible for creating their fate, actualizing a self-conceived destiny, it is the martial entrepreneur busy accumulating investments in order to underwrite a political career who is ritually reinstated to reclaim his rightful place in society.

access to women and public spaces, sanctioned by personal/caste status, and economic visibility. The self-representation of the Thevars in recent years is a case in point.

The popular Tamil printed text today, by virtue of its constitution referred to earlier as a cultural anachronism, 'a structure of living fossils' (McCracken, 1998), gestures in its strained contemporaneity to the cultural economy of the late 70s and 80s. The substantial interchangeability of Tamilian and Indian emphasized by the mandatory baroque flourishes gesturing at an achieved distinctness of this period in the political history of Tamil Nadu and the nation operated within a cultural economy composed of myriad elements. Post the death of MGR, the existential contradictions that showed up the promised Dravidian utopia as hollow, though the degrees of dissatisfaction tended to vary among castes/communities, were accompanied by a heightened mobilization along alternate identity formations that for the first time tended to take precedence over existing and maintained party affiliations. The Dravidian politics of competitive populism was now taken to its logical conclusion by various groups engaged in the mobilization and circulation of monolithic caste/religion/class centered overlapping identities that infused old concepts with a new content. The continued state deployment of the nominal Tamilian against the Indian amidst the fragmentation and communalisation of the polity, necessitated a reconstituted Tamilian to serve its ends. The concept of *suya-mariyathai*, self-respect, pioneered by Periyar had come to signify under the DMK a hierarchized polity wherein the individual's right to

respect in the polity/community figured as family<sup>8</sup> flows from his command of people and resources, and his status as a self-interested patron: the individualism of inequality suggested by Simmel (Mines, 1992). The individual's right to respect (maanam, later changed to the 'more Dravidian' mariyathai) had earlier flowed from the recognition of a common, shared, equalizing humanity, which in praxis derived its deconstructive critical edge by refusing to positively valorize caste based difference in prevailing upper caste and class elitist social norms founded on purity/pollution. While maanam traditionally, from late pre-colonial times included elements of domination over the community (Price, 1996), the successful DMK (and ADMK or any other) politician was associated with andasthu, which unlike the relative maanam was absolute, and flowed from being a conduit of state power, of influence over men and resources.<sup>9</sup> The undeniably economic basis of andasthu and its legitimization as the necessary accoutrement of elected power in popular perception is at the base of a populist politics that has been observed in many political contexts, premised on the primacy of representation over state

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<sup>8</sup> The radical questioning and levelling of respect enjoyed by family heads and elders was perhaps the most eventful fallout in the traditional family of the early phase of the DMK's mobilizing. The party's thondars or followers were mostly young lower caste men and their access to education, widely accepted as the modern, post-Independence replacement of ritual in the provenance of authority (Price, 1996), facilitated this realignment of male power. The reintroduction of the nuclear family in the late 70s as the normative ideal set up an uneasy power structure in the community mediated through the subordinate women.

<sup>9</sup> It has been shown that access to caste based reservation increased dramatically for the party functionary while his/her party held power (Subramanian, 1999), and that even in availing of benefit schemes and sanctioned ration allowances, those who owed allegiance to organized and vociferous groups, tended to make away with the lion's share, most others being denied their rightful quota (Ambirajan, 1999).

policy: a 'dada-populism' (Price, 1996) where protection bought from the powerful underwrites existential security. The party then effectively renders account to the populace not in terms of a track record, but through subsidies and spot largesse,<sup>10</sup> articulated in the symbolism of monarchical lordship; association with the leader's retinue now replaces *suya mariyathai* as the source of *maanam*.<sup>11</sup> The DMK's revival of selected precolonial elements in addition to the movements for

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<sup>10</sup> In the two decades beginning with the 80s, there has been a phenomenal increase in the disbursement of subsidies. Calculated as a percentage of the total current expenditure, the figure for subsidies stood at 12.96% during 1980-90, and almost doubled, at 22.96% between 1990-95. It is no doubt salient that the period beginning with the late 70s and 80s has seen the gradual build up of violence in caste and communal relations. The rash of communal murders in the early 80s, like the atrocities against Dalits, built up a momentum and a logic based not the least on economic deprivation. The sanctioning of subsidies with much fanfare continues to happen on an almost daily basis; while they rarely reach the poor target population ostensibly for whose benefit the subsidies have been sanctioned, the per cent recovery of subsidies in the years 1995-98 has never exceeded 8% (Ambirajan, 1999).

<sup>11</sup> This allegory of Tamil political economy can be compared to the folktale analysed by Rao, Shulman and Subrahmanyam as a survival of Nayaka cosmology, where the emphasis is on the elevation of non-ritually elite Shudra kings as alternate centres of power, whose capitulation to the overlord in representational terms also paradoxically marks their loosening of suzerain shackles. The focus on ritualized bhoga or sensual enjoyment as public spectacle, posited as the reward of a successful substitution of illusion or the evanescent non-real as permanent and true, underwrites power and kingship. Tracing the beginnings of a shift in perception to a modern cultural economy in this period, they point out that the tale, *The Subahdar of the Cot*, recorded at the turn of the century, while conflating historical periods, leads directly back to a Nayaka cultural economy. It tells of a poor Brahmin cook's playacting the king in his Chettiar master's mansion; the channelling of resources to sustain the illusion paradoxically actualizes it by its effects. Such a transition, they point out, hinges on an underlying extremism and imbalance: extreme states and extreme steps, where falls and slips are irreparable: one gives all to gain all, and importantly, underpinned by asymmetrical, because entrepreneurial economic exchange. 'It is a story about power, what constitutes and preserves and enhances power—namely money, honour, display, a certain brazen audacity and vision, a willingness to play at power games...the central issue...is about...the compelling and creative power of illusion in the service of politics and status'. (Rao, Shulman and Subrahmanyam, 1998). The DMK's borrowal of representational elements from late colonial and pre-colonial non-classical, minor and folk forms may well have drawn on the same, or similar cultural pools.

cultural autonomy of the 1880s referred to earlier brought back into circulation a complex of polyphonous signs that continue to be invoked today by different groups in the pursuance of different political goals, but ironically within the same cultural economy. The most important of these are *andasthu*, and *maanam* or honour, which tended to run into and reshape each other, and *viram* or martial valour, needed to uphold *maanam* and *andasthu*. While EVeRa emphasized an internal, individual strength, the category of *viram* while retaining traces of pre-colonial martial valour in defending honour and property (and figured similarly in Sangam literature, another favourite supplier of rhetorical tropes in Dravidian discourse) was deflected into maintaining one's honour as a Tamilian. The DMK invoked a historical, valorous tradition traced to the Chera, Chola and Pandya kings, with the central story of Kannagi's honour redeemed by a Chera potentate who defeated a slanderous 'Aryan' kingling,<sup>12</sup> facilitating the easy slippage into defending /avenging male honour in the service of national/women's honour, and chastity or *karpu*.<sup>13</sup> The DMK's years of stabilization relocated *viram* and *karpu* within the confines of the family rather than the larger polity or community. *Viram* meanwhile, was appropriated by the 'martial'

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<sup>12</sup> The M. Karunanidhi scripted *Raja Rani* cinematized the legend to runaway popular acclaim. Most respondents to Price's survey related the saving of Tamil honour by the king in dialogues memorized from the film, even after a couple of decades (1996).

<sup>13</sup> One of the distinctive modalities of agency appropriated by MGR as hero relates to his access, and dominance, over women. See Pandian, 1992 for a detailed analysis. The valour of women as wife, and *Tamilthaay* as mother, grew out of their willingness to sacrifice everything at the altar of their chastity, to surrender even husbands and sons to maintain the land's honour. See Ramaswamy, 1996.

castes such as the Thevars, whose growing political clout under the DMK and later Jayalalitha's regime was accompanied by displays of explicitly martial *viram*, most memorably in the rash of anti-Dalit riots in the 90s, where older ritual *mariyathai* based on caste hierarchy rather than the now common *andasthu* and class was defended in explicitly military rather than honour terms (the hereditary right to be armed, carry weapons, display signs of dominance in clothing, etc). The representational economies of excess, while reflecting a political economy of imbalance, necessitate a continued circulation of allegories of excess, articulated in times of crises in paradoxically literal terms, actualized on the human body. The politics of segmentation in late 90s Tamil Nadu, while sometimes articulated in pre-colonial kingship terms, draws equally on the mythic lore of popular religion and folk beliefs, which had in the 40s and 50s necessitated the Dravidian renunciation of atheism (Pandian, 1991; Subramanian, 1999), and lately increasingly on Hinduism of the revivalist sort as well. Mobilizations along caste, cultural and religious identities accelerated by the fallout of the Masjid and Rajiv Gandhi assassination issues, by the Coimbatore blasts of February 1998, and the continuous clashes between the Dalits and upper castes through the 90s, have tended to emphasize *maanam* and *viram*, while *andasthu* as has been pointed out, is seldom seen as linked to social processes (Price, 1996). The rich and the powerful automatically command respect, and bestow protection.<sup>14</sup> It is no coincidence that such tropes of excess

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<sup>14</sup> The conflation of the king and divinity in the figure of the man of *andasthu*, whether merely rich, or politically powerful, is a continuing daily feature.

articulated as honour, valour and non-ritual economic rank, in the idiom of religion and conducive to a politics where the representation can be denied, or identified completely with, on pain of death.<sup>15</sup> Manufactured as they are out of the aporias of existentiality, living the illusion however requires a wide-eyed, maybe never-voiced disavowal.

Adorno suggests that the repetitive formula of the magazine short story would seemingly reinforce and reconcile the reader into accepting the frozen, fossilized content for the structures and logic of empirical reality, and that the infinite, replaceable aesthetic detailing loses its dissonant stimulus by virtue of its interchangeability (Bernstein ed, 1991). However the changed conditions of reception in the late 90s, while representing the tentative tactics of assimilation of social change into the form, introduce techniques and tropes that render the fictional totality susceptible to the operation of the

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The political and social systems in Tamil Nadu, anchored by a personality rather than organization based framework inhabited by 'stars' lend themselves easily to such a typology, where divine and monarchical privileges are seen as accruing from this status, or lineal participation in it. Film stars and politicians have temples dedicated to them, and are regularly visually figured as gods and goddesses, a practice encouraged by MGR and Jayalalitha. See Jacob, 1999.

<sup>15</sup> The dada-populism of the Shiv Sena, the RSS, the BJP and the Dravidian parties all focus to a startlingly similar degree on the redemption of honour through valour as a constitutive component of citizenship in the devotee-community, to merit protection by the powerful. See Price, 1996. Dada-populist styles of politicians such as Kanshi Ram of the BSP and Laloo Prasad Yadav have similarly defined rank as monetarily, not socially produced, and as following from stateowned administrative power. The undeniable violence implicit in the cultural policy of the DMK and the ADMK, while documented as media and police repression, have yet to be studied. See Pandian, 1992.

critical moment of dissonance, the contaminating traces of reality.

While the Nehruvian secularism of mutually tolerant co-existence has been a favourite theme, caste and community have rarely been explicitly discussed,<sup>16</sup> the exceptions falling back on the monolithic Brahmin/non-Brahmin Dravidian dichotomy shorn of any specificity, or the assimilation through the print constituency of the rural into the urban. As has been pointed out, the rural-urban gap is itself in many ways a caste gap (Tharu and Lalita, 1997). The centrality of detailed caste and religious/non-metropolitan communities in journalistic prose in this period has resulted in the impossibility of sustaining older discursive conditions. The violence documented by the newsheets is sought to be managed and shown up as the consequences of the disavowal and displacement of the fictionally constructed norm. This reverse engineering, as it were, builds up a harmonious community haunted by the 'impossible' present. Located as the siru kathai is within the same pages of news that have traditionally supplied its content,<sup>17</sup> this chaotic annihilation of the normal now represents its themes, complicit with the 'irrationality' the stories must now rewrite into order. By thus calling into simultaneous play the impossible real and its urgent fictional

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<sup>16</sup> See Dickey, 199 for a discussion of caste and community, and typecasting of the minority community in supportive villain or whore roles in the mainstream Tamil film.

<sup>17</sup> Almost ninety percent of the short stories incorporate an explicit reflexivity of context: they obsessively discuss the location of stories within print - news and periodicals, and attempt to trace a two way causality between the two, and their embeddedness in 'real' life.



(re)construction, the siru kathai produces an excess or surplus: more questions are raised, or the existence of other, parallel questions are acknowledged, that are answered or resolved by the formal closure. The diagnosis of reality as mere deviation hinges on the acceptance of the normative subject positions the narrative nudges the reader into. The simultaneity of the intrusive real into the fictional reality destabilizes the achieved transparency of the form, most often deflecting it into a discussion of the comparative status of the fictive and the 'real'. Neale's discussion of the two basic subjective mechanisms involved in the recuperation of imbalance into symmetry by the mainstream narrative: the pleasure of process, and the pleasure of closure (Neale, in Ashley ed, 1997), points to the tension between the two. The threat of loss of mastery in the process and the threat of stasis in the closure are balanced by the story. The unwitting entry via the newspapers into the siru kathai of the details and characters that are not contained by the existing stereotypes breaks the usual dichotomization of the cultural economy of the siru kathai. Neither the Tamilian, or the Dravidian, or the Indian is found adequate. The accommodation of new detail by its specificity opens up a range of possible reading-subject-positions<sup>18</sup>, which may contradict each other, and either the chaos of loss of mastery, or the fear of helpless

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<sup>18</sup> 'Each text is in fact a network of intersecting and overlapping statements. A text, any text, consists of a bundle of discourses, each discourse installing its subject of enunciation. This also means that it is misleading to describe a text as a signifying chain, i.e., one discursive operation corresponding to one subject production. As texts are imbrications of discourses, they must necessarily produce series of subject positions. But these subjects can be (and are) mapped on to each other, pulled into place.' P. Willemen, quoted by Neale, in Ashley ed, 1997. The subject position that subtends all the others, Tamilian, Dravidian, Indian, is Hindu: a point that I will discuss in the context of specific stories.

fixity in an endangered position may predominate. The abstract, endless present of the fictive world, prised apart by the shadow of the world outside the text cannot cohere in the privileged subject whose awareness of the contamination by the real forecloses complete identity. The contradictory simultaneous presence of the two storeys retrieves significations unimportant to the story, and unimportant to the externally present world: the fictive and the real jostle for attention in a non-linear, disruptive way. Following Barthes' typology of units in the analysis of narrative, the informants, the realist operators which authenticate and embed a narrative in reality, become indices, with implicit signifieds that undercut the fictive by pointing to its constructedness, which fails to capture the complexity of the existential reality. The phatic function of maintaining contact between the narrator and addressee ironically eclipses the cardinal nuclei of the story in importance. The underscored temporal duality between the fictive present and the real reworks the narrative, the indices now the non-linear but dissonant details of the displaced fictional narrative.<sup>19</sup> The variable intensity of reading which propels the reader to the 'warmer parts of the anecdote (which are always its articulations; whatever furthers the solution of the riddle, the revelation of fate)' (Barthes, in Ashley ed, 1997) now fastens on these magnified, phatic, 'cardinal' functions.

The construction of the siru kathai across a bare 2-3 pages, and the familiarized genre allow attention to wander,

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<sup>19</sup> See Barthes, *An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative in Image-Music-Text*, 1991.

fasten on non-linear functions and their fictive implications.<sup>20</sup> Both the pleasure of process and closure are rearticulated in an examination of the indicial detail, and its imbrication in discontinuous realities. 'The time in which history comes to a standstill', the 'abstract episodic present' of the cultural artefact (Bernstein ed, 1991) is redrawn into the tumultuous temporality of the present: one is lead inexorably back to the headlines of the periodicals' pages. The uni-dimensionality of the siru kathai's time is opened to the flux of the subject's experience. The 'more arduous process of real experience' now breaks into the narrative, and the episodic, anecdotal siru kathai fragments into details, images, snatches of conversation.<sup>21</sup> The 'aesthetic attitude that cannot be disturbed by external contingency or any other facts' is prised open in the recall of the narrative, which refigures Adorno's reified artefact. The memorability of disconnected parts that disregards the whole is permissive of recuperation into a reading practice and a praxis that may resist the facile stability of the fictive at best, and rest aware of the polyphonic informant at worst. The reception and recall of film songs within the linear narrative of the film could be a pointer in this regard. Sometimes dismissed as the pandering of the film industry to the childish pleasures of an unsophisticated

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<sup>20</sup> It is the absence of this process and the docility/obedience of the reader, that Adorno laments: 'The more the film-goer, the hit song enthusiast, the reader of detective and magazine stories anticipates the outcome, the solution, the structure, and so on, the more his attention is displaced towards the question of *how* the nugatory result is achieved, to the rebus-like details involved, and in this searching process of displacement the hieroglyphic meaning suddenly reveals itself.' (Bernstein ed, 1991).

<sup>21</sup> I shall return to this point in the context of specific stories.

audience,<sup>22</sup> the songs arguably gain importance over the filmic narrative proper: films are most often remembered in terms of the songs, not vice-versa as has been shown (Baskaran, 1991).

The persistence of objects, allusions, associations and tropes, the unruly and insubordinate, may well be the brand marks that serve as informants across most stories in the late 90s, or the indices of consumer capitalism that document upwardly mobile urban lifestyles. The 'memory', the trace occasioned by these consumer choices, actualized within the fictional confines of the family or at most the work place, are rests or luxuries (Barthes, 1991) within the narrative with weak functionality, but are now elevated to a vivid prominence.

