Visualizing Amman: Womanhood, the Goddess, and Middle-class Modernity in Tamil Religious Cinema

Lisa Blake
Faculty of Religious Studies
McGill University, Montréal
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Abstract

This thesis examines Tamil Amman films (*amman paṭaṅkaḷ*), a specific genre of South Indian cinema that centres on the figure of the fierce goddess Māriyamman. The study analyzes the films in the context of class and caste in South India, focusing specifically on how India's emergent middle class has shaped changing constructions of womanhood and religious practice in South India. Middle-class status is an overarching and recurrent theme in Amman films, which also consistently deploy and negotiate ideas about "tradition" and "modernity". I argue that the films themselves both represent and reify middle-class notions of religiosities and womanhood, while simultaneously serving a pedagogical purpose for audiences, namely, articulating a *way* of being middle class.

Résumé

Cette thèse s'intéresse aux films tamouls portant sur Amman «*amman paṭaṅkaḷ*», genre cinématographique propre au sud de l'Inde consacré à la figure terrifiante de la déesse Māriyamman. Ce travail analyse ces films dans le contexte des classes et des castes qui caractérisent le sud de l'Inde. Il s'agit en particulier d'étudier la manière dont la classe moyenne indienne émergente participe aux transformations qui touchent la représentation de la femme et les pratiques religieuses de cette région. Le statut de la classe moyenne est un thème dominant et récurrent dans les films portant sur Amman, ces derniers exploitant et négociant constamment les idées de «tradition» et «modernité». Je montre que les films exposent aussi bien qu'ils consolident les conceptions de la classe moyenne sur les pratiques de la religion et les femmes, tout en ayant une portée pédagogique pour les spectateurs, autrement dit tout en proposant une manière d'*être* classe moyenne.

Note on Transliteration

This thesis employs standard transliteration for Sanskrit and Tamil words. Tamil transliterations follow the University of Madras Tamil Lexicon. Terms that commonly occur in pan-Indian contexts (e.g. *sumaṅgalī*) are transliterated using the more familiar Sanskrit spellings.

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Introduction

Tamil "Ammaṉ" films (*ammaṉ paṭaṅkaḷ*) form a specific genre of South Indian film that centres on the figure of the fierce goddess Māriyammaṉ in her localized form. Although the films do share some characteristics with the meta-genre commonly referred to as the "Indian mythological", they also share a number of characteristics not found in the typical mythological that support their existence as a distinct genre. The generic semblance between mythologicals and early Ammaṉ films, however, makes it difficult to ascertain a precise date for the genesis of the genre, but it is clear that it existed by the 1970s and gained a modicum of popularity in the 1980s. Although Ammaṉ films are found throughout India, this study will focus on a particular type of Ammaṉ film found in Tamil Nadu, whose characteristics will be discussed in greater detail later in this introduction.

Although Ammaṉ films have only appeared in the past 40 years, religious mythologicals and devotionals have been present throughout India's cinematic history. In fact, the first Indian-made film, released in 1913 in Mumbai, was a mythological entitled *Raja Harischandra*, directed by D.G. Phalke (Dwyer 2006, 14). The film followed the story of King Harishchandra, originally found in the two major Hindu epics, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*. Similarly, South India's first film, *Keechaka Vadham* ("The Death of Kīcaka"), released in 1917, was based on a story culled from the *Mahābhārata* (Guy 1997, 23). Mythologicals remained popular until the 1940s, when social dramas, which dealt with "real life" issues, became increasingly popular. Variations on social dramas still form the majority of new releases, with religious films forming a much smaller portion of overall releases. Ammaṉ films are often denigrated as low-budget devotionals designed as a final resting place for washed up actors. As one reviewer states "Whenever a well-known actress takes on the role of the goddess, it is a sure sign that the actress, once a top heroine, is now past her prime" (Balaji 2002). However malicious the reviews might be, the films nevertheless retain a small but devoted audience, which many attribute to the devotional content of the

films. “It is normal for any director to believe that the special effects and the devotion[al] content will ensure success at the box office” (Kumar 2000). For the mainly female audiences who view these films this is often true, as the viewing of the film becomes akin to viewing an image or an icon of the goddess. When watching the films, some members of the audience perform rituals for the on-screen goddess or pat their cheeks in devotion when she appears on the screen. The films are particularly popular in the Tamil month of Āṭi (mid-July to mid-August), when the goddess is believed to be in her most heated state, and thus in the greatest need of worship and cooling.

In addition to their devotional aspects, the films fulfill a niche that has become important as the middle class has expanded in India. Although on the surface the films seem to show a simple narrative of the power of the goddess and her worship by a non middle-class devotee, the films are structured in such a way so as to show the social mobilization of the devotee from non-middle to middle class. They thus become paradigmatic for women who find themselves in the same position as the devotee—that is, newly ascended to middle-class status and pressured to *remain* middle class. The films thus serve as a mirror for many of the anxieties associated with middle-class status and a perceived loss of “tradition”, while simultaneously celebrating the material and religious dimensions of contemporary, urban middle-class life.

As such, the present study seeks to question the nature and purpose of Ammaṉ films in the context of three major themes found in the films: womanhood, religion, and the development of the middle class. I focus on questions such as the following: How do Ammaṉ films both represent and reify existing models of womanhood in Tamil Nadu? How do they mirror the changing role of religion in the lives of middle-class Indians and elucidate the changing worship of the goddess? For the middle class, how do the films simultaneously promote and mitigate fears over the changing class status of many Indians? The answers to many of these questions ultimately serve a pedagogical purpose; they teach non-middle-class devotees *how* to be middle class, while reinforcing the importance of maintaining the traditional values that constitute their “Indianness”

in the face of a globalized world. This becomes especially important amidst fears that a changing world signals the end of traditional Indian culture, and, by extension, Indian religion. Ultimately, the films show that middle-class status is acceptable – and even revered – but that it should never come at the expense of Indian tradition. The films repeatedly show the middle-class family suffering hardships due to their neglect of the goddess, whose worship is metonymic of "Indian tradition". However, by the end of the film the family has learned how to be both traditional *and* middle class, an important lesson that is passed on to the viewers.

Amman̲ Films as a Genre

Drawing from the work of Raynor *et al*. on cinematic genre (2003, 56-59), I propose that Amman̲ films can generally be characterized by the presence of five distinct elements: (1) They tell the story of a village goddess and her devotee using a number of common plot points and characters; (2) They juxtapose the rural non-middle class with the urban middle class, where the rural is viewed as "traditional" and the urban as "modern"; (3) The goddess is shown as fickle and therefore is identified with the dangerous village goddesses of South India; (4) Often the antagonist of the film is the devotee's own husband, who is usually extremely abusive towards her, even though the film ends with his repentance; and (5) Although the devotee and goddess mirror each other, it is clear that "real" women are distinct from the goddess; audiences are meant to identify with the figure of the devotee and *not* the goddess.

Tamil Amman̲ films present a distinctly somatic approach to religion that I believe is informed by some of the ideologies around gender and gender roles perpetuated by Indian nationalism and Tamil Dravidianism. Many Amman̲ films resonate with larger public and political constructions of the home-life of the middle class, the role of women, and the role of religion in the (Tamil) nation. In this thesis, I focus on three issues: (1) contemporary constructions of Tamil womanhood, (2) the nature of the goddess and her rituals, and (3) the moral, economic, and religious "middle classness" of Tamil Amman̲ films.

In much of the current literature, caste and class are heavily enmeshed. Following the work of K.L. Sharma (1994), although they are clearly distinct categories, at many points in this thesis they are one and the same, since the actions of the upper class clearly become conflated with the Brahmins, and the non-upper class with non-Brahmins. Tamil cinema itself has been closely involved with these issues since its inception. Traditionally, cinema was seen as a non-elite/low-caste medium, with social stigma following actors and patrons alike. As Theodore Baskaran notes, "In a society that was rigidly stratified…cinema appeared as mass entertainment, cutting across all strata…Cinema's very accessibility to the lower classes alienated the elite of society from it" (1996, 10). Additionally, as the films began to move away from mythologicals, political issues surfaced in the films, particularly those having to do with caste. As early as 1936, anti-caste films were made, such as the film *Balayogini*, which "…reinforced existing values, including religious beliefs, but attacked the irrationality of a hierarchical order decided by birth" (Baskaran 1996, 15). The class issues that form the major plot of Amma<u>n</u> films, therefore, come out of a long history of class/caste issues in Tamil cinema. Therefore, though this study focuses on Amma<u>n</u> films, many of the conclusions concerning caste are relevant for Tamil cinema as a whole as well.

Both the aesthetics and morality of Tamil films draw upon an ideology of somatic nationalism embedded in and disseminated through the public sphere. Tamil nationalism, often glossed as "Dravidianism," developed in the shadow of Gandhian nationalism in the early part of the twentieth century. It engendered radical social and political ideologies around the female body, nation, religion, and sexuality through figures like E.V. Ramasami Naicker (also known as "Periyar," 1879-1973). Sumathi Ramaswamy's *Passions of the Tongue* explores the deployment of somatics in the creation of ideological connections between Tamil culture, understood as the goddess Tami<u>l</u>ttāy ("Mother Tamil"), and her devotees (the Tamil people) in the context of the Dravidian movement. As devoted children, Tamil men are urged to protect the mother – to remove her shackles, heal her wounds, and ease her ever-present tears – by safeguarding the

Tamil language, culture, and state. The image of Tamil̲ttāy as mother is important, as "The modality of somatics…thrives on the patriarchal imagining of the woman as passive victim, dependent on her male kin to protect, honor, and save her" (Ramaswamy 1997, 101).[1]

Amman̲ films do not show the image of a suffering goddess, but somatic nationalism is scripted onto the character of the devotee, who is shown in distress throughout the film. As the film begins, the viewer is inevitably introduced to four main characters: the goddess and her devotee, and the *mantiravāti* (Skt. *mantravādin*, "sorcerer") and his "student" or apprentice, who is the future husband of the devotee. The *mantiravāti*, who has a great desire for the powers of the goddess, enlists his student's help, promising him his own set of powers once the goddess' have been reappropriated. It is not long before the devotee meets the student and they marry; she has not yet discovered his true nature. Soon, however, the devotee finds herself in the home of her new in-laws, where she is treated as a servant and subjected to mental and physical abuse, often by her husband and sister- or mother-in-law. Much of her anguish is caused by the presence of the *mantiravāti* in her husband's life; he becomes the cause of most, if not all, of her husband's evil acts. The goddess, who has been patiently observing the suffering of her devotee, unleashes her wrath on both the *mantiravāti* and the husband. The film reaches its climax when the goddess kills the *mantiravāti*, but is prevented from killing the husband because her devotee pleads for his life. This chaos is only mitigated when the husband reforms and repents, thus allowing his wife to retain her status as a *sumaṅgalī* (Tam. *cumaṅkali*, "auspicious married woman") and as a devotee.

Although on the surface the goddess could appear to be a potentially "empowering" figure for real women, the sharp contrast between the goddess and her female devotee only serves to reify the quasi-traditional roles for women

[1] Although the focus of my work is in a Tamil context, there is a parallel here with the figure of Telugu-Talli ("Mother Telugu"), who serves a similar function to Tamil̲ttāy in Telugu Amman̲ films. For more on Telugu-Talli, see Lisa Mitchell's *Language, Emotion, and Politics in South India: The Making of a Mother Tongue* (2009).

perpetuated by nationalist discourse. The female devotee is not to react against her abusive husband, but rather must remain devoted to the goddess, who will eventually save her. The films emphasize that the proper role of the Tamil woman is that of "wife" (Tam. *pattiṉi*, *pativiratai*; Skt. *patnī*, *pativratā*), and that without a husband, her purpose in the modern life of the nation cannot be fulfilled. As such, the films can be understood not only in terms of their obvious theme of good versus evil, but also as contemporary commentaries on everyday middle-class domestic life.

The Origins of Tamil Cinema and Precursors of Amman Films

A critical history of Tamil cinema must begin with Sankaradas Swamigal, an actor who began the boys' troupes in the early twentieth century. Boys' troupes (also called boys' drama companies) were acting troupes that contained only preteen males, who would play both male and female roles (Guy, 1997, 2). By removing females from the equation completely, it was believed that chaste behavior was all but guaranteed, while preteen actors could be more easily controlled by the director. In addition, the performances themselves often focused on religious stories and avoided the "crudeness" associated with earlier drama troupes that was considered inappropriate by the upper class. These were a direct precursor to Tamil cinema and many of the boys' troupe actors became cinema stars in their later years.

Films Come to India

In 1909, the Prince of Wales visited India and brought with him a British film, the first to be screened in India. The film was displayed on a projector that was combined with a gramophone player, allowing for sound to accompany the film. One of the audience members, Ragupathy Venkaiah (now recognized as one of the "fathers" of South Indian cinema) was so enamored of this device that he bought one of his own, paying Rs. 30,000 for the privilege. He first screened imported British or American films for the locals, allowing an appreciation of film to grow. As attendance steadily increased, Venkaiah decided to take his projector

on the road. His touring cinema was a huge success and soon after he began the process of making his own films. Although he attempted his first film in 1917, a defective camera and a lack of funds caused it to never be released. Meanwhile, however, another director, R. Nataraja Mudaliar, had purchased a 35 mm camera in 1916 and had been working on directing his own film. The film, *Keechaka Vadham,* was released in 1918 in Madras City (present day Chennai). Soon after, Mudaliar began work on his second film, another mythological, entitled *Draupathi Vastrapaharanam*, which was also a huge success (Guy 1997, 24).

The success of these films is most often attributed to their status as mythologicals. Mythological films are based on popular mythological stories, generally from the Purāṇas or the *Mahābhārata*, that are well known by the majority of the Indian population. Directors were eager to use these stories in their films as they endowed the film itself with a sacred nature, while the visual connection with the film deity was often viewed as a religious experience. These factors guaranteed attendance at the film, especially because audiences were curious to see how the director had chosen to represent a familiar story.

Mythologicals were also important in regards to the nature of silent film. Dialogue was only possible with the use of cue cards, through which it was difficult to fully relate the nuances of a story. As a result, directors had to rely on body language and primitive special effects in order to adequately portray a story. The use of mythologicals removed many of these issues, as the audience would already know the story, and therefore the images would be a supplement rather than the primary mode of storytelling.

However, even after mythologicals began to be filmed, cinema houses continued to show popular British and American films. There were two major reasons for this, the first being the sheer number of copies of these films, which made it easier for them to be obtained and shown all around India, and the second being the higher quality special effects and stunts in the films.

Throughout the period of silent film, from 1916 until 1931, 124 silent features were made in South India. Although drama had conceivably been made respectable for all castes and classes, cinema fell under the purview of entertainment for the non-elite, and thus some aspects of its success were tempered. The issue was not with the content of the films, but rather it was an issue of access. Since all were welcome at the showing of a film, both the elites and non-elites would be contained in the same room – an unattractive situation to those of the higher castes/classes, many of whom believed that by associating with those who were "below" them, they too would be seen as non-elite. Thus cinema was quickly designated as an art form for the masses, although the upper classes did still attend screenings. Thus, the elite patrons of cinema had to, "…differentiate their engagement with cinema from that of the subalterns" (Pandian 1996, 951), with their involvement tending more towards the business and financial sides of the industry. Many efforts were made to interest high-class/caste women in the cinema, but they most often failed and the acceptance of cinema as a form of leisure among the elite came only when they realized the possibilities of money and celebrity that it had to offer. The elite also soon differentiated themselves from the non-elite by insisting on films that were *not* mythologicals, but rather focused on realism that was common in English and other foreign cinema. This removed cinema even further from the context of the company dramas and allowed for the elite to find their own niche within cinema that was untainted by the tastes of the non-elite. This is still seen today in the disdain by many for Amman̲ films and other religious films that are accused of lacking a semblance of realism.

Talking Films

As the silent film era came to an end and the first talkies were filmed, music and dialogue became increasingly important in Tamil films (Baskaran 2008, 114). Although new technologies were being developed, it was still impossible for music or dialogue to be recorded separately from the visual, resulting in a need for studios to hire actors who were musically talented. The

immediate choice for "live" singers were Karnatak musicians, many of whom refused roles due to the still-present stigma of cinema. Those who did join the industry, however, helped to increase its respectability as they were highly trained and highly respected (Baskaran 2008, 116). As a result, many of the films contained more songs than dialogue, with one, *Sangeetha Lava Kusha*, reaching a record of 63 songs (Randor 1985, 465).

