

## GENDERED RELIGION

### Autoethnography as a Methodological Tool in Religion Studies

Maheshvari Naidu ♦

#### 1. Introduction

This paper engages with and utilises autoethnography as methodological tool in research. The paper is in part a personal narrative and an autoethnographic account of some of my experiences (as female researcher) in choosing to undertake postgraduate study into particular aspects of gendered religion. It is also an engagement with the merits of using autoethnography as a qualitative research methodology in the Humanities and Social Sciences in the sharing of the research and research experience. Autoethnography refers to instances when the autobiographical material of the author is woven into the sharing of the research, and where the author does not feign an absence from the research process and documentation. Autoethnography uses the autobiographical materials of the researcher as the principal data and emphasizes cultural analysis and interpretation of the researcher's thoughts and experiences in relationship to others in the research field.<sup>1</sup>

I was aware that anthropological narrative genres welcome the researcher as part of the research process and are supportive of narrative styles that include the researcher as a full participant in the final research text. My own research, however, was situated at the disciplinary intersection of Anthropology and History of Religions. Adopting a personal narrative style, would have formed an uneasy alliance with History of Religions where the researcher more usually than not adopts a dispassionate distance. I confess that there was thus a level of intellectual angst in suppressing some aspects of the research narrative where my own 'voice' emerged within the research process as I was attentive to the fact that I was writing within both disciplinary as well as institutional

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\*Dr. Maheshvari Naidu lectures in Anthropology in the School of Anthropology, Gender and Historical Studies, at the University of KwaZulu Natal South Africa. Her research interests are Anthropology of religion, Feminist anthropologies, Female Body Construction, Transnationalised Hinduism and Identity and Alterity.

<sup>1</sup>Adams, Tony E. and Jones Stacy Holman, "Telling Stories: Reflexivity, Queer Theory, and Autoethnography," *Cultural Studies, Critical Methodologies*, vol. 11.2, 2011, 108-116.

expectations. This paper is thus liberating as it is positioned within an autoethnographic framework that not only allows such an inclusion of the 'personal,' but indeed welcomes it.

The paper follows the path of three 'moments' in the personal 'telling' of the study of religion.<sup>2</sup> Although I share vignettes of these stories in different sections, the nature of the task means that these moments do not stay confined to their own section and are not necessarily chronologically told, but at times 'bleed' into the telling of each other. The first moment I shall refer to as broad choice of *wide area of study*, (religion and feminism), the second as specific and *narrow research focus* (gender, feminism and the Hindu goddess Meenakshi), the third as *female studying religion* (women and religion studies). All the narrative 'moments' are embraced within the methodological tool of autoethnography.

As I look back over my shoulder reflexively, I am appreciative of the fact that my intellectual roots are wonderfully adventitious and wide spread. They go back to my early days in comparative religion, what was referred to as 'Science of Religion' in my University, with focus on the majors in Hinduism and Indology. From there I moved organically *into the discipline of Anthropology* (as a young Masters student) and *into the Department of anthropology* (as a young academic). It was at this juncture that events began to unfold and re-knit themselves together in a rather exciting and synchronistic manner. After agonising for some interminable weeks (much in keeping with the trend of the typical Masters candidate tasked with 'finding' their unique research voice), I suddenly knew implicitly that I wished to study in the broad area of 'Gender and Religion.' I was already employed as an associate lecturer at the then University of Westville in Durban, South Africa. Like other faculty members, I was free, as soon as the students had completed their examinations, and I the marking of those papers, to take a rather extended leave. This leave straddled the end of one academic year in November-December into the new calendar year of lectures in the following year. I decided that I would use this three months break to undertake fieldwork in that land conceived by me as exotic and alluring, India!

This decision heralded my fluid move from religion studies, specifically Hindu Studies at the University of Westville, into

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<sup>2</sup>I use the broad referential term 'religion' consciously even though my specific focus is Hinduism. This is because my focus on South Asian and Hindu is cast against the wider canvas of comparative religion and feminist religion.

Anthropology of religion. The decision to focus on aspects of gendered religion proclaimed a further intellectual shift into anthropology of gender and feminism, or feminist anthropologies. Wishing to go to India to undertake ethnographic fieldwork was very much in keeping with the disciplinary imperatives of anthropology. Wishing to undertake that ethnography in the distant land of India (from South Africa) was very much in keeping with the clichéd understanding that the anthropologist had to trudge off (Victorian style) to some 'exotic' land and undertake the *doing* of research with the so called 'native other.' Clichéd or not, I was rather naively intent at that time on (intellectually) discovering that exotic land. I had already amassed a general and cursory lay of the land in two previous visits when I backpacked through the northern and southern states. This time I was setting off, having adjusted my gaze from tourist to researcher, and I was eager to get underway.

## 2. Moment: Religion and Feminism

Phenomenological understandings of religion and religious experiences make it clear that religion is something experientially intimate to the believer, and that the outsider, in a sense can have no real access to these experiences, much less the right to critique them. However, feminist and other critical and deconstructive theories lay bare the fact that, *outside* of the believers' experience of his/her religion, there exists multiple religious 'realities' that are mediated by institutional and political disciplinary frameworks of power. Feminist theories are especially alert to codes of hegemonic prescription and political contexts that position women outside the constructed normative frames of reference. I was aware that 'gender' as a category and 'site' of analysis, need not only include the female population but rather referred to the fluidly negotiated terms of (asymmetrical) reference that (was made to) distinguish males from females. I was also acutely aware that these terms of reference were in reality rigidly constructed in many patriarchal cultures to the extent that women were ascribed gender roles that painted them outside many structures of institutions, religion being one of these. That being said, I was keen to focus on gender and religion by looking at more specifically *women and religion*.