The illustrations that accompany every siru kathai mask what Barthes has classified as areas of rest, or luxuries within the narrative. The pictorial code that structures the illustrations is unabashedly filmic, drawing on the conventions of cinema hoardings, posters and stills for a middle class version. The titles of the siru kathai and the illustrations are decisive in halting the reader, forcing themselves into the vision, demanding to be chosen, seen, read. The standard typecasting of fictive individuals by the illustrators allows the reader to gather at a glance the main actors of the story, their background, and pointers to characterization. The importance of the illustration lies in its establishment of a half-guessed at riddle that the accompanying text will solve: Todorov, following Shklovsky, characterizes the fabula in detective fiction as 'the

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<sup>22</sup> See Hardgrave, 1973 for a typical reading.

events as they happened' while the *sjuzet* is the narrative of the investigation (McCracken, 1998). If the illustration, customized and drawn to the accompanying text by the illustrator, following the codes of the trade, comprises the *fabula*, the *sjuzet*, the *siru kathai* merely explicates. While the illustrations rather than further the text actually point to a differently oriented perception centred on the woman, the dissonance between the two resists their easy superimposition, while informing the reception of each other. The memorability of the illustrations then offers yet another displacement away from the fictive whole. The epistemological validity of the *fabula* and *sjuzet*, thus played off against each other, offer two different interpretations that do not balance each other perfectly. The disequilibrium of the two would suggest that rather than perceived as complementary to each other, they offer counterpoints stretching the limits of the narrative whole, and its claims to explicate the economy of the totality. The discontinuity between the lyrics of the film songs and the picturisation offer a similar dilemma: the viewer can follow the logic of the images, or the syntax of the lyrics; both converge when actions mime the words, or diverge, when there is only an implied synthesis. As Dilip Kumar remarked (Interview, April 1999), the reader's reference point tends to be the cinema rather than popular fiction. Reading practices may conceivably be built around the cinematic valorization of spectacle and image in fiction. The illustrations index the *siru kathai* in terms of viewing. The tension between the gendered moral ambiguity that still characterizes cinema (Dickey, 1993; Ravindran, 1999), especially with regard to the perception of, and effects on,

women, and the superiority of literature and print: the perception that 'by virtue of being published, it is good, it is literature' that Dilip Kumar draws attention to, are reconciled in a legitimated voyeurism that the story sanctions.<sup>23</sup>

The doubling of snatches of film songs, the most popular words and phrases as titles of short stories has long been an established but perennially well received practice. While the titles may not invoke the specific film characters, themes, or storylines, their use is a reinforced invitation to the reader to peruse the story, the promise of a titillating recognition, the thrill of the hit. The cinematic associations 'supplement' the stories (Dilip Kumar, Interview, April 1999). The incidence of direct references to particular films or hits, and explicit invocation of cinematic ways of seeing is very high in the stories. The presentation of the siru kathai was so central to the production process that illustrators were in all cases required to read the story and draw accordingly; an illustration brief was also sometimes provided, and redrawn illustrations requested if deemed inadequate (Interview, Seetha Ravi, Manjula Ramesh, April 1999).

My intention in mapping multiple moments of possible dissidence in the reception of the siru kathai, far from suggesting the norm or usually deployed range of reading practices, gestures towards the implications of the changed circumstances of enunciation and reception in the late 90s. The

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<sup>23</sup> The role of the song and dance sequences in allowing access to the heroine in sanctioned ways that would not be permitted within the 'real' narrative of the film or in society is discussed in Dickey, 1993.

re-ordering of elements and revalorizing of emerging stereotypes in cultural discourse in the period is accompanied by a sense of crisis in the field of the siru kathai among editors, writers and critics (Interviews, Dilip Kumar, Vasanthi, Seetha Ravi, Manjula Ramesh, April 1999). While interviewees remarked that thinking and values have changed, they lamented the inability of the siru kathai, unlike in its earlier phases, to reflect or document these changes. While the niche and expressly activist magazines, now mushrooming in number produced 'protest fiction' (Interview, Vasanthi April 1999) that was committed to a critical political programme, there were no emergent voices or writers attracted to the form. The consistent growth of periodicals while widening the demand, tended to fall back on established writers; editorial efforts to promote new talent floundered for want of new writers. Some magazines are now being reduced to employing staff writers to script siru kathais (Interview, Seetha Ravi, April 1999) while the more discerning magazines may prefer not to carry any in an issue. While the emergence of a new writer into the siru kathai mainstream is facilitated by the easy grasp of formulae and stereotypes that people the pages, and the contemporary detailing that imparts credibility, the older writers are perceived as being unable to move with the times, and the younger, preferring to script well paid serials for TV, or stay away. The loss of currency of the older formulae and stereotypes tend to result in a falling back on the body of the woman, where consistent concerns and tropes can be reaffirmed and mapped. It is no coincidence that women's magazines tend to outstrip other mainstream periodicals (Interview, Manjula Ramesh, Seetha Ravi, April 1999), with a steadiness of brand growth that

even film periodicals cannot match. The crisis seems to have bypassed the women, who work, wife and mother with an alarming fidelity imputed to them in the siru kathai. The older formulae and stereotypes are here still supposedly valid.

### **The Fictive Real**

‘Sundar did not expect Sumathi to do this,’ begins Prapanchan’s gently ironic *Orunmaikathai* (A True Story, *DMDM* 1997,3:424-8), which parodies many of the concerns of the popular siru kathai and its reader, while simultaneously employing them to good effect. Having mimicked with a slightly suspicious naturalism the melodramatic in medias res of the usual siru kathai, the setting, the story adds, is somewhere in Tamil Nadu. In easy conversational prose, the story then elaborately describes a time and place that is identical with the present: an evening in the Deepavali season, in a city that can only be Madras, the Marina beach, to be precise. This once introduced, is a favoured tactic; the story will supply the reader with simple clues, fighting shy of actually naming, identifying, situating. The elaborate, yet harmless hide-and-seek the reader is required to indulge in by the narrator resists and breaks the supposed passive consumption of the story. This easy camaraderie of the masterful reader with a none too bright narrator is however undermined by the patently partial consciousness of the characters, explicated and rendered intelligible by the omniscient narrator. The love interest, as the story makes clear, is a familiar quotidian one: the characters



are normal, average, work a day world citizens, like you, and me, and almost like the author. Sumathi as the siru kathai reader will know, is the name of all of Prapanchan's heroines, and her partner following the laws of Prapanchan's euphony can only be a man whose name begins with an S. The reader recognizes from the very first line that the lovers will be united at the closure, despite the does she? Does she not? that structures the story. The simultaneity of time and action is taken apart, pointedly registering Rashomon-like Sumathi and Sundar's vastly different perceptions and interpretations of the same instant/action. The reader's comfortable, familiar orientation is suddenly disrupted as well; while s/he correctly interprets unconsciously generated signs that both Sumathi and her friends, (lost in the normal world of films, serialized novels, topics of the day and tedious jokes that the story explicitly names as the milieu of the middle class woman office-goer) and Sundar, an engineer, cannot decipher. A little child selling bad sundal, and the unmitigated misery of Sundar's mood break into the nonchalance of the narrative with their insistent sorrow in an otherwise pleasant world. Rather than dismiss Sundar economically and characteristically for the siru kathai as merely 'sad', the narrative lingers on the rising and falling waves, the lonely walk back, the anguished night, in an usurpation of Sundar's voice. The pathos of Sundar's inarticulate efforts to woo Sumathi is understood by her ailing, hospitalized mother, and the reader. A couple of sentences later,

the narrative that made a point of explaining is rendered superfluous by an inexplicable change in Sundar. Assertive, confident and laughing, he succeeds where all earlier efforts have failed, by taking control of the situation at her house, where he has gone to meet her, in suddenly fairy tale 'Mullai Nagaram, where a mallikai plant grows'. Or does he? The return to the normal conventions of the siru kathai is symbolized by the last minute complication in the introduction of a possible visitor, the obviously familiar Subramani into the house: his name begins with the S, could he be the real hero? The last sentence is inconclusive: 'Come in, Sundar, and shut the door'. The reader and narrator alike are literally left out in the cold, with a few (valid?) pointers: Sumathi, earlier a goddess wielding weapons, surrounded by her attendants, bestowing and withholding grace, is unprepared and powerless, like the reader, before the vaguely menacing anticipatory stalking of the new, masterful Sundar.

The siru kathai's self-appointed task of mediating between appearance and reality is here confronted with the possibilities of lack of authorial, and by implication, reader's access to worlds and spaces that are familiar and presumed to be laid bare, understood. The reader is allowed little respite, piecing together the implications of an ostensibly straightforward narrative. The stories return obsessively to questions of verity, fantasy, representation: in an endless circularity, stories refer to real people, places, and the centrality of fiction in their lives; the concerns of the story are borne out by newspapers that mimic

fictional themes and conventions; and finally fiction prefigures, and becomes, life. The fictive real, posited between the fact of the newspaper and the fantasy of the film is simultaneously both in a transcendence that is recognized as complex, its polyphony a frequent structural device and topic of debate. Sujatha's *Nijathai Thedi* (In Search of Truth, ICA 1998:59-69) draws attention to the often met with disorienting, blurring effects of 'real' life following fiction. M. Annamalai's commending citation of the story remarks that the author shows how 'even truths can sometimes become false'. Wrapped in the neutral silence of a couple 'happily' married for nine years, Krishnamoorthy and Chitra enact a typical morning scene. He reads the newspaper, she, a short story in a periodical: 'Did you see, Vimala, the suffering of these little children?' while she waits for the cooker to whistle.<sup>24</sup> The appearance of a young man, dishevelled, a plate of flowers and burning incense in his hands disturbs them. His wife has just died. They are migrant labourers, new to Bangalore, and he has no money for the last rites; could they help him? Krishnamoorthy senses that something does not ring quite true: why the flowers and incense, the trappings of the beggar's trade? Why does he not

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<sup>24</sup> We are not so far here from S.S. Vasan's 1920s rationale behind the pioneering regular appearance of short stories in popular periodicals: something to amuse and educate the Brahmin housewife, to usefully occupy her while she waits for the pot to boil (R.A.K. Barathi, Interview, April 1999). Chitra is housebound, inexperienced, and therefore (legitimately, according to the critic who selected the story for the anthology) ill-equipped to deal with real life. She operates in the realm of emotions, dreams, fiction; her husband is pragmatic, and has fact and good plain common-sense to his credit: a dichotomy that the story subverts in no uncertain terms. The story she is reading in the magazine similarly has the male explicator of the cosmic order lecturing an ill-adjusted woman on the realities of life. Yet, as Krishnamoorthy feels, it is the illusion, the representation that is important, not the 'truth' it embodies.

remember his own address? The dialectic of reasoned questions yields no satisfactory answers; the beggar is a charlatan. Chitra however wishes to help—he could be telling the truth, and how does it matter if he is not?—but to no avail. Chitra's hysteria, madness, and inability to distinguish fact from fiction: the cardinal male virtue, must be set right once and for all. He drives off the check the story, and discovers the 'beggar' to be genuine. No matter; Chitra must be 'reformed', she cannot be told the 'truth'. The story, the critic M. Annamalai remarks, puts dissembling beggars in their place. While indirectly valorizing the siru kathai's epistemology and dramatizing the truth effects of fiction (why would the man imitate the beggar, it would only have undercut his cause, Krishnamoorthy's most telling argument), the story uncannily seems to pre-empt a critical response such as Annamalai's: neither Chitra, nor the beggar are in command of the verbal resources at Krishnamoorthy's disposal. Their speech is fractured, broken, reduced to 'hysteria' and silent sobbing at the margins and disjunctures of the discourse of power and reason. The narrative voice that describes rather than speak for them, points up the impossibility of their speaking themselves completely into the roles given them as well as their inability to turn the dialectic to their own ends. Yet the danger of dissenting discourses that they pose in embryonic form by refusing to vocalize is palpable enough to force Krishnamoorthy into rearranging his all-important 'facts of life' to anchor his wife firmly into the only possible role she can be allowed to inhabit. As has been suggested, elite cultural negotiation is premised on a telos of mimetic realism, reason, and the valorization of 'literature';

emotional, melodramatic, popular forms are ridiculed for the liberties they take with reality (Pandian, 1996). The role of the author in such an elite, producer's configuration is the unveiling of explanations hidden to all but a select few, but which must be communicated as an important component of the project of educating into respectability. Both these stories by reputed, established literary as well as popular market authors in magazines of low canonical authority don the author's mantle with a tolerant reserve that interrogates/refuses realist mimetic practices.<sup>25</sup>

Neela Padmanabhan, who takes his role of literary author rather seriously, has differently oriented concerns.<sup>26</sup> In *Oru Pettikadaikaaran Kathai* (The Tale of a Street-shopkeeper, *DMDM* 1998,1:108-11), the 'real life' story is told by a narrator explicitly identified as the literary man of repute. The story in search of an author selects its teller purely on merit: the inarticulate shopkeeper-autodriver, 'the scribble that no one can read' lies in a hospital bed, dying painfully after his attempted self-immolation, unable to speak or move. The story is told entirely

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<sup>25</sup> Sujatha's *ICA* story was first published in *Kungumam*, May 1998, when it was nominated story of the month for the prize story anthology. The magazine, owned by the Maran family, is best known for its appeal to teenagers and the younger middle class: it is 'the victory tilakam of the new generation', as it styles itself on the cover and edit pages. Vehemently and insistently anti-ADMK and Jayalalitha, it is the only magazine that feels obliged to carry a liability disclaimer for its sometimes thinly-veiled fiction, and is notorious for its kutti kathais, little stories of a small formatted page each, with accompanying illustrations of exaggeratedly well endowed women irrespective of the particular story. The text invariably uses sex and sexual innuendo as the structuring principle.

<sup>26</sup> In 1983 Neela Padmanabhan introduced a book of short stories he had edited with a prefatory note that read in part, 'I have never written for the popular magazines, a fact that I have been proud of.' (quoted in Kanakarasan, 1987).

in his own voice, addressing the narrator, whose merits are catalogued: he is respected by the literary community who seek him out, as the shopkeeper knows from his vantage point close by; though he is ill-read, he has come to respect the narrator for his composite characters that refuse to be merely heroes or villains; he has responded to an unspoken call, answering like a god, when invoked during the agonizing act of immolation. The devotee-hard hearted divinity dyad follows the classical medieval Tamil Bhakthi idiom analysed by Shulman (Shulman, 1980), common to popular religious boon-seeking and vow-fulfilment practices as well. The ultimate dismembering/effacing demanded by the divinity as a proof of love is requited by an act of grace that restores the wholeness that was sacrificed, elevating the devotee to a higher spiritual level. The god-author now displaces the estranged wife in the consciousness of the inadvertent immolator as he burns, concentrating on the miraculous face of the author that only he can see from within the enveloping sheets of flame, and inert on the hospital bed, surrounded by the police, doctors and wailing relatives. The initiating guilt of the wife, who 'lays traps with her web of words', ensnaring everyone, is identified as the disrupting factor; but the author-god will now battle on his behalf, an avenging force born of the sacrificial libation. The divinely written (the shopkeeper does not forget to call him 'saar') story will now vindicate the speech-less life of the driver through the power of his inspiration. The patent impossibility of the story's narration, now a product of divine literary creativity, speaks for the silenced man, countering in public, the wife's protest in private of public shame: her alcoholic husband deserts her for

his drinking friends, abuses her on the road, and objects to her familiarity with the neighbouring male shopkeepers. While dramatizing the power of the writer's art in the face of apparently insurmountable existential barriers, the story chooses to focus on the liberating humanity of the author, who acquits his brief by building a defense for the driver. The class/gender/political praxis associations of the situation are reworked into a narrative of marital discord where the more eloquent speaker wins. The implications of the ambiguous, alcohol induced moment of inadvertence when the auto driver strikes the match is reduced to the typical irrationality of the 'uneducated' classes, rather than identified as a hyperreal charged moment with all the qualities of nightmare, when the invoked threat of self-immolation fails to achieve the required result. The half-serious (and therefore guilty of a lack of dedication that fails to qualify him for the martyrdom reserved for the political activist) imitation of a familiar discursive ploy in a historically established cultural-political context completes itself, the hailed trope compulsively working itself out. The auto driver is drawn into a representational regime that emphasizes his reduction to a total instrumentality, and a total lack of signification within the symbolic order that rewrites him and the jottings in his pocket book into an indecipherable scrawl. The dynamics of the subjective' that must enter the narrative (Sunder Rajan, 1999) is read off by the empowered narrator from the scribble, and reduced to a totality of causal sequences, a hermetically sealed linearity with a prewritten telos in the high literary master narrative. We are returned once again, to the

centrality of mimicry, masquerade, which disconcertingly become, or are made, real.<sup>27</sup>

The stories tend to work with a transgressive fictive reality that consistently undercuts the accepted primacy of mimetic realism, using elements of fantasy, nightmare, myth and montage to construct a complex mechanism whereby at crystallized points of crises, structurally the cardinal nuclei, the simultaneous inhabitation of the fictive and the real are flattened into one of the poles of the dichotomy, sacrificing the polyphonous potential of the unruly, epistemologically impure, contaminated text.

As R. Chudamani's story *Neeruvu Petror* (Neeru's Parents, *DMDM* 1997,2:312-6) proceeds, Neeru, who discovers by accident on her twenty-first birthday that she is adopted, is restrained from seeking out her 'real' parents when her servant-maid, back from a holiday in the village, recounts tales of female infanticide she witnesses there. Neeru's eyes fasten on a weekly lying nearby where extensive reports document the steep rise of

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<sup>27</sup> The use of suicide, particularly self-immolation as an extreme form of political praxis in Tamil Nadu has consistently and disturbingly been a feature of Dravidian cultural rather than electoral politics (Subramanian, 1999). Though such instances have been quickly co-opted at election time into the Dravidian master narrative, which may arguably have provided some of the most important contributing factors and the immediate context, the anti-Hindi suicides for example, they were undertaken in the course of an oppositional political movement. The spate of suicides by men marking MGR's death highlighted the newer, personalized allegiance to a figure rather than an organization or a political programme, where devotion and grief at harm done to the object of one's piety can be proved/expiated only through an extreme self-flagellation: the impotent's retrieval of political agency, and the possibility of praxis in the face of overweening insignificance, by locating the self as the site of discourse, by paradoxically actualizing the objectivity of the alienated subject (Hawkes, 1996). As he points out, death is the ultimate false, but simultaneously real, objectification.



female infant mortality in Tamil Nadu. She loses all interest in her once consuming quest, and declines an offer to read the orphanage's file on her. To say that urban rates of female infant mortality do not follow the rural trend (the story is set in the city), or that the author underestimates the reader's intelligence in her establishment of a spurious causality is to disregard the working of the story. The siru kathai harnesses tropes that are current in mainstream discourse in a causal sequence that is not nearly as important as the series of specific instances, a configuration of sub-plots that each carry their own disphasic pools of signification. The threatened loss of identity that Neeru faces (her first reaction is an uncharacteristic, dead faint) refers her back to the constructed nature of the a priori role she believes defines/limits her subjectivity: once again, it is the excess, the uncontainable spilling over of consciousness that interrogates the established real: Who am I? What is the truth? Was I adopted because my parents only needed a baby to love?—questions that dominate the narrative.<sup>28</sup> The structural closure—'I know who my real parents are'—ostensibly ties up

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<sup>28</sup> The amnesia/loss of memory technique, a favourite with popular cultural forms, provides opportunities for the interrogation of a dominant symbolic order by its withdrawal of all socio-cultural givens. Neeru's books, clothes, cassettes—her 'private' property—now no longer define her identity, just as the very language she uses takes on implications that strike at the basis of her social and legal insertion into the family and the community, as the story points out. Ironically recognized by the law as an individual entity at twenty-one, she realizes that her legally sanctioned adoption reduces her to a 'daughter' (and now, by implication, 'citizen') in a long game of institutionalized make-believe. The machinery of the state lurks just beneath the stories, and the realization of the characters that their roles no longer contain the sum of their socially constructed obligations, is at the same time, the knowledge of their limitations, a neat inversion in the less-privileged subject of the kingly Nayaka paradox of maximum freedom at the moment of capitulation referred to earlier.

loose ends, but her re-acceptance of the mantle of daughter involves a recognition and vocalization of an unspoken fear.