Although silent films had been successful in a nation that boasted a number of languages, the introduction of films in local languages was a much bigger success and created the possibility of films with new stories that varied from the mythological base, though mythologicals continued to be the biggest draw for patrons (Pandian 1996, 954).

The most interesting new aspect of films in this era, however, was the use, specifically by A. Narayanan, of film as a tool to influence the masses. Narayanan produced a film called *Dharmapatni*, which "highlighted the ruinous effect of drinking and the impact drink had on the family" (Guy 1997, 29). Raja Sandow also followed this trend, as he believed that cinema should be used as a tool of mass communication to educate and elevate people, and therefore to bring about social awareness and social change (Guy 1997, 35). This take on film was an accepted trope among the Tamil elite, many of whom felt that cinema *should* be used in order to disseminate messages to the masses, but that in its current state it was actually being used to further moral degradation (Pandian 1996, 954).

With the advent of Tamil nationalism, films began to be used as political propaganda. When the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) was formed, it was under the leadership of C. N. Annadurai, a popular film writer. Annadurai was accompanied by some of the biggest Tamil film stars, such as K. R. Ramaswamy, S. S. Rajendran, and Shivaji Ganesan (Hardgrave and Neidhart 1975, 29). While the government leaders at that time had laughed at the idea of a government composed of people from within the film industry, the DMK won a landslide victory in 1967, with Annadurai becoming the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu (Hardgrave 2008, 61).

As Chief Minister, Annadurai continued to write films with the purpose of educating the masses and sending a message. The most successful DMK film of this era was M. Karunanidhi's *Parasakthi*, which, though originally banned, went on to become a huge success. The most controversial portion of the film was a scene that showed the molestation of a young girl by a priest in front of a temple idol. In the film, the girl is rescued by the hero, who then takes the opportunity to delineate the social philosophy of the DMK (Hardgrave 2008, 63).

Ammaṉ films developed out of both mythologicals and the social drama, and as a result it becomes difficult to discern their precise beginnings. Films that are centered on the figure of the Ammaṉ have been a constant throughout India's cinematic history. Although these are not the Ammaṉ films that this study is based on, they are important to understanding the role of the Ammaṉ within Tamil cinema. One such example is the 1976 film *Bhadrakali*, which is located between the two genres of the modern Ammaṉ film and the mythological.[2] It is not a mythological, since it is not a retelling of a popular religious story, and it shares some, but not all, of the distinctive characteristics of Ammaṉ films: the film revolves around the goddess and her female devotee and many of the major plot points revolve around issues of class, womanhood, and westernization in South India.

> As the film begins we meet the protagonist, Gayathri, a married woman with a young child who has decided to pursue a job outside of the home. On the day of her job interview, she witnesses the rape and murder of a woman by a man who, the audience will come to know, is a serial rapist. Gayathri escapes unscathed, but not for long. The man begins to follow Gayathri and repeatedly threatens her. Gayathri becomes mentally disturbed as a result. In this unstable mental state, she kills her own child and at this point her husband divorces her. Gayathri's former husband soon marries a woman named Jayanthi, who becomes pregnant and gives birth to a child, while Gayathri lives a reclusive life with her Brahmin parents. Meanwhile, Gayathri, who has been continuously stalked by the rapist, decides that instead of being his next victim, she will kill him. She begins to believe that she is the goddess Kālī and the rapist is Mahiṣāsura. It then becomes apparent that Jayanthi and the rapist have had a prior

[2] *Bhadrakali* was remade in Hindi as the film *Baawri* in 1982. The remake follows the same plot as the original and uses much of the same overall imagery (Fig. 0.1, Fig. 0.2).

connection. The rapist had previously been a driver for Jayanthi's father and had tried to molest her before she was married. He was fired because of this and wants to wreak his revenge on Jayanthi, too. He manages to kidnap her child, a catalyst for Gayathri's "possession" by the goddess Kālī. The film climaxes, Gayathri-as-Kālī rescues the child, kills the rapist and then dies herself.

Figure 0.1. *The rapist is impaled on the trident of the goddess' image. (Baawri)*

Figure 0.2. *The rapist is impaled on the trident of the goddess' image. (Bhadrakali)*

Bhadrakali animates many of the key themes that recur in the Amma̲n films that form the subject of this thesis: violence, middle-class women's identity, and the simultaneous parallels and differences between goddesses and real women. *Bhadrakali* is an important precursor to the Amma̲n films we will examine below because it bridges social drama and religious cinema, but more importantly, sets the pace for a number of middle-class-oriented Amma̲n films that follow in the 1980s and 1990s.

Literature Reviews

Although Tamil and Indian film studies have increased in recent years, mythologicals and Amma̲n films have remained a neglected field. When the films are mentioned, "The slim literature on the topic bears a tone that is variously apologetic, disapproving, or dismissive—suggesting that mythological films are, frankly, embarrassing: the most tawdry and regressive products of an otherwise

much-maligned industry…" (Lutgendorf 2002a, 13). Scholarship on Amman films is virtually non-existent and is, in fact, limited to two short articles. The first of these articles, Maria-Priska Ondrich's "Amman movies – an Introduction" (2005) introduces the plot of Amman films, but focuses mostly on the rituals found in them. Although the main characters (the goddess, the sorcerer, and the devotee) are discussed, the article offers no critical analysis of the films or of the themes found within them. Kalpana Ram's 2008 article "Bringing the Amman into presence in Tamil cinema: cinema spectatorship as sensuous apprehension" offers the analysis that Ondrich lacks and carries a more in-depth critical reading of Amman films. Ram presents the films in the context of the history of the mythological genre in India, while focusing on the way in which the films blur the accepted line between spectatorship and worship. Although these two articles represent the entirety of research that is available on the specific topic of Tamil Amman films, there is much scholarly work available on the themes that are employed in this study. These include the themes of religion and cinema in India, middle-class religion, and goddess worship in South India.

Religion and Cinema in India

Many films made in India contain overtly religious themes, yet studies of Indian cinema generally marginalize this aspect in order to focus on the nationalistic aspects of the films. A number of recent scholarly works, however, have focused on discussions of religion and film. Of these, the most relevant to my own work are those by Philip Lutgendorf and Rachel Dwyer. Lutgendorf's study focuses on the Hindi film *Jai Santoshi Maa*, a mythological film that surprised critics by becoming one of the biggest hits of 1975. Although it was "a low-budget film featuring unknown actors, cheap sets and crude special effects, and a plot and audience dominated by women" (2002a, 11), Lutgendorf concludes that *Jai Santoshi Maa* was particularly successful because it served as a commentary on social convention, while simultaneously focusing on visuals in a way that was enticing for female viewers. In his analysis of the film, Lutgendorf focuses on Hindi cinema's aesthetics and tropes, as well as the major themes in

the film, such as class status, the Indian woman, and nationalism, while also discussing the importance of the film to lower and middle-class women. Although the context and content of *Jai Santoshi Maa* is different from the Amman films that I focus on, Lutgendorf's approach has deeply influenced my own.

Rachel Dwyer's study *Filming the Gods: Religion and Indian Cinema* is one of the few extant studies that focus on Indian film in the context of mythological and devotional genres. However, as is made clear in her introduction, she has limited herself mainly to Hindi cinema, with some brief points of discussion on Marathi cinema (Dwyer 2006, 10). Dwyer devotes a section to the beginnings of the mythological film industry in North India, focusing on Phalke's *Raja Harischandra,* a forerunner of the genre. She also notes the much-maligned state of mythologicals today and its connection to class status, as mythologicals are most often aimed at and viewed by audiences from a non-middle-class stratum (Dwyer 2006, 56). She does briefly note the presence of Tamil Amman films, but because they fall out of the scope of her study, they are simply mentioned as being ubiquitously popular throughout the South (Dwyer 2006, 51). Nevertheless, Dwyer's work is an important addition to the field, as it is one of the few devoted solely to the study of religion and cinema, acknowledging the significant role religion plays in popular Indian cinema today.

Sara Dickey's study *Cinema and the Urban Poor in South India* focuses on the place of film in the lives of the "urban poor" who make up the majority of the audience at cinemas in Madurai, Tamil Nadu. Dickey presents an intriguing analysis of three popular Tamil films, including common themes as well as the audience's reactions to and interpretations of the films. Throughout the work, she shows the relevance of film in the daily life of cinema-goers, as she gives insight into fan club organizations as well as the myriad connections between film and politics. Much of her discussion also focuses on the importance of class in the world of film. Although many middle-class people are now active patrons of cinema, there is often an underlying disdain for the medium due to its accessibility. As a result, fan clubs with middle-class members often work to help

the poor, which "…allow[s] members to perceive themselves as separate from the difficulties of the poor" (Dickey 1993, 176). Behind the camera, upper class filmmakers often glorify poverty, yet end the films with the utopic image of the non-middle-class character whose difficulties have disappeared when he triumphantly ascends to a higher class status. This is in many ways parallel to Amman̲ films, in which a final image of the newly ascended middle-class devotee is presented as a social and civic "goal" for the audience.

Middle-Class Religion

In recent years, the burgeoning middle class has become a popular subject of government surveys and academic studies alike. Although some of these studies focus only on defining and discussing the middle class as a whole, a large number focus on the changes religion has undergone in the new middle-class community.

Fernandes' (2006) study on the middle class does not have a particular section focused on religion, but rather references the interactions of the middle class and religion throughout. Her study is perhaps most valuable in its quest to determine the criteria for middle-class status; she chooses to base status not on economic level *or* status-based actions, but rather discusses the two in conjunction. The discussions on the history of the middle class are broad, but are useful in understanding the fears surrounding the middle class and westernization. By contrast, Minna Saavala's (2010) study of middle-class communities in Hyderabad presents a localized study of the middle class. Saavala discusses the importance of religion in marking the new Indian middle class as separate from the westernized masses, stating that "By actively engaging in religiosities…, new middle-class Hindus mark their difference from a secularized, immoral and 'Westernised' elite" (2010, 152). Ultimately, she focuses on an analysis of religious practice in the context of the middle class lifestyle in order to understand how religious practices have changed in the wake of the emergence of twenty-first century middle-class culture.

Mary Hancock's (1999) study on upper class Smārta Brahmin women in Chennai focuses on the interactions of the group with middle-class religion. Hancock discusses the women in their role as *sumaṅgalīs* and how perceptions of this role have changed and been reasserted through the complexities of nation and modernity. Hancock asserts that for Smārta women, "…domestic rituals are actions by which self-defined 'middle-class' persons characterize the ways in which they differ from the poor and from non-Brahmans…and represent their Indianness" (1999, 25-26). The idea that specific actions—ritual or otherwise—are taken to mark the middle class as separate from the non-middle class is a theme that pervades much of my work throughout this study.

In 2001, the *International Journal of Hindu Studies* produced an issue that dealt mostly with questions of the middle class and religion. In speaking of the essays included in this issue, John Stratton Hawley questions "…whether and to what extent one can successfully characterize major traits in middle-class religion in contemporary India as a whole" (2001, 224), the difficulty beginning with the fact that a scholarly definition of the Indian middle class does not exist. Nevertheless, Hawley concedes that there are middle-class traits becoming increasingly apparent in religion, with many rites and rituals being repackaged "…in ways that integrate them into the general milieu of the contemporary middle-class Hindu religion…" (2001, 222).

This idea is taken up with great interest by Joanne Waghorne in her book *Diaspora of the Gods: Modern Hindu Temples in an Urban Middle-Class World*, where she discusses the "gentrification of the goddess" in terms of her changing temples and rituals in modern Chennai. She refers to the goddess Māriyamman̲, who, as we will see, was originally considered to be a goddess for non-elites, but who now boasts some of the wealthiest temples in India. Waghorne concerns herself with questions of how Māriyamman̲ has been able to successfully become a goddess who "…cuts across caste lines, crosses class distinctions, and bridges the urban-rural divide—all under the banner of new middle-class respectability" (2004, 133-34). In a similar manner, William Harman's essay "Taming the Fever

Goddess: Transforming a Tradition in Southern India" focuses on the changing worship of Māriyamman in two temples in South India, the traditional Samayapuram, and the relatively new Mēlmaruvattūr. In comparing the two temples, Harman points out the sanitization of rituals at Samayapuram (i.e., ritual bloodletting and animal sacrifices are no longer performed) and the ultimately new middle-class religion that occurs at Mēlmaruvattūr under the leadership of Bangaru Adigalar. Together, these two studies form a basis for my own claim that Amman films represent a new kind of worship of the goddess that is fully middle class in nature.

Goddess Worship in South India

There has been much written concerning goddess worship in South India, as it has become a prominent topic of scholarly discourse. In her study on the goddess Aṅkālaparamēcuvari (1986), Eveline Meyer brings an encyclopedic understanding of South Indian village goddesses, including their rituals and devotees. Her research is based on ethnography in several Tamil villages and contains detailed descriptions of traditional rituals for Māriyamman and their interpretation. Her work thus has formed much of the basis for my own understanding of goddess rituals in South India. In a similar vein, Isabelle Nabokov's *Religion Against the Self: An Ethnography of Tamil Rituals* focuses on Tamil rituals in the context of "village Hinduism". Nabokov discusses these rituals as societal structures that are used in order to create the proper Tamil individual, but argues that "…the person who emerges from many of the rituals and religious experiences…is a compound of disparate identities that do not always blend very well" (2000, 15). More recently, Amy Allocco has written a dissertation concerning *nāga*, or "snake" goddesses (a localized form of Māriyamman) in South India. Like Meyer, she reports on and analyzes the traditions and rituals surrounding the goddess, but she also discusses the changes in practice, particularly in urban areas, and the ways in which religious practice is used to "…negotiate a range of shifting social and economic contexts" (Allocco 2009, abstract). For more general information on Māriyamman, including her

origin myths, I turn to Elaine Craddock, who discusses a localized form of Māriyammaṉ, Pavāṉiyammaṉ of Periyapāḷaiyam. She also discusses the importance of ritual actions, noting that, "In each village, in each place, people are intimately connected to their goddess through ritual interactions; the *śakti* that flows from the goddess to her devotees and back to her is negotiated through the proper ritual actions" (Craddock 2001, 151).

For more specific information on the rituals involved in the films, Alf Hiltebeitel's seminal work *The Cult of Draupadī* has been an important resource. Hiltebeitel focuses on the goddess Draupadī and her rituals in great detail. Although not all of the rituals that he mentions are represented in the films, he nonetheless gives an example of a ritual-based Ammaṉ cult and the meanings and traditions behind the rituals.

Methods and Materials

This study involves both textual analysis and secondary research. For my textual analysis, I use a number of films as primary texts. Each is analyzed in the context of the themes I have mentioned above, with certain scenes transcribed in order to analyze the use of language as presented in the film. My textual analysis, therefore, includes the following primary sources: *Sri Bannari Amman* ("The Goddess of Bannari," 2002),[3] *Kottai Mariamman* ("Māriyammaṉ of the Fort," 2001),[4] *Raja Kaliyamman* ("The Stately Goddess Kali," 2000),[5] and *Padai Veetu Amman* ("Mother of the Battle House," 2002).[6] Since film analysis is its own distinct field of study, my theoretical perspectives and methods will be derived

[3] Directed by Bharati Kannan.
[4] Directed by Rama Narayanan.
[5] Directed by Rama Narayanan.
[6] Directed by Pugazhmani.

largely from film theory, particularly focusing on ideas of narrative, film technique and editing, and mise-en-scène.[7]

Todorov's narrative theory defines narrative structures by the presence of "cause and effect relationships" that contribute to a transformation (Branigan 1992, 4-8). This is particularly relevant in the study of Ammaṉ films because the logic of the film itself is predicated on popular understandings of cause and effect, framed in the language of karma. For example, in many of the films, one of the female antagonists is afflicted by smallpox because she has insulted the goddess and has to perform a ritual act in order to rid herself of the disease and restore her own karmic balance. Therefore, one aspect of my study is to pinpoint these "cause and effect" relationships in narrative and to compare them across a sample of Ammaṉ films.

I also examine film technique and editing with the aid of Rowe and Wells, who state that although one purpose of editing is to ensure that all of the acting and dialogue is seen and heard, the way in which the camera moves or the scenes are cut is a deliberate act, and contributes to the overall feeling of the film (2003, 75). This is particularly apparent in the climax of Ammaṉ films, as the camera quickly cuts between the raging goddess and the object of her wrath, foregrounding the physical and moral powers of the goddess. Mise-en-scène is a term that encompasses the visual aspects that appear within a single shot, including the setting of the film, props, costumes, and the performance and movement of the shot (Rowe 2003, 63). In the context of Ammaṉ films, mise-en-scène – references to satellite TV and the visual prominence of Western designer clothing labels, for example – reveals the class status of each character and also provides a meta-commentary on class itself.