It seemed a perfect 'excuse' to allow the budding feminist in me to begin to intellectually engage with 'feminism' in relation to religion. Of course not all work on 'gender' draws upon feminist theory. However, I found myself drawn to the paradigms in feminist thinking. One of my

favourite Journals, *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* (JFSR), described that, as feminists, their writings attempted to “work within a theoretical framework that analysed the intersections of gender, race, class, and other structures of domination.”<sup>3</sup> I had also just attended a presentation by a female professor in Theology who had pioneered a course on gender and religion and who pointed out in impassioned words, that *both* women’s studies and religion studies were relatively marginalized scholarly disciplines in the academy. This was all that I needed to hear, that the subjects that I was passionately interested in, were disciplinary underdogs so to speak. This talk was the catalyst that further cemented the direction of my studies.

I knew that I wanted to travel to some location, geographically far (far) flung from where I was at that moment. I also knew that I had to find a research space where I could engage on a personal and scholarly level with issues of gender and religion and turn my gaze on how religious subjectivities, norms and practices come to be hegemonically sculpted. During my backpacker wanderings through India I had visited the city of Madurai and the beautifully towered temple of Meenakshi Amman. Most importantly for the particular direction that my personal story was destined to follow, I had also heard in conversations with people living in Madurai, that the Madurai Meenakshi Temple was distinctive in an exceptional way. Many of these devotees spoke especially reverentially of the goddess Meenakshi here. This was not by any means unusual in the multi-stranded and polyvocal tradition of Hinduism with an emphatic focus on goddess worship. However, there was something remarkably atypical here. For when I had visited the temple, I had been cautioned by my (local) companions that I ought to always proceed to the shrine of the goddess before entering that of Siva. I recall making a mental note when told by the people around that all rituals were first offered to *Amman* (Mother goddess) before being offered to the god Siva. I remember catching myself reacting to this unusual tradition not practiced at the other major Saiva temple in South India, Chidambaram, and which appeared to be peculiar to the Saiva Meenakshi Temple. For in all other major Saiva temples in India “worship of the mother follows the worship of Siva.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup>This statement is part of their publishing philosophy and appears on the website as a description of ‘who they are,’ as feminists, and ‘what they do.’

<sup>4</sup>Subramaniam, R. Parartha Pujā, in S. S. Janali, ed., *Siva Temple and Temple Ritual*, Madras: Kuppasami Sastri Res. Institute, 1988, 77.

Thus, this rather peculiar (and pleasing) 'ritual reversal' piqued my curiosity and appealed to the feminist in me at that time. This curiosity and fascination in the reversal of the order of ritual was something that I was to later pursue as part of my Masters Studies. It was this *encounter* with what appeared as the 'ritual prerogative' afforded to the goddess that drew me to the temple and to the city of Madurai. To me this peculiarity had significant implications in terms of the theology of the gods. It was also clear from the behaviour of the other temple goers that the ritual protocol, what Laidlaw would describe as "ritual commitment"<sup>5</sup> of proceeding to the shrine of the goddess first, was not to be made light of and that any indiscretion on their part, or mine for that matter would anger the goddess and we in turn would be visited upon by grave misfortune. The rule that the goddess' shrine was to be visited first was widely pervasive and certainly not restricted to the Brahmin classes in the Madurai community. I found that regardless of which class of which of the Hindu traditions I observed, that even a child of five was conversant with this religious protocol.

The research space and site was thus decided. It was to be the city of Madurai. My Masters proposal described that I aimed to probe the ritual order and power dynamics in the context of the Madurai Meenakshi Temple. After presenting the proposal to my school and taking heed of their theoretical and methodological advice I excitedly booked my passage to India. I recall quite vividly that my supervisor was almost as excited as I was! The old classic Hollywood movie '*Planes, Trains and Automobiles*' perhaps sums up my flight from South Africa into the north Indian city of Bombay and a long distance train haul from Bombay to Madras. The last leg into the city was by that ubiquitous of Indian vehicles, the auto-rickshaw. However, even before the Vaigai Express pulled into the Madurai Station I had a wonderful introduction to the city.

My very first introduction to the city of Madurai and the Madurai Meenakshi Temple as a research space was through the conductor of the train that I was travelling on. He was himself from Madurai and seeing me, asked if I was visiting family in Madurai. I explained that I was a student from South Africa and I intended doing some fieldwork in the city related to the temple activities. His response was almost immediate: 'Ah, but once you have set foot within the city of Madurai you have set foot within the temple. You see the city limits are the temple gates.'

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<sup>5</sup>Humphrey, Caroline and Laidlaw, James, *The Archetypal Actions of Ritual: A Theory of Ritual Illustrated by the Jain Rite of Worship*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994, 88.