Padmanabhan's inability to work with the conventions of the popular siru kathai (as his autodriver says, fiction is different, interesting, meaningful; injunctions that the popular written forms interpret in terms of a possible, all too probable, coming together of discrete, conventionally figured tropes in formulaic ways that release the components from the tyranny of the authorial/fictive totality, and the pre-occupation with craft in authors of canonized, literary excellence) results in a 'simplifying' of 'good literature' that flattens the complexity of the popular by injecting it with the values of the former. The mystic power of the authorial creation, like the mythic power of the politician, or the compulsion of the regimes of Dravidian cultural representation, can be developed logically only into the sacrifice of agency at the altar of the illusion institutionally reinstated and materialized as reality. The crystallized cardinal nuclei that refuse the mythic and legitimize other symbolic orders, and the indicial functions that posit alternative nodes of reading/symbolic satisfaction therefore enter into a complex dialogue with the existing dominant discourses; yet the indicial functions may themselves be part of the dominant symbolic order in other contexts. The imaginary of the siru kathai endlessly plays these discourses against each other, creating a reading context of inherently unstable overlapping discourses, refusing a levelling equalization. The physical context of the particular kathai as part of an anthology of siru kathais (as is the case of most of the primary texts in this study), or as part of

a periodical that includes other kathais as well as features and articles, creates a potentially infinite, contaminant intertextuality that resists a recurrent, fixed, hierarchisation.

Damayanthi's *Ezhavathu Penn* (The Seventh Woman, *KDM* 1997:125-6) is the story of a manager of a private company vetting one of his subordinate employees as a possible candidate for the seventh affair he hopes to initiate. The scene is not the workplace, adding a new element to the office romance: he visits her at home, on a Saturday. The manager, Nagarajan, comes face-to-face with a genteel unapologetic poverty: the 'hall' a mere ten-by-ten example of the typical government housing colony, the 14-inch BPL, the Bombay dyeing Jayaprada on the walls that he cannot help staring at—'If you come in,' her younger brother adds, 'you can see Simran and Rambha, the Jayaprada is my brother's doing'. While her mother, full of an old-world dignity and hospitality, talks to him, 'she' emerges, changed out of her torn, faded nightie into a salwar that shaves almost a decade off her twenty-seven years. Her cardamom tea reminds him of Ragini, one of the earlier six. The elder brother, she says matter of factly, is at the police station in connection with a pirating case at the cinema theatre where he works; he is also into women, ganja and liquor. The father runs a pavement bookstall, and is seemingly vehemently opposed to the corner-cutting survival strategies of his sons. Her earnings run the family; she is old, needs to be married off as soon as possible. Can he suggest a suitable groom, the mother asks as she serves a reluctant Nagarajan a simple lunch. The caste is unimportant. She silences them: whenever a suitable groom presents himself,

they always manage to detect a flaw, she says wryly. As he beats a hasty retreat, she adds that she would like to be like him—a room to herself, her stove, her bed, her clothes. She is not the seventh woman; he will not be back.

The story is haunted by the strangely reversed ceremony and conventions of the prospective groom visiting the bride's house as a preliminary to commencing official negotiations. The manager is painfully conscious of the fracture between the old and the new orders, her family symbolizing the worst of both. Her parents mimic the old, but without the consonant *mariyathai* or *anthasthu*, valueless anyway in a changed world. Their pretensions as embodiments of old values are delegitimized as the story proceeds: the warning flashed by their professed 'modern' disavowal of caste restrictions (they are obviously high caste) and the father's persistent harping on his honest trade is borne out by their complicity in erecting this pitiful 'upright poverty' edifice on their daughter's aspirations. The brothers are out of step, unable to keep up in a world where they are disadvantaged to begin with: the older is a typical law-breaking ruffian with outdated cinematic tastes, the younger better adjusted, but for all that, lacking the sophistication of taste that marks the true, established parvenu. The lack of money is here born of an a priori lack of values, symptomatised by a lack of taste. The father is loud, overbearing, unpredictable; the mother, for all her quiet hospitality, a heartless schemer; the sons, wastrels, lacking the entrepreneurial edge that could have catapulted them into success and ethical respectability. Strangely, the reference point of this evaluation is the cinema.

All the women named are actresses; the prospective seventh woman is merely a pronoun, invisible in the language of command the men wield, not needing distinctive recognition, or meriting it before her possible elevation into significance by being chosen. Objects, names and labels assume a centrality that resonates beyond the immediate needs of the story, marginal to the sequential causality of the plot. The BPL, the pin-ups, the lack of jewellery, the cycle, the bag of books, clothes, food, all betray an absence of aesthetics. Nagarajan's real life Ragini may sound like a starlet, but is emphatically not Jayaprada, Simran or Rambha: the glamour of cinema without the whiff of immorality (any reader-condemnation of Nagarajan's affairs will have to contend with the more reprehensible parents' gross dereliction of duty; the unmarried woman is usually the most potent omen of a diseased society).<sup>29</sup> Although the old stereotypes of the honestly poor and dishonestly uncontrollable are invoked, the latter undercuts the former, while both are stripped of value by their inconsistency as much as their ontology. Padmanabhan lists as his autodrivers' redeeming feature his (futile) desire to reform by earning a living as a

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<sup>29</sup> *Kalki's* preoccupation with socially responsible and serious entertainment (Seetha Ravi, Interview, April 1999) translates into a systematic valorization of the high arts rather than cinema, whose popularity is acknowledged, but never unreservedly praised. Each Deepavali number unfailingly carries essays on Carnatic music, Bharatanatyam, and the milieu of concerts, high-Hinduism, the economy, etc. The ideal Tamil-Indian citizen-reader is informed about his religious heritage even if he is not a practicing believer; a committed voter, he takes his politics seriously but with the cynical humour of the well educated; travels far and wide, never quite bereft of the safety of an anchor, but open to new impressions and values, and above all, a disciplined modern subject whose light entertainment may be frivolous, but never in bad taste. While the boxed humour and accompanying cartoons in the *KDM* focus for the most part on politicians, with the odd henpecked husband or harassed father-in-law of the insatiable groom, the *DMDM* jokes return obsessively to the 'offensive' woman.

driver, rather than the emasculate minding of his father-in-law's legacy, the street-shop; and the father in Damayanthi's story is not so upright after all. The laundering of wealth into goodness invests Levi's, Hero Hondas, Mercedes', and the cellular with an ethical multiplier component that now functions as an effective code across anthologies and periodicals. S. Sankaranarayanan's *Verum Ver Adi Mannum* (Roots and Soil, ICA 1997:114-28), originally from the *Ananda Vikatan* of November 1997, explicitly measures 'good' against the easy, detached handling of money and technology: the aestheticization of economics. The metropolis, access to the Western metropolis, high art, fast cars, mansions, controlled atmospheres, flash clothes, big-bucks entertainments: the possessor of these also has, *a fortiori*, an inalienable connection to the coarse, native soil of his homeland. Spectacularly well-mannered in his consumption, the young, male, new generation protagonist, Siddharthan, can indulge the 'irrationality' of his desires in ways the autodriver cannot, unrequired to prove or validate his intentional credentials. Money robs myth, dream, nightmare of the magical possibility/trance-like paralysis of any but elite aesthetic content. Colour coordinated dreams mirror a customized, made-to-order reality where bad taste spells economic disaster in an inverted cause-and-effect relationship. Strangely, the aestheticized economy, powered by technology and its mastery over nature, has no place for women: the father 'bears and labours and nourishes the son, and the village-cum-tourist destination-bound grandfather accepts Siddharthan over the estranged son, building a circular conduit that short circuits contact with the sweaty terrain of labour: 'art [but not 'the silly

serials of TV] transcends poverty', as the narrator remarks. Savithri who rescues her husband from the clutches of death, here in an ancillary role, buys his entry into society with her dowry of two lakhs, a hundred gold pouns and felicitations and announcements in the dailies.

The radical ambiguity attached to the rural and underdeveloped is a natural corollary in this development narrative. The gritty realism of the scientific discourse replaces the tenor of playful mythos discussed earlier. The shift in register necessitates a clearly defined hierarchisation; the stranger to the community, the socially committed urban/social misfit, is the harbinger or forerunner of Progress. Unlike the psychological dilemmas of Siddharthan's father, the drama of beset fatherhood is here exchanged for a purely external one, man and the elements. Ra Ki Rangarajan, who chose Ettayapuram Rajan's *Pasumai Bootham!* (The Green Giant! ICA 1997:129-38) as the story of the month from the *Ananda Vikatan* of December 1997, calls it 'exemplary in its demonstration of how a story should mirror the power of labour and persistence'. The Kathiresamalai foothills' branch of the nationalized bank is everyone's idea of a punishment posting. The newly transferred manager and his ten subordinate colleagues detest the dry red dust-laden winds, the unbearable humidity and the barren land. Sumathi, the manager's wife, complains persistently and successfully, winning her husband's silent acquiescence to her petitioning her Delhi-based IAS officer-uncle into arranging a transfer to Ambasamudram, on the Tamraparani, within a week. Five years later, the manager

returns on an audit. The area is transformed. Originally described as palai land, desert and dismal, the topography is now that of the marutham and mullai.<sup>30</sup> While Sujatha's story rewrote the capital of Karnataka into Tamil cultural topography,<sup>31</sup> the onward march of development stories reclaim the disinherited badlands by integrating them into a national economic narrative where state boundaries are subtly erased. The artificially constructed Tamil economic circuit of the popular film of the 50s referred to earlier, is now more than willing to recognize centres of commerce that lie beyond the state's borders, while Delhi is now the Metropolis, the seat of influence and power. Ambasamudram pales before the renamed Pasumai Nagar, where a government agricultural officer, school headmaster and bank branch manager succeed in greening the desert, in language that evokes the Green Revolution, set, uncannily to the national five year developmental clock. Auvaiyar's song, invoked by the headmaster, seeks classical precedents for a colony's insulated success story: the land shivers awake at the touch of human sweat, to yield abundantly. The vegetable-traders, we are told, now procure their produce from Pasumai Nagar. Auvaiyar's poetry redeems Tamil modernity from indictment: by actualizing an inspired home truth through government agency, the story reaffirms the

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<sup>30</sup> See Ramanujan, 1994 for an extensive description of the landscapes of Sangam poetry.

<sup>31</sup> The Kaveri river-water disputes and Tamil migrant labour are issues that touch the public raw nerve in both states. Inter-state buses are often the targets of ire on both sides of the border, and a simmering discontent informs the border districts. Sujatha's casual relocation of Bangalore in Tamil space therefore assumes a significance the reader cannot be unaware of.



entrepreneurial economy: from effort to reward is a linear relationship, an unchangeable verity, that Tamil modernity merely accelerates and confirms. Strangely, Pasumai Nagar boasts no impoverished farmers, petty traders, artisans, servants, needing succour, upliftment, or even a bank (yet the manager's house is guarded by a twenty-four hour watchman with a gun), an artificially cleansed city in the midst of the desert. The description of economic well-being and prosperity is coded into a Sangam cultural economy: the palai cactus is replaced by the mango, the magizham (the 'happy' tree), the plantain, of the mullai and marutham, connoting domesticity and happiness, buttressed by cash crops: brinjal, ladies finger and chillies, that nevertheless valorize not the fabled Pothigai hills near Ambasamudram, a resonant Dravidian cultural symbol, but Kathiresamalai, with its technological sthala purana. And once again, it is the original manager's wife who prevents his participation in an 'eventful', successful, modernity.

The 'giant' of Ettayapuram Rajan's story, unleashed but harnessed by a modern state in a fairy tale Green Revolution, finds its human counterpart in Gandharvan's *Athisayam* (The Wonder, ICA 1998:99-106), also an *Ananda Vikatan* story. The toiling giant of the story is abnormal, and primordially so: he dwarfs the village's strongest, well-muscled men, and is sponsored by the local zamindar to stage a spectacle: he will pull down a palmyra palm of the village's choosing with his bare hands. He is led to the rockiest part of the village, in due ceremonial procession, followed by the villagers, whose fatigued

bodies after the harvest respond eagerly to this new diversion. It is just after three in the afternoon when the giant's ordeal begins. He stoops, touches the roots of the selected palmyra in obeisance, and then prostrates himself before it. Having shepherded the noisy villagers into two blocks well away from harm's way, he uses his shoulders alternatively, protected by a folded blanket, as a battering ram, running full tilt into the tree. The tree registers not a quiver. After what seems an eternity, his energy has not flagged, and nor has the tree shown any signs of toppling. 'Like a servant who feels neither enthusiasm, nor fatigue', he continues expressionless, doggedly; the older women cannot bear to watch, and turn away—'Who knows where he is from? And the poor woman who married him? And where do his children wander while he slaves here?' The young men, meanwhile, enjoy the proceedings, which seem to them to possess all the 'rousing sensationalism of a fight-scene'. The palmyra has become the villain, evil, mocking, to all the spectators. The village girls fetch him gruel; he acknowledges their gesture with neither gratitude nor bitterness. When the palmyra finally topples at sunset, he is led to the tank in ceremonial procession, where he bathes, and dons the wet, washed clothes he laboured in. Two cocks are killed for his meal at the zamindar's house. At night, when the villagers return, he waits by his outstretched blanket for alms; he ties up his day's earnings, and walks away in the darkness to the road, the bus stop, and the next day's work. The day's greatest wonder to the villagers, the narrator notes, was his beggar's face as he waited for the coins of the puny and the weak. The nominating critic, R.

Venkatesh remarks that the story portrays 'the pathetic kneeling of human labour, toil and strength before money'.

The narrative realism of the two stories hinges on the established verity of unchanged, essential natures: the sleeping giant of the elements, and its ultimate defeat before the gigantic capacity of male labour. The more than sufficient equivalence of returns in technological progress, and the beggary of individual effort are both processes of war against nature, explicitly identified as such by the narratives. The key to reward, the stories seem to suggest, is institutionalized, urban/metropolitan support, and the ability to adapt to the conventions of social behaviour demanded by such support. The unnamed strong man, like the autodriver, recreates in himself the dyad of nature/conqueror, oppressor/oppressed; we are here in the presence of Adorno's 'fascism in the head' (Bernstein, 1991).

Thangar Pachan's *Gouravam* (Prestige, ICA 1998:1-11), from the *Kumudam* of January 1998 dramatizes the 'culpability' of the villagers whose mobilizational capacity, sought to be reduced to votes, finds outlets punishable by a withdrawal of state patronage. The new minister, in deference to his share of 736 of the 764 votes in Badirakottai village, duly arrives with his cavalcade of cars to inaugurate the bus service to Cuddalore, 26km away. The bus service draws the village into a network presided over by the city, rather than the market town of Nadu Veerapattu. The village, famous far and near for the industriousness of its inhabitants, soon undergoes a completely unprecedented change. The agricultural labourers now mark time by the bus horn, the Chettiars, Mudaliars and Bais

(Muslim merchants) of Nadu Veerapattu lose all custom; young men flock to the morning shows at Cuddalore and fantasize about the white skinned women in the Malayalam film hoardings; the 'big hospital' that treats for free is now accessible. All these changes are presided over by a son of Badirakottai in the transport department, the minister, and the bus conductor and driver, who reinstate pictures of the usual gods and goddesses alongside the state provided, glaring picture of an unkempt Periyar. Trouble soon breaks out between the inhabitants of Kaattupalayam, 2km away on the Cuddalore Road, and Badirakottai. Knowing that they lack a bus because of their 350 votes in favour of the minister's opponent, educated Kaattupalayam inhabitants read the transport officials the law: a state owned bus is obliged to ply a route of 30km, by which rule, Kaattupalayam at 28km is a legitimate stop. Realizing that this could help the minister garner the errant Kaattupalayam votes, the minister obliges, and is gratified by the Kaattupalayam delegation that visits him to express their gratitude. Badirakottai now gives way to Kaattupalayam on the bus' signboards, to the chagrin of the former's inhabitants. It is now the turn of the Badirakottai youth to mobilize, and they demand that the name of the bus route be changed again, to read Cuddalore-Badirakottai. This time, the clashes are serious enough to merit newspaper reports; the service stops. The minister and his minions meet with the elders of both villages, and peace is restored, but the sign still proclaims Kaattupalayam. The cashew topes that escort the road out of Badirakottai provide ideal cover; the bus is stoned repeatedly, the drivers refuse to work, and the service is discontinued once

and for all, in the face of the ridiculous pride of the two villages. Thus, Paduthalam Sukumaran, the nominating critic points out, is development stalled not by bureaucrats and politicians, but by the villages themselves. The onus of progress by being devolved on the villagers, allows an ambivalent exploration of their insertion into accessible 'modernity': city markets, cinemas and hospitals put the traditionally money-lending, mercantile and artisanal castes in the rural economy (in Nadu Veerapattu) out of work; productivity declines, and clashes that express this uneven development are a matter of 'honour'. Badirakottai has a large Harijan colony; Kaattupalayam is strangely the 'enemy' village, undifferentiated by caste or class.<sup>32</sup> It is the 'educated' here who quote the rulebook; and it is the young men who are behind the clashes. By reading the parable of irresponsibility to the villagers, the story indicts them for their inability to see beyond the spectacle; yet it was, as the story points out in passing, the political importance attached to the Collector and minister's inauguration of the bus that redeemed the importance of the road, to begin with. The people will confuse fiction for truth, the educated lament. Once again, it is the inability of the governed to read the language of governance aright that points to their inherently uncultured 'hooliganism'. Like Damayanthi's Nagarajan, and Padmanabhan's literary merit, the bus is figured as the eligible, new 'groom', worshipped, auspicious, desirable, and the villagers, the lacking

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<sup>32</sup> The relocation of 'honour' in relative village status and the resultant clashes seek to sanitize the contemporary history of clashes by cleansing it of all but the minimal references to caste and class articulations that structure social communication. For a similar erasure of caste specificity in popular Tamil film, see Dickey, 1993, and in fiction, Kanakarasan, 1987.

brides. The gendered narratives of war and marriage are invoked time and again, in the representation of patriarchal modernity: the violence of 'development' is naturalized into narratives of (unequal) gendered equivalences, where only the paternal/aggressive male power of reason can triumph over the passive, inherently uncontrollable female power of the masses.<sup>33</sup> The 'wonder' that Gandharvan's story enunciates is the emasculation of the pre-colonial prototypical Tamil male village hero. Rendered an individual, solitary servant by his insertion into modernity, bereft by definition of mobilizational appeal, he is thus vulnerable to interpellation by the economic might of the people; the weak and the puny are compensated by his need for alms, though their malnourished bodies and contracted labour speak of a similar interpellation.