As I have already mentioned, this thesis will also employ a number of secondary sources, mainly anthropological studies of Tamil women and their religious experiences, Tamil village goddesses and traditions of their worship (particularly those centering on Māriyammaṉ), and votive rituals that focus on the

[7] There is obviously a vast amount of scholarly material dealing with film theory and analysis. For my project, however, I primarily use the works of Branigan (1992); Mast (1974); Raynor *et al*. (2003); Rowe *et al*. (2003); and Stam (2007).

body. I will reference some of these in the individual chapter summaries that follow.

The opening chapter of this study discusses the origins of nationalism and the ways in which it has been linked with womanhood. As Partha Chatterjee has pointed out in his pathfinding work, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, much of Indian nationalist discourse in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries linked women with nation. Women came to represent, "…the spiritual qualities of self-sacrifice, benevolence, devotion, [and] religiosity…" (Chatterjee 1993, 131), but only within the private realm of the home, which was "…envisioned as the site of feminine action for the nation" (Hancock 1999, 227). Many of these ideas resonated with those ideologies around gender propagated by the Dravidian movement discussed above.

Ammaṉ films play with many of the tropes that are embedded in both Indian nationalist and Dravidian discourse. The films focus on a bifurcated model of womanhood: that of the "traditional," non-middle-class woman (the devotee) on the one hand, and of the "modern," middle-class woman (often the sister-in-law, an antagonist) on the other. Although the films emphasize that the "modern" woman (who does not retain her traditional values) is undesirable, they are also characterized by a tension that pushes the "traditional" woman into the middle-class setting, creating a utopic postcolonial image of the "traditional" woman in the middle-class home.

Using examples drawn from the films, I analyze recurrent themes such as that of the *sumaṅgalī* ("auspicious married woman") and the symbolism of the *tāli* ("marriage cord"), in order to demonstrate how Ammaṉ films as a genre valorize images of Tamil Indian womanhood produced and disseminated through nationalist frameworks. In addition, I analyze the films in the context of Sumathi Ramaswamy's somatic nationalism, focusing on imagery concerning the tears, blood, and violated body of the devotee. I argue that these somatic elements are used within the films as a nationalist "call to action" to safeguard the ideal of the *sumaṅgalī* from the "westernization" that results from the rise of the Indian middle class.

While the goddess is understood as a composite image of the divine-feminine, visually Ammaṉ films present audiences with a figure of the goddess that closely resembles Māriyammaṉ. In the second chapter I demonstrate how the relationship with Māriyammaṉ is expressed through the iconography, rural localization, and distinctively somatic elements of the worship of the goddess. The titles of some Ammaṉ films, like *Padai Veetu Amman* and *Kottai Mariamman*, for example, directly reference local Māriyammaṉs, while almost all of the films represent votive rituals such as *tīccaṭṭi* ("fire pots"), *aṅga-pradakṣiṇā* ("circumambulation with the whole body"), and deity possession, that are also clearly associated with the goddess Māriyammaṉ. However, as middle-class anxieties over maintaining status have increased, Māriyammaṉ herself has changed to become a middle-class goddess with sanitized rituals and middle-class patrons. Ammaṉ films mirror this reality, as rituals dedicated to the goddess form a small part of the overall films, and the new middle-class devotee mostly does not take part in them and is separated from the other, non-middle-class devotees. In this chapter, therefore, I focus on these changing practices in worship and the processes that have caused them. I argue that Ammaṉ films demonstrate how to practice middle-class religion, and by extension, how to be middle class.

Thus, in the third chapter, I bring together themes from the first and second chapters in order to focus on the "middle-classness" of Ammaṉ films. I first dissect the phenomenon of the new middle class, from its beginnings as a result of the liberalization of India's economy in the 1980s. The importance of the middle class as a group becomes clear here, as middle class status is noted as "…one of the most potent idioms of identity, rank, and political power in contemporary India, particularly in urban areas" (Dickey 2008, 224). This extends to Ammaṉ films, where the emphasis on class is striking, as each film inevitably creates a narrative that is metonymic of social mobilization. The protagonist is almost always born into a non-middle-class family and marries into a middle-class family. Much of the action of the film takes place in the middle-class household and the heroine, in the end, is completely reconciled with the culture of the middle class. As such, I analyze Ammaṉ films as they relate to the development of the

middle class in South India, focusing mainly on the films' representations of the lower and middle classes and the roles women are expected to fulfill in each of these contexts.

Chapter 1

Contemporary Constructions of Tamil Womanhood

The advent of nationalism in India brought about myriad changes in the accepted roles for both men and women, a fact that continues to be mirrored in cinema. As Partha Chatterjee and Tanika Sarkar have demonstrated, in an attempt to maintain Indian customs, language, and religion, nationalists looked to women in their roles as mothers and wives. In delineating the role that women should play in the nationalist movement, a redefinition of women's roles in Indian society at-large occurred in this period. This new paradigm of the "ideal (modern) Indian woman" was also affected by the concurrent popularization of the goddesses Bhārat Mātā and Tamil̲ttāy ("Mother India" and "Mother Tamil"), who were gentle, motherly, and deeply associated with nation and region.

The figure of the *sumaṅgalī* ("auspicious married woman") is highly visible in Amman̲ films, as one major plot point involves the devotee's transformation into a respectable married woman. At first she is joyous, but is inevitably shown as battered and tearful. Yet she nevertheless remains a proper *sumaṅgalī* who is utterly devoted to her abusive husband. In this chapter, I will focus on the trope of the *sumaṅgalī* in Amman̲ films using examples from *Kottai Mariamman*, *Raja Kaliyamman*, and *Sri Bannari Amman*. I will argue that the use of somatic elements, such as the blood, tears, and violated body of the devotee, are a call to protect the ideal of the *sumaṅgalī* and, by extension, "traditional" culture from westernization. In order to understand the milieu from which these ideas developed, however, it is first necessary to discuss the processes of Indian and Tamil nationalisms that gave rise to the redefinition of state-endorsed roles for modern Indian women.

The Origins of Tamil Nationalism

Tamil nationalism has its origins in the Dravidian movement, which held that Tamil culture was a separate and distinct entity from Sanskritic culture,

identified with North India. Many believed that the language and culture of the South had, in fact, been corrupted by the Sanskritic culture of the North, and these radical individuals advocated a return to a "pure Dravidian" state by removing Sanskrit cultural and social influences from the South. The term "Dravidian" was coined by the Reverend Robert Caldwell to describe both the languages and the non-Brahmin people of South India.[8] A missionary from 1837 until his death in 1891, Caldwell based the word on the Sanskrit *dravida,* meaning "man of an outcaste tribe". This served not only to identify the people of the South, but also to position them as the diametric opposite of the North, thus creating "…the conceptual basis for a 'Dravidian' cultural/religious identity with an accompanying history – and even for a Dravidian nation" (Ravindiran 2000, 56).

Along with the conception of a Dravidian nation came a Dravidian goddess, Tamiḻttāy. Tamiḻttāy, or "Mother Tamil", first appeared as a hybrid mother-goddess figure in the hymn "Tamiḻt tēvya vaṇakkam", or "Homage to the Goddess Tamil", written in 1891 by P. Sundaram Pillai. The figure of Tamiḻttāy became popular as an icon that represented the Tamil people and their culture, while giving the community a way to reference the belief that they were a part of a distinct genealogy. Part of the movement, therefore, included removing all aspects of culture that were not thought to be expressly Dravidian, by, for example, cleansing the Tamil lexicon of Sanskrit words and cleansing the religion of Brahminic rites and rituals.

The development of this Dravidian identity played a large part in the start of the Dravidian movement. In the eyes of M.S.S. Pandian, it was also greatly influenced by three factors that defined the Madras government at the time:

[8] Caldwell believed that the Brahmins, even those of South India, were descended from an Aryan stock. In his discussions, his anti-Brahmin sentiments are apparent. He argues that "few Brahmins have written anything worthy of preservation" and that "The language has been cultivated and developed with immense zeal and success by native Tamilian Sudras; and the highest rank in Tamil literature which has been reached by a Brahmin is that of a commentator" (Ravindiran 2000, 58).

> (1) the near monopoly over the public administration of Madras Presidency exercised by the English educated Brahmins; (2) their privileging of Sanskrit as their own distinct cultural marker and the simultaneous inferiorisation of Tamil culture/identity by them; and (3) the efflorescence of a kind of Orientalist scholarship which offered a picture of glorious Tamil/Dravidian past/identity as distinct from Sanskrit/Aryan past/identity (1994, 85).

These factors become far more problematic when looking at the population breakdown of the region—though most offices were held by Brahmins, only three percent of the population were Brahmin. Most of the remaining ninety-seven percent, therefore, could not hold office, nor could they read Sanskrit. The stage was thus set for a movement that would allow all members of the nation to participate in its governance. In 1916, the first of such movements was developed, when C. Natesa Mudaliar founded the Dravidian Association. The organization formed with the intent of electing non-Brahmins into the government, but was ultimately not successful. It did, however, serve as a precursor for other similar groups, such as the South Indian People's Association, led by P. Theagaraya Chetty. In 1917, this organization issued the "Non-Brahmin Manifesto", which hoped to mitigate many of the issues cited above by M.S.S. Pandian by advancing non-Brahmin participation in education, the government, and professional orders. The manifesto demanded the addition of non-Brahmins to the Legislative Council and marked the formation of the South Indian Liberal Federation, later known as the Justice Party (Ram 1974, 217). It was this party that, in 1919, won a spot for separate non-Brahmin representation in the Madras Presidency and, in 1920, won a victory at the elections. The party retained office in 1923 and was intermittently successful throughout the rest of the twenties and thirties, winning its last election in 1937. Mohan Ram argues that the party's ultimate failure was a result of its elitist and vindictive nature, as well as its allegiance with the British, which did not sit well with the often anti-British non-Brahmins (1974, 218).

One of the foremost leaders of the Justice Party was E.V. Ramaswami Naicker (also known as Periyar), who was best known as the founder of the Self-Respect Movement, a social protest against Brahminism and the caste system in

particular. As a leader of the Justice Party, Naicker protested the Chief Minister's attempt to make Hindi a requirement for school children as a part of the move towards using Hindi as a national language. Naicker was successful, and Hindi became an optional, rather than a required, course. However, the threat to the Tamil language was taken seriously and Naicker, supported by the Justice Party, called for a separate Dravidian nation to be formed.[9] This was followed by a formal demand for secession in 1938, which was ultimately ignored.

As evidenced from the lack of support for the Justice Party, by the late 1930s its popularity had waned and in 1944 a new party, also led by Naicker, was formed. The formation of this party, called the Dravida Kazhagam (DK), has been termed by Marguerite Barnett as merely a "renaming" of the Justice Party. In her view this was necessary, as there was a need to disassociate from the "rich man's party" image that was synonymous with the Justice Party and to increase the party's association with popular anti-British sentiments (1976, 66). The move was apparently successful, as the Dravida Kazhagam quickly gained support; membership increased from 7,369 in 1944 to 75,000 in 1949. Naicker's time at the helm of a popular party, however, was short lived. In 1949, one of the other Dravida Kazhagam leaders, Annadurai, split from the party to form the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK). The split itself is often blamed on differences in matters of political style, participation in elections, and the question of a successor for Naicker. Publically, however, many DMK leaders claimed that they left as a result of Naicker's marriage to a woman forty-two years his junior, an action at odds with his previous denigrations against similar practices. At the time of the split, approximately 56,000 of the DK's 75,000 members became part of the DMK (1976, 75).

[9] The proposed boundaries of this "Tamil state" coincided with the outlines of the Madras Presidency, a region in which a number of different languages were used. Although these were all South Indian languages, the argument was that Tamil was the most purely Dravidian of the South Indian languages, and therefore that it should be the one used by all (Ram 1974, 221).

Tamil Nationalism and the Nation as Goddess

Concurrent with the political developments of the nation, the increasing popularity of Tamil̲ttāy, the goddess figure who was, literally, "Mother Tamil" helped Tamilians to view themselves as one community. Although Tamil̲ttāy is first referenced in Pillai's 1891 hymn, it was only in the 1930s that she began to appear in literature and images throughout Tamil Nadu. These images often depicted the body of Tamil̲ttāy in the shape of the Dravidian nation, marking her intimate connection with the land itself. While the Dravidians were seeking a separate nation, Indian nationalists hoped to keep an increasingly fragmented India intact, with Bhārat Mātā, or "Mother India" at the helm.[10] Like Tamil̲ttāy, Bhārat Mātā's image was often used for nationalist aims, with her body covering the whole of India. As Tamilians were seeking a separate identity from India as a whole, many of them decried Bhārat Mātā as a "false mother" who sought to remove Tamilians from the bosom of their own mother. Tamil̲ttāy herself was "…modeled on the 'new' mother who…[Tamil nationalists] hoped would eventually come to reign in Tamil-speaking homes – disciplined but compassionate, educated but modest and feminine, and respectable and virtuous" (Ramaswamy 1997, 99).

The popularity of both Tamil̲ttāy and Bhārat Mātā was largely due to the presence of their imagery throughout India. Printing and lithographic presses were already well established in India at this time, and prints of Bhārat Mātā and Tamil̲ttāy were available even for members of the lowest social strata.[11] These prints became a platform for nationalist propaganda. Besides prints of the

[10] The figure of Bhārat Mātā ("Mother India") is a fascinating goddess and thus has been the subject of a few in-depth studies, including Neumayer and Schelberger (2008), Ramaswamy (2010) and McKean (1996).

[11] The technology for lithography arrived in India in the 1820s, and by 1826 the Government Lithographic Press had been established, though many Indians at this time had also built their own presses. However, it was the Ravi Varma Fine Arts Lithographic Press, established in 1892, that first made lithographs that were affordable for even the lowest classes. Images of gods and goddesses that were produced by these presses were often used in home shrines, and it was through these means that the figures of Bhārat Mātā and Tamilttay became well-known throughout their jurisdictions. For more on the technology of early lithography in India, see Pinney (2004) and Neumayer and Schelberger (2003)

goddesses, many also portrayed the 'golden age' of India or figures considered important to the struggle for Independence (Neumayer and Schelberger 2003, 55). Prints of Tamiḻttāy fall into two distinct categories; the early images of her as the golden goddess, replete with jewels and ornaments, and later images designed to evoke fear and horror, with Tamiḻttāy in shackles, wounded, crying, or in threat of being disrobed (Ramaswamy 1998, 80). While the earlier images reinforced her role as the divine mother of the Tamil people, her later images represented her bondage by the shackles of colonialism and her violation at the hands of Hindi. The use of the figure of the violated mother helped to form an "imagined community", where most of the members "…never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 2006, 6). In this imagined community, devotees were encouraged to band together to save Mother Tamil. While her sons were expected to *actively* engage in demonstrations and movements, her daughters were encouraged to show their support by maintaining a traditional home. As their duty was centered on maintaining the traditions of India, the need for women to retain an "essential Indianness" in the face of westernization was pushed to the forefront. This becomes a central theme in Ammaṉ films, as women, and their bodies, become a representation of India and a site of the nationalist movement.

The Sumaṅgalī *and the* Vidhavā

As nationalist movements took over the subcontinent, a new paradigm of womanhood began to develop. At its core, womanhood came to be increasingly represented by the upper-caste images of the *sumaṅgalī* and the *vidhavā*. Prior to the era of Indian nationalism, images of the *sumaṅgalī* and the *vidhavā* were mostly limited to women of the upper castes. It appears that these bifurcated images became engrained in "popular culture" with the development of a pan-Indian notion of "proper womanhood" combined with the shifting aspirations of some non-Brahmins who, in emulating Brahmins, hoped to become like them.

As nationalist movements overtook India, there were a number of factors involved that became important in the new demarcation of the proper Indian woman. This was both reflected in and influenced by Bhārat Mātā and Tamil̲ttāy. Although some earlier incarnations of the goddesses were modelled after Durga and thus somewhat fierce, as Sumathi Ramaswamy has noted, this fierce model collapsed from the protectress of the nation to one who must be protected. It was her role as "mother" which became her most important feature, as she became seen as the mother of all Indians. This archetype was increasingly extended to Indian women in general, who came to be seen as the keepers of Indian tradition and the mothers of the next generation. This phenomenon has been documented elsewhere by Mary Hancock. Hancock's informants, a group of upper class Brahmin women in Chennai, are shown in much the same light. Even though some of their traditions may no longer be acceptable in a middle or upper class milieu, the traditions are still continued, even if it is necessary for them to be performed by a non-middle-class servant in their place (Hancock 1999, 134).