With this sort of introduction I was almost tempted to look around for the temple elephant as I alighted from the train. What greeted me was the dense traffic of Madurai. As I was driven in search of accommodation I caught sight of four tall structures dominating the afternoon horizon. When the vehicle drew closer I realised that these structures were in reality temple towers that reached majestically into the sky. Later in the day, walking around the streets of the city I took in the sights and sounds of the city. These sights being new to me, I remember looking around for a corner so that I could make a note of everything I saw before I became, with the passage of time, more accustomed and naturalised to them. I observed the constant stream of people entering and leaving the temple. I overheard parents shouting 'Siva', 'Sundara', 'Meena', etc., with more familiarity than one would expect from devotees calling their god until I saw that it was to their children that the calls were addressed. And as I observed the many stores and autos even, named after Siva or Meenakshi (in one or more of the many permutations of their names) I began to get the sense of the complexities of the land. Madurai, it said, is owned by the gods Siva and Meenakshi and is comprehended as sacred by the Tamil Saiva devotees of Madurai. The Meenakshi Temple stands in the centre of the squarely organised ancient inner city, constructed in a *mandala* style.

When the city itself is modelled on the lines of the temple, the city, in term of religious sentiment becomes a temple. Diana Eck's description of Madurai is one worth repeating. Eck states that:

A direct parallel to the structure of a temple may be seen in the city of Madurai in Tamilnad, where the city is laid out in the shape of *mandala* [ritual closed polygon space]. At the centre is the temple compounded of Minakshi and Sudaresvara, with its all, elaborately carved gateways, called *gopurams*, in the four directions. Around the temple are three concentric square processional streets. Here an entire city has been built according to the plan of [the texts] the silpasastras, and the plan is precisely that of the *vastupurusha mandala* [closed polygon space of the existing Cosmic Being] which delimits the sacred space of the temple. The city is the cosmos, bounded from forces of disorder which the *mandala* establishes.<sup>6</sup>

I was reminded of the words of the train conductor, '...once you have set foot in the city you have set food within the temple. The city limits are the temple gates.'

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<sup>6</sup>Eck, Diana L., *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, New York: Anima Books, 1981.

And inside the actual temple precinct itself, the vibrancy was quite captivating. The aroma from the flower sellers' stalls, the music blaring out in unlikely jostle from the several tightly packed shops around the temple, and the constant traffic of people entering and leaving the temple tangibly inscribed the city in a way that was immediately experienced. Robert Levy's study invited attention to how Bhaktapur's sacralised space acted to organising the meaning of the city.<sup>7</sup> By this Levy was saying that in Bhaktapur, much of the time, space, status and psychological life of the city is organised by sacred symbols. Pretty much the same can be said for the city of Madurai where the power of the sacralised space inhabited by the gods Siva and Meenakshi also serves to organise much of the meaning of the city in terms of the believer's perception of herself and her place in the world. In the period of three months that I undertook my fieldwork I was fortunate to have lived with families in Madurai and I consciously dressed to resemble a 'local.' I was able to converse fairly comfortably in the local vernacular of Tamil, which greatly assisted in gaining me entry to the homes of my informants, many of whom were Brahmin. I was able to intimately observe that, for all categories of Madurai devotees, Brahmin and non Brahmin, male and female, the power of the sacralised space and the concentrated presence of the gods within the temple, appeared to permeate their lives in a very palpable way. This was something I could also immediately discern just by positioning myself outside the temple.

Positioned thus, I observed the brisk trade of the ubiquitous temple flower sellers as well as their presence late into the night which complimented the constant stream of traffic entering and leaving the temple and further underpinned the centrality of temple going. Within the space of a few minutes one evening I observed a baby, who could not have been more than a few weeks old at most and swaddled in a towel, being brought in for the blessing of the gods Siva and Meenakshi. A rather ancient looking Brahmin hobbled in on his stick, and children, as if on an exciting fieldtrip, tumbled in at approximately eight o'clock by which time the temple was very crowded and busy. By nine that night the temple was comparatively speaking, more crowded and much busier. I remember writing in my notebook, regarding the matter-of-fact manner in which the worship was carried out *'that was not exactly mechanical, that it was almost like breathing – something you not think about but is just done'*.

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<sup>7</sup>Levy Robert, "The Power of Space in a Traditional Hindu City," *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, vol. 1.3, 1997, 55-71.

It was clear to me that while the gods Siva and Meenakshi were felt as present throughout the length of Madurai, their presence, as far as the devotee was concerned, was tangibly experienced within the temple precincts and more precisely defined in the *garbagrha* (inner sanctum, literally womb house). If one had to translate in lay terms the exigencies of the sacrality of temple space, perhaps the words of one of my informants whom I caught just as he was about to enter the temple, best sums it up. The informant, referring to the temple claimed that, "While it may be that god is everywhere, he is more so in the temple."

I smiled as I remembered that *agamīc* textual tradition also tells us that the temple is the place where the god 'lives.' The temple is thus accepted by multiple categories of believers as being the dwelling place of the gods. The present urbanised city of Madurai has of course expanded far beyond the four angled parameters of the ancient city of the Sangam period. And while Sewell makes the point that by the late nineteenth century Madurai is no longer functionally dominated by religious institutes,<sup>8</sup> yet much of the time, space and psychological life is here still organised by sacred symbols within the city space that the gods Meenakshi and Siva inhabit. From all my observations and interactions with the devotees, it was clear that the 'images' of the gods Meenakshi and Sundaresvara were not merely images. Rather as the *agamīc* ritual texts construe it, and the devotees perceive it, the image is a manifestation of the God after it is infused with the spirit of the God through ritual.