The different key of the development narratives is necessitated by the story of communities, rather than individuals, and consequently, the 'scientific' language of 'sociological' reason, rather than emotion. The dispassionate strongman, the inscrutable elements and the violence of village 'communities' are recuperated into the master narrative of modernity by explanations that rely entirely on the structural causality of the plot. The interiority of subjective experience is

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<sup>33</sup> Hardgrave in one of his essays on the Tamil folklore of cinema draws attention to the dismay of theatre owners at the invariable destruction of seats and property when MGR starrers were released: the fan clubs, the backbone of the ADMK, were recognized as lawless, disorderly, potentially violent, ill-educated mobs. His interviewees all characterized the audience of MGR films as 'low class', and (therefore) 'disorderly'. Police presence and lathi charges on heavy crowds were a regular event; the enthusiasm of the MGR fans in itself 'approached pandemonium' (Hardgrave, 1971). The stories similarly betray a deep unease with groups of women, potentially disruptive of a modernity articulated in terms of male dictat.

rendered deducible from the reactions of the informant—the bureaucratic minion of the state—the agricultural officer, the headmaster, the transport officials, the narrator, the literary critic. Such stories have no ‘sub-plots’; the main causal thread can be lost sight of only in detriment to the ‘moral’ of the story. The task of the critic is to restate the moral in relation to the social commitment of the ideal writer’s craft.

Vaiyavan’s *Tractor* (ICA, 1998:12-29), originally published in the *Kalki* of February 1998, like Gandharvan’s *Athisayam* explores the role of the misfit in the rural economy, rewriting the codes of the conventional development narrative. Govindan, B.Sc, unemployed, has finally turned to driving a tractor to earn his living, bound for the 33acre Puliur hill estate of his city-based employer. The forbidding cold and desolation of his destination intensify at the forest checkpost where Kapali, the lorry-driver, the cleaner Mari, the forest guard manning the post and Govindan settle down to finish the rum Govindan has brought along: the guard’s rabbit fry will go nicely with it. As the conversation, fuelled by alcohol, spins along, Govindan notices a trussed-up moaning man: an inhabitant of Puliur, ostensibly picked up for killing the rabbits they are now consuming, Govindan realizes, but in reality for assaulting Govindan’s predecessor, the married bulldozer driver, with his gun. The guard’s vicious beating of the man forces Govindan to look out, where he sees his tractor, tightly trussed up with ropes and hooks, gleaming, beautiful: ‘like a bride at the altar!’ Noticing Govindan’s discomfort with the Puliur labourer, the guard spits out, ‘Assault the bulldozer driver, would you? The tractor has

come!' In a sudden change of mood, he orders the man untied, and offers him the quarter-full bottle with Kapali's consent. Govindan realizes that a game is afoot: the cruel habitual drinker's desire to see the debasement of a drunk opponent. The Puliur man obliges; the alcohol releases him from his sullen hunger of the day. His inhuman howls of despair are drawn into a duel with the taunting guard. The bulldozer driver has attempted to rape the man's sister; the guard sneers: 'Oho, and your poor innocent sister didn't know what was happening to her. As if this is her first time!' The guard's ambivalent reception of Govindan is soon explained by the Puliur man: the bulldozer and the tractor will leave the Puliur labourers out of work; their bullocks and wooden ploughs will now find no renters. The estate has already broken up the inaccessible village community; the educated have left, the poor grow poorer and are now to be denied a living. The Puliur man ('the hill elephant', 'the wild pig') breaks down completely, smashing the bottle in impotent rage. The guard towers over him, forcing him to pick up the slivers of glass. The next morning, Govindan and the tractor reach Poonkulam, the benami estate acquired by the owner in the name of the villagers. Dispossessed, out of work, they watch as Govindan revels in the comfort of his tractor responding smoothly to his every command on the bulldozed fields, chasing away the bruised, hopeless face of his drinking companion of the night: 'It would take time to come, the numbing hardening of the heart into stone, Govindan thought'.

Vaiyavan's story beats the narrative conventions of these stories at their own game: the wealth of positivist detail



demanding by the sub-genre produces a different explanation, a different interpretation of the Nehruvian economic model. As has been observed, some of the *Ilakkiya Chinthanai* stories, especially those of the 80s, have been intensely critical of the Nehruvian planned economy, and the subsidy raj of the Tamil politicians (Kanakarasan, 1987). The late 90s have seen a revival of earlier oppositional conventions and themes in the service of the state, ironically in a context of globalization and abdication of unfinished responsibility by the state. As Kanakarasan has observed, the code of the *Ilakkiya Chinthanai* Trust has been to popularize stories that reflect society; 'literary awareness' carried with it the post-1947 responsibility of the 'social consciousness' of the writer in bettering society. Originally the preserve of the elite, literary 'little magazines', the mantle of critical entertainment has played a central role in the legitimization of popular magazines through a watchdog respectability that threatened to usurp the role of the press. The press has often been castigated in the prize stories for a gross dereliction of duty in failing to bring to light social imbalances. The role of fiction in highlighting fact has often been instrumental in effecting legislation in the House: in 1987, a child labour prevention law was tabled in the Legislative Assembly, citing certain short stories that dwelt on the inhumanity of working conditions (Kanakarasan, 1987). The interpenetration of fiction and reportage has consequences for the detailing of themes as well. The status of 'positivist' social

detail in such fiction carries intact the sanctity of developmental fact, of government reports, of press critiques. The popularization of 'high' literature, as evinced by the shifting profile of the periodicals whose stories are selected has broadened the field to now include all published fiction, conditional on nomination by the critics.<sup>34</sup> A critic then, is merely one who evinces an interest in literature. The central role of periodical fiction in dramatizing debate has meant an increased self-consciousness on the part of the writer in choosing realist narrative modes, techniques, themes. The stories mentioned here are all from reputed, established magazines and authors; and in a seemingly consensual back-to-basics framework, it is 1947, Gandhi and Nehru that serve as reference points. Ka Murugavel, the nominating critic, remarks of *Tractor* that it draws attention to the self-sufficient village rajya that Mahatma Gandhi espoused, and the human costs of mechanization. The burden of the 50th year of Independence, recognized and feted by the anthologies and periodicals has seen an increased incidence of the rural in fiction as

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<sup>34</sup> To begin with, the *Ilakkiya Chinthanai* in 1970 adopted as its motto, '*Ilakkiyathaiyum, thiranaivayum mathipittu potruvadu*'—to evaluate and promote literature and criticism (Brochure, *Ilakkiya Chinthanai*, Madras). In the early days of the organization, stories from the 'little magazines' were largely selected; as the years passed, popular mass-circulated magazines' stories, nominated by the reviewer-critic—'mostly writers, or earnest readers' (R.A.K. Barathi, Letter dated 13.3.99), began to predominate: magazines such as *Kalki*, *Ananda Vikatan*, etc. were also recognized as selecting stories of literary value. By the late 80s, the transition had completely reversed the 70s trend: 'little magazines' had become the exception, rather than the rule; but writers, especially the prizewinners of earlier years still tended to nominate stories, though it was widely known that interested readers were welcome to do so (Dilip Kumar, Interview, April 1999).

symptomatic of the failure of development models, or productive of that failure. The rural increasingly symbolizes the bad conscience of the responsible intellectual, captured in all its ambivalent valorization of the modern; the absolution of the nature and scope of planned technological intervention is moderated through the intractable ungovernability of the masses, rendering them complicit in their culpability. The rocket parts that Kapali ferries to Thumba in *Tractor* necessitate their counterpart, in the story, in Govindan, B.Sc, unemployed, now tractor driver: the reversal of the intellectual's role is complete when Kapali announces of his uneducated cleaner, 'Mari will beat you hollow when it comes to intelligence', as Govindan feels increasingly disoriented in a differently oriented world, on the threshold of an order he has no knowledge of. The decentering of the discourse of the urban intellectual/official who wields power is paralleled by the re-establishment of Govindan's power over the tractor: his mechanical bride. Thangar Pachan, Vaiyavan and Gandharvan are separated by a few odd pages in the *ICA* 1998 edition; Ettayapuram Rajan's is the final story in the 1997 anthology. The centrality of the development narrative, enunciated variously as unqualified success, or qualified failure, establishes a dialogue across the anthologies, and among the stories in each: the stories converse with each other, denied a unified, sacrosanct, moral voice. A similar conversation comprises the economy of reading practices in the consumption of popular fiction; texts are seldom the

isolated focus of reader attention, preventing the privileging of any one text or voice, and the passive acceptance of offered subject positions. Such a reading strategy assumes significance in the context of a narrative mimetic realism, where the interested mobilization of 'empirical', 'politically neutral' detail tied to the plot disallows the reader maneuverability that the mythic realism of the parent genre encourages.<sup>35</sup>

### **FICTIONAL BORDERS**

The expansion of the imaginary of the Tamil cultural economy in the 90s is a corollary of the greater Tamil political presence at the centre. The regional endorsement of national power necessitates and is prefigured by a fictional conquest of what was once alien territory and culture. Rendered amenable through an ambivalent participation and exclusion that allows recuperation of the Other into Tamil political and cultural narratives, the conquest is geographical as much as cultural. The increasing identification of Delhi as the centre of the national body politic is accompanied by a felicitous Tamil maneuvering in alien geographical space: Delhi is remapped on a grid of Tamil presence: a cartography that retakes the symbols of national governance, in a conquest ratified by the non-Tamil native. In Pa Raghavan's *Ellaikal Ulla Ulagam* (A World With Borders, *KDM* 1997:224-8), the 'South-Indian typical middle class Srivaishnava Brahmin' falls in love with a North Indian girl, Malini, whose father is an important official in the Home

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<sup>35</sup> I will discuss specific strategies of reading in the context of gendered reception of texts.

Ministry, 'very close to Indira Gandhi and P.V. Narasimha Rao, but that was before the court case'. The software executive posted in Delhi delineates the contours of the capital city along a Tamil axis: Rashtrapathi Bhavan, Karol Bagh, Iyer's Mess; and a 'cosmopolitan' international itinerary, made possible by his vocation, and its command of the circuits of international capital. Tamil culture is pointedly restrained, civilized, pure (a scam-tainted Rao is expressly disowned, appropriated, and disappropriated, for the Tamilian, anti-North Indian identity), and requires a vigilant animosity to polluting alien practices, a task ideally suited to the devout Brahmin protagonist. His Brahmin consciousness here stands in for an authentically Tamil/Dravidian one: access to power in an alien land necessitates the donning of an explorer/pioneer's mantle, with the liberating sanction at home that crossing boundaries builds.<sup>36</sup> It is important that the *Kalki* readership is mostly upper caste, upper class Tamil, a sequestered, beleaguered identity in Dravidian cultural politics, that here explicitly disowns the 'Aryan' for an unproblematic, representative Tamil.

In G. Suresh's *Duraimargalum Duraisanimargalum!* (KDM 1998:325-30), the circuits of international capital are broken into, valorizing Tamil superiority in the face of 'North Indian imperialism'. The explicitly colonial idiom evoked by the title (durai being the generic name for the white-skinned masters, and later, the ruling class), draws attention to 'Aryan' North

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<sup>36</sup> See McClintock, 1996 for the implications of boundaries in an age of colonial expansion, and Pandian, 1992 for a study of the transgressing of boundaries by folk heroes in Tamil.

Indian neo-colonisation of the Fourth Estate, in an effort to cement Tamil identity by mobilizing indignation, anchoring it to a colonial-anthropological typology of the undifferentiated, colonized peoples. The 'Saala Madrasi' can never be trusted, his loyalty always in question, his intelligence suspect, needing constant surveillance ('like Shah Jahan's slaves'). 'Who says there are no colonies?' demands underpaid Chandran, the only Tamil freelancer with the *Madras Daily Tribune*, an alien in an office of better paid because North Indian and Malayali 'superiors'. His nuanced command of English (his models are R.K. Narayan, Wilde, Faulkner, Hemingway and Kafka), and international affairs is however yoked to the service of pulp journalism, purveying gossip columns filled with the prurient details of stars' personal lives, a circulation boosting excess that is nevertheless sneered at for its lack of 'North Indian refinement'. The taunts of his superiors are uncannily similar to those of his Christian schoolteacher, Rosary Victoria, who systematically denigrated Chandran's ability to turn his genius with the language into a career. The valorization of English over Tamil, like the valorization of Brahminical purity over lower caste pollution, is here undertaken in the service of a pan-Tamil nationalism, whose zeal adroitly renders such distinctions superfluous to the (mostly Brahmin, English-educated) reader.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> *KDM's* 40,000 subscribers are 'middle aged, middle class' (Seetha Ravi, Interview, April 1999) and implicated as Brahmin reading subjects by the

The control of Tamil economic capital by outsiders (the Levi's, air-conditioners, Zens, and cellulators are the prerogative of the dorais) is finally rendered redundant when Chandran's novel *Men Without Roots* which tells of an East-West encounter, is sold by his London agent, John Berger, to Colin and Harper for a subscribed royalty of 3.5 crores, and an advance of a crore. By playing on fears of a takeover of the regional/Tamil press by 'foreign' players in the context of possible foreign entry into the liberalized media,<sup>38</sup> the story subtly invokes a xenophobia that includes Muslims and Christians in its ambit, by paralleling and equating their patent cruelties as portrayed in the story. The categories of non-Tamil, North Indian, Muslim and Christian are seen to overlap in striking ways by drawing attention to their treatment of subject populations. The changing definition of Tamil to mean Hindu, and possibly upper caste, is underwritten by the globalized endorsement of this identity-formation by international capital, ironically by the erstwhile, and now neo-colonising First World. The Tamil economy feeds directly into the global, in a context where foreign investment in individual states

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articles, stories and essays. The preoccupation with high religion, and the non self-conscious use of the Brahmin patois recurs more frequently here than in periodicals of larger circulation. The stagnant 'core readership' subscribes to a set of values that most approximately characterize the male, Brahmin, upper middle class bracket. A commitment to Nehruvian secularism and planned development, and a strategic enunciation of Tamil upper caste identity are palpably present.

<sup>38</sup> See N. Ram, 1994 for a discussion of the impact of foreign entry into Indian mass media, especially the regional press.

has come to be seen as an index of economic progress. By reversing the fears of foreign takeovers into a North Indian conspiracy (the 'Aryans' are now, uncannily reminiscent of Periyar, 'demons' and 'rakshasas'), the story draws on a past history of anti-Aryan/Hindi mobilization, giving it a new lease of life, while simultaneously blanket-laundering international capital investment.<sup>39</sup>

Su Venugopal's *Bhumikkul Nathi Oduhirathu* (The River That Runs Underground, *KDM* 1998:63-5), explores a caste-clash through the consciousness of Virumandi Thevar, a schoolteacher in Vembakottai. The Thevar sabha has been convened to take stock of the Thevar-Dalit clashes in Sivakasi, 260 miles away. Four Thevar lives have been lost to the three Dalit lives taken; a retaliation is planned. The women watch, sequestered, as Virumandi's pleas for village peace go unheeded. His daughter Eswari's village has also witnessed clashes; her brother-in-law is injured. The young men, baying for vengeance, order the women to be armed, and plan the killing of Marimuthu, the loud-mouthed Pallar Dalit, in the street. Virumandi's wife is worried; should they hold their grandson's cradle ceremony elsewhere? Virumandi is disturbed

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<sup>39</sup> In Iykan's *Chorul* (Food, *DMDM* 1997:2,284-7) the validation of Sethumadhavan Nair's domiciled Tamil citizenship focuses on the fact that not a paisa of his life's earnings has been remitted to Kerala, his home state; his descendants, employed in the Middle East, invest in Tamil Nadu, not Kerala. The software economy, valorized across the stories and periodicals, speaks of Tamil presence in the global economy via the MNCs; the upwardly mobile middle-class man, and to a lesser extent the woman, now work as the managerial class and software executives rather than in government offices. The exceptions are the Delhi based upper echelons of society.



by his conversation of the previous night with Subbammal, his Pallar bride-to-be in his youth, when caste restrictions tore them apart. She is haggard, old, poverty stricken, married to Marimuthu, whose frequent absences on 'village work' when questioned invite physical abuse. She is 37, and has just had her fifth daughter. He is 43, and has seen his grandson. 'I should have been the school teacher's wife,' Subbamma laments. Her wasted body and premature decay remind him of their youth, when they assumed that neither untouchability, caste or class posed a problem. The world of women, Virumandi reflects, allows no quarter to caste enmity; their ties established as they work together hold fast in the face of madness. He is a descendant of Aangu Thevar, the legendary zamindar, whose lineage owes the Pallars a debt of gratitude. The Thummalagundu and Karungida zamindars, incensed by the growing power of Aangu Thevar, set their men on him. Disguised as a Saivite mendicant, he shakes them off, when confronted by one of the zamindar's men, singing suggestively, leering at the women working in the fields. The Thevar's fury erupts, and he cuts him down, leaving a decapitated body by the tank. He now flees with his pregnant wife and two children, travelling by night. His wife delivers a baby boy, but is near exhaustion; the Pallar women nearby hide the fugitives in their homes, Moopan's wife nursing the baby along with her own son. The Pallar couple performs the cradle ceremony for the Thevar child, a custom followed until recently, disregarding the normally applicable laws of untouchability. The hotheaded Thevar youth have prevented its observation lately. Subbamma arrives that evening at Virumandi's house: when can she come to perform the cradle ceremony? Disregarding his offer of money

to defray expenses, she arrives the next day under cover of darkness, performs the ceremony, blesses the child, feeds it. If either community discovers this, neither family will be spared; Marimuthu, Subbamma's husband, is already a targetted man.