This emphasis on the importance of keeping traditions alive can be traced back to colonial Madras, when anxieties about an "essential Indianness" renewed focus on the need to maintain "traditional" culture and values. Men became responsible for the exterior, material world in which they worked, while women's duties became mostly limited to those associated with the inner world of the home.[12] This was, at first, a reflection of the fears posed by westernization, but it soon became one of the major foci of the nationalist movement. Women, who had been excluded from nationalist activities that would bring them into the exterior world, were quickly drafted to ensure the stability and Indianness of their own homes, in the hope that a traditionally Indian home would ensure the continued survival and transmission of culture. As such, a woman's role in the nationalist movement was distilled to her role as a devoted wife and mother. As this role was idealized, the notion of the *sumaṅgalī* – previously associated mainly with the upper castes – became extended to all Indian women.

[12] Partha Chatterjee's analysis of the interior and exterior worlds is discussed in greater detail in chapter 3.

The figure of the upper caste *sumaṅgalī* is closely associated with the home and the family. The *sumaṅgalī* is responsible for ensuring that her children grow to be culturally Indian; she is the one who must teach them the language, customs, and culture of India. Beyond her children, the *sumaṅgalī* is also responsible for her own presentation as "traditionally" Indian. Therefore, she is demarcated not only by her behavior, but also by her dress. She is marked for the first time with the ornaments of the married woman on her wedding day, a daily ritual that she upholds until her husband's death. These ritual elements include *kumkum* powder, which she wears in the form of a *poṭṭu* on her forehead and in the part of her hair, a silk sari, gold bangles and jewelry, and most importantly, the *tāli*.[13] The *tāli*, or "marriage cord" is the visible marker of the bond between the husband and wife. During the marriage ceremony, the husband ties the *tāli* around his wife's neck, and from that point on it is "…never to be removed until the marriage bond is dissolved or the husband dies" (Reynolds 1980, 38). This rule is not taken lightly, and many believe that to remove the *tāli* prematurely is to precipitate the husband's death. Thus, the *tāli* literally places the burden for the life of the husband around the bride's neck, serving as a constant reminder that she must always perfectly uphold the ideals of proper womanhood in orthodox Tamil Brahmin contexts. Upon her husband's death, the *sumaṅgalī* dies a social death, as her social value is placed in the context of her husband.

The upper-caste *vidhavā*, therefore, is feared by the *sumaṅgalī*, for she is "…the most inauspicious of all inauspicious things" (Reynolds 1980, 36). The fear of widowhood marks many of the actions of the *sumaṅgalī*, including the many rites and rituals that she performs in order to maintain the health of her husband. The death of a husband before his wife is considered a blight upon the wife's character, as it is believed that women become "…widows because they have not behaved properly in this or previous lives…" (Wadley 1980, 155).

[13] The precise origin of the *tāli* is unknown, but it is present in ancient Tamil *akam* poetry and appears to be indigenous to South India. Holly Baker Reynolds discusses the history of the *tāli* in great detail in *To Keep the Tāli Strong: Women's Rituals in Tamilnad, India* (1978).

As with the *sumaṅgalī*, the notion of the widow as inauspicious and societally dead is a Brahmin notion that has become pan-Indian. Much of this stems from the now-uncontrolled sexuality of a widow; without a husband, her sexuality is unbridled and therefore feared. The power of her uncontrolled sexuality is believed to give the powers to curse or harm others and therefore she must be removed from the centre of society (as when she was a *sumaṅgalī*) to the very periphery of it. As with the *sumaṅgalī,* the widow's status is apparent by the markers on her body. Upon her husband's death, a woman relinquishes her *sumaṅgalī*hood and all of the accoutrements associated with it. "By all accounts, this transition was one of euphemized violence directed on her body" (Hancock 1999, 125). At the end of an orthodox brahmin funeral, either the woman's son or other close male relative removes her *tāli*, toe rings, and bangles before shaving her head and giving her an unbleached cotton sari, which she must wear for the remainder of her life. The tradition of these visual markers as representative of marriage or death are not only paradigmatic, but in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries came to profoundly permeate Indian popular culture. As a result, the *sumaṅgalī* has also become a trope within Tamil cinema.

Although the character of the devotee in Amman̲ films is shown as having a miserable married life, her fear of widowhood is a theme throughout the films. The goddess repeatedly threatens the devotee with widowhood and it is only through the devotee's pleas that her husband is allowed to live. We can assume that these pleas stem not from a love of her husband, but rather from the devotee's own fears of living the life of a widow. This is apparent in the following scenes from the film *Raja Kaliyamman*, in which we see the devotee presented with the clearly bifurcated markers of the *sumaṅgalī* and the *vidhavā* in the kitchen of her middle-class home. She immediately recognizes their presence and realizes that they signify the goddess' desire to kill her husband. The devotee becomes increasingly angry with the goddess and threatens that if the goddess ends her husband's life, her own life will end as well.

An empty kitchen is shown before the camera moves to a close-up of a neatly folded white sari on a golden platter. After a quick cut to a close-up of the anthropomorphic goddess, standing in the middle-class living room, the shot returns to the empty kitchen, where a plate piled high with *kumkum* fills the frame. As the goddess leads Meena into the kitchen, the camera again focuses on a close-up of the sari before panning to the right to show the plate of *kumkum* (Fig. 1.1).

Figure 1.1. *Meena enters the kitchen with the goddess, where she sees a plate of* kumkum *and a plate holding a white sari. (Raja Kaliyamman)*

Meena, upon seeing the two plates, angrily says to the goddess, "If you want to take away my life as a *sumaṅgalī*, take [away] the *kumkum*!" The camera zooms in on the *kumkum*, before panning up to the goddess, a shot that is repeated three times. This is repeated with the sari, as Meena tells the goddess to give her the white sari if she wants her to die. After pausing for a moment, the goddess grabs a small amount of *kumkum* in her hands. She tells Meena that she would not give her the white sari, for that would be cruel, and then places the *kumkum* on Meena's forehead and in the part of her hair, promising that as long as she has a *poṭṭu* on her forehead, her husband will not be in any danger. The goddess leaves the room, as the devotee looks after her with tear-filled eyes and her hands clasped together.[14]

This scene illustrates a very visible demarcation between the widow and the *sumaṅgalī*. Meena immediately recognizes the urgency of the situation, and in extracting a promise from the goddess, she ensures her husband's well-being. It is important to note that in between the previous scene and the following scene Meena learns that her brother is dead and that he was killed by her husband. Even

[14] *Raja Kaliyamman*, DVD. 1:32:29 – 1:33:33

though she felt much love for her brother, this is put aside as she saves her husband from the wrath of the goddess.

> Meena's husband enters the goddess' temple, and walks directly to the icon of the goddess. He grabs at her garland of lemons, causing them to break, and also rips off the cooling neem leaves that circle her neck. As he is doing so, he mocks the goddess and tells her that he is going to take her eyes. As he reaches for them, a wild wind starts, lightning crashes and he is prevented from reaching them. Armed with a crowbar, he again attempts to reach her eyes. Floating up from the ground, two neem leaves hover in the air for a moment before transforming into a pair of eyes. These eyes move towards the husband's face, where they land on his own eyes and tear them out, leaving him with bloody eye-sockets. In fear, he screams for Meena and the lightning, wind, and torrential rain become increasingly heavy. Meena arrives, and as she runs to him the goddess is shown in her anthropomorphic form in front of her statue, and she proclaims "The death of Mahiṣāsura will occur again." The goddess lifts her trident, but pauses as Meena reminds her of the promise that she has made. At this point, the rain becomes so heavy that Meena's *kumkum poṭṭu* is washed off her forehead. Her promise nullified, the goddess rears back to kill Meena's husband, but just as she is about to do so, a snake touches Meena's forehead with his bloody mouth, creating a new *poṭṭu*. The goddess puts down her trident, and the husband, still unable to see, runs toward the goddess, apologizing for his mistakes and sins, while swearing that he has repented. Raja Kaliyamman tells him that it is only his wife's *tāli* that has saved him (Fig. 1.2).[15]

Figure 1.2. *Meena, with her snake-given* poṭṭu*, and her husband, with blood streaming from his empty eye-sockets, show their devotion to the goddess. (Raja Kaliyamman)*

[15] *Raja Kaliyamman,* DVD. 1:53:30 – 1:58:14

Between these two scenes, Meena shows herself as the ultimate *sumaṅgalī*. Even though her husband has treated her carelessly since the time of their marriage, she still pleads for, and ultimately saves, his life. This is no surprise, for Meena is responsible for her husband's life; if he dies, she is to blame. The goddess herself reinforces this paradigm, as it becomes Meena's responsibility to always wear a *poṭṭu* – if the goddess sees her without one, the husband will be killed. When Meena is shown the white sari (Fig. 1.1), a symbolic representation of the *vidhavā,* her fear and disgust is a visible reminder of the social discomfort surrounding widows. This is further shown in Meena's assertion that in giving her the white sari the goddess would be taking her life as well.

The plight of the *sumaṅgalī* as shown in these scenes is found consistently throughout the films. However, the *sumaṅgalī* herself is rarely presented as more than a one-dimensional character; the audience is not privy to her thoughts and she never deviates from her expected role. Therefore, in the films she is the figure of the ideal *sumaṅgalī,* and therefore the "traditional" figure who must be protected and saved. This becomes especially apparent in the next section, which focuses on the imagery of tears and the violated body of the devotee.

The Use of Somatics as a Call to Nationalist Action

In her seminal work *Passions of the Tongue: Language Devotion in Tamil India, 1891-1970*, Sumathi Ramaswamy discusses the somatics of devotion to Tamil̲ttāy, arguing that somatic elements, such as the womb, milk, tears, and violated body of the goddess, were strategically mobilized in early twentieth century South India. These "…images of the distressed, diseased, and violated mother were circulated not just for rhetorical effect but also to incite her 'children' to take up arms and come to her rescue" (Ramaswamy 1998, 110). In Amman̲ films, these somatic elements are also used, but they are placed on the body of the devotee. I would argue that there is some conceptual continuity with Tamil̲ttāy imagery here: the rhetoric of "safeguarding tradition" is actualized through the visualizing of woman and Amman̲.

As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, the devotee of Amman films is modelled after the "new Indian woman", who, as a *sumaṅgalī,* is devoted to her husband and her home. As in the case of Tamiḻttāy, the tears and the violated body of the devotee became a call to mobilization for Tamil audiences. Just as images of the battered Tamiḻttāy are used "…not so much to draw attention to acts of violence against women as to highlight the plight of the language and the dishonor wreaked upon the community of its speakers" (Ramaswamy 1998, 112), the atrocities committed against the devotee are not meant to foreground the abuse that many women face daily. It is not the individual women who must be protected, but rather the notion of "tradition", represented by the *sumaṅgalī*.

Tears

As with Tamiḻttāy, the tears of the devotee are one of the most visible manifestations of her distress. Her tears mostly result from the physical and emotional abuse inflicted upon her by her family and the insulting ritual acts that she is forced to perform on the goddess. The devotee's tears are borne out of her entrance into the middle-class family. Just as Tamiḻttāy's tears "…come to somatically index the sad state of the body politic in Tamil devotion" (Ramaswamy 1998, 109), the devotee's tears represent the perceived "sad state" of the potentially "westernized" middle class.

In the following scene from the film *Kottai Mariamman,* tears are used first as a representation of the pain that has been visited upon the devotee by her middle-class in-laws, and secondly as a reminder of the close relationship that exists between the devotee and the goddess. The scene takes place at the beginning of the film and the devotee here is not the protagonist of the film, but her mother. The mother's death at the hands of her husband occurs while trying to protect the goddess and this seems to be the reason why the protagonist of the film has a relationship with the goddess that is similar to that of a mother and a daughter. Immediately before this scene begins, the *mantiravāti* is shown trying to steal the eyes of the goddess from her statue. His quest to usurp her power is

blocked, however, as bolts of lightning strike him as he attempts to carry out the act. It continues as follows:

> A woman enters the front door of a well appointed home. As she is rushing up the stairs, we see a large, definitively middle-class home, with glossy wooden staircases, stained glass, and European art adorning the walls. The scene abruptly cuts to a close-up of a man lying in what appears to be a hospital bed, wearing a white blindfold over his eyes, but the woman's footsteps are still audible. As soft, yet ominous, music begins to play, the camera cuts to a different angle, and we see the woman rush into the room, asking what has happened. The man sits up and tells the woman, Minakshi, that there was an accident at work; while he is speaking, a doctor enters the scene (Fig. 1.3).

Figure 1.3. *Minakshi and her husband discuss the "accident" that left him "blind". (Kottai Mariamman)*

> The doctor asks the man how he is feeling, and then asks Minakshi if she is his wife. When she responds in the affirmative, the doctor requests that she step outside, where he tells her that her husband's accident has resulted in the loss of his eyesight. Minakshi, visibly upset, asks the doctor what she can do. He responds, "I'm sorry. I'm a doctor, Madam, not god." The doctor leaves the room and as Minakshi begins to cry, the camera zooms in to show a close-up of her alone.
>
> The scene abruptly cuts to a wide-angle shot of a dirt road at night, where approximately ten renunciants, dressed in orange robes, are walking. The music is at first an upbeat melody over a droning hum, but changes to a far more ominous minor key as one of the renunciants begins to speak. He is an older man, who appears to be the leader. As he stops to look around, he softly says, "Everyone, stay here." A quick cut changes the scene to Minakshi's home, where she sits with her head resting on her hand. The shadow of the renunciant enters the shot, followed by his feet, and the music again changes to an upbeat tune.

Figure 1.4. *Minakshi and the renunciant speak in her middle-class home. (Kottai Mariamman)*

This is overlaid with the dialogue of the renunciant and Minakshi; he tells her that he felt that he was called to her home, and she responds that she did, indeed, call for Koṭṭai Māriyamman̲ (Fig 1.4). She tells him of her husband's lost eyesight and asks him if there is anything that he can do. He responds, "Which doctor can say that a man's eyesight will not return?...What the doctor says he cannot do, the goddess can do." They both laugh in happiness and the renunciant tells Minakshi that to cure her husband's blindness she must go to Koṭṭai Māriyamman̲ and remove her eyes. She should then place these eyes over her husband's, which will allow him to see. Upon hearing this, Minkashi's face falls and there is a quick cut to an image of the goddess, which is accompanied by music and lightning bolts. Just as suddenly, the scene returns to Minakshi, who asks, "How will I go to the temple and take the goddess' eyes?" However, she seems to recognize her fate; although she is visibly upset, she agrees to do it.

As before, the scene again changes to a close up of the goddess' face, accompanied by her musical theme, before the camera zooms out to reveal Minakshi walking through the temple toward the image of the goddess. She angrily explains to the goddess why she is there and then reaches for her eyes with trembling hands. The image of her hands is intercut with flashes of lightning, which continue until immediately before she removes the eyes, when the entire shot spins around once.

Figure 1.5. *Minakshi removes the goddess' eyes for her husband. (Kottai Mariamman)*

As she pulls the eyes from the image, the empty eye-sockets ooze trails of blood down her face (Fig 1.5). The wind in the temple increases and the ringing bells of the goddess, along with her threatening theme, serve as the background to Minakshi's ever-increasing sobs. Still crying, Minakshi runs from the temple, the eyes clutched in her hands.

Minakshi then returns to her home, but before her husband notices her arrival, she sees him, no longer blind, sitting with the doctor and the renunciant, all three laughing about the trick they have played on Minakshi. Hearing this, Minakshi refuses to give the eyes to her husband and she runs from the house, grabbing her daughter as she goes. In her attempt to escape, she is shot by her husband (Fig. 1.6). With her last breaths, she places the misappropriated eyes on a tree, and uses her bloody hand to make a *poṭṭu* for the goddess (Fig 1.7).