One would naturally be led to assume that because the male god was deemed by the *tala puranic* text to be the primary deity, the devotees would seek out Sundaresvara-Siva over and above that of the goddess. However, my informants would often point out that on the occasions when they were rushed, or during the season of pilgrimage when the traffic at the temple was even denser than is usual, they would leave even before visiting the shrine of Siva. But they were emphatic that they would not leave without offering worship at the shrine of the goddess. In a survey conducted some twenty years ago it was estimated that the daily visitors to the temple, on average numbered fifteen thousand and on Fridays, a day sacred to the goddess, a staggering twenty five thousand!<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup>Sewell Robert, *Madurai on the Verge of Change: Western Sources for the Early Nineteenth Century*, Madras: Munshilal Manoharlal, 1977, 17.

<sup>9</sup>Fuller C. J., *The Divine Couple's Relationship in a South Indian Temple*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980, 171.



### 3. Moment: Gender, Feminism and the Hindu Goddess Meenakshi

Standing amongst the many other devotees I was in awe of the goddess Meenakshi as she stood in her inner sanctum in classical goddess pose. Her image, sculpted in black stone was strikingly arresting. She was regal looking and had what are considered to be beautiful almond shaped eyes. The eyes that greeted the devotee were large and distinctive. As her name, *Meen-akshi* suggests, she was very much the fish-eyed goddess. The gold covered body showed her to be resplendently decked in the ritual paraphernalia befitting a goddess. A colourful silk *sari* was carefully draped around the slender waist. From the finely chiselled face glittered a large diamond nose-ring. Her face was framed by heavy earrings and around the ankles were the traditional *golisu* (ankles), on the toes the *mitti* (rings). Her image and the embedded mythology of her 'birth' are richly evocative, for both the devotee as well as the student of religion.

Catherine Bell claims that ritual acts are articulated and are to be understood within a semantic framework. She tells us that the significant of the act depends on where it is articulated, and the context of all other ways of acting, that is to say, "what it echoes, what it inverts, what it alludes to, what it denies."<sup>10</sup> If one has to extend this to the articulation and the sequential ordering of the daily public worship to the gods in the Meenakshi temple we see that it can facilitate a heuristic interpretation of the theological import of these deities. The order of worship between the two main deities is itself simple and something that I was able to observe over the many weeks of doing fieldwork there. The daily ritual public worship is *first offered to Meenakshi and thereafter to Siva or Sundaresvara*.

It made sense for the Meenakshi devotees at Madurai to offer worship at the goddess shrine before proceeding to Siva's shrine. To the devotees this behaviour mirrored the fact that all rituals were themselves offered to the goddesses first. The rather charismatic temple head musician Ponusami Pillai revealed to me that although the exact time varied, usually all rituals to the goddess (accompanied by full complement and religious fanfare of temple musicians), were offered approximately fifteen to thirty minutes before being offered to Siva. He did add though, that there were times when the second priest (at the Siva shrine) began to offer worship before the worship to the goddess had been fully completed. All this was confirmed in a subsequent interview with the temple priest.

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<sup>10</sup>Bell Catherine, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, 220.

Another informant Gnana Sastrigal rightly pointed out that in all the other major Saiva temples in south India, ritual was always offered first to Siva and only thereafter to the goddess. This point was borne out by another participant, this time a young scholar by the name of Sankarasastri who also maintained that as far as the Saiva *agamic* texts are concerned, ritual was prescribed to be performed first to the male god and only thereafter to the female goddess. He too stated that for the order of worship to be any other way at Meenakshi Temple meant that the order had been somehow inverted. Thus what had come to be standardised was the inverse<sup>11</sup> of this *agamic* prescription. This inversion fascinated me.

Now this is different from offering worship first, to say a deity like Ganesha. Ganesha is constructed in both textual and popular religious imagination as the remover of obstacles and first ritual offering to him makes sense at that level. It is not any kind of inversion that is perceived here. And Ganesha is not deemed as more important ontologically speaking because of offering ritual and worship to him first. No more so than offering ritual to the gate-keeping Munisvar, before proceeding to the shrine of the goddess would have us construe Munisvar as the theologically superior. He is rather the gate-keeper deity. However, the ritual order at the Meenakshi temple *does have* theological import for the simple reason that *it is an inversion within the context of the Saiva agamic prescriptions for temple ritual worship*. While the inversion may have been politically motivated, it comes to be understood (in popular consciousness, by the devotee) as having theological significance. And it becomes significant for a discussion on gender and religion. Tirumala Nayak may not have had gender and feminist concerns on his mind (if

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<sup>11</sup>There is a small body of oral testimony that suggests that Tirumala Nayaka was responsible for inverting the order of the public worship to the deities, Meenakshi and Sundaresvara. What emerges from a few scarce literary sources was that Tirumala Nayaka in the thirteenth century, who was a Vaishnavite, that is a worshiper of the god Vishnu rather than Siva, was also a strong follower of Mother power goddess worship. One suggests then that it is very possible that it was during this period that the original order (as would have been prescribed by the Saiva *agama* texts) of performing the *puja* at the Sundaresvara shrine first, was altered to afford the mother goddess a more prestigious place, thereby affording her the ritual prerogative to grant the first *darshan* to the devotees. And interestingly, although we come across the name Cokkar, Somasundera, etc., well established in the literary works during the Nayak period (1600- 2750 BCE), the name Meenakshi Temple, although not found in the literary tradition, is used in popular tradition from the days of the Nayak rulers (Kramrisch Stella, *The Hindu Temple*, vols. 1 and 2. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1976.)

indeed he was responsible for the inversion of the ritual order) however, the change that he initiated comes to have implications for the feminist cause of gendering a vital aspect of worship in a Hindu context.