Venugopal's story draws on a version of history that coincides with the self-representation of the Thevars: the once kingly, heavily armed, impulsively violent martial clan has been cheated of its rightful inheritance, chased from their lands, bereft of their property. The economic circumstances of the untouchables, in their ghettoised streets in Thevar dominated villages, are here reduced to the straitened circumstances of Subbamma alone, whose good-for-nothing, loud-voiced, abusive, animal-like husband is the proverbial village troublemaker. Virumandi, on the other hand, exhibits the restraint of the village elder and schoolteacher, as befitting his elite, educated status. Virumandi's capitulation to the endogamous caste laws confirms their validity, while also upholding his elite credentials. The naturalization of violence and the effects of poverty as attributes of birth paves the way for a racialist interpretation of caste and social behaviour. The Dravidian-inspired assertion of male youth has come home to roost: the voice of reason of the older generation, the story suggests, is part of an older social order, where riots were prevented by a benevolent Thevar elder presence. The rise to economic and social prominence of Aanga Thevar's descendants is a naturalized fact that requires no explanation, nor, by extension, the Pallar community's poverty; we are here returned to Thangar Pachan's diagnosis of a community that refuses to

better itself, its 'ridiculous pride' that instigates Marimuthu into challenging the upper castes.<sup>40</sup>

The structuring of frames of identity as concentric circles around a fixed, immutable centre allows the privileging of the outermost, as containing all the rest. Tamil, Dravidian and Hindu are therefore supposedly subsumed under Indian, the ur-category that then encompasses the others. Such a spatialization of overdetermination refuses the simultaneous,

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<sup>40</sup> In a political context where Dalit struggles are understood to be part of a larger political telos—'the Dalit struggle has to be for the liberation of a nationality' (Thirumavalavan, of the Liberation Panthers, quoted in Omvedt, 1999), the Tamil-Dravidian community is still valid as the most inclusive political category. The overdetermination of the reading subject, variously interpellated as Hindu, Tamil, Indian, by the texts, tends to crystallize in an upper caste, Hindu, Tamil, Indian position that works by accessing an easy passage across boundaries. McClintock's categorization of the sacrosanct boundary and the sanctioned male pioneer/explorer as transgressive by definition, his vocation entailing the crossing of accepted limits, is here appropriated by the elite classes. Access to what lies beyond boundaries, social, cultural, political, geographical, is an elite privilege. The 'liminal condition' contingent on the male explorer allows a reformation of subjectivity, an agential component in representational regimes for the lower classes, that has been availed of by folk heroes in the Tamil traditional ballads. Mobilization across state-centre, rural-urban, national-foreign boundaries made possible by the compulsions of a vocation with national-global implications (politics, travel for leisure, a bureaucratic or MNC position), allow the male subject the possibility of shedding articulations impossible as a participating member of a community and its representative regimes. The Delhi-based MNC executive or bureaucrat/politician is a Dravidian/Tamilian, the caste/class articulations miraculously invisible; abroad, he is Indian with a similar invisibility cloaking his Dravidian interpellation. The Brahmin in Delhi, as in Pa Raghavan's story, can therefore construct a Brahmin-Tamil cultural regime that effaces the crucial articulatory differences that interpellate him. The lower castes/classes can cross boundaries only in times of political mobilization; the illegitimacy of this appropriation of elite privilege is expressed as an excess unbecoming the disciplined modern subject. Thangar Pachan's villagers respond to their insertion into the urban economy by a falling productivity; 'their culture wavered'. The violent expression of the imbalances and inequalities that structure their interpellation as lower caste, rural are read as an inability to withstand the forces of modernity, indicative of low moral fibre. The violent excess of the riots confirms their status as a lower, animal like order; the self-policing of the modern individual is a task they are incapable of. The emotions that run riot, indicative of unstable natures that do not respect the institutionalized sanctity of boundaries, therefore invite the charge of complicitous lack of development.

overlapping, variant interpellation of the reading subject. The appropriation of the Tamilian/Draavidian by Indian/Hindu as the overarching category automatically delegitimizes the usefulness of Tamilian/Draavidian as a political weapon in a nationalist telos, such as espoused by the radical Dalit political programmes.

Sarada Viswanathan's *Arasiyal Endroru Matham* (A Religion Called Politics, *DMDM* 1998,3:478-83), written after the February 1998 Coimbatore serial blasts has a twin trajectory—Hindu-Muslim Unity, as well as reaffirmation of family bonds in times of threatened disintegration. Salim Akhtar, leader of a Pakistani goodwill delegation, has a strange request to make of the Indian President: could he depute a Tamil speaking official to accompany him on a visit he must undertake to a little village near Madurai? Salim is a child of Partition; much against the family's wishes, his grandfather, in a frenzied madness, insisted that they migrate to Pakistan. His father, having lost his legs in an accident, has charged his son to visit his friends, Michael and Jagadisan, in their hometown. Panch, 'a high ranking official in the Foreign Office' is detailed to be his interpreter—Salim knows no Tamil. A visibly irritated Panch ('It is years since I spoke Tamil') accompanies him to Madurai, where the Collector, Jain, receives them. Salim declines all the paraphernalia of travelling officialdom: 'I am a pilgrim. The land of my ancestors is my Mecca; it is Allah's grace that I am here to fulfil my father's desire.' Panch is aghast at his lack of culture: he does not wish to visit the Taj, or the Ajmer Dargah, as holy as Mecca, or the birthplace of Jinnah, the

father of Pakistan. Salim insists on undertaking his journey on foot, the devout pilgrim's mark of respect to the sanctified ground he treads. The approach to the village is suggestive: dry, barren fields, overflowing gutters, teeming with pigs, pariah dogs. Salim's relatives crowd around him; introductions carried out, gifts distributed. Salim is invited into the house of the eldest granduncle; Panch, translating, follows, appalled. The house is old; plaster peels spectacularly off the grimy walls; cobwebs hang from the ceiling in thick ropes. They are given tea in chipped, filthy porcelainware, and Panch cannot bring himself to touch the biryani on a common leaf-plate laid out in the hall. The women huddle behind gunny sacks tied up as curtains. Panch excuses himself from the next visit; Jagadisa Iyer lives in the next village, and knows English; Michael's family is dead. Salim is received by Iyer and his wife with great love and affection. He is served coffee in the spick and span house, in a shining brass tumbler, gleaming like gold from its repeated washing. Though they observed ritual purity/pollution taboos, the wife, Vishalam, informs him, they were a family, Hindu and Muslim religious obligations followed at no detriment to their social interaction. Today's generation, the father laments, have lost the art of living together. Salim rises to leave, and stoops to receive their blessings in the North Indian way, promising to find their errant son, 'dedicated to the service of the country in Delhi'. The next day, Panch is handed a parcel by Salim; the Brahmin couple has sent him something as well. The accompanying letter, to Panchapikesan from his parents, sends him their blessings, and the sweets his mother had prepared for her Muslim friends no less than her son. Rather than

embarrass him in front of Salim by acknowledging their relationship, which he has disregarded for many years now, they had played by the rules of his game.

Once again, it is Gandhi's opposition to Partition, in an explicit disavowal of the Nehruvian project, that is invoked to justify contemporary communal relations in a realignment of contemporary political facts. India, by common consensus, is the native soil of the subcontinental Muslims, despite the existence of Pakistan: by relocating Muslim religious and 'political'<sup>41</sup> shrines in India, Pakistan is figured as a truncated, unfinished entity, its historical origins disinherited, the soil of its birth in Indian hands. As Salim adds in confirmation, the soil of one's ancestors is Mecca. The village Muslims are depicted with a fascinated, morbid obsession that centres on their sub-human conditions of living and an abhorrent medievalism, contrasted by the narrative voice with the neighbouring Muslim-free, clean, shining Brahmin village. The entire parable of a family reunited hinges on the mediation of a dutiful Muslim bureaucrat son, in the face of an unresponsive Brahmin one: a potential substitution that the story suggests, but does not accept. The enormity of the comparison is sufficient in shaming the son into obedience. Salim is ultimately the representative of Pakistan in India, irrevocably beyond an all-too-real border that can therefore be fictionally rendered redundant. The Indian-Pakistani family, however, cannot translate into a Hindu-Muslim one in India: Salim's relatives

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<sup>41</sup> The periodization explicitly is Hindu, Muslim and Christian, corresponding to a Hindu Golden Age, the Mughal Empire, and the British Empire, followed by a return, at Independence, to a Hindu rather than secular state.

have regressed, denied the 'big man' status as a Pakistani bureaucrat that he enjoys. While the common bureaucratic vocation of the sons establishes a structural equivalence, native Muslims, unable to establish a domain of equivalence, are not recognized as belonging. In Vanathi's *Unakku Naanum, Yenakku Neeyum* (For Each Other, *DMDM* 1997:3, 376-81), the yoking of what are perceived to be polar opposites in wedlock exemplifies a 'secular' narrative in a favoured technique. The use of inter caste, inter religion marriages as a socially corrective measure has been advocated since the early Nationalist Movement as well as by Periyar and the Dravidian Movement, and are still current in popular political discourse, arousing strong feelings, often leading to caste riots.<sup>42</sup> The story opens with Gayathri's first Deepavali since her wedding, a function of ritual importance for newlyweds. Gayathri is however now Khatija, converted to Islam since her wedding to Sikandar. The narrative enumerates, using Gayathri's nostalgia, the Deepavali preparations in a typically Brahmin household. The 'pure' well-loved vegetarian food in Gayathri's memory is contrasted against the garlic and onions, taboo in Brahmin orthodox households on festival days, that she is now preparing for the fish curry. Noor-un-Nisa, the proverbial cruel mother-in-law beloved of popular fiction since the early 70s, has a vicious tongue that she uses liberally to horsewhip her daughter-in-law,

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<sup>42</sup> Pandian documents the incidents leading to caste riots in southern Tamil Nadu when a Dalit leader, John Pandian, suggested at a political meet that the upper castes be asked for their daughters' hands in marriage to lower castes and Dalits. The forcible marriages of Brahmins to non-Brahmins, invoked by Dravidian demagogues in platform speeches, are now echoed by certain Dalit speakers in a redeployment of the idiom of the Dravidian Movement against its latter day representatives (Pandian, 1992).

whose original sin of desertion of her parental home for Sikandar leaves her loyalty permanently suspect: is the food ready, or is she staring off into space? What about the pigeon, has she cooked it yet? Khatija's heart, though inured for the past year to 'the murder of living beings', cannot accept the slaughter of the trusting pigeons she has come to love, and that, on a festival day! The arrival of her husband necessitates the quick donning of the role of efficient wife: will he have coffee or milk? They are interrupted by little Rahim, who says that their mother is berating a relative from Khatija's house. Husband and wife—Khatija in a black burka and black beads (karukumani), rush to the door, to hear Noor-un-Nisa declare, 'How can I send her to you? Having already run away once, will she not change, and do so again? There is no Gayathri here, only Khatija. It is your mother's fault, she has not brought her up properly... no girl from our community would have run away like her, with the first young man she meets...she prays five times a day, her name has changed, her religion, her family...she has nothing to do with you.' Ramu, Gayathri's brother, pleads: their mother is at death's door, her life hanging in the balance. Gayathri was once the darling of the family, how could she not come to see her mother? Gayathri slumps against Sikandar; he tells his mother that the humanity enshrined in the Koran declares that she let her go. Noor-un-Nisa flares up: it is only because his father is not back that he dares answer her so. She storms into the house in a huff; Gayathri leaves with her stunned brother, whose stricken face registers her changed attire and values. Sikandar catches up with them, bag in hand; it is as Gayathri that she must enter her old home, not Khatija.: her old clothes,



jewellery, bindi, flowers—the symbols of a married woman, no less than that of an unmarried girl—are in the bag. Ramu is moved; Gayathri's choice of lifemate, he says, is vindicated.

Gayathri enters the house, drawing venomous stares and sibilant whispers. She throws herself at her mother's feet, blaming her conduct, responsible for driving her mother to an untimely death. Her mother stirs from her coma, and asks her daughter to sing as of old. Gayathri obliges with a couplet from the *Skanda Sashthi Kavacham* in praise of Muruga. Her mother, satisfied that she has remembered 'all that she was taught', recovers miraculously. The doctor declares, 'Remarkable. Just like the cinema, only this is true'. Ramu escorts Gayathri back, where she cannot meet her husband's eyes: 'Don't I need to change?' she asks, burka in hand. 'No,' he replies. The rituals of religion need not mediate between them anymore. She will be Gayathri, and he, Sikandar. Gayathri swoons at his feet, overcome. The fascinated repugnance with an 'unclean' way of life structures the construction of this story as well. The context of the story in the Deepavali Malar automatically aligns itself against the systematic defilement of ritual norms common to all Hindu homes on the festival day. The heartlessness and insensitivity of the mother-in-law are here characteristics of the stereotype that gain an additional valency from the fact of her Muslimness, and are reinforced by her son's submissive behaviour: the emasculated son is firmly under her thumb. Gayathri and the narrative voice catalogue a high Hindu Brahminical virtue and consequent culture that that Noor-un-Nisa is seen to lack: Gayathri's home is ruled by love, Khatija's

by termagant dictat. The recuperation of Gayathri into a Hindu narrative necessitates Sikandar's inadvertent recognition of a supposed equality in wedlock, that releases her from her Islamic obligations: the Muslim mind has erred again in forcing a conversion.<sup>43</sup> The structural valorizing of orthodox Hindu over orthodox Muslim offers a reading subject position acceptable to all but the minority community, in the context of a shared festival that is desecrated. <sup>44</sup> Gayathri's return to an originary, primary identity, like Neeru's earlier, has dramatized a 'fact': conversions into Islam are not easy to sustain: a convenient fiction that further proves the unsuitability of the religion, an alien one. The burka, as with Risa Khan's relatives, here becomes a medieval remnant that limits a once-enjoyed freedom; it is the livery of Gayathri's subjection to Khatija. By relocating the Muslim beyond the border, the narrative posits the 'acceptable' Muslim as a denatured one, with no corresponding transformation of the Hindu subject. Salim is a clean, cultured 'big man', an influential bureaucrat, whose Mecca may be in India, unlike his Madurai counterparts, but

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<sup>43</sup> One only has to recall the wave of protests over the Meenakshipuram conversions, and their resonances in the anti-Muslim wave carrying all before it in the aftermath of the Coimbatore serial bomb blasts in February 1998.

<sup>44</sup> However, the radical privileging of vegetarianism, seen as a Hindu rather than a Brahmin attribute, is likely to be contested by the majority of the readers. Of the *DMDM's* eight lakh readers, it is inconceivable that all, or even a majority are Brahmins. The Dravidian Movement expressly privileged a cultural formation where the members of the community shared no explicitly Brahmin characteristics, vegetarianism being chief among them. However, not all non-Brahmins are non-vegetarians, though very few people would partake of such food on a festival day. The disavowal of the Brahmin reading subject position can however be conceivably mobilized around the more inclusive Hinduism represented by the *Kavacham*, one of the manifestations of a soft high Hinduism in popular religious mobilization in recent years. The *Mangayar Malar* advice columns explicitly advice bhajan singing as a useful group and leisure time activity, to keep the devil at bay.

not quite the Brahmin son; nevertheless, acceptable because Pakistani, safely across an all too literal border. Sikandar too, achieves his respectability by turning on his mother, asserting his masculinity and husbandly proprietorship, and distancing himself from his 'religion'. In portraying the orthodox Muslim as the invariable type, while liberal Brahmins are. presumably a category that needs no special attention, the text further contributes to a reductive representation. Inclusion clearly demands a rejection of any potentially traitorous difference.

The subsumption of all other regimes of identity under a soft Hindu formation is premised on a regulation of boundaries that demarcate the community, and an implicitly violent transformation of the Other into a sanitized version of the Supreme Subject, the majority regime of identity. The zeugmatic yoking of Brahmin and Muslim implicitly revalorizes Brahminical Hinduism while simultaneously allowing a soft, universal Hindu subjectivity to come into play, releasing a plethora of shared cultural values opposed by the extremity of the Muslim stereotype, in comparison. The centrality of the category of the Brahmin in negotiating a discourse productive of the Other, is a striking device, that allows discursive maneuverability in the recreation of the Indian-Tamil-high caste/Brahmin at the expense of the Pakistani-manqué-Muslim. The failure of the Indian low class Muslim to achieve the status of his successful Pakistani counterpart, is explained away as a lack of disciplined initiative, or a failure to play by the rules: an epistemology that willy-nilly frames the reception of Thoppil Muhammad Meeran's *Napathi-anjavathu Ward Vetpalar* (The

Candidate of Ward 45, *KDM* 1997:105-10). The well-known author's story operates through a Muslim calendar of religious observances. The Deepavali reader is transported to the cold, forbidding, eerie night of *Shab-e-Barath*, the day of reckoning. The narrative is interspersed with distancing parentheses that explain unfamiliar religious and cultural terms, observances. The graveyard narrative contrasts oddly with its Deepavali Malar host, a distinction that however does not apply to *Kalki's* story in the same volume, a humorous ghost story, that does not traffic in the heavily ironic while unnervingly serious and gloomy social realism of Muslim life that Meeran's story does. The familiar milieu of *Kalki's* dated world is allowed a fictional and thematic latitude that will not affect its reception adversely, unlike with Meeran.<sup>45</sup>

The corrupt candidate is visited by the apparitions of his murdered victims; it is a sordid tale of rape, betrayal, and plunder of the defenseless: old women, innocent girls, school children. The fear-struck candidate, whose sole motivation behind his participation in the ceremony is the community's votes in the forthcoming ward elections, faints away to regain consciousness in the grey drizzle of dawn. Unfortunately for Meeran, the stereotype of the cheating Muslim, and the

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<sup>45</sup> *Kalki* prides itself on a 'literary' commitment that publishes good art, in the true Nehruvian secularist tradition. However, the reception of the work in today's context, while heavily informed by communalist discourse, even, and possibly especially amongst, the upper castes/classes, is matched by the publication of the story at all: the literary capital of the author's name and reputation for award winning literature may conceivably break down the resistance to the world of the Other. Meeran's refusal to write in terms of the codes and symbols of the dominant male symbolic order in which he is explicitly refused participation is in itself an act of reappropriation that refuses to be written into a subjected role by a language it does not recognize.

dissonant tenor of his graveyard, presided over by the community of voters and their candidate feed directly into the stereotypes outlined above. The strikingly different community and its observances reinforce the distance that the Muslim must travel into acceptance, and an existence that renders parentheses redundant.