Figure 1.6. *Minakshi is shot three times by her husband. (Kottai Mariamman)*

Figure 1.7. *Minakshi stands before the tree where she has placed the goddess' eyes and left a bloody* poṭṭu. *(Kottai Mariamman)*

> After Minakshi is dead, the goddess bursts from the tree (in her anthropomorphic form) and kills the husband with her trident. Minakshi's crying daughter is left alive and unharmed; it is she who becomes the protagonist of the film.[16]

The somatic nature of the relationship between the devotee and the goddess is shown in its most visceral form here. When Minakshi removes the eyes from the goddess' icon, she effectively removes the goddess herself from the temple (Fig. 1.5). The ability to remove the eyes should not be ignored; we have already seen that the goddess is capable of preventing someone from stealing her eyes, but the devotee is able to do it without repercussion. It is the symbiotic nature of their relationship that allows this; the devotee's extreme *bhakti* has served to make each an integral part of the other, thus even their bodies are mutual property.[17] The devotee's removal of the eyes is acceptable, as it is equivalent to her giving her own eyes for her husband. The goddess' anger, therefore, is not aimed at the devotee, but at the men who have tricked her. Minakshi herself is horrified when she realizes what has happened and refuses to give the eyes to her husband. It is this refusal that results in the sacrifice of her own body in order to ensure the goddess' continued existence. While her husband shoots her with a gun, she continues to run, and uses her last breath to place the goddess' eyes on a tree, thus marking it as the physical location of the goddess (Fig 1.6, 1.7). Minakshi then uses her own dying blood to mark a *poṭṭu* above the eyes, symbolizing the ways in which her own life-essence has become a part of the goddess. This action reifies the shared nature of their bodies. Upon removing the eyes from the goddess' icon, Minakshi's pain is made visible through her tears. This pain is mirrored by the goddess, as her empty eye-sockets drip, tear-like, with blood. Here the tears of the Ammaṉ film goddess and the devotee show their unity – the pain that each feels for the other is inevitable.

Although Minakshi is at first a dutiful *sumaṅgalī,* her love for the goddess eventually causes her to disobey her husband, as, in a rage, she runs from her

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[16] *Kottai Mariamman*, VCD disc 1, 08:55 – 17:00

[17] Eyes and their removal play a major part in Tamil devotional traditions. The "gifting" of eyes to a deity out of devotion is a common motif throughout Indian devotional traditions, and in the South Indian context the figure of the Śaiva saint Kaṇṇappar is perhaps the most famous of these.

husband, hoping to protect the goddess from his hands. Her devotion to the goddess is quite clear, but it comes at the expense of her *sumaṅgalī*hood, and ultimately, costs her her life. As we will see repeatedly, the devotee's utmost duty is to obey her husband and her devotion to the goddess should come second. Minakshi's reversal of this normative hierarchy results in her death, a clear message that the duties of the *sumaṅgalī* supersede all others.

Blood and the Violated Body

Violence against females, whether physical abuse or rape, is common in Indian cinema, and Amman̲ films are no exception.[18] The devotee is subjected to both mental and physical abuse at the hands of her husband and sister-in-law, who often use it as a means to convince the devotee to harm the goddess. In other situations, when there is nothing for the husband to gain from the abuse of the devotee, violence is simply a "…legitimate tool that a man can use to punish a woman" (Chatterji 1998, 144). The punishment of the devotee in these situations is not really a response to the devotee's perceived wrongdoing, but rather is representative of the husband's desire to have control of the devotee, and in turn, the goddess. Within Amman̲ films, this abuse is shown in the context of the middle class. However, it is important to note that this should not be seen as a general denigration of the middle class itself, but rather as a demonization of certain aspects of the middle class, notably those that are associated with westernization. By contrast, the films glorify middle-class status, but always with the qualification that an "essential Indianness" must be maintained in this context. The abuse, therefore, is linked with the "western" qualities of greed and overconsumption; it is the husband's quest for power over the goddess that leads him to abuse his wife.

[18] In her book *Subject: Cinema, Object: Woman: A Study of the Portrayal of Women in Indian Cinema* (1998) Chatterji provides an in-depth study of rape narratives in popular Indian cinema, as well as the history of this narrative and its relevance in Indian society. (134-161). As an interesting point, Chatterji discusses some important distinctions in the Indian Penal Code, which, until recently, stated that for a man "sexual intercourse with his own wife, the wife not being under 15 years of age is not rape" (Chatterji 1998, 139).

In *Sri Bannari Amman*, abuse is shown against both the devotee and the goddess. The devotee, Bhavani, physically abuses the goddess (who is disguised as a healer), before then being abused by her husband. Bhavani, like the devotees found in other Amman films, is a formerly non-middle-class woman who has married a middle-class man. In his interactions with Bhavani, her husband is shown as a caring and sensitive man, but in scenes where she is not present, the audience is shown his evil and plotting ways. Although Bhavani is a fervent devotee of Bannari Amman, she does not recognize that the village healer, whom she calls "Mother", is the physical incarnation of the goddess; her husband, however, is aware of this and intends to use Bhavani as a means to usurp the goddess' powers. He and his henchmen, a *pūcāri* ("temple priest") and a *mantiravāti* ("sorcerer"), hatch a plan to force the goddess to leave the village, thereby leaving Bhavani unprotected. Bhavani does not become aware of the true nature of her husband until after she has harmed the goddess and ordered her to leave, as depicted in the following scene.

> A crowd of villagers has gathered at the temple. They are mostly men, with a small group of women, and their agitation is palpable (Fig. 1.8). The *pūcāri* begins to speak, and he tells the crowd that the Amman's jewels have been stolen from her temple.

Figure 1.8. *The crowd surrounds the healer (the goddess) as she is accused of stealing jewels from the temple. (Sri Bannari Amman)*

> The villagers look to the village healer (the goddess in disguise), who has been accused of the crime. Bhavani comes to her rescue, denying any possibility that the healer has committed this atrocity. Amidst her yelling, Bhavani's seemingly devoted husband says that if she has any doubts at

all, she should simply ask the healer for the truth. Bhavani relents and tells the healer that if she will just say that she did not do it, she will believe her. The healer, however, simply looks at her and remains silent. This provokes a reaction among the crowd, and the shot changes to close-ups of various villagers yelling "Say it!" and "We're listening!" While the healer continues to gaze calmly upon the scene, Bhavani becomes increasingly frantic, until she is finally screaming, "Speak, Mother, speak! [Tamil: Pēcu āttā pēcu!]". She continues, "If you don't speak then I will doubt you. Maybe you took the snake [goddess'] money and you are indeed a thief!" Outwardly the healer remains silent, in response, the villagers' frenzy increases and cries of "Thief!" are heard repeatedly, until Bhavani's husband begins shouting, asking if anyone actually saw the healer stealing. In order to prove the healer's innocence, he has Bhavani fetch her belongings. As Bhavani walks away, the camera cuts to a close-up of her husband's face, upon which an impish smile is forming, then to the *mantiravāti*, and finally to the *pūcāri*, who appears rather nervous. The camera then switches back to a wide-angle shot of the devotee returning with a suitcase. She opens it, and throws sari after sari to the ground, before removing a diamond and ruby necklace, which, from the gasps of the crowd, appears to be the one that was stolen from the temple. As she holds up the necklace, the music swells and her husband cries out in (apparent) surprise. The shot quickly changes to a close-up of the husband, the *mantiravāti*, and the *pūcāri* again, before zooming in on the necklace, which is now in the husband's jewel-covered hand (Fig. 1.9).

Figure 1.9. *The husband holds the "stolen" jewels in his own bejeweled hand. (Sri Bannari Amman)*

The camera then quickly moves from Bhavani, to the jewels, to the healer, before cutting to a much wider shot. As Bhavani begins to speak, the camera again switches between close-ups of her and the healer, juxtaposing the fury of Bhavani, accompanied by a loud, intense score, and the calmness of the healer, who is backed by a softer, calmer sound. Having determined that the healer is the thief, the *pūcāri* says, "In this town, anyone who steals from the temple will be whipped." Bhavani's husband, however, comes forward, and says that he should be whipped in

her stead, because it is his fault that she came to the village. The whip cracks on his body twice, but on the third attempt, Bhavani rushes forward to stop it, yelling that her husband should not be whipped due to the healer's thieving. She picks up the whip and cracks it over the healer's body (Fig. 1.10). The shot then changes to the icon of the goddess in her temple, as she too is struck with a whip, breaking the flower garland held upon her neck (Fig. 1.11).

Figure 1.10. *Bhavani whips the healer because she thinks she has stolen the goddess' jewels. (Sri Bannari Amman)*

Figure 1.11. *The icon of the goddess that is shown while the healer is being whipped. (Sri Bannari Amman)*

Interspersed with these images are close-ups of the husband, the *mantiravāti*, and the *pūcāri*. Bhavani continues to whip the healer, until a wink from the *pūcāri* causes her husband to jump up and yell "Enough!" before telling the healer to leave [Tamil: pōtum! pōṅka mā, nīṅka pōṅka]. The healer looks at Bhavani one last time and Bhavani responds "Never come back to this town or call me…Go, go back to your home!" The crowd then parts to allow the healer to leave, an image that is intercut with one of the goddess on an elephant that is slowly walking backwards out of town. The scene cuts to the *kōpuram* ("temple tower") of a well-lit temple, whose lights fade to black, then to a close-up of the iconographic image of the goddess. The camera slowly zooms out, as this image, too, fades to black.

The scene changes to the interior of a middle-class home, where a close-up of an alcoholic drink being poured is backed by a menacing drumbeat. The husband is shown lying on the floor, drinking and smoking a cigarette.

Figure 1.12 *Bhavani's husband drinking and smoking, after he has caused the goddess to leave the village. (Sri Bannari Amman)*

Bhavani enters the home, but as she walks toward her husband, she stops abruptly upon noticing the drink and cigarette (Fig. 1.12). The shot changes to a close-up of her face; she is trembling and beginning to sob, which her husband responds to with a maniacal laugh. He stands up and begins to tell her the details of a "play", which is actually the true story of what occurred earlier. As he is telling her this, the camera begins a three-hundred and sixty degree pan,[19] which is useful not only as a symbolic measure of the confusion of the moment, but also as a means to display a detailed look at the middle-class home. As the husband speaks, two sets of tables and chairs, large shelving units, vases, and flowers are revealed. Bhavani's shock is palpable and she stands stunned as he says, "Where did your mother [the healer] come from? Nobody knows…" before patting her cheeks three times, as one would do in devotion to the goddess. He then says, "Kali! Trisuli! Maha Sakti! Bannari Amman!" As he says "Bannari Amman" the scene quickly changes to lightning bolts and ominous violins, then to the anthropomorphic goddess dancing, and then to the icon of the goddess in the temple. The camera spins faster and faster as he yells, "In this town, the punishment for a mistake is a whipping!" Bhavani, rather stoically, yells for him to hit her, and in response to the strike, the camera spins once more before stopping on a medium close-up of Bhavani.

[19] A pan is "a camera movement with the camera body turning to the right or left…which scans the space horizontally", therefore, a three-hundred sixty degree pan is one in which the camera moves the entire three-hundred sixty degrees of a circle in a horizontal line (Prunes 2002).

Figure 1.13. *Bhavani stands still, recognizing her error, as her husband whips her. (Sri Bannari Amman)*

> She stands still as the whip continues to hit her, with just one tear making its way down her face (Fig. 1.13). The whipping continues, involving an old woman who has run in to stop the assault on Bhavani. Eventually, the husband stops and leaves the room, and the scene ends with a close-up of Bhavani and the old woman, huddled together.[20]

In this scene, Bhavani and the goddess are bound together somatically through the bodily injuries that are inflicted upon them by Bhavani's husband.[21] Bhavani here is still unaware that she is speaking to the goddess, which explains her insistence that the goddess must leave. This is one of the few instances in which the audience is shown the limits of the goddess' powers; even if the goddess wished to stay, she is obliged to obey Bhavani, a side effect of her devotion. It is Bhavani's emotion, "…the pain of [her] longing and [her] love, [that] gives [her] genuine power over the god [she] loves, the power to make the god come to [her]. It is this emotion alone that gives [her] power" (Egnor 1980, 20). However, the goddess' leaving is not simply a marker of the devotee's devotion, rather it is also used to place the blame for the goddess' absence squarely on the devotee, which, in essence, means that the atrocities that occur for the rest of the film are at least in part her fault. In *Raja Kaliyamman*, for example, this occurs on the date of the wedding of the devotee, Meena, to her husband.

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[20] *Sri Bannari Amman*, DVD. 1:47:14 – 1:58:42

[21] Although it is Bhavani who actually physically whips the goddess, this only occurs as a result of her husband's trickery, and therefore he should be seen as the responsible party.

Meena is worried that the goddess will try to attend her wedding, which is located in another village, thus leaving the temple and village unprotected.[22] In order to prevent this, Meena asks her brother to draw a line across the temple so that the goddess cannot leave. In her efforts to save Meena, the goddess *does* try to leave, but is unable to cross the barrier. With his dying breaths, Meena's brother crawls to the temple to erase the line; it is only then that the goddess is able to help Meena, though she cannot fix what has happened in the interim.

These moments create a milieu in which the blame for the devotee's abuse is connected to her own folly of not allowing the goddess to help her. Both Meena and Bhavani view their respective situations as having been their own fault, and they therefore accept and even invite their punishments. This legitimates women's physical and mental abuse on the basis of acts that they were either forced or tricked into performing. According to Chatterji, this is also common in depictions of rape, which films often use "…as a platform for a very unequal negotiation between men and women, in which men assert power and lust and women are permitted neither the assertion of their desire nor their autonomy, nor even fair justice" (1998, 161). Bhavani's whipping at the end of the scene falls into this type of representation (Fig. 1.13). Upon realizing the trick that has been played on her, she reacts in anger, but it is not directed at her husband. Rather, Bhavani's anger is at herself and as punishment she screams for her husband to hit her. It would be easy to classify the whipping she then receives as retribution for her whipping of the goddess. However, there is no evidence that the goddess has caused this out of retaliation; rather, the scene shows an absence of the presence of the goddess. The actions of Bhavani's husband appear not as a punishment for any specific action, but as a way of asserting his authority and dominance in the household. Malavika Karlekar supports this line of reasoning in her discussions on violence against women in India. She notes:

> Violence often becomes a tool to socialize family members according to prescribed norms of behaviours within an overall perspective of male

[22] The notion of Māriyammaṉ as a boundary goddess will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 2.

> dominance and control. […] …often enough, those being 'moulded' into an acceptance of submission and denial are in-marrying women and children. Physical violence, as well as less explicit forms of aggression, are used as methods to ensure their obedience" (2008, 242).

Although this may explain the husband's motives, it is clear that Bhavani views her own whipping as a type of penance for her sins against the goddess. This is made evident not only by Bhavani's forceful yelling, but also the cinematography that backs the scene. As Bhavani's husband relates the truth about the stolen jewels, the camera spins, a visual reflection of Bhavani's reeling confusion. This confusion and disbelief increases as Bhavani learns that the healer was, in fact, the goddess and the spinning of the camera increases in speed, becoming dizzying to the point of complete disorientation. The camera's sudden stop, therefore, forms a marked contrast, mirrored in the devotee, who, with strength formerly unseen, shouts for her husband to hit her. Her fortitude is shone further as she accepts the beating in silence, a single tear gliding down her cheek.

There is never any indication from Bhavani that the daily abuse she will now be subjected to is inappropriate, nor is the audience led to believe that she will remove herself from this situation. Bhavani's relatively calm demeanor and acceptance of her situation is not atypical, rather, it fulfills the model of proper womanhood. Even though Bhavani now knows the true character of her husband, "So strong is the sense of the husband's superior status and his right to power and the wife's obligation to serve and obey him that whatever the moral failings of a particular husband, the wife is still thought to owe him absolute respect and submission" (Daniel 1980, 68). Therefore, his beating is not a sufficient reason to leave; it is simply his assertion of his rights as her husband. The gratuitous shots of her being whipped remove any power that she was shown to possess while she was whipping the village healer. In this way, her subordinate status is maintained.

The brutal whippings that are shown in this scene are also an effective way of mobilizing a community to protect what it holds dear. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, imagery of the goddess being violated was often used as a "call to action" for her sons to protect her. In the case of Amman films, a similar trope is

enacted, but the call is to the audience, made up mostly of non-middle-class female devotees. The call for these women is to maintain the figure of the *sumaṅgalī* even in the face of radical cultural change, especially in the context of a westernizing middle class. Again, the violation here is not of *a* specific woman, or even of women in general, but rather it is the violation of the figure of the *sumaṅgalī*. Keeping this in mind, we discover that even though a powerful goddess is depicted throughout the films, it is not she who is to be emulated, but the woman devotee.