The inversion was also reflected in popular sociological terms. A common colloquial that has been documented by scholars like William Harman, and which I came across personally in my own interviews, was the expression '*who wears the pants in the family.*' This was a reference to the question as to which of the spousal figures, the male or the female held dominance in that particular family. It was also a popular reference to the fact that in terms of the locally understood theology of the gods, Meenakshi was understood in some respects, as being more powerful than Siva. Of course Siva was revered and worshipped, but it was clear that the devotees at Madurai felt that the goddess Meenakshi took a personal interest in their welfare and was more powerfully connected to them.

Of greater interest was also the fact that many women alluded to the goddess in their discussion of more egalitarian sharing of power and decision making in their households. Even many older and traditionally inclined female informants shared that "*amman* was a good example to them, and gave them the power to be strong women in their own home." One woman shared that in "no other place is the goddess given the honour of worship first... in an *amman* temple yes... but this is a Saiva temple... yet it is Meenakshi first..." These kind of statements are anecdotal markers to how the theological importance of the goddess comes to be construed. It underscores manner in which the Madurai devotees view their goddess, as the primary divinity in their lives and inverts the (textual) superiority of the male god. If we had to apply the argument that relations of power are rarely engendered from only the top down, but from the bottom up as well<sup>12</sup> to the Madurai devotees, it is clear that ritual behaviour is not only structured from the top, by the texts and Brahmin specialists, but also engendered by the devotees themselves. The devotees seek out the *darshan* of Sundaresvara-Siva, but only after they have had the sight of the goddess Meenakshi. She has been granted the prerogative, not shared by the other main female deities in other Saiva temples, to have the devotee look upon the goddess first, and to offer the first *darshan*.

There are two reasons that one is able to adduce for the relative importance of the goddess over the god, in terms of ritual dominance as well as theological import. The first is the devotees' attitude towards the

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<sup>12</sup>Bell, *Ritual Theory*, 201.

goddess which alludes to certain features of the goddess' personality, who if we accept as an ancient goddess from the local Madurai folk tradition, appears deeply embedded in the religious consciousness of the devotees. Alongside the obvious reverence felt towards the goddess (seen as the mother who takes care of her children, epitomised by the devotees) it is the strong element of fear that the goddess must not be transgressed. My informants were all emphatic that they would not leave the temple without having received the *darshan* (sight) of Meenakshi.

The second point refers to the ordering of the public worship offered to the two main deities in the Meenakshi Temple, which reinforces the primacy and centrality of the goddess in the existential welfare of the Madurai devotees. All daily *pujas* from four thirty in the morning, from the *tiruvanantal puja* (waking up the deity) to the *palliyarai puja* (putting the deity to bed) at nine thirty in the night is first offered to the goddess housed in the inner shrine, before being offered to Siva. While the former is a reflection of the devotees' religious feeling towards the goddess, the latter can be suggested as a result of a political strategy on the part of the ruling Nayaks of the thirteenth century.

In the final analysis, the reality is that while the *Tiruvilaiyadal Puranam* constructs the perception that the space belongs to Siva, the devotees understand that as presiding deity of Madurai, the city is under the control of the goddess. This paradox between the goddess' textual status and the way she is understood by her lay<sup>13</sup> worshippers suggests points to the possibility of older and popular elements of the goddess that predate the Madurai marriage myth in the *tala Purana*.

#### 4. Women and Religion Studies: Engaging with Autoethnography

My zeal to study religion or rather gender and religion was shaped in part by me having a clutch of experiences as a woman. It was also shaped very decisively by my early travels through India. On the two occasions that I had travelled for three months across the North and South Indian states of India, I was struck by how incredibly easily it was on some levels to be welcomed into the home and intimate family spaces of many people. I was equally struck by how incredibly difficult it was to travel in my nomadic state-hopping style as single female from city to city across India. I encountered, and experienced firsthand the abyss between how women were conceived in religious terms and how they were construed and

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<sup>13</sup>I use the term 'lay' to differentiate between the temple-going devotees and the ritual specialists or priests who are also devotees.

constructed in cultural and popular terms. In a land of people who revered the female as Feminine Divine, existed also very parochial and damaging perceptions of women, in terms of what her worth and character might be, especially if she had chosen to travel alone.

All of this prompted, in the third trip which was the research trip, a methodological strategy of dressing in a *sari* or *churidar* to resemble a local. It also saw me taking a conscious decision not to socialise with the many backpacking male and female travellers that passed through the city. I had been very harshly treated and chastised for what had been construed as 'low morals' for socialising with loose morale 'white' European women travellers. The widely pervasive perception about these white female travellers (and of myself by default) was that we must necessarily be women of little or no morals, who would take up an unsavoury alliance with one or more of the local men. I found that no matter how respectfully the female travellers or I dressed and behaved, we always had to stave off really crude misogynist comments and approaches. There appeared to a massive disjunct between how women (as goddesses) were constructed in textual sources and how women were constructed in popular social interactions. I ascribed much of this behaviour to the fact that women (after a certain age) were thought of as needing to be married. The single Indian female was considered as *deviating* from the normative cultural imperative of marriage, while the single foreign female was considered as *deviant*. This was more so because she was travelling alone and was constructed as being perpetually sexually available (thus not wanting or needing a male chaperone). While this perception of sexual availability may not have been shared by the families that I encountered and shared time with, it was a perception that most males whom I encountered (at my lodge etc.) seemed to have. And while many of the welcoming and caring families I befriended did not think me morally wayward, they did pity my unmarried state: '*Kalyanam yoonama agilai*' or '*not yet married*' was something I rapidly grew very accustomed to hearing.