## **CHAPTER - III**

### **STRATEGIES OF READING**

#### **THE PRACTICAL READER**

The spatialization of overdetermination privileges, through the newly magnified indicial detail and/or the causality of the linear referred to earlier, certain categories (male, upper class/caste, Tamil, Hindu, etc), that in the reading subject, enter into a complex dialogue with each other, undercutting, destabilizing, or confirming the specificities of his/her insertion into the dominant symbolic orders. The concentricity of these frames of reference plays an important role in orienting the reading subject towards positions implicated by the text, engendered across (and above) the storeys categorized by Barthes in his analysis of narrative.

Siru kathais in periodicals of different ranges, with differing circulations and reading constituencies, mobilize variably across these analytic categories. My analysis of the linear master narrative of development characterized it as a male classic realist narrative, where the causality of the linear offers minimal displacement of attention to the isolated subsets of details that in the popular mythic-realist narrative allow a reading luxury that subverts the 'tyranny of the linear' (Adorno, in Bernstein ed, 1991) by coding it as the 'warm' part of the narrative. Vaiyavan and Gandharvan use the conventions of aggregation of 'realist' detail and linear plot to privilege marginal

voices (rural women, low caste/class labourers, etc) that in their phatic function imply sympathetic reading subject positions,<sup>1</sup> and an altered causality that is interrogative of the founding empirical validity of this sub-genre of narratives. Interestingly, these master narratives of development were originally carried in periodicals of established literary and socially responsible credentials (*Kalki*, *Ananda Vikatan*, etc), by authors whose experience in the siru kathai field spans decades, rather than imply debutante literary activity. The exception is Thangar Pachan, a cinematographer and later entrant, whose short stories, like those of the others, have won state awards. The component of socially responsive literary art is validated by their nomination for the *Ilakkiya Chinthanai* yearly selections, the anthologies that represent the high literature end of the continuum of periodicals I have chosen to study. Ashokamithran's *Puthiya Payirchi* (A New Beginning, *KDM* 1998:261-3) documents the struggle of a young girl to earn her computer degree, teaching at the same institution to make ends meet. Her father waits at the lonely suburban bus depot every night to escort her back to their house. The story chronicles the tiredness, the fear of the unknown, predatory world, and the humdrum routine of the daily grind through the consciousness of the old, tired man, waiting anxiously for his daughter. The indicial functions gain importance for their compassionate

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<sup>1</sup> 'The cultural producers, who occupy the economically dominated and symbolically dominant position within the field of cultural production, tend to feel solidarity with the occupants of the economically and culturally dominated positions within the field of class relations. Such alliances...are not exempt from misunderstandings and bad faith' (Bourdieu, 1994).

understanding of a common enough routine in the lives of working women, and old, single men: the endless waiting at the bus stop is itself a structural device that denies the primacy of a linear plot.<sup>2</sup> The privileging of the normatively non-dominant voice teases out subject positions that question their insertion into the dominant symbolic order. Ashokamithran's woman protagonist is shown in the process of acquiring the economic and cultural capital that will ensure her easy mobility across traditionally demarcated gender roles, a situation that the structure of the story prefigures in the male donning of the patient waiting suggestive of the housewife. The act of consumption of the ambivalently gendered popular fictional text<sup>3</sup> is informed by an aesthetics that is gendered. While the act of reading fiction is characterized as a female activity, the middle rung *DMDM*, with the largest circulation and number of stories, privileges a fictional totality that draws equally on 'empirical' detail and the 'low', 'impure' melodramatic

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<sup>2</sup> The ICA 1997 story *Thundu* by Gandharvan (50-61) similarly uses the repetition of the action of lowering the towel worn over the shoulder by lower caste men, in the presence of upper castes, to document caste based oppression. The title of the story means towel, as well as fragment: the author's use of the word invokes both senses, as the nominating critic explains, to portray the fragmentation of the national polity along caste based lines. Once again, the reference point is Gandhi.

<sup>3</sup> The aesthetic appreciation of what has been classified as low culture can be related to the production of new kinds of taste by new social classes' (Bourdieu, 1994). As has been discussed earlier, the consumption of popular fiction in the Tamil context has been perceived as a female activity, the non-elite technical devices such as melodrama, *deus ex machina*, reversal, coincidence, etc and choice of themes are supposedly particularly symptomatic of the 'sensationalism' demanded by the lower classes and women, and result in their being swept away in a tide of sentimentality that follows from their unreasoning identification with the characters. As Cora Kaplan has pointed out, in 18<sup>th</sup> century England, men supposedly read critically, while women and working class readers read emotionally, and lacked an 'aesthetic' disposition. (Kaplan, quoted in McCracken, 1998).



conventions of popular culture in a conspicuously brazen self-consciousness that undercuts the sanctity of the 'realist' development narrative within the same cultural economy.<sup>4</sup> The privileging of identity formations that inform both these narrative types share an articulation premised on male, upper caste, upper class status, and consequent sanctioned boundary crossings.<sup>5</sup> In this cultural economy that I shall call the popular mythic/classic realist, the 'male' text engenders a range of passive 'female' reading subject positions corresponding to their positioning in the dominant symbolic order; these are however contrasted by the ambivalently gendered reading subject positions that are allowed to emerge by the subversion of the codes of the linear and the elite representational regimes.

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<sup>4</sup> The 'literary' stories of the *ICA* annuals appear in their parent magazines along with the 'mythic realist' narratives that that characterize the *DMDM*.

<sup>5</sup> In Su Samuthiram's *Sathikaatha Jaathi* (Unachieved/Unrealized Caste, *DMDM* 1998:1,52-5), the lower caste girl elopes with the son of her father's upper caste friend; when the girl's caste sabha convenes and decides to pressurize the minority higher caste into ratifying the union by holding a wedding, it is revealed that the boy in question is the untouchable servant who bears the same name as the friend's son. The story clearly dramatizes the inability of upward caste mobility, here articulated through female agency, at the same time punishing aspirations to such boundary-crossing by decreeing a demotion in ritual and economic status for the transgressing family and community. In Nithiarasar Mohan's *Sadhanai!* (*DMDM* 1998:3, 434-7), the upper caste aged landlord's young wife initiates an affair with their young lower caste servant when her husband is away, and is caught with him. She immediately protests rape, and is witness to the young man being hauled off to prison on charges of having stolen a diamond ring. Female agency is repeatedly used, as Tharu and Lalita suggest, to portray women as guilty, betrayers (1997). The indicial detail documents caste differences in much the same way that conventional tropes demonize the Muslim, the Christian, and the rural. In *Michangal, The Remains*, by Firdaus Rajakumaran (*ICA* 1997:102-3), Jappaan's low caste slum dwelling precludes office participation in the wedding ceremony; it is only the Muslim and Christian joiner and fitter who reluctantly decide to attend, forcing the others to stop for a cursory benediction. Jappaan is underpaid, his nickname mocks his 'Japanese' features; and is allowed allies in the other ritual/religious outcaste denominations. who it is implied, share a similar socio-economic cultural status. The story was originally published in the *Dinamani Kadir* of August 1997.

The stories in the women's magazines draw on these strategies to recuperate a female empowered reading subject, whose appropriation of the language of command reclaims stereotypes valid in the 80s, transforming them to suit present-day requirements. Such siru kathais too draw on both mythic and classic realist conventions to destabilize the privileged order by recuperating agency across the categories. Parvathi Surya's *Pennalla, Priya Thozhi!* (Not Daughter, But Dear Friend! *MMAM* 1998:36-8) focuses on a possible community of women, united by their opposition to sexual harassment at the workplace in an easy conversational style. Radhu, the young college student daughter of Charu, zooms in on her Scooty, tosses her handbag on the table, and banter her mother into a breezy informality that makes her drop her older generation Brahmin woman inhibitions. When Charu confides haltingly in her daughter, Radhu's reaction surprises her: 'Oh, that! We teenage women face it all the time!' The male rulers of the private firm where she is employed are shown as strangely impotent despite their sexual aggression: by playing the outgoing MD against the new incumbent, his son, Radhu subtly reverses the rules of the sexual game: she strides into his office without an appointment, brings him a bouquet of flowers and hints that his father was anxious about his ability to manage the company. The rules of the office romance are overturned: Radhu moves from home to office, subordinate to superior, and points out the

inconsistencies in the MD's language, in command of a male syntax of mobility and speech that she recasts as specifically female.<sup>6</sup> The insistence on the indicial detail: the Scooty, the flowers, the B.Com degree invest the protagonist with an agency that is oppositionally gendered and revalorized. The provenance of such agency in Radhu's Brahmin, upper caste status is used against Brahmin, upper class male opponents to reiterate a gendered consciousness, that in its provision of a memory of dominance and equivalence re-establishes the primacy of the gendered, reconstituting the hierarchy of subject positions spatialized by the text.<sup>7</sup> Rather than an isolated instance, the *MMAM* stories persistently reclaim non-privileged cultural identities through subtly changing protagonist positions that draw into play and disarm male constitutive injunctions, recreating mythic realist paradigms of exposition and consumption. Central to such a conception of subjectivities-in-play, as opposed to the dominant, immutable stereotypes in the

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<sup>6</sup> Radhu also specifically reverses the College Girl stereotype in popular Tamil film and fiction, where the 'Westernized', arrogant, rich spoilt girl is initiated into conventional Tamil woman by the 'rowdy' lower class/caste male classmate/senior who tames her into the submissive paragon of Dravidian motherhood/wifehood. As has been pointed out, the norm even in the days of the Self Respect Movement is the virtuous domestic woman (Tharu and Lalita, 1997). Radhu's Brahmin status codes her breaking of conventions, figured as the normal, existential reality in her class/caste, into a specific disavowal of this Dravidian stereotype, current in the 80s, invoked fairly frequently even today.

<sup>7</sup> The paradox of subjectivation (*assujétissement*) is precisely that the subject who would resist such norms is itself enabled, if not produced, by such norms. Although this constitutive restraint does not foreclose the possibility of agency, it does locate agency as a reiterative or rearticulatory practice, immanent to power' (Judith Butler, quoted in McCracken, 1998).

persistent focus on movement, changing, passing. The male access to the female spheres of the private that all these stories penetrate<sup>8</sup> self consciously emerges as a caught-in-the-act voyeurism, that Anuradha Ramanan's *Azhage!Azhage!* (Beauty! *DMDM* 1997:1, 58-61) vocalizes. Unable to understand her husband's compulsive discussion of the physical 'beauty' of every woman he meets, the wife is made to understand that true 'womanliness' resides in the dutiful performance of wiveing and mothering roles.<sup>9</sup> While 'looking' is desexualized into an asexual aesthetics that both husband and wife can invoke in the contemplation of the female form (which male articulated aesthetic, the text makes clear, the wife cannot participate in with any appreciable degree of pleasure or involvement), womanly beauty flows from the acceptance of (legalized, as well as cultural) boundaries: an explanation the text cannot quite justify to the wife. In drawing out into the open, public forum of

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<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of the gendered public and private spheres in the Indian electronic media context, see Rajagopalan, 1999. Rajagopalan argues that the visual media portrays heterosexual intimacy as the privilege of the upper caste, upper class male, and female, an agency denied to the lower caste/class woman, 'who cannot love her man back'. Though this is largely true, the reception of such cinematic valorizing in Tamil would suggest that the woman's agency in love is not a salient factor; despite her initiatory moves, and subsequent passive role, the uneasy male voyeurism that is unfailingly articulated in terms of the immoral heroine, and the perceived harmful effects of cinema, particularly for women viewers points to the primacy of the public/private dichotomy in both viewing and existential social relations. See Pandian, 1992; Dickey, 1993; Ravindran, 1999.

<sup>9</sup> Well into the 90s, cinema hoardings, popular films and fiction recall the 'mother community' that was one of the most potent mobilizational tropes in Dravidian cultural politics, rising to its zenith under MGR. (Ashokamithran, 1996, Pandian, 1992). The characters in this story are non-Brahmin, possibly not upper caste; the 'low' cultural aesthetics of such 'looking' supposedly alien to the Brahminical spiritual/ritual ethos.

discussion, the lives and intimacies of its woman protagonists, the normatively male constructed siru kathai form that reiterates gendered boundaries of the private and public is guilty of an originary transgression that must be rendered inaccessible to the woman. The marriage of text and illustration that is the format of the mass produced siru kathai draws on the codes of both cinema and literature in an uneasy, unstable partnership. The illustration, or fabula, in its primacy of time and space as positioned by the presentation of the text, is explicitly oriented to a male viewer, drawing on cinematic codes of representation.<sup>10</sup> The brightly coloured, well dressed woman young is positioned almost three dimensionally in the frame closest to the reader. The male and other older women supporting characters are banished to the background. The exaggerated sari clad Barbie doll like torso of the woman is positioned to maximum titillating 'effect', angled sideways, facing left, exposing her midriff and outlined bust, the sari drawn over the left shoulder as here, or frontally, demurely, facing the viewer. Her gestures and positioning within the frames of the illustration link her to the male protagonist,

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<sup>10</sup> The Tamil popular cinema implicates a male viewer, whose concerns people and animate the filmic text. Ashokamithran, in his analysis of the heroines of Tamil cinema and female spectatorship points to a nuanced viewing that bypasses male injunctions articulated in the films to build an alternative set of viewing guidelines that focus on the women characters: a fact recognized, if obliquely, in the titles of the films of the 50s and 60s where the male protagonist is given a secondary role. The female stars, he suggests, point to a different epistemology for their female fan following (Ashokamithran, 1996).

though the overall effect coheres in the male viewer 'outside', whose pleasure in the private approach to a publicly available woman is heightened by the pictorial insistence on the accessibility of the fragmented female body he is now allowed to possess. The figure of the woman invites possession in a uniquely singular way: the male viewer and his object of fantasy, alone in a sexualized intimacy, unimaginable in quotidian social transactions.<sup>11</sup> The fantasy-fabula, with its promise of originary epistemological validity is denatured by the explicating sjuzet of the text: the 'facts' that write the pictorialized cinema heroine into respectability, order, law: her virtuous counterpart, shorn of the threatening transgressiveness the illustrations suggest. Such sanctioned male trespassing across the institutionally sacrosanct, legal boundaries: of marriages, for instance, and its rhetoric of the proprietorship of the woman—invites a palpable uneasiness that rescues the male from culpability by reinvoking the private, intimate women's sphere as paradoxically, beyond the reach of the law, a cultural economy that in complete autonomy under male supervision, regulates itself. In Punithan's *Enna Saiya Pohiraal?* (What Will She Do? *DMDM* 1997:1, 76-8), Lakshana discovers at a chance visit to the doctor that she suffers from terminal lung cancer. Her husband, Vignesh, will not withstand

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<sup>11</sup> 'The illusion ingratiates itself, promising satisfaction: it reads desires in one's eyes, and brings them to the surface of the commodity' (Haug, 1994).

the shock; the doctor, a family friend, agrees to keep the news from him. Pretending to be barren, Lakshana capitalizes on Vignesh's desire for a child to describe herself as failing to perform her wifely duties. Providence offers her Triveni, newly arrived at the government office where all three work: young, stunningly beautiful, divorced, living 'alone' in a ladies hostel—the last three the unchanging attributes of the traditional fictive Tamil fallen woman. Lakshana throws the two together, prevailing over a weakly protesting Vignesh (wifehood cannot be reduced to child bearing, he says; theirs is a one year old love match), presiding over the ritual wedding she arranges for them. Triveni soon, with Vignesh's tacit approval, wants Lakshana thrown out. At this juncture, Lakshana is summoned by the doctor: there has been a mistake, the X-rays were wrongly filed; it is not Lakshana, but Triveni who suffers from cancer. Lakshana, relieved, sets about 'regaining' what she 'has lost'. In this proverbial male fantasy come true, Vignesh is absolved by a systematic usurpation of agency by the woman, subtended by male needs. Lakshana initiates and legitimates the wedding, standing in as the witness cum dominant organizing force, arrogating to herself the male, institutional roles of the couple's fathers, and the legal registrar of weddings. Triveni, already the cinema heroine and inherently destabilizing, predatory, initiates the act of expulsion.<sup>12</sup> Vignesh is further emasculated by his

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<sup>12</sup> The name Triveni, as the text slyly draws attention to, hints at the asymmetrical menage-a-trois that is naturalized in the housebreaking fallen

government job: both Lakshana and Triveni inhabit the same position, representing the same economic capital, unthinkable in a cultural economy where the male is always several notches above the wife or lover, unless he is the hero who tames her into renouncing her status, caste and arrogance, conventions perfected by the early 80s. The accompanying illustration figures both women and the man in a single frame, fragmented into different coloured rectangles, emphasized by an insistent, black border. The women could be mirror images of each other, and as their gestures suggest, caught by a camera a few seconds apart in a fluid, continuing motion. This splitting of the wife- stereotype into its two extremes that look identical, draws attention to the transgressive similarities of both. Lakshana may be the ideal wife, the fabula suggests, but she is tarred by the same brush that Triveni is. The sjuzet provides hints enough, without making too much of them: Lakshana has married late, has contracted a love match, not yet produced children, and has crossed boundaries, even if empowered by a missionary zeal in the service of male sexual fulfilment. Beware, warns the fabula: Triveni can just as soon become Lakshana, as Lakshana, Triveni. This essential anxiety in 'fixing' the role of the woman

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woman, whose inability to retain her first husband already indicates a failure to perform wifely duties well; she is contrasted against the Brahmin Lakshana, whose name connotes married auspiciousness. In Vanathi's story discussed earlier, Khatija's 'original' name Gayathri, by drawing into play the 'holiest' of Vedic, high Brahminical mantras, heightens the blasphemy of Khatija, the name of the Prophet's wife. As Sikandar sums up, Gayathri cannot be Khatija.



necessitates the constant revalidation of boundaries as male imposed and transcended, female observed. The multivalency of the liminal and its potentialities for transgression (Vignesh's twice married simultaneity is one such male instance) are a product of crossing limits, of inherently abnormal, extreme states; the inadvertent female agency necessitated by the structural causality of the plot renders both women protagonists in control of such power. Sunder Rajan suggests that women's exceptional entry into the space of the public positions her as the object of the male gaze, calling forth a response that is ambivalently divided between pride and shame: a simultaneous exhilaration and disgrace/danger.<sup>13</sup> It is this newly created possibility of subverting the positions offered by the discourse of the dominant that the women's periodicals and the mythic realist popular narratives appropriate, while the male oriented siru kathai demonizes such agency as fallen.<sup>14</sup> The anxiety attendant on male manoeuvres, patently illegal,

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<sup>13</sup> She however cautions against the interested development of the ambivalence, culminating in its extreme in the often institutionalized rape fantasy, where one aspect of this characterization, with its inbuilt withdrawal of all agential power, is magnified out of all proportion, disregarding the attendant actual play of power, into a supposed female desire for violation (Sunder Rajan, 1999). Interestingly, Rao, Shulman and Subrahmanyam characterize the fluid crossing of boundaries by the up and coming Nayaka period individual as a violation; texts that they analyse bear this connotation as well (1998).