The Powerlessness of the Goddess of Amman̲ Films

It is obvious that the goddess is not intended as the films' role model; the sharp contrast between the goddess and her female devotee only serves to reify the traditional roles for women perpetuated by nationalist discourse. Although the goddess is permitted to strike down any of the characters who do not treat her with respect, the female devotee is not to react against her abusive husband; if she maintains her *sumaṅgalī* status and remains devoted to the goddess, she will eventually be 'saved'. This dichotomy between the two major female roles of the film is at first confusing, but in the context of the differentiations between woman and goddess, it becomes clear that the goddess herself should be thought of as an entirely different type of personage.

This is also shown in the case of the goddess Tamil̲ttāy, who represents the nation of India as a strong feminine power. In her work on Tamil̲ttāy, Sumathi Ramaswamy questions the existence of a powerful feminine figure being at the helm of a patriarchal nation, and comes to the conclusion that Tamil̲ttāy is presented in such a way that she would never be mistaken as a role model for women. She notes:

> She is first isolated and abstracted from the "real" world in which Tamil-speaking women of all shades have been disempowered through much of this century; she is then endowed with a plenitude of powers and possibilities which transform her into a strikingly exceptional Woman, not readily confused with the flesh-and-blood women on whom she is also obviously modelled. Although she may be thus empowered, her potential

> to exceed the control of her (male) creators is contained through her fragmentation" (Ramaswamy 1997, 79).

This is true of the goddess of Ammaṉ films, who, likewise, is so entirely abstracted from the world in which the devotee lives, that her "otherness" removes any notion of her as a role model. When studying the films in detail, it becomes obvious that not only does the goddess *not* empower women; her character effectively serves to disenfranchise them. The presence of a savior figure removes the devotee's control over her own life, as it places the power of deliverance solely in the hands of the goddess. Although the devotee's living situation is ultimately rectified, this is always at the hands of the goddess, and it is framed as a reward for her continuous *sumaṅgalī* nature, even in the face of her husband's physical abuse.

Conclusion

Why does the *sumaṅgalī* play such a large role in Ammaṉ films? As the main character of the films, the devotee is imaged as the perfect *sumaṅgalī* who, even in the face of adversity, maintains her traditional role. I would posit that while she is used as a role model for women in the audience, she is more important as a reminder of the need to protect the *figure* of the *sumaṅgalī*, understood as metonymic of "tradition", in an ever-changing India. This urge to protect is furthered by the use of somatic elements in the films that serve to liken the devotee to the mother goddesses Tamiḻttāy and Bhārat Mātā, as she becomes the representation of a movement, an emblematic figure, as opposed to a human being. Therefore, by depicting the *sumaṅgalī* in dire need of protection, the films are not speaking of the devotee in particular, but rather of the traditions and culture abstractly *associated* with the *sumaṅgalī*. This message becomes increasingly apparent in the next chapter, which focuses on the changing religion of the middle class amid fears that traditional religion, and the goddess Māriyammaṉ in particular, will be forgotten in the wake of new middle-class lives.

Chapter 2

The Nature of the Goddess and Her Rituals

The goddess of Ammaṉ films is undoubtedly the South Indian village goddess Māriyammaṉ. Māriyammaṉ, often referred to as a smallpox or fever goddess, has remained popular even since the eradication of the smallpox disease in 1979. Although she is most often considered to be a goddess for the non-middle-class, a new "middle class" Māriyammaṉ has developed in the wake of the rising numbers of the middle class in South India. In particular, the last few years have seen a surge in popularity for the goddess, as she has been embraced by devotees seeking children, jobs, husbands, medical interventions, and other healing actions (Smith 1997, 190). She is, however, a fierce goddess; although she is protective of her devotees, if a vow is not fulfilled or if she is not properly worshiped, her full wrath will be shown.

As many of her devotees have ascended to the middle class, Māriyammaṉ, and the worship of her has changed significantly in recent years. For those recently ascended to the middle class, many of the normative Māriyammaṉ rituals have been deemed inappropriate, resulting in a new kind of Māriyammaṉ worship. In this new middle-class worship, so-called "lower class" rituals, which often involve offerings of the body, have been removed and replaced by monetary offerings. In Ammaṉ films, however, the middle class (with the exception of the devotee) are shown as avoiding any worship or propitiation of the goddess. The only worship shown, therefore, is that which would be termed as "lower class"; even this, however, is relegated to short, interstitial dance scenes involving the goddess, the devotee, and a group of non-middle-class women. On the whole, the films show what would now be termed a non-elite approach towards worshipping the goddess, marking the rituals themselves as simultaneously "backward" and non-middle class. With the help of the films *Padai Veetu Amman* and *Raja Kaliyamman*, in this chapter I will discuss the phenomenon of the new middle-class Māriyammaṉ, focusing on the filmic representation of the goddess as well as

the ways in which her middle-classness has affected the expected manner of her worship.

The Māriyammaṉ of Ammaṉ Films

The Ammaṉ of Ammaṉ films is indisputably Māriyammaṉ, who is shown in a localized form. In her generalized form, Māriyammaṉ is a powerful mother goddess, with the powers to both heal and harm. However, in her more localized forms, her purpose and actions become more specific. For example, in the film *Padai Veetu Amman*, the Māriyammaṉ referred to is Muttu Māriyammaṉ, a Māriyammaṉ goddess who is particularly associated with smallpox, as her *muttu*, or "pearls", are seen as a representation of the pox themselves. According to traditional accounts of the origins of Muttu Māriyammaṉ, pox began as a result of her hunger and desire for shelter. After asking the gods for these basic needs, she was told by them to inflict pox on human beings and then insist on an offering of food before removing them. This is found today in the offering of goddess gruel when small pox are present – once this offering is made to Māriyammaṉ, it is thought that she will be satisfied and she will remove the pox from the afflicted (Meyer 1986, 17).

Other Māriyammaṉs are represented as boundary goddesses, such as in *Kottai Mariamman*, which translates to "Māriyammaṉ of the Fort". "Though the goddesses have different names…as well as independent temples on different sites, all…are said to be the same power…" (Mines 2005, 129). The idea of Māriyammaṉ as a boundary goddess, as in *Kottai Mariamman,* is popular in villages, where processions that propitiate the goddess also serve to demarcate the boundaries of the village. As long as the goddess is kept within the confines of the village, it is believed that she will protect the village and all who live there. This is apparent in an example from *Raja Kaliyamman*, discussed in chapter 1, where the goddess is prevented by Meena's brother from leaving the temple to attend her devotee's wedding. This was necessary because if the goddess leaves the confines of her temple within the village, the village is left without protection. This notion of village boundaries is important and is often physically and symbolically

marked with the use of temples and processions. During processions, pots representing the goddess are brought to all four of the borders of the village, in a process called *kāppu* and *ellai-kāṭṭu*, meaning "tying the borders". This reestablishes the boundaries of the village and reasserts the goddess' protection over the houses and people who are within those borders (Alloco 2009, 411). Diane Mines argues that processions which perform rituals along the borders of a village are demarcating the interior, protected space from the exterior space filled with 'maleficent beings who linger outside the village and who want to but must not come inside" (Mines 2005, 34). She goes on to remark that the purpose of these processions and the festival itself is to "…effect a unity among the participants…, they distinguish an interior from an exterior…, and they protect that interior from negative and harmful influences" (Mines 2005, 37). The boundaries of the village are not seen as something that was set up by humans, rather, the boundaries were set by the goddess herself, long before humans had settled the village (Mines 2005, 130). "What is absolutely characteristic of [the village] form of the Goddess is that her place of worship is always located on the limits of a populated area. As the protectress of a site, she should in fact be found on the border, prepared to challenge the enemy" (Biardeau 1989, 132).

Although Māriyamman̲ is localized in many different areas, her iconography remains relatively the same. She is most often represented in an iconic form, sometimes with a full body, and other times as a bust of head and shoulders. In her full-bodied form, she is shown most often in a relaxed position, with between two and eight arms and a crown of snakes above her head, one of the most distinguishing characteristics of Māriyamman̲. Her hands may contain items such as a drum, a trident, or a snake, or they may be in the *abhaya-hasta*, or "fear not" mudra, all of which symbolize her power (Smith 1997, 191-192). In Amman̲ films, however, when she is represented in an iconic form she is most often shown as a bust of head and shoulders. This depiction of Māriyamman̲ is linked with the myth of Reṇukā, a connection that will be discussed in the following section.

Mythology of Māriyammaṉ

The origin myths of Māriyammaṉ are many and varied,[23] but all are connected to the issue of caste, where her deification is a result of the intense anger she feels upon her fall from a high caste to a low caste status. At the Samayapuram Māriyammaṉ temple, Māriyammaṉ's origins are connected to an unintended low caste marriage. In this myth, a high-caste woman is tricked by her father and brother, who have arranged her marriage to a man whom she believes is high caste, but who they know is low caste. She is married to him for several years and bears several children before she discovers the truth, at which time her fierce anger comes out in a powerful rush of flame, burning her husband to ashes. She becomes a widow, and is cursed to become a low caste woman, covered in pox. It is her anger at the situation that gives her power and results in her becoming the goddess Māriyammaṉ (Harman 2004, 5).

Māriyammaṉ is also connected with the goddess Yellamma (sometimes also called Reṇukā). Yellamma is a powerful Ammaṉ who is worshipped most often by members of the Dalit community. Similar to Māriyammaṉ, Yellamma is associated with sickness, most commonly with fevers and skin diseases, such as pox, measles, mumps, and rashes. She is also a border goddess, who normally resides on the perimeter of the village. In particular, this connection is shown in the mythology of Jamadagni and Reṇukā, which delineates the origins of both Māriyammaṉ and Yellamma.

> Reṇukā was the wife of the sage Jamadagni and was renowned for the great power of her chastity. Each day, Reṇukā would walk to the river, where, with the force of her chastity, she would form water into the shape of a vessel and carry it back to her husband. One day, while at the river, Reṇukā became distracted by the reflection of a Gandharva and lost her chastity, and thus was unable to bring the water home for her husband. Jamadagni, aware of Reṇukā's loss of chastity, flew into a rage and insisted that his son, Paraśurāma, kill Reṇukā (his mother). Paraśurāma agreed, but only on the condition that Jamadagni would grant him a boon

[23] Although here I only discuss two Māriyammaṉ-Reṇukā myths, there are many others that I have chosen not to include. For greater detail on these and other Reṇukā-Māriyammaṉ myths, see Biardeau (2004), particularly 112-114 and 185-190.

> upon completion of the task. Paraśurāma, equipped with an ax, began to chase after Reṇukā, who ran to hide in the home of an untouchable washerwoman. Paraśurāma quickly found them and decapitated them both. Having fulfilled his father's wishes, Paraśurāma returned to Jamadagni to receive his boon, for which he asked that his mother, Reṇukā, be brought back to life. Jamadagni then gave Paraśurāma a vessel of water, and told him to reattach the head to the body, and the to sprinkle it with water. In his haste, Jamadagni attached the washerwoman's head to Reṇukā's body, and Reṇukā's head to the washerwoman's body. Now that his wife had the body of an untouchable, Jamadagni would not take her back, and she became the goddess Yellamma, while the washerwoman became the goddess Māriyammaṉ (Craddock 2001, 148-149).

The differences between Yellamma and Māriyammaṉ, therefore, are not related to their origins or their powers, but rather are related to the status of their devotees. Although Māriyammaṉ is a goddess who is associated with the non-elite, her followers do not have the same stigma that is associated with followers of Yellamma. Yellamma is considered to be the goddess of the *jogatis*, a group of male and female-bodied women who are most often from Dalit communities (Ramberg 2009, 502). These women are recognized as the *pūcāris* of the Yellamma temples, where sometimes worship is performed by Dalit women. In Tamil Nadu there is a tradition of Dalit girls given to the temple in fulfillment of a vow.[24] Many of the dedicated girls become priestesses (De Bruin 2007). In *Padai Veetu Amman,* the goddess is depicted as having a presumably Dalit priestess ("*pūcāriyammā*"), which resonates with this older tradition. The *jogatis* occupy a unique space in that they are seen as both polluting and auspicious – polluting because of their Dalit status, but auspicious because of their connection to Yellamma. While fulfilling their ritual roles, these women are treated as receptors of the *devi*, and therefore higher-caste devotees will touch the Dalit *pūcāris* feet as both a measure of respect and a way to receive the blessing of Yellamma. "As members of Dalit communities, they are 'untouchable' for members of dominant-caste communities; as Yellamma women, they are auspicious, and contact with them confers blessings of fertility" (Ramberg 2009, 506).

[24] The Ammaṉ film *Samayapurathale Satchi* ("Witness of Samayapuram") made in 1985 contains an episode in which a girl is given to the goddess in fulfillment of a vow. This practice has also been documented recently in an article in *The Hindu*, "Minor girl made 'Devadasi'" (Anonymous 2007).

Māriyammaṉ, colonialism and disease

Although Māriyammaṉ and Yellamma were widely worshipped in South India, early colonial and missionary writings viewed worship of village gods and goddesses as an aberration of a pure form of Hinduism that had existed in the past. As such, scholars of the time were interested in the translation and analysis of Sanskrit texts, which they considered as containing the 'essence' of Hinduism. Even the texts, however, were considered to have been defiled over the years, and orientalists studying the Vedas would often refer to the texts' "noble thoughts on humanity" as being "concealed in rubbish" and "childish thoughts" (Sugirtharajah 2008, 77). Missionaries who wrote on temple worship practices would refer to Hindu deities as "…embodiments of vice, lacking in moral virtues and qualities, and thought therefore that those who worshipped them imbibed the immoral qualities of their deities" (Ward 1817, 1: lxxxviii-lxxxix; as quoted in Sugirtharajah 2008, 80). Village gods and goddesses were thus seen as the embodiment of an uncivilized nation and a degenerate religion. Consider, for example, the following quote, discussing village festivals, from the Reverend Henry Whitehead:

> They are only gloomy and weird rites for the propitiation of angry deities or the driving away of evil spirits, and it is very difficult to detect any traces of a spirit of thankfulness or praise. Even the term worship is hardly correct. The object of all the various rites and ceremonies is not to worship the deity in any true sense of the word, but simply to propitiate it and avert its wrath" (1921, 47).

This attitude towards indigenous culture is seen clearly in the example of smallpox in colonial India. Smallpox was a very real threat, claiming 11,000 lives between 1837 and 1851 solely in the city of Calcutta, and reoccurring with a vengeance nearly every five to seven years (Arnold 1993, 117). Although the smallpox vaccine, developed in 1796, was made available in India, it was not until nearly the end of the nineteenth century that it became somewhat common for it to be utilized (Arnold 1993, 120). Although a large number of Indians had

participated in the yearly ritual of variolation,[25] many were uncomfortable with vaccination. Colonial officials did not understand why many were so reticent to receive the vaccine, but when considered in the context of the indigenous culture it becomes apparent. In many parts of India, smallpox is associated with a smallpox goddess, with the disease understood as a manifestation of the goddess within the body. In South India this goddess is Māriyamman̲, but in North India and Bengal, the goddess associated with smallpox and fever is the goddess Śītalā. Śītalā first appeared in medical texts near the beginning of the sixteenth century, but there are images that are thought to be her that date back to the twelfth century (Nicholas 2003, 177). In traditional beliefs, in order to remove the disease (and the goddess) from the body, rituals would be undertaken to propitiate the goddess; she is both the cause and the cure. Therefore, for devotees, ritual practices were the only acceptable way of removing the disease; they feared that the use of a vaccine would be viewed by the goddess as impious, and that in her anger the goddess would cause the smallpox to become even worse (Arnold 1993, 123). The British eventually implemented a compulsory vaccination policy, not only to protect Europeans in India, but also to represent the colonial government as a humane and benevolent entity (Arnold 1993, 136).

Although smallpox was eradicated in 1979, it still plays a major role in Amman̲ films, as a representation of the goddess' anger as well as a reminder of her presence. It was once thought that "…the relationship between the goddess and the disease is direct, if mystical, so…the eradication of smallpox will bring with it the disappearance of Śītalā worship, if not of the goddess herself" (Nicholas 2003, 167). However, in the years since the eradication of smallpox, Śītalā and Māriyamman̲ have remained popular goddesses in the worship of the lower *and* middle classes.

[25] For more on the specifics of variolation in India during this time period, see Arnold (1993), pp. 127-133.