This disjunct, that made itself visible at the level of the popular, in fact underscored that in numerous instances, many aspects of the rich and diverse religion of Hinduism was interpreted in very parochial and patriarchal ways that obligated particular normative appearances and hegemonic codes of behaviour for women. Thus, the goddess Meenakshi at the Madurai Meenakshi Temple, her rich mythological history as warrior-goddess, and her ritual prerogative of offering the first *darshan* to devotees, provided rich opportunity for textual and ethnographic scrutiny.

According to the *puranic* tradition the goddess is said to have been born with three breasts from a sacrificial fire. Meenakshi's birth is traced to the myth informing us that queen Kanchanamala and king Malayadvaja Pandyan, the son of Kulecekara Pandyan, find that they are unable to have a child and undertake (with the advice of Indra) the performance of the Vedic injunctive sacrifices prescribed for a male child. The child born (as a three year old) visibly thwarts the need for a male heir and is instead the female *Tataikai*, who grows into the three breasted Meenakshi. Much has been written by scholars like Dennis Hudson as to how the third breast can be likened to a phallic symbol of sorts. Whatever we may make of this suggestion, there is no escaping the possibility inherent in the way the mythological texts speak of the goddess, that there are androgynous overtones to Meenakshi. I have written elsewhere<sup>14</sup> of how this notion of androgyny can be interpreted through queer theory as blurring the lines between normatively constructed male and female genders with the possibility of the goddess being an example of 'fuzzy gender.'

It was clear from one of the groups that I interviewed regarding the dominance of the respective gods that the religious community of Madurai, Saiva as well as Vaishnava, saw the goddess Meenakshi as responsible for every facet of their well being. As such she was also perceived to be responsible for any misfortune that might befall them, in which case special propitiation to her was required to reverse the tide of events. The fear that this goddess elicited, together with the reverence and awe the devotee felt toward her, appeared to connect her with the (more capricious) village goddesses who were at once responsible for averting major calamity as well as bringing it on, both in the life of the 'devotee,' as well as for the village as a whole.

Most religious establishments, authored texts and rituals in the context of Indian society, values even, are sponsored and managed by males. It thus becomes easier to understand why it is that, in religious texts, the power structure between male and female throughout the corpus of *Brahmanic* as opposed to folk mythology is almost always unequally balanced in the favour of the male.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup>See Naidu, Maheshvari, "Inscribing the Female Body: Fuzzy Gender and Goddess in a South Indian Saiva Myth, *Journal of Religion Southern Africa*, 2008, vol. 21, 1, 19-36.

<sup>15</sup>See Sharma P., *Woman in Hindu Literature*, New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 1995, 56 and O' Flaherty Wendy Doniger, *Tales of Sex and Violence*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1981, 77.

Additionally it is revealing that when a Dravidian goddess marries into the Sanskritic *Brahmanic* tradition, she is said to retain a separate shrine for herself. This appears to be the pattern in Saiva temples. A few of my informants, who were traditionally trained scholars and appeared to be die-hard Siva supporters, maintained that the goddess shrine was a much later addition to the temple. However the original mythic narrative in the *tala puranic* tells us that Kulecekara Pandyan ordered that two shrines be built and that one would be for the goddess.

While temporal privileging does not necessarily mean ontological dominance, I feel that in this context it does point very suggestively to theological dominance. This is for the simple and telling reason that image worship is what the *agamic temple tradition* is all about. The worship of a deity in an image is the central ritual concern of the *agamic literature*<sup>16</sup> and this is very much the vein in which the "ritual actors"<sup>17</sup> come to understand worship offered to the image housed in a temple. At the centre of (most) temples in the *garbhagrha* or womb house within which the god is said to reside and which is a small dark space that is enclosed on all three sides by the walls of the shrine. And the image, especially the image in the *garbhagrha* to which worship and rituals are offered is especially powerful as it is supposed to house the concentrated presence of the main deity. It thus follows, I believe that order of the ritual to the powerful concentrated presence of the gods in the inner sanctum, is of significant importance. While none of the changes in ritual order were an intentional gendering of the religion, yet that is how it has come to be experienced at the popular level. This is the point that I make. Privileging the goddess with the ritual order may have been politically motivated, but the reverberations of that act can well be refracted in gendered terms, for the simple and salient reason, that this is how the devotees experience it. And the ritual order is first to Meenakshi, the goddess with 'male-like' warrior ancestry and elements of the 'masculine-like' and powerful folk goddess, what I refer to as a 'fuzzy' goddess.

The notion of 'fuzzy,' I believe, offers liberatory possibilities within patriarchal religions. Given her mixed ancestry and her connection to indigenous folk goddesses, the goddess Meenakshi can be seen as occupying a grey area or a fuzzy space. While born with an extra breast, a signifier of 'being female,' she lives and is raised plastically, outside of the

<sup>16</sup>Surdam Wayne, "The Vedicization of Saiva Ritual," in S. S. Janali, ed., *Siva Temple and Temple Ritual*, Madras: Kuppasami Sastri Res. Institute, 1988, 54.