<sup>14</sup> The desirability of the women in the illustrations follows precisely from their heightened power; the transgressive, uncontainable possibility of such power, although present and recognized as threatening, is sought to be tamed by the linear closure of the text. The *a priori* validity of the illustrations in the act of reading, however freezes the moment of power in an ambivalent tamed/unleashed reiteration of the moment of danger.

punishable by the machinery of the state, is rendered harmless by characterizing such female agency as Lakshana's and Triveni's as applicable only in the home, a private, hermetically sealed interior where the state cannot intrude, thus manipulating this agency. In Rajesh Kumar's *Ilar Ilaray Oru Kutram* (A Minor Crime, *DMDM* 1997:1, 144-51), a young psychoanalyst takes advantage of his hypnotized patient to assault her sexually; she commits suicide, and her fiancé, on discovering the reason, follows suit. The doctor is visited by a young couple; the girl is in need of psychiatric help; will he pay a house call? He arrives at his destination, following their instructions, to be locked into an old mansion, where he is asked to prepare for his death at an appointed time. When the hour arrives, he is asked to look up, at the framed picture of a young man that hangs in the room; the fiancé, who has committed suicide. The young man who visited the doctor is his twin brother; his companion, the dead girl's sister. By making the doctor undergo the pain and agony of approaching death, the brother has been avenged. The obviation of legal redress for the rape is a corollary of the wronged fiancé, driven to suicide, not the rape victim or her death. Strangely enough, the illustrating codes that position the woman closest to the reader are disregarded: the doctor occupies the first frame, his back to the viewer, facing beyond his desk, the young twin, the girl standing behind his chair, attired in a salwar, dupatta drawn

carefully well above her exposed neck and the deep neck line: she is the whore heroine, related to the raped, mentally aberrant sister, whose submission to the 'medical' examination by the culprit strips her of her purity. A few hours' agony are equated with a rape<sup>15</sup> and two deaths.<sup>16</sup>

*Mangayar Malar*, one of the leading women's magazines, is devoted to 'the practical woman'; all short stories are women centered, 'practical', deal with human relationships and the problems faced by working

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<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, stories by women writers tend to emphasize the presence of the law, mediating their plots through legal sanction: Neeru, in Chudamani's story *DMDM*\_1997:2. 312-6) is legally adopted, marriages are legally conducted; etc.

<sup>16</sup> The discussion of marital violence is similarly premised on the sanctity of 'female' private spheres, where physical abuse is a family matter, that cannot be allowed to become a public spectacle. In Pe Nayaki's *Bothai Maram* (*ICA* 1998:107-15), the male protagonist, reeling in drunk one night, the first time since his wedding, slaps his wife when she berates him. He wakes the next morning to his in laws' presence; when he shamefacedly blurts out his folly of the previous night, he is informed that that is his private matter; they merely wish his permission to 'borrow' their daughter to have her inaugurate a shop they have acquired. The wife, the only daughter of her parents is ashamed that her husband could discuss their married life with them parents. In Su Karunanidhi's *Aan* (*Man*, *ICA* 1997:11-20), the Sri Lankan couple living next door, the narrator begins, are a strange couple. The young 'modern' wife (she wears jeans, has styled short hair, and is employed) struggles to bring up her children in an alien land with an out of work, alcoholic husband who abuses her physically. The police are summoned by her young daughter one day in desperation as she cowers from her husband's blows. 'We do not want to interfere', they inform her. The next incidence of battering is so severe that her skull is fractured; the kindly upper caste neighbours wonder if they should intervene in 'a private quarrel', when her bleeding comatose state necessitates an ambulance. The male culprit in this case is a Sri Lankan, denied the cultured restraint of Nayaki's Tamil protagonist who 'realizes' his folly. The Sri Lankan wife is suggestively leered at and molested by her husbands 'Tamil' friends; being modern and alien, she is fair prey. Aliens are seemingly exempt from the 'sanctity' of the private, and the disciplined morality of the Tamil public space. In marked contrast, amongst the dominated classes, there are, and can be no 'private' spaces; the community is privy to all goings on, and no matter is beyond community arbitration or intervention. See Viramma et al, 1997.

women, and have 'positive endings' (Manjula Ramesh, Interview, April 1999). The implications are clear: the working woman cum housewife, the modern reader, will orient herself in the real world by her fictionally received bearings: she is the Practical Reader, whose entry into the public domain is accompanied by an easy going familiarity with the ways of the world, mother, wife, daughter, whose awareness of her culturally defined roles is informed by a pragmatism that brooks no dissent. The monthly's interactive pages discuss issues of sexual harassment, budgetary household economics and career options: working woman she may be, but the kitchen and its economics are entirely her responsibility—the space open to contributors of tips, jokes, recipes and random notes is the most extensive of the periodicals under study. *Mangayar Malar* shares some of the features of the *Dinamalar*, *Kalki* and *Ilakkiya Chinthanai* anthologies, inhabiting a position in the field of literary production that is informed by fictional tropes, techniques and assumptions evident in all three, mobilizing them in unexpected ways. Selva Kadiravan's *Niraiyu* (Fulfilment, *MMAM* 1997:112-4), opens with Meenakshi Sundaram, a superintendent with the PWD, dreading his approaching retirement: the lack of a job is to him a loss of identity, function and individuality. Vishalam, his wife, SSLC, B.Ed points out that they have no financial obligations; her calm understanding and apt metaphors soothe him and open his eyes to the existence of identities such as hers: where did she come by such knowledge, she does not leave the house! From reading, she replies: newspapers, magazines, books. The valorizing of popular printed texts in the context of the elite dismissal of popular fiction as epistemologically unreliable, and the activity of reading such fiction as feminine, is here reclaimed for a gendered epistemology that is shown to be superior to

the compartmentalized male one. Her unpaid jobs in the community centres around the locality are structured across a social network that is, in contrast to her husband's departmentalized one, inclusive, and composed of women. The strong presence of women's networks across the *MMAM* stories contrasts suggestively with some stories in the *DMDM* and *ICA* that valorize popular literature in terms of an aesthetic sensibility that is characterized as a gender neutral isolated activity, informed by male networks of codes and processes. In Balaram Senthilnathan's *Kannikku Therinthavai* (What We See, *KDM* 1997:254-6), Kausalya's husband is immersed in the paper—it is the afternoon of Mahavir Jayanthi, a holiday—when the North Indian woollens seller comes calling. Kausi is entranced, making him display every single piece that he has, calling on her husband to translate: he has passed the *Madhyama*. He obliges with irritation, documenting for the reader his wife's shrill argumentativeness, haggling and suspicion. The woollens seller is dressed in dirty, soiled clothes, 'smelling like a stable', looks like 'one of the naturals in the unity of the nation televised broadcasts'. The observing, openly abusive male spectator-king (he threatens to slap his wife when she asks him to intervene in the haggling) chronicles with sardonic malice the incurable propensity of women to hoard discarded disused clothes, boxes, tins, back-issues of *Ananda Vikatan*, *Kalki*, *Kumudam*, and their inability to deal with the realities of life. The bargain concluded, she invites the trader in, feeds him the morning's stale leftovers, which he relishes, and leaves to attend to her work in the kitchen, asking her husband to keep an eye on him lest he steal anything. The itinerant salesman in an alien land understands what is being said about him: 'Don't worry *behan*, I would not steal from my sister, I am an honest man'. She pays him the money; he leaves. Later in the day, the neighbourhood women

troop in: 'that Cochin woman' and two others. They eagerly display their woollen purchases: she discovers that she has paid double, for the same garment. 'The poor man,' Kausi lies, 'I felt so sorry for him that I gave in.' The male narratorial voice explicates her dilemmas with, 'You know how it is,' a male addressing other males on the vagaries of women. His worldly-wiseness, it is clear, derives from the world beyond the home, the latter a regrettable, unavoidable prison, peopled by female hysteria and unreason. He is familiar with Hindi, but quick to point out his distrust of the North Indian, who is by definition wily, untrustworthy, and a compulsive liar.<sup>17</sup> The company of women is disparaged in no uncertain terms: loud voiced, shallow, given over entirely to matters of shopping and conspicuous consumption. Kausalya stands alone: she is the supreme virago, suspicious, the type and the favourite of the boxed *DMDM* and to a lesser extent, the *KDM* humour that sympathizes with the oppressed husband. The husband here is proud of his dominantly vicious streak, confident in his superior knowledge of cultural difference that once again proved right. What we see, as the title suggests, lays bare its secrets only to the male eye.

Jyotirlatha Girija's *Thotrangal!* (Appearances, *DMDM* 1997:2, 305-9) draws attention to the ever widening public sphere, where women's mobility must always lag behind the pioneer man. Vishali's fiancé, her aunt's son, is returning to India from his education in the

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<sup>17</sup> The metropolitan male is routinely figured as a participant in Delhi/North Indian culture, yet a halting one, his status of Tamilian/outsider vital to his identity, a barrier that must be safeguarded: participant, but pollution free. In R. Badrinath's *Sathi* (*ICA* 1998:91-98), the barbaric 'North Indian' custom of sati in the late twentieth century is lamented by the software executive Tamilian and his Rajasthani friend, who tells him the story of his friend's sister's forced immolation. The protagonist teaches his friend Tamil, and understands Hindi, but makes it clear that he is no enthusiast of the 'North Indian' way of life.

States; Vishali's parents live in Trichy, and she lives in a ladies hostel in Madras, employed in a private firm. She decides to meet the plane, and is shocked to see 'him' disembark with a white woman who looks up at him, lost to all else. She returns, agitated, and leaves for Trichy, where her fiancé follows her the next day. The misunderstanding is soon cleared up; the 'white woman' is in India to seek out her fiancé, who has come to India to seek his parents' acquiescence to his marriage to her. Anxious to retrieve 'Indian' honour, 'he' had promised to help her. It turns out that the young man lives at the next street corner, and has been in a coma following an accident; and all's well that ends well. The female propensity to accept the ontologically false as real because seemingly true, is articulated as a female science of the surface. The woman herself is dichotomized into an outer surface and inner essence, mapped as a territory that will be cartographed along a-historical attributes: the male eye penetrating through the transparent surface to the core within. Women are creatures of the surface, the fabula suggests, the sjuzet merely confirms the alignment of female inside/outside: the male gaze has brought to the surface the essence of woman.<sup>18</sup>

The dynamics of female interiority can thus be called up by invoking the indexing role. Sumangali's *Ethuvum Vandaam* (I Require Nothing More, *DMDM* 1997:2, 268-71) complements Balaram Senthilnathan's *Kausi* with her Jana, the Brahmin wife of a government clerk who writes stories for the popular magazines to

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<sup>18</sup> It is no coincidence that Triveni and Lakshana look alike: one the surface, the other the essence, yet both known, devoid of mystery, every woman the same. The sjuzet, and fabula, demystifying only to complicate, alluring only to point to the always known, together thus point to reading subject positions that destabilize each other, refusing to validate either the one or the other.

supplement his meagre income. The four children, in quick succession, necessitated by the first three being girls, need barely enter the story: the dutiful wife is an axiomatic dutiful mother. Under the pen-name Athavan (at least two very famous siru kathai writers have used the same nom-de-plume), her silent, abstracted husband spends his waking hours devising plots and techniques for his literary pursuits, writing far into the night. Jana would like a Mysore silk sari for Deepavali, like one she has seen on a pretty young woman at the beach, amusing herself, looking around, while her husband, immobile, is courted by the Muse. Athavan works night and day to have ready the novella that the *Cinema Kadir* people accept for Rs 750. He uses the money to buy her the sari; Jana, that Deepavali night, hearing his racking cough, is overcome with penitence: a wife's true desire is her husband; she was seduced by the wares of the marketplace; she will, having learnt her lesson, be more than content with her husband, praying for a long, healthy life for him.<sup>19</sup>

Lakshmi Rajarathinam's *Evan En Pillai* (He is my Son! *DMDM* 1998:3,396-9) dramatizes the mothering role of Sumangali's Jana: Arun, promising to marry Madhu, puts off going to her mother to formally ask for her hand. One day, he vanishes, and Madhu realizes she has no way to track him down. She gives birth to a baby boy, whom she decides to have adopted by a childless couple who turn out to be Arun and his wife of many years. She decides to be a single parent, rather than give up her son.

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<sup>19</sup> Lakshmi characterizes this stereotype as the *Kurinji Malar Goddess* (from the novel of the same name) in the kitchen: chaste, pure, dutiful (1984). Developed extensively in the 80s, this stereotype rarely makes an appearance as the sexless goddess; stories now compulsively recognize sex as a component, even of 'childhood friendships'.



The same anthologies, however, carry stories that engage with these stereotypical extremes, recuperating them for a discourse that refuses crystallized virtues from another era, such as Chudamani Raghavan's *Thahuthikal* (Qualifications, *DMDM* 1998:3, 354-7). When Veda's colleague Deepan complements her, saying that her spectacles suit her well, she is pleased, but amused. At her betrothal, however, she had been without them, diagnosed as myopic a little later. She arranges to meet her fiancé at the beach. He drops the honorific plural that she continues to use with him, addressing her in the singular, and bespectacled himself (as the illustration, but not the text shows), declares that bespectacled women look ugly; he wished he had known earlier. Veda retaliates: she is every inch as qualified as him, yet she is to be judged solely by her looks. Rather than be reduced to a beautiful surface, she breaks off the engagement. The broad stereotypes documented by C.S. Lakshmi: the chaste goddess, the modern, sexually desirable whore and the goddess of the kitchen—in the late 80s<sup>20</sup> have changed with the times in subtle ways, working across stereotypes to articulate themselves in dissident detail—Jyotirlatha Girija's reclamation of the hostel for women, Lakshmi Rajarathinam's single mother, to name just a few.

Geetha Bennet's *Mounamey Idaiveli Ahi* (Crevice of Silence, *MMAM* 1998:20-8) establishes a community of women that spans typically contradictory fictive subjectivities: mother, daughter, daughter-in-law. Husbands are secondary to this narrative, where friendships are forged and alliances made on the basis of a shared recognition of mutual needs. To be a parent at 43, or to be a single

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<sup>20</sup> See Lakshmi, 1987 for a detailed analysis of the portrayal of women in Tamil popular fiction, as well as high literature.

mother at 20 are options that are re-examined, and deployed as fictive actualities that inflect the received discourse of mothering roles in destabilizing ways. The rescued respectability of the potentially disruptive beautiful widow, by finding her a motherless child and a dutiful father, as in S. Lakshmi Subramanyam's *Thanimai* (Solitude, *KDM* 1997:301-3) begins to seem, like Jana's options, decidedly facile.

Like her younger counterparts, Lakshana and Triveni, the mother-in-law finds herself written into two extremes, which rather than mutate into each other in a seamless transference, are informed by the retributive cyclicity of their roles. In Jyotirlatha Girija's *Maamiar Vendam!* (No Mother-in-laws!, *DMDM* 1998:3, 496-9), Pankajam, thrown out of her house by her sons and daughters-in-law, is found a place in an old age home by her employer, whose children take charge of the housework when they see Pankajam's ill-health. At the home, she is greeted by her own mother-in-law, whom she had driven out twenty years ago. The sons in both the generations tend to agree with their wives.<sup>21</sup> As with Vignesh, the timely assertion of

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<sup>21</sup> The changing loyalties of the inconstant woman are presumed to lie with the husband rather than her natal family at her marriage (Khatija cannot be sent to see her ailing mother, as Noor-un-Nisa says, since she may desert her husband for her 'home', having committed the crime of marrying out of her religion, thereby giving sufficient proof of her perverse turning of norms on their head), but shift to the son when he matures. The 'mother's boy' stereotype is portrayed to be as castrate as the henpecked husband. *Penn Janman, Women*, by Iykan *DMDM* 1998:3, 465-70, has the husband, Sundaresan, firmly under the control of his mother, and his employed wife, Revathi, an active member of a Ladies Club, finds little to do at home, happier with her women colleagues and her work. The warm approval mother and daughter-in-law voice of each other's roles is interrupted by the arrival of a baby. Revathi declines the top managerial position in her firm, choosing to stay at home for the baby instead: a needless step, as her mother-in-law informs her. The sustained parody of 'the new woman' that the story undertakes, refers back repeatedly to Sundaresan's subject status. 'Normalcy' is restored when 'Rev' decides that to mother is the natural vocation of the woman: an unprecedented volte face that as the narrator, Sundaresan's retired neighbour and fellow sympathizer, informs him, is

women's agency saves the blame for them. The upper caste/class woman, on the other hand, is allowed an agency that is free from compulsions of male ratification: in Uma Kumar's *Karma yogi* (MMAM 1997: 70-76) the woman protagonist establishes a world for herself, and will not exchange her solitude for the comforts of her married son's home. The valorization of her unconventional occupation, running a mess, is written into a religious idiom that her caste background suggests, painting her with a halo, that Devi Bala's *Purinthu Kollungalen!* (Do Try and Understand! DMDM 1998:2, 236-40) 'modernizes'. Aswina's mother-in-law looks after her like a daughter while she attends computer classes and manages a job. Devi Bala's 'modern girl' dresses in clothes 'that are too tight for her, her body bulging out of her tight jeans and shirt'. She is picked up and dropped off on a bike by her male friends: 'the respect that our generation gave the body, this generation doesn't bother with. They look beyond to the heart'. Aswina's chastity and loving heart place her beyond the pale of suspicion, as her mother-in-law proves to a doubting aunt.