Smallpox

In the films, smallpox (*ammai*) serve as a reminder of both the goddess' grace (*aruḷ*) and her anger, and may afflict a member of the middle-class family, the devotee, or even the *pūcāri* (Allocco 2009, 291). The pox, therefore, are seen as both a manifestation of the goddess' dwelling within the body of the afflicted, and a reminder "…not to stray from ever-mindful devotion to her" (Craddock 2001, 146). Smallpox is especially feared in the month of Āṭi (August to September) when the goddess is in a particularly heated state. Since it is believed that smallpox can only be avoided or cured through the goddess, many festivals at this time are devoted to cooling the goddess (Meyer 1986, 67). Neem leaves and "goddess gruel" are considered to be appropriate offerings for the goddess, as they will cool her down. Neem in particular is important as a cooling agent; the afflicted is covered in the plant in the hopes that it will lessen the heat of the goddess and cause her to remove the smallpox.

In the following scene from *Padai Veetu Amman*, we see a direct cause and effect, in which the middle class daughter becomes afflicted with smallpox after she purposefully disrespects the Ammaṉ. It is important to note that although the middle class family has been shown as disrespectful and even disdainful of Māriyammaṉ, she is still the first point of contact after the discovery of the daughter's smallpox. Although the daughter can be said to have brought the pox on herself, there is never a moment in which we see her repent. Rather, it is through the ministrations of the *pampaikkārar* ("ritual drummer") that she is cured of the smallpox.

> The daughter of the middle-class family is shown racing down a dirt road in a red car. The scene suddenly changes to a wide-angled crane shot, in which a small area of trees, a small altar with a statue of Māriyammaṉ, covered in neem leaves and lemons, and a *pūcāri* are shown. As the camera angles down to become level with the ground, we see that the *pūcāri* is completing a colourful rice-flour image of the goddess on the ground below the altar, while calm music forms the background of the scene (Fig. 2.1).

Figure 2.1. *The pūcāri finishes her image of the goddess*. (*Padai Veetu Amman*)

Figure 2.2. *The middle-class daughter drives her car over the image of the goddess*. (*Padai Veetu Amman*)

Interspersed with this, we again see the daughter, driving recklessly, until the camera quickly cuts back to the *pūcāri*, whose face registers a look of alarm as she gasps and jumps out of the way of the oncoming vehicle. The daughter runs over the image and a close up of the goddess' statue, lit up by bolts of lightning, is then shown while ominous violin music and sharp drums play. The daughter then backs up her car, laughs, and runs over the image repeatedly; each time she backs up, the image of the goddess is shown again (Fig. 2.2). The shot changes to a medium close-up of the *pūcāri*, who is visibly distressed, and begins to chant "Om Sakti, Parasakti!" as the daughter laughs once more before she drives away. At this point, the calm music of the beginning of the scene returns and the *pūcāri* touches the remaining parts of the image and begins to cry. As she looks up at the statue of the goddess the camera follows, and with drumbeats and lightning, the audience is shown the goddess' anger.

The scene then changes to the middle-class home, where the camera follows behind the happily humming daughter as she enters the dining room, where her mother stands. As she speaks to get her mother's attention, her mother turns around to look at her face (which the audience has not yet seen) and screams as the music of an orchestra crescendos in the background. The daughter leaves the room, and the shot changes to focus on a mirror, which the daughter is walking toward. Upon looking in the mirror, she sees that she is covered in pox; she gasps as the camera spins to focus on her face (Fig. 2.3). This image and that of the angry goddess' statue are then shown back to back, as the drumbeats continue.

Figure 2.3. *The middle-class daughter sees her pustule-covered face in the mirror*. (*Padai Veetu Amman*)

As the scene cuts away, we are shown a man, presumably one of the servants of the middle-class home, walking towards the temple's *pampaikkārar*, whom he tells of the pox-covered daughter, and asks for his help in her recovery, to which the *pampaikkārar* agrees. As drumbeats begin, the scene quickly changes to a painted image of the goddess that is found within the temple. A close-up of her two implements, a trident and a snake, is shown before the shot changes to a close-up of her face. Her full statue is shown from a number of angles, before the focus changes to the drum-playing *pampaikkārar*. The daughter is then shown, covered in neem leaves and laying on a platform that has been placed in front of the goddess' altar (Fig. 2.4). As the music continues to play, we are shown the daughter, lying on the neem leaves, and the earlier scene of her driving her car over the image of the goddess. The image then switches back to the temple, where it remains for the rest of the scene, which takes place entirely as a part of the *pampaikkārar's* song.

Figure 2.4. *The* pampaikkārar *performs his ritual song for the goddess and the neem-covered daughter. (Padai Veetu Amman)*

The goddess' altar is shown in detail; we see that each step leading to the altar has a pot of fire, and that the image of the goddess is ornamented with garlands of flowers and lemons, and covered in *kumkum*. The *pampaikkārar* continues to sing and gesture towards the goddess and the daughter. Amidst a final frenzy of drumming, the camera quickly cuts between the goddess and the daughter as the pox disappear, first from her hands and arms, and then from her face (Fig. 2.5). Visibly relieved, she looks to the *pampaikkārar*, who brings his hands together in praise as the scene ends. [26]

Figure 2.5. *The daughter, covered in neem leaves, realizes that the goddess has removed the smallpox from her body.* (*Padai Veetu Amman)*

As a whole, this scene presents an interesting commentary on middle-class views of the goddess and her rituals, in particular in the context of smallpox. The daughter is quite obviously from a middle-class family, as shown by her car, her home, and even her clothing. She is represented as having all of the qualities of the "evil" middle class; she is guilty of overconsumption and her selfishness in regards to the goddess is shown throughout the film. Māriyamman is generally disregarded by this middle-class family, but the daughter goes beyond this in her desecration of an image of the goddess. However, I would argue that her actions should not be viewed as an attack against the goddess, but rather they represent the goddess' complete irrelevance to her life. Although she does run over the image of the goddess, this malice seems to be directed at the *pūcāri*, who created the image, rather than at the goddess herself. This anger towards the *pūcāri* is connected to an event that occurred earlier in the film, when the daughter

[26] *Padai Veetu Amman,* VCD. Disc 1 00:28:00 – 00:32:00.

discovered that the man she wished to marry was determined to marry the *pūcāri*. In her quest to hurt the *pūcāri*, it does not occur to the daughter that she is also hurting Māriyammaṉ, because Māriyammaṉ does not have a role in her life. This is a dramatization of one of the fears associated with the rise of the middle class, that as westernization occurs, the current middle class will disregard the goddess to such an extent that by the next generation she will be completely forgotten. In this case, however, the goddess reasserts her existence by bringing smallpox to the middle-class family.

Although the family members are not outwardly shown as devotees of the goddess, the first place the pox-ridden daughter is taken is not to a doctor, but rather to the temple. This seems to indicate that the family has recognized the smallpox as a manifestation of Māriyammaṉ and still believes in her efficacy in removing them. This also serves as a message to the audience that a "return" to Māriyammaṉ is always possible. Upon entering the temple, the daughter is treated as Māriyammaṉ; she is addressed as her and rituals are used to appease her. She is placed on an altar and the entire ritual episode is directed towards her, as she is at the centre of the fire-pots, neem leaves, and singing.

The Rituals of the Goddess

In a typical rural Māriyammaṉ temple, the most common way of worshipping the goddess is through ritual acts, including *aṅgapradakṣiṇā* ("circumambulation with the whole body"), *tīmiti* ("firewalking"), and *tīccaṭṭi* ("carrying the firepot"). While taking part in these rituals, many women also become possessed, flying into a chaotic frenzy as the goddess enters their bodies. Although these are major and regular events in most traditional Māriyammaṉ temples, Ammaṉ films limit the depiction of goddess rituals mostly to one or two scenes, which, in almost all cases, are shown in the context of a dance sequence. In these sequences, possession, *aṅgapradakṣiṇā*, and *tīccaṭṭi* are shown in seconds-long flashes, sandwiched between long sections of Bharatanāṭyam dancing, while *tīmiti* is rarely seen. This raises questions about the purpose of these scenes in the film; do they serve to index and reify the rituals of the

traditional Māriyammaṉ, or are they meant to persuade the new middle-class to continue with their worship of Māriyammaṉ in an altered way?

At Māriyammaṉ village temples in South India, possession is a common occurrence for female devotees. For most women, possession is welcomed and is often precipitated by ritual drummers (*pampaikkārar)* who are used to summon and dismiss the goddess (Allocco 2009, 387). Women who are possessed are often also given special status within the community as a conduit of the goddess. Once the goddess has entered the body, the possessed devotee is overcome with erratic body movements and vacant and unfocused eyes, and often also screams ecstatically (Meyer 1986, 258). Traditionally this was a major part of Māriyammaṉ worship, but at modern Māriyammaṉ temples, possession of female devotees has become rare. At the Melmaruvattur Māriyammaṉ temple, which is considered to be a place of middle-class Māriyammaṉ worship, possession occurs only on scheduled dates, and only for Bangaru Adigalar, the leader of the temple (Harman 2004, 10). As Māriyammaṉ worship continues to undergo a modernization, possession is thought of as a "lower class" ritual that is best left behind. For those who are newly ascended to the middle class, therefore, it has become necessary to eschew such non-middle-class rites and to emulate the actions of the higher castes and classes, which are usually associated with Brahminic culture. As Karin Kapadia has noted, possession has traditionally been associated with non-Brahmins, while Brahmins themselves have looked down on it as an extroverted form of worship akin to theatre (1996, 437). This has been emulated to such a degree that in a middle-class context if it appears that a woman is starting to become possessed, she is quickly stopped, either by her husband or the women around her, who smear ash on her forehead in order to end the possession (Waghorne 2004, 168).

Similar ideas are found when discussing the ritual of *aṅgapradakṣiṇā* ("circumambulation with the entire body"). Traditionally, *aṅgapradakṣiṇā* is performed in exchange for the goddess' help in anything from healing a sick family member to obtaining employment, but in many middle-class Māriyammaṉ

temples its importance has been greatly reduced, with offerings of money or jewels seen as sufficient in its place (Harman 2004, 120). As with deity possession, much of this has to do with the development of the middle-class manner of worshipping Māriyammaṉ. *Aṅgapradakṣiṇā* involves lying on the stone floor of the temple and rolling the body clockwise around the entire space of the shrine multiple times, with the exact number dictated by the vow that has been made between devotee and goddess. A common number for the vow is 108 circumambulations, an incredibly demanding project, made even more severe by the degradation associated with rolling over surfaces littered with trash, elephant excrement, and water spilled from coconuts (Harman 2006, 33). This perceived degradation has caused the ritual to be viewed as unsavory for middle-class devotees, while the rolling bodies are considered a disturbance to other temple-goers. Amy Allocco discusses this in the context of the Muṇṭakakkaṇṇi Ammaṉ temple, located in Chennai, where *aṅgapradakṣiṇā* is discouraged, particularly on Fridays, because there is simply not enough room for it to be performed. Allocco says, "On several occasions I have witnessed them [temple officials] scolding these votaries…and forcing them to reschedule or abandon their vow, or reduce the number of 'rounds' they have committed to offer the goddess" (2009, 389).

In Ammaṉ films, *aṅgapradakṣiṇā* and possession are present, but are represented as being separate from the now middle-class devotee. Although she appears in the scenes with these rituals, her participation is separated from that of the other non-middle-class devotees who surround her. The scene which follows encompasses approximately three minutes of the film *Raja Kaliyamman*, a minimal portion of the screen time, that nevertheless presents the film's attitude toward Māriyammaṉ rituals and her changing worship. This scene takes place near the end of the film, directly before the devotee's husband experiences his final showdown with the goddess.[27] The scene includes *aṅgapradakṣiṇā,* possession, and *tīccaṭṭi* and is also replete with images of Bharatanātyam. Although the devotee is pictured with non-middle-class devotees, she herself is

[27] The husband's final meeting with the goddess is the final scene of the film and was discussed in detail in chapter 1.

marked as separate and different from them and does not take part in many of the ritual actions in the same way that they do.

> The scene begins with a string of punctuated drumbeats, as the shot moves from the tip of the anthropomorphic goddess' headdress to her face. This shot then changes to a close up of the goddess' eyes and *poṭṭu*, before returning again to an image of the full face. As we are focused on this, the drumming begins to speed up. The camera switches to a wider-angled shot so that we are able to see the full form of the goddess, who is carrying a trident and dancing in front of a large statue of her head. This is shown for a few seconds before Meena, standing in the temple with a large group of women, appears. Meena is easy to pick out even in the large group, as she is wearing a deep red sari, whereas the other women wear yellow and hold neem leaves (Fig 2.6).

Figure 2.6. *Meena, in her red sari, stands out among the yellow clad non-middle-class devotees who wave neem leaves in front of the goddess*. (*Raja Kaliyamman*)

> She begins to sing the many names of the goddess, while behind her the other devotees dance silently in formation (Fig. 2.7). The group of devotees then split into two lines, while Meena stands in the middle. Every few seconds, this is interrupted as the goddess is quickly shown, holding her trident and appearing quite angry. As Meena finishes the first verse, the other devotees join in and sing in response "Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari, our goddess". In the second verse, Meena is still heard singing, but the focus is now on the goddess, who is dancing in front of a full-bodied statue of herself. This statue is on a stone altar and shows the goddess in a seated position. Around her neck there are two garlands, one made of flowers, and one made of lemons, while by her feet there sits an offering of a broken coconut and two lemons. The image itself is covered with *kumkum*, and in front of the image there are flames, as well as smoke rising from a firepot. As the third verse begins, the women are shown standing in two

lines to either side of Meena, shaking their neem leaves over her head as she walks between them towards the camera, still singing the names of the goddess. Before the next verse begins, the goddess is shown in another location, standing in front of two golden full-size statues. Here she is shown dancing Bharatanāṭyam as the music changes to a slower tune with a less pronounced drumbeat.

Figure 2.7. *Meena and the devotees dance in front of the image of the goddess*. (*Raja Kaliyamman*)

Figure 2.8. *Meena and the devotees perform* aṅgapradakṣiṇā *on the ground of the temple. (Raja Kaliyamman)*

Meena and the other devotees are then shown dancing outside of the temple on dirt as opposed to the stone floor they had previously been on. They perform synchronized hand movements while sitting and then follow Meena in formation as the goddess dances in front of the image of her head. It is at this point that Meena makes her first plea to the goddess, as she sings, "This daughter's problem is your problem. If you see, my problem will get removed." Immediately after finishing this phrase, the women are shown on the ground in two lines, performing *aṅgapradakṣiṇā* (Fig. 2.8). This is interwoven with images of the goddess, who appears increasingly angry. The scene then changes to the goddess standing in front of a purple and blue background, as the music changes. The goddess lifts her hands, and is shown changing into the form of a trident. This trident is then shown in front of a black background, which quickly changes back and forth with a close-up on the goddess' face, as the music returns to the strong drumbeats, the rhythm of which is punctuated by her hand movements. The camera changes to a wider shot, in which we again see the goddess standing next to the icon of her own head. As she dances, the music changes again. At this point, for approximately thirty seconds, the camera stays on the goddess dancing, with the devotee kneeling in front of her quickly chanting her many names (Fig. 2.9).

Figure 2.9. *The goddess dances Bharatanāṭyam in front of her own image in the temple. (Raja Kaliyamman)*

The devotees are then shown with a variety of ritual implements. First, they are shown dancing with firepots (Fig. 2.10), then with *māviḷakku* ("rice-flour lamps") (Fig. 2.11) in their hands, and then with firepots and neem leaves together.

Figure 2.10. *The devotees hold neem leaves and* tīccaṭṭi *in the temple. (Raja Kaliyamman)*

Figure 2.11. *The devotees hold* māviḷakku *in front of the image of the goddess. (Raja Kaliyamman)*

Meena walks through the dancing women, but is not shown carrying anything until the camera begins to switch between close ups of Meena and shots of the devotees. Meena is then shown first with *māviḷakku* in her hands (Fig. 2.12), then with a firepot (Fig. 2.13), and then with neem leaves.

Figure 2.12. *Meena holds* māviḷakku *in her hands. (Raja Kaliyamman)*

Figure 2.13. *Meena holds a* tīccaṭṭi *in her hands. (Raja Kaliyamman)*

She once again pleads with the goddess, and says, "Open your eyes to save my life," at which point the goddess again begins dancing with the trident as the devotee stands behind her yelling "Ammā." Separated from the goddess and Meena, the devotees are shown, still in formation, but now they are frantically moving, as their hair whips backward and forward, they wave their neem leaves in the air and begin to scream. This is not mimicked by the devotee, who, though standing behind the goddess and pleading with her, does not become possessed (Fig. 2.14). This ends the scene, as the devotee and the goddess are pictured together, with Meena kneeling on the ground, looking to the goddess for help.[28]

Figure 2.14. *Meena gives a final plea to the goddess as she dances with her trident. (Raja Kaliyamman)*

[28] *Raja Kaliyamman*, DVD. 1:48:44 – 1:53:32.