<sup>17</sup>Humphrey, *The Archetypal Actions of Ritual*, 1994, 97.

prevailing cultural mores prescribing the behaviour for a female. She is raised, according to the *puranic* mythology, as a male. The extra breast in this context does not translate to her being, *even more female*, but rather, *more male*. This “female masculinity” or “feminine masculinity” can perhaps be construed in the “articulation of a third sex, the category of inversion” that opens “up a terrain for imagining both ‘feminine men’ and ‘female masculinities.’”<sup>18</sup> I quite like the possibility of construing the goddess as an inversion of the sexes and as occupying a space of fuzzy gender as this was echoed by the way both male, and even more so, female devotees perceived the goddess, as she was *prior* to her marriage (as warrior-princess *Tatakai*). The Hindu women I interviewed spoke proudly of the goddess’ exploits. While they did not overtly appear to perceive her as male, or even in any sense androgynous, their narrative of her was constantly punctuated with, “just like a man,” “courageous like a man.” Not male, but just *like* a male.

Meenakshi, as an example of fuzzy gender, offers a challenge to “historical signatures”<sup>19</sup> of male-embodiment and female-embodiment and an androcentric understanding of labour that harks all the way back to man the hunter in opposition to woman the gatherer and reproducer. “Fuzzy” as a conceptual tool is traceable to Buddhist philosophic notions of fuzzy logic and the Hindu and Buddhist matrix of non-dualism, and as such is not completely foreign to the Indian subcontinent and Hinduism.

## 5. Conclusion

As the introductory paragraphs spell out, much of this paper was in the style of sharing autobiographic experiences and observances leading up to, and lived in the research space. I find that the methodological tool of autoethnography lends itself to sharing emic experiences with the reader, where the reader is allowed to in part, *journey* with the writer. Granted this methodology would not lend itself to all disciplinary frameworks. It would make less intellectual sense for research work in the Natural sciences. However, it is felt that for work in the Humanities and Social sciences, and especially work in anthropology and feminism, it is most apposite. Autoethnography as a methodology is of course not only available to

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<sup>18</sup>Breger Claudia, “Feminine, Masculinities: Scientific and Literary Representations of ‘Female Inversion’ at the Turn of the Twentieth Century,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 14, 2005, 76-106, 76.

<sup>19</sup>Tauchert Ashley, “Fuzzy Gender: Between Female-Embodiment and Intersex,” *Journal of Gender Studies*, 11.1, 2002, 29-38, 32.



women or feminists (and some feminists are indeed male activists or scholars). However, being a woman and feminist researcher allowed me to not only search out the women amongst the general community of Siva and Meenakshi devotees, and ask questions and listen to their stories, more importantly it allowed the women to confide sentiments that they would not normally have shared with male researchers. It is a well known fact that the early benchmark theorists, the likes of Bronislaw Malinoski and AR Radcliffe-Brown, although providing us with rich ethnographies of the communities they studied, wrote as if the women were largely muted and invisible. Much of their questions were directed to the males and answers heard from the males. It was later feminist theorists in anthropology, the female anthropologists like Michelle Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere<sup>20</sup> who showed that much of the early ethnographic material carried a heavy gender bias in favour of the male. Likewise when scholars like C. J. Fuller and William Harman<sup>21</sup> worked with the priests at the Madurai Meenakshi Temple they worked almost exclusively with the male priests and devotees of the temple. This was of course very possibly because of the social protocol in the average Indian home of the times, where the senior male members of the family would interact with outsiders, especially foreign male outsiders. Thus, while my 'Indian-ness' and 'Hindu-ness' were variables that helped broker a relationship with the women, my female gender was what further cemented initial rapport and subsequent trust with them. All of this has more to do with being a female research, than being a feminist or using autoethnography. However, I would suggest that it is the use of autoethnography I believe, that allows the reader to get 'to know' both the researcher and research participant. Female researchers are further able to share, through autoethnography, how their experiences as women have allowed them to broker special kinds of research relationships with the women in their study.

Anthropological work is cognisant of the postmodern recognition of the author as an integral part of the research work. Feminist studies and feminist ethnographies have also long been open to alternate modes of inquiry and enquiring and alternate modes of communicating that enquiry to an audience. Feminist writers have used poetry and performance, as

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<sup>20</sup>See Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, ed., *Woman, Culture, and Society*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974.

<sup>21</sup>Fuller C. J., *Servants of the Goddess: The Priest of a South Indian Temple*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984 and Harman William, *The Sacred Marriage of a Hindu Goddess*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989.

well as art as viable academic forums that are able to communicate on multiple levels of the emotional as well as cognitive and intellectual levels. It is within feminist scholarship that we are able to interrogate the personal (constructed) realities that women are made to perform within religious norms and ritual. Much of the performance of female gender scripts appear to be drawn from the regulatory power of certain (male-centred) canonized religious texts, themselves authored by male religious custodians. As females we are the canvas upon which these scripts come to be enacted. Autoethnographic modes within feminist studies and feministic perspectives in religion studies allows us the space to connect the experiential (our stories) to the theory and paves the way for both theoretical and concrete deconstruction of hegemonic normatives.

Autoethnography is "an autobiographical genre of writing that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural."<sup>22</sup> Ellis and Bochner put forward that autoethnography as "a form of writing that turns the researcher's own experience into a topic of investigation in its own right."<sup>23</sup> To me, autoethnography is an example of methodological innovation that allows us to be candid about our involvement in the research process. It is not so much about privileging ourselves over and above those we are studying, or subsuming and muting the participants' voices, but more about a methodological awareness that ethnography is embodied practice, and that as researchers we hold great representational authority and responsibility. 'Coming clean' or being honest about this point, and bringing it under scholarly scrutiny, rescues us from solipsism, or narcissism and prompts us to be reflexively analytic.