The unique economy of practices that subtends the production of the siru kathai for the popular journals of mass circulation establishes a field wherein every siru kathai when printed, enters willy-nilly into a fictive block-and-tackle with the other stories in the

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itself an inherent female trait. The understanding that the women share, however, remains undisturbed. The framing of the narrative through the concerns of the old, decidedly traditionalist Brahmin narrator however easily allows a multiplicity of age and gender determined subject positions to emerge in reading. The woman who favours her son when she is old is the structuring focus of Su Venugopalan's *Veezhnda Marathil Vazhnda Paravaihal* (The Birds of the Fallen Tree, KDM 1997:257-60). The unemployed son and his mother deliberately refuse the father medical aid when he suffers from prolonged attacks of asthma: he is due to retire from service as teacher in a government school, and if he dies in harness, his son will be offered a government job. The arrival of a neighbour necessitates his removal to the hospital, but the tragedy will not be allowed to happen; parricide is not a fictive possibility, though rape and suicide are entertained.

field. Thus far in my analysis, I have followed themes and tropes across stories and periodicals, tracing the limits of the stereotypes, and the fictive latitudes allowed their fictive deployment. In opening this chapter with 'the practical reader', I would like to draw together my analysis of discrete stories by using the *MMAM* stories, oriented to a specific target audience, aiming to represent its reading constituency in its fiction. The magazine embodies an upper caste/class identity that is evidenced even in the interactive spaces: all the cooking recipes and tips relate to vegetarian food alone, a trait shared by *Kalki*, owned by the same house. The women's pages in the other anthologies under study (the *ICA* have no special sections for women) have no fiction, carrying only recipes, as a gender specific reading orientation that can nevertheless be secular in commemoration of the 50<sup>th</sup> year of Indian Independence the *KDM* 1997 carried a 'Knit India Through Recipes' feature, paralleled by recipe sections in the *DMDM* issues that focus on food, both vegetarian and non-vegetarian, from all over the country. The popularity of the *Mangayar Malar* suggests that it is not merely Brahmin women who comprise the readership.<sup>22</sup> The *MMAM* siru kathais are authored by both men and women; the fewer stories makes the Brahmin patois more insistent, calling attention to the assumption that to be Brahmin is also to be well off in this fictive world. While these characteristics are shared by the *KDM*, with its profusion of short fiction, attitudes to love and relationships differ markedly. Established authors may carry specific orientations across all periodicals, though not necessarily so. The *KDM*'s are most

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<sup>22</sup> In the absence of readership surveys or breakups, it is only possible to work with approximations. The *KDM*, for example, with its smaller circulation that is presubscribed, and by being the costliest of the anthologies under study, can be safely characterized as counting a larger number of Brahmin/upper caste/upper class readers in its constituency.

resistant to unions across castes and classes, while less intractable with minority religious communities; the *MMAM*s least so. The *DMDM*s deal with non-majority communities expansively, the *KDM* the least. While translations are not accepted by the *ICA* and the *DMDM*, the *MMAM* carries fictionalized pieces on personalities; the *KDM* carries translations. The *ICA* 1997 and 1998 editions betray a consensual concern among nominating critics with the burden of the last 50 years; yet in choosing from the obtaining pieces, the periodicals have, through these years, carried increasing 'classic-realist' pieces. The percentage of caste based stories to the total for each anthology is an almost constant 1% or even less; yet concerns of caste and status haunt these stories. The illustrative codes across these anthologies while following basic, common principles in typecasting enter into nuanced relations with the text and the self-construction of the periodical's profile. The positioning and framing of figures plays an important role, as do the colours, in enunciating fine tuned distinctions. While I had characterized the *DMDM* illustrations as cohering in a male viewer, my foregoing analyses of the text can be differently inflected by a consideration of the pictorial codes across stories.

Jyotirlatha Girija's *Appearances* (*DMDM* 1997, 305-9) is accompanied by an illustration that recreates what Vishali had first seen: her fiancé and a white woman, whom the text discursively creates as a predatory, immoral alien to whom conventional rules of gendered behaviour do not apply. The woman is looking at the man, as the text explicitly states. The picture is ostensibly Vishali's first glimpse; she has turned away to face the viewer, her hands almost at her throat in shock. The normative male viewer now sees what Vishali

has seen, inserting himself into an explicitly gendered viewing position: the white woman is conventionally dressed in Western attire, no surprises here; but nor is her body sexualized, ready for male viewing as in all other illustrations. Vishali's fiancé is positioned just behind and to the left of her, in what is attempted sleight of hand too efficiently accomplished: his face nuzzles her hair in what cannot be mistaken for perspective. If this is what prompted Vishali's confusion, the fabula says, we are all equally guilty. Maharishi's *Thotrangal* (Appearances, *DMDM* 1998:3, 372-9) has a similar storyline: the male protagonist's wife is deeply suspicious of his colleague, who is loud, laughs and talks exuberantly with the men, but 'has a heart of gold'. The wife realizes how mistaken she was in suspecting 'that woman' of ill intentions (borrowing money, and stealing her husband), and the two become the best of friends. Once again, the two women in the illustration could be twins: they are once again grouped together, but separated by a column of text; the outlines of the man and the friend are interrupted by the magnified outline of the wife, across the page: the images, quite literally, run into each other, the two women suggestively figured as one. Perversely, it is the wife who is positioned as the object of desire, not the intruder. The fabula suggest divergent, dissonant details that the veracity of the printed text, the discourse of reason, of investigation, contradicts. The male privileged viewing position, presumably, does not offer all the answers, or even the right ones. P.D. Samy's story (*Aval Varattum! Let Her Come!* *DMDM* 1998:3, 392-5) centres on a husband and wife pair, the latter working as the PA of a hotel manager. The illustration, in a departure from the norm, has the wife, Sumathi, leaning dangerously low over the seated manager, laughing. It is only on reading the text that one realizes that the man in the poster in the light, fading background is Yohan, the

husband. Though the text overlooks the manager's effusively enthusiastic praise of Sumathi's body, the illustration does not. The practiced eye of the siru kathai reader will respond to the illustrations, read as part of the story, absorbing detail: the implied male or female Brahmin voice, betrayed by a solitary inflection or suffix is immediately coded into the way the sari is worn, the bindi, the sacred thread, etc. In Vanathi's story, Khatija wears a salwar, though the text does not specify so: Gayathri, a sari, bindi, flowers. Sikandar in contrast is coded explicitly differently from the average, open faced male, in an uneasy delineation that makes him alien. In the context of the story, this would undercut his Tamil/Muslim characterization. In contrast, the 'secular' narrative in *Arasiyal Endroru Matham* is helped along by an illustration presided over by Mahatma Gandhi, Jagadisa Iyer's prominent sacred thread, Vishalam's nine yards sari worn traditionally, and a Tamil-looking Salim in sherwani and Islamic beard, coded normally as the hero/protagonist is.

Illustrations play a conspicuous role in the *KDM*. While the *DMDM* volumes each carry a film star on the cover, the *KDM* carry specially commissioned, lavishly coloured glossy renderings of gods and goddesses. These are the primary visual draw of the volumes, replicated on the inside pages with accompanying text recounting the mythology of the particular deity. The siru kathai illustrations are stylized, rarely colour, mostly black and white; both men and women occupy all frames, the woman seldom explicitly sexualized or constructed to titillate the male gaze. The stories themselves are accented towards an older, reasoned, readership, looking for entertainment that is not cheap or reprehensibly frivolous: the solid core of the upper middle class.

The *MMAM* illustrations are all in black and white, and focus on groups of women, or family situations. The women are buxom, svelte or traditionally dressed, as demanded by the story, but never threateningly transgressive, or sexualized in male terms. The Gita Bennet story (*MMAM* 1998:20-8) described earlier has a passive Mini, her long hair falling in waves around her, ensnaring her mother and her husband, and herself: a tiny figure facing away from the viewer, head bowed, adding a new element of understanding to the story, visualizing the implied theme. The *ICA* yearly editions carry no illustrations: the stories, abstracted from their original homes in the periodicals undergo a transformation into the sober, formal category of literature, chosen on merit from amongst competing compatriots. The *MMAM* stories invoke a happy familial harmony where the tenets of the Nehruvian project still underwrite attitudes to class, caste and mobility. Families are united, nuclear, but accommodative of the elderly and the harmlessly deviant.

The *MMAM* represent the only triumph of the transgressive love match in the fiction under study;<sup>23</sup> the stories, by their complex gendered engagement with themes, techniques and fictive assumptions that inform other sub-genres and classes of stories in the major periodicals recuperate an oppositional agency, empowering the female subject.

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<sup>23</sup> Kanakarasan and Lakshmi both document the love match and its themes. As Kanakarasan points out, the love match stories in the 80s as well were ambivalent, some authors resisting the miscegenation that these transgressive stories implied, others welcoming it as the harbinger of a newer, more inclusive society (Lakshmi, 1984; Kanakarasan, 1987). The harmony and possibility of structural mobility in the stories that authorize love matches recalls the fictive themes of similar stories in the 80s, when women were increasingly largely employed as discursive mediants.



The *MMAM* represent the only triumph of the transgressive love match in the fiction under study; and the stories by their complex gendered engagement with themes, techniques and fictive assumptions that inform other sub-genres and classes of stories in the major periodicals recuperate an oppositional agency, empowering the female reading subject. Usha Sreekumar's *Eppodum Amma-vai* (Always a Mother, *MMAM* 1998:150-3) is narrated through Pattakka's younger brother, Krishnamoorthy, whose only daughter is to be married; Pattakka has sent them a letter saying she will be unable to attend, having another wedding obligation on the same day. Kamalam, the wife, bursts out in anger; the old lady has a heart of stone. Pattakka's only son, wished to marry a Bengali girl, Charulatha. He brings her to his uncle, seeking his mediation, but Pattakka is adamant: she will not stand by and see 'the seed of a thousand years' sullied. Suresh leaves with his bride, but within a few months, dies on a tour in an accident. Charulatha has no close relatives or parents; Pattakka, angered by Vijayanthi's sanctioned inter caste marriage, the family feels, will not attend. The groom, Nikhil Chopra is Vijayanthi's classmate, the only son of his parents. As Nikhil's father points out laughingly, 'Consent or not, they will be married anyway; better to consent and see them happy!' The standard comparison of horoscopes, gotras, etc are dispensed with; the wedding is celebrated with due pomp, and the newly weds leave for Delhi. Pattakka arrives a little later, and discloses that the other wedding she has attended was Charulatha's. Fearing that the young girl, alone and unhappy, would be reminded of her unhappiness by staying with Pattakka, she had arranged for her to stay in a ladies hostel. When Charulatha had come

to terms with her grief and loss, Pattakka had advertised for a suitable groom for her, picked a suitable match, and had borne witness at the registrar's. Kamalam exclaims, 'I knew you could not but be a mother in the end!'

The story is the first instance of the neutral portrayal of the 'North Indian' in the stories under discussion. The girl is obviously marrying into a lower caste; 'modern' Vijayanthi has none of the modern girl's vices, nor is her falling in love deemed a mortal sin. The demonized, barbaric 'North Indian culture' (the stories refer frequently to the ostentation of the Hindi screen villain and his looks as suitable indicators of deceit and flashy thuggery) invades the 'sanctity' of the wedding ritual: the band strikes up 'Didi tera dewar deewana', and the much maligned salwar, denoting the brazen woman, graces Mrs Chopra in the mantapam. Pattakka's adoption of Charulatha contrasts with the tyrannical 'Muslim' Noor-un-Nisa, as much as her 'Hindu' counterparts, and the 'Brahminical' mother who lives out her remaining years in accordance to the karmic laws of the cosmos, in a social service that leaves her son and daughter-in-law with an admiring but clear conscience to live their lives alone, which some of the stories suggest is the true role of aged parents. Mothering is here voluntarily adopted, not biologically determined, and Pattakka chooses, and then lets go. Her widowed solitude is not spiritualized into true Brahminic sadhana, or consecrated as an example of the selfishness of the younger generation, as discussed earlier. The decentering of the Brahmin claim to purity that informs all

discussions of the Other is here permissive of non upper caste privileged reading positions that include gendered positions as well.<sup>24</sup>

Nor is the preserve of interrogating gendered boundaries the preserve of the siru kathais in the women's periodicals alone, as has been observed earlier. S. Ramasubramanian's *Bommi!* (*DMDM* 1998:1, 113-20) chronicles the life of a eunuch through the horrified eyes of his classmate Sundaresan, on business duty in Delhi, and returning to Madras by the Grand Trunk Express. Sundaresan's slow journey to a comprehension of the tyranny of constructed boundaries, intolerant of difference, leads to an appreciation of the courage that actualizes Bommi's choices. Renouncing a secure life as the son of a government servant, Bommi's identification with the aliens within societal boundaries provides a reading position that is empowered through the newly acquired visibility of boundary policing. The woman, and the differently gendered Other's mobilization of economic capital to generate gendered agency merely offers one of possibly empowering memories, potentially recuperative in praxis.

The production in fictive discourse of the Other through the dominant category of the Brahmin seeks to reduce the marginalized, and demographically though not socially or ritually equally minority categories, in an a-historical ontology of the discursively produced object. The yoking of extremes, a device frequently met with in popular fiction that draws into play the implications of such constructions,

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<sup>24</sup> The Brahmin is thus recuperated into a social and ritual importance, beleaguered during the days of the Dravidian Movement, when it was opposed by the equality of all subjects under new ritual and cultural regimes, such as the Self Respect Marriage. The mobilizing of the Brahmin simultaneously re-elevates it, at the expense of the manipulatively 'reduced' communities.

which I shall characterize as the zeugmatic device, operates in this fictive context to consistently revalorize the rich, ritually pure, empowered male subjectivity such that any one attribute arrogates to itself the power of the others to itself as well. The consistency of the need to depict the underprivileged, non-dominant categories as negative, is however, by its overdetermination permissive of reading strategies that tease out the interstices of dominant discourse, to consume the text in unpredictable and destabilizing ways.

## **Conclusion**

My analysis of the cultural economy of the popular siru kathai, while detailing tropes by attempting to follow their mobilization across conventions and anthologies, seeks to examine their implications for the reading subject. The unconscious, structured around the fixed positions that cultural and sexual stereotypes produce (McCracken, 1998), feeds off the discursive objects generated in the play of reading subject positions, and their intermeshing with the actualities of lived existences. The destabilizing of stereotyped discursive objects by their deployment in the popular siru kathai results in the need to engage anew, to reiterate and ratify or oppose these constructions. By privileging the non-linear and deflecting attention into cultural constructions as inbuilt fictive technical devices, the economy of reading practices into which the particular siru kathai is inserted, necessitates an awareness of the varying sub-generic codes of representation that a story embodies, and their differing specificities of valorization of categories such as caste, gender, communities, etc. By requiring an infinitely open ended, inclusive dialogue of the stories, voices and the authors that comprise the productive economy of the siru kathai, the reader, empowered by the expertise s/he brings to the consumption of the siru kathai plays an active role in accepting/creating reading subject positions that correspond to his/her conditions of existence that obtain in the 'real' world. In a political context of increasing communalization of the polity, the complex manoeuvres executed by the discursive deployment of newly valorized stereotypes/aggregates offer scope for recuperation into oppositional narratives that empower non-

privileged reading groups. The preoccupation with the definition and transgression of cultural/political boundaries when dramatized, draws into play a series of options, of which the structural closure represents merely one. By vocalizing and drawing into debate such submerged positions/options, the texts are instrumental in circulating them anew.

While I have not discussed the language of the stories in any detail, it is in the construction of the common, shared language that cultural stereotypes are naturalized, to acquire an a-historical, eternal validity, limiting the potentially infinite multiplicity of reading positions a text engenders. The move away from the cinematic however does not lessen the centrality of cinema in consuming the printed text, suggesting newer and unanticipated mobilizations, a factor that I have merely touched upon.

The unruly extremes that animate the popular text are attended by a violence that breaks the surface of the normal in unanticipated ways: random acts of fate, accidents, asymmetrical retributions. I have been unable to explore this complexity and its implications. The matter of fact retelling of random violence while pointing to the ever-present anxiety about instability and chaos, may also lead back to social identities and relationships that are charged with such a threat<sup>1</sup>, a characterization that has been beyond the scope of this study.

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<sup>1</sup> Shahid Amin points out that the matter of fact 'naturalization' of violence is one way by which members within a face to face society escape remembering actual brutality (Amin, 1995).

In mapping some of the potentialities for processes of subversive consumption, I have had to focus on textual possibilities to a large extent. In practice, such processes may derive from a large number of external referents such as the cinema, institutional affiliations, etc., which has been beyond the scope of this study.

## **Appendix**

The following interviews were conducted in Chennai, in the month of April 1999.

Dilip Kumar, Bookseller, short story writer and critic.

Manjula Ramesh, Editor, *Mangayar Malar*, Chennai.

Vasanthi, Editor, *India Today*, Chennai.

R.A.K. Barathi, Trustee, *Ilakkiya Chinthanai* Trust, Chennai.

Seetha Ravi, Editor, *Kalki Weekly*.

### **Brochures and Letters**

*Ilakkiya Chinthanai Statement of Aims, Activities and Awards*,  
Ilakkiya Chinthanai Trust, Chennai.

Letter from R.A.K. Barathi, dated 13.3.99.

Letter from Seetha Ravi, dated 6.3.99.



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