Reed-Danahay<sup>24</sup> explains that autoethnographers vary in their emphasis on *graphy* (i.e., the research process), *ethnos* (i.e., culture), or *auto* (i.e., self). This is what I have attempted in this paper. Whatever the specific focus, as authors we use our own cultural experiences reflexively, to look more deeply at self-other interactions. By writing ourselves into our own work as characters, autoethnographers challenge accepted views about silent authorship. There is always the balancing act of giving voice to ourselves as well as to our research participants. Autoethnographic

<sup>22</sup>Ellis C. and Bochner A., "Autoethnography, personal narrative, reflexivity: Researcher as subject," in Denzin N. & Lincoln Y. eds., *The Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 2000, 739, 733-768.

<sup>23</sup>Ellis and Bochner, "Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity," 739.

<sup>24</sup>Coffey, "The Place of the Personal in Qualitative Research," *Qualitative Researcher*, 4, 2007, 1.

methodology's success as a qualitative tool lies in the convergence of the "autobiographic impulse" and the "ethnographic moment." Autoethnographic methodology makes us acutely conscious of how we "witness" our own reality constructions. Amanda Coffey in her article 'The Place of the Personal in Qualitative Research'<sup>25</sup> tells us that researchers are in any event concerned with "observing, narrating and writing lives and experiences, and as such act as biographers of sorts." She asserts that one should be aware that qualitative research, in its purest form, "is experienced by and embodied through the researchers themselves."<sup>26</sup>

This paper has not been so much about the specific *research findings*, which I have addressed in other papers, how Madurai comes to be constructed as sacred space,<sup>27</sup> the ritual imperative of marriage and what marriage does to the goddess,<sup>28</sup> the goddess as having local indigenous roots.<sup>29</sup> Instead the point of this paper was primarily to probe the use of autoethnography as a tool in communicating more intimately the *research process* in the context of gender and religion. Within this brief I have sought to highlight (*using autoethnographic material*) certain aspects of ritual and worship at the Meenakshi temple that can be looked at within a feminist and gendered theory.

In typical autoethnographic style, I will close with a narrative that perhaps better explains the unpredictable research process. I had prefaced my stay in Madurai with a short stopover in Madras, meant to allow me time to visit the libraries of the University of Madras. In Madras I met several people who were intrigued by a student from South Africa who wished to, as they put it, study their religion, while all their students were aspiring towards studies in the sciences. Many of them were incredibly helpful. I remember clearly one particular elderly lady who offered to contact her relatives in Madurai so that I could be accommodated with family during my stay in the city. Her good Samaritan efforts did not actually come to fruit as I was compelled to decline the offer. Although

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<sup>25</sup>Coffey, "The Place of the Personal in Qualitative Research," 1.

<sup>26</sup>Coffey, "The place of the Personal in Qualitative Research," 3.

<sup>27</sup>Naidu Maheshvari, "Business Suits and Priests: Power and Priesthood," *Nidan: International Journal for Hinduism*, vol. 14, 2004, 2-18.

<sup>28</sup>Naidu Maheshvari, "Ritual Space and Ritual Dominance: The Goddess Meenakshi," *Nidan: International Journal for Hinduism*, vol. 12. 1, 2002, 12-28.

<sup>29</sup>Naidu Maheshvari, "Inscribing the Female Body: Fuzzy Gender and Goddess in a South Indian Saiva Myth," *Journal of Religion Southern Africa*, vol. 21. 1, 2008, 19-36.

excited by the prospect of living in a traditional Indian village I also wanted to be as proximate to the main temple as possible. I thus felt that living with her family on the distant outskirts of Madurai would have complicated daily travel arrangements to the city centre.

I was nevertheless naturally grateful to her kind efforts thanked her. She returned my words with a smile and said: "Never mind, Meenakshi (referring to the goddess) will take care of you my child." I had forgotten this remark and probably would have not paid it too much attention. Certainly I did not expect the goddess to meet and escort me from the train station. Later that week, on the train to Madurai I was fortunate enough to befriend a young student from Madras who had overheard my conversation with the conductor. Hearing that I was a student from South Africa he assured me that although he did not live in Madurai, his female cousin who was meeting him did, and that '*she would take care of me.*' You could well imagine my bemused surprise when I was introduced to the cousin waiting patiently on the platform. *Her name was Meenakshi.*

She apparently visited the temple as often as she could. Meenakshi was to be an invaluable companion and guide over the next three months, helping to orient me to the city. She even helped as we drove in search of suitable accommodation, negotiating our path through the dense traffic that is an audible greeting to any foreigner. Meenakshi's helpful presence was a vindication of the words of the conductor earlier in this research story. The city limits were certainly the entrance into some kind of religious space.

In a city where the goddess is known as Meenakshi it is of course no surprise that there would be many named in her honour. The name of the goddess was considered so auspicious that I found it graced stores and buildings, even rickshaws(!). There is thus no allusion to anything supernatural about my meeting, but to the more mundane, completely unpredictable reality of fieldwork. Fieldwork is at times downright frustrating. Quite often it frankly fails to live up to the rather romantic notions one carries around. When everything is said and done there is much about fieldwork that simply translates to 'being there at the right time,' or 'making contact with the right person.' There are however, those beautiful 'encounters' that leave warm memories of the research process, little reminders of the sheer chance of it all as we search for answers.