This scene, the second to last of the film, is one of the few instances in which we see rituals that are associated with the non-middle class being performed. By this point of the film, Meena has adapted to her new middle-class lifestyle and appears almost out of place in the non-middle-class temple. Meena has become the ideal middle-class woman;[29] she has maintained her religious connection to the goddess, but she does not take part in rituals that would jeopardize her middle-class status. Even though the rituals are shown in the context of the temple, the most egregious rituals, such as animal sacrifices, blood-letting, and *tīmiti* ("firewalking") are noticeably absent. The remaining rituals, involving *māviḷakku* ("rice-flour lamps"), *aṅgapradakṣiṇā*, ("circumambulation with the body") *tīccaṭṭi* ("fire pots"), and finally, possession, are shown relatively quickly, with the majority of the scene filled with images of the devotees and the goddess performing Bharatanāṭyam dance.

The performance of Bharatanāṭyam, by both the goddess and the devotees, is one of the most patently obvious markers of the middle class during this scene.[30] Bharatanāṭyam, commonly understood as the "traditional dance of South India", is widely popular among middle-class women, who become involved with Bharatanāṭyam as a way to increase their own social value while remaining connected with the religious ideals and values of "traditional" India. Middle-class girls, both in India and the diaspora, take Bharatanāṭyam classes not because they necessarily hope to become professional dancers, but rather because "…the dance serves as a social accomplishment, and as a means of learning about and expressing traditional Hindu social and artistic values" (Gaston 2010, 277).

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[29] The notion of the middle class as well as the expected role of the middle-class woman will be discussed in detail in chapter 3.

[30] Although many Bharatanāṭyam dancers talk about the dance as being thousands of years old, in reality it only developed in the 1930s and 1940s, as a reinvention of the devadāsī dances that were found in the region. Devadāsīs themselves were constructed as "prostitutes" and there was a movement to "rescue" the art of their dance, which was made effective by removing "inappropriate" aspects of the repertoire and replacing them with the bodies of respectable, middle-class, women. For more on the history and development of the devadāsīs and Bharatanāṭyam, see Soneji (2010b).

The stage performance of Bharatanāṭyam, therefore, has both a social value and a class value. The goddess of Ammaṉ films is always pictured in a traditional Bharatanāṭyam costume, which serves two purposes. First, it reinforces the middle-class reimagination of Bharatanāṭyam as a dance of gods and goddesses, and second, it represents the goddess as performing a middle-class act, rendering the essence of the goddess as ultimately middle class and European. In addition, the close affinity between mythological cinema and Bharatanāṭyam as a stage practice influences the view of Bharatanāṭyam dancers as modern cultural artifacts. In this scene, however, the dance is not limited to the middle class, but rather is performed by Meena, the non-middle-class devotees, and the goddess. This is one of the most obvious markers in the films of Māriyammaṉ's transformation from non-middle to middle class, as she is shown performing an act that is almost solely associated with the middle class. At one point of her dance, she stands behind an arched candelabra and raises one leg in the style of Naṭarāja, the patron deity of dance, who is always present on the stage of the Bharatanāṭyam performance.[31] Since its inception, Bharatanāṭyam has been associated with "…an emphasis on religion that [is] markedly 'middle class'" (Soneji 2010a, xxvi). Its prevalence in these scenes, therefore, marks the goddess as middle class, while also showing middle-class propriety in maintaining religiosities.

The evidence of Māriyammaṉ rituals in this scene is mostly based on the easily recognizable ritual implements they are associated with, as the actual rituals are supplanted by Bharatanāṭyam. These include neem leaves,[32] *tīccaṭṭi* ("fire pots"), and *māviḷakku* ("rice-flour lamps"). *Tīccaṭṭi* are part of a ritual that is sometimes performed in middle-class Māriyammaṉ temples, but is more often associated with the traditional temples of the goddess. The *tīccaṭṭi* are pots filled

[31] The popularity of Naṭarāja and his associations with Bharatanāṭyam were accomplished in no small part by Ananda Coomaraswamy in his essay "*The Dance of Siva"* (1924). Rukmini Arundale also placed a statue of Naṭarāja on her stage and it has become a staple in staged performances of Bharatanāṭyam. For more information see Coomaraswamy (1985) and Allen (2010).

[32] Neem leaves are considered a cooling agent and are especially important in the worship of a heated goddess, such as Māriyammaṉ. They play a major role in the rituals surrounding the removal of smallpox, as was discussed earlier in this chapter.

with oil-soaked wood chips made of neem, which are then lit on fire. The fire pots become exceedingly hot and serve as a representation of the goddess' heat. As such, the ritual is done in devotion to the goddess, most often as the fulfillment of a vow (Harman 2006, 35). *Tīccaṭṭi* has mostly replaced *tīmiti*, a staple of traditional Māriyamman worship in which devotees walk across hot coals, but Madeleine Biardeau likens the two, stating that in *tīccaṭṭi* "…the fire is no longer beneath the feet, but in the devotees' hands" (2004, 181). Although *tīccaṭṭi is* performed in traditional Māriyamman temples, it is more acceptable to the middle class than a *tīmiti* ceremony would be, as fire-worship is found in other, higher class forms of worship, such as the Brahmin *homa*, which involves the burning of items in a sacred fire. Therefore, the *tīccaṭṭi* do not detract from Meena's middle-class status, but rather indicate her connection with Māriyamman while maintaining the propriety of the middle class.

The *māviḷakku* ("rice-flour lamps") are found only in South India, most often in the context of Māriyamman. They are made with a moistened mixture of rice flour and jaggery, which is then formed into a ball and indented in order to hold oil and a wick (Hiltebeitel 1991, 82). Traditionally, the *māviḷakku* were used for smallpox, but they are also used for other skin diseases or body parts; they are placed on an ailing part of the body as a plea for the goddess to remove the illness that is afflicting the devotee. Foulston argues that "these offerings are *not* given to appease her wrath, nor as gestures of atonement. They are gifts; although the devotees hope for a cure, nevertheless, they are making a gift of their ailment to the goddess" (2002, 131). In this scene, however, it does not appear that the lamps are being used as a request to end a specific ailment, but rather are a cinematic representation of a ritual for the goddess. Therefore, *māviḷakku*, similar to the *tīccaṭṭi*, are most important in this scene as an index of rituals for Māriyamman, rather than as a representation of the actual ritual itself.

By contrast, the performance of *aṅgapradakṣiṇā* is much closer to a ritual performance that would occur in a temple. Unlike the other rituals, Meena is directly involved and is shown performing the ritual with the other devotees.

Directly before she begins the *aṅgapradakṣiṇā*, Meena is shown calling to the goddess in earnest, pleading for her help. In this way, the ritual can be construed as Meena's fulfillment of a vow to the goddess in exchange for her help. However, Meena's presence in this ritual act seems out of place when taken in the context of the scene, where she is consistently shown as separate from the devotees, and where she is not fully involved in their enactment of the rituals. As was discussed earlier, *aṅgapradakṣiṇā* is a humbling and somewhat degrading vow that many temple-goers see as a nuisance; it is not a marker of a middle-class Māriyammaṉ, but rather is often considered as a "holdover" from non-middle-class practices. It is sometimes performed in modern Māriyammaṉ temples and Meena's performance of it can be seen as a marker of her continued devotion to the goddess. It does not appear that this affects her own middle-class status in any way, and after the *aṅgapradakṣiṇā* is finished, she again is shown as separate from the other devotees. It is this separation from the other devotees that reifies Meena's ascendance to the middle class, and therefore her difference from the other, non-middle-class, devotees. This difference is obvious immediately; the devotees are a sea of yellow saris over a red blouse, whereas Meena is clad fully in a deep red. The devotees wear their saris tucked in, whereas Meena's is pinned to her shoulder so it flows down her back. Meena is also shown wearing a large number of red bangles and jasmine in her hair, while few of the other devotees have jewelry and none have jasmine. While the other women dance in formation with neem leaves, Meena walks among them, but is decidedly not *of* them; she does not carry neem, nor any of the other ritual implements that they later use. Meena presents an interesting paradigm, as she is clearly still an extremely devoted Māriyammaṉ devotee, but she also does not take part in rituals that were most likely a daily occurrence for her before her marriage. It is these ritual scenes in particular, therefore, that are able to serve as a model for the new middle class to emulate. Meena is still loyal to the goddess and still propitiates her as expected, but she has dropped rituals that would be considered as depraved from her repertoire. The most striking example of this is seen at the very end of the scene. As the crowd of devotees is shown wildly dancing and screaming, in the throes of

possession, Meena is shown kneeling behind the goddess in a stance of dignified worship. She does not take part in the possession rituals, but she does worship the goddess. This can also be seen as a commentary on non-middle-class rituals, in showing that these rituals are not necessary for the middle class, but that the true worship is not in the performance of rituals or possession, but in the true devotion that is felt for the goddess. Meena exemplifies this to perfection and it is during these scenes of the film that we see that Meena has fully reconciled herself with her new class status.

The Middle Class and Māriyamman̲

Traditionally, Māriyamman̲ has been associated with the non-elites, but as the non-middle class increasingly become middle class, many have brought Māriyamman̲ into the middle-class milieu as well. As a result, much of Māriyamman̲ worship associated with the non-middle class has been 'sanitized' and, in some cases, Brahminized, in order for it to be appropriate for middle-class devotees. This is not surprising, as "…in India, lower-ranked castes often try to emulate the ritual pattern of higher-ranked castes in the hope of raising their social status. This model of reform assumes that there is a pervasive sense of hierarchy marking off the social order and the ritual forms each of the social classes use" (Younger 2010, 71). This is indicative of the process of change that has occurred in Māriyamman̲ worship, as rituals associated with the non-middle-class have been replaced by higher class rituals and in some cases even Brahmin priests have been employed by the temples (Waghorne 2004, 133), while offerings of meat have been shunned for the now-vegetarian goddess (Hancock 1999, 154). This has also resulted in more Brahmin women becoming devotees of Māriyamman̲. Mary Hancock discusses a group of Smārta Brahmin women in Chennai who consider themselves to be devotees of the "modernized" Māriyamman̲. However, these women did not worship Māriyamman̲ in the same way that their lower caste counterparts would, as their fears of pollution prevented them from it. If they attended the temple, some of the women would prepare their own offerings (instead of using the temple-made ones), but many more would send a non-

Brahmin servant to the temple to perform rituals in their stead (Hancock 1999, 134).

Although it is obvious that Māriyamman has successfully become a part of the middle-class world, it is not so obvious as to why this was both possible and necessary. William Harman, who has studied the Māriyamman temples of Samayapuram and Melmaruvattur extensively, argues that it is Māriyamman's ability to offer security and to protect her devotees that has kept her relevant. Those who are newly ascended to the middle class are often moving "from secure village contexts into urban centres" and the protection of Māriyamman offers a source of solace. They are also aware that their status is in a liminal state, and so they understand that Māriyamman must be approached in a different way. At Melmaruvattur, this means that instead of physical offerings done in exchange for a boon, the goddess should be approached with gifts of money that are intended to be used for the poor. This fulfills ritual duties, while also reassuring the devotees that they themselves are not poor (Harman 2004, 12). Harman believes that Māriyamman herself has not changed; she still heals people of disease, takes part in possession, and grants boons. However, her grace is received in a different way, as possession and healing comes from her 'human representative', Bangaru Adigalar, and "Devotees themselves…[are] the instruments for the healing, uplift and prosperity of the poor…In following the Māriyamman of Melmaruvattur one becomes, almost *ipso facto* a member of the new generation of middle-class devotees" (Harman 2004, 13).

Joanne Waghorne discusses the new middle-class Māriyamman in a different way, as she posits that the changes in Māriyamman are representative of the change in general that has been found in Chennai (2004, 134). As Māriyamman temples have become a part of the middle-class, Māriyamman herself has become a unificatory partner in a new middle-class world, with temples and worship "…molded in part by a conscious effort to create a multi-caste community that is integrated into a common ethos, which may indeed be 'middle-class' (Waghorne 2004, 149). As shown by Hancock, the traditions and

rituals of Māriyammaṉ have become somewhat Brahminized, thus disassociating them from their origins (Waghorne 2004, 135). Most importantly, Waghorne argues that the temples themselves offer a space for the new middle-class to develop and to "become conscious of itself within the walks of a religious public space" (Waghorne 2004, 170). Although they will use the goddess, they will only do so if she herself can become part of the middle-class, thus destroying elements of her worship, "….including her unrefined devotees" (Waghorne 2004, 170).

In becoming middle class, then, worship of Māriyammaṉ has undergone a large number of changes. Within Ammaṉ films, this dichotomy presents an interesting conundrum, as Māriyammaṉ worship is to be promoted, but non-middle-class rituals should be limited. Although the devotee of the film is originally non-middle class, by the end of the film she appears to have fully embraced her middle-class status, a fact which is shown particularly well through scenes of rituals which come near the end of the films. With very few exceptions, the rituals are shown only in brief dance sequences taking place at a village temple with non-middle-class devotees. These scenes do not show the most 'offensive' rituals, such as blood-letting and animal sacrifice, and rarely show *tīmiti* ("firewalking"), but the middle-class devotee does not take part even in these sanitized rituals in the same way as the other devotees. The rituals that are shown, namely *aṅgapradakṣiṇā*, *tīccaṭṭi*, and possession, can still be found in modern Māriyammaṉ temples, but they are not as common as they would be in a traditional temple. Therefore, the films become a reflection of the ways in which upward-rising Māriyammaṉ devotees must change, and even remove, aspects of their worship in order to maintain their middle-class status, while simultaneously warning of the importance of maintaining proper worship of Māriyammaṉ.

Conclusion

Māriyammaṉ has traditionally been worshipped in the warm Tamil month of Āṭi, when smallpox and other fever diseases are the most rampant. Throughout much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, smallpox in particular was an aggressive killer. In order to stave off the disease, festivals to Māriyammaṉ

were held, replete with offerings and vows made to the goddess in exchange for her protection. When smallpox vaccines became available, many were hesitant to use them because of Māriyamman̲'s reputation as a fierce goddess; there was a belief that the receipt of a vaccine was an impiety showing a devotee's mistrust in the power of the goddess. Despite this, the disease was eventually declared eradicated by the World Health Organization in 1979. With the perceived purpose of her existence gone, many assumed that Māriyamman̲ would soon disappear as well. Rather than disappearing, however, her popularity has increased in the intervening years as her devotees have applied the notion of her as a fierce protectress and granter of boons to other aspects of their lives.

In more recent years, the emphasis on middle-class lifestyles has again changed attitudes toward Māriyamman̲. Traditionally, she has been associated with non-middle-class worship, but as her devotees have ascended to the middle-class, they have chosen to bring her with them. However, in order to make her an acceptable goddess for the middle class, aspects of her worship have been changed and sanitized, resulting in a move away from devotion rendered physically to that which can be given monetarily. This also comes in the wake of fears that the middle class will move away from religion, and thus away from the traditional values that define their Indianness. The films address this problem quite frankly, as in her new family the devotee finds herself alone in her wish to propitiate the goddess. Rather than simply ignoring the devotee's devotion, they use it as an opportunity to torture her, while similarly disregarding the goddess.

That being said, the ritual scenes of the film seem to serve two distinct purposes. First, they represent the realities concerning the religion of the new middle class, and second, they provide acceptable solutions for maintaining both devotion and middle-class status, both of which are relevant for many of the devotees who encounter these films. The next chapter will more deeply delve into these issues, focusing on the development of the middle class, its changing attitudes towards religions, and its representation within Amman̲ films.

Chapter 3

The Moral, Economic, and Religious "Middle Classness" of Tamil Amman Films

The notion of a middle class in India has been present since the colonial period, but this is quite different from the "new" Indian middle class that has developed in India since the 1990s. This new middle class has been estimated at variously between 40 and 200 million people, creating questions as to what factors should be used to determine middle-class status.[33] Many studies focus on salary and expendable income, ignoring the many social and cultural markers of the middle class.[34]

This chapter seeks to discuss Amman films in relation to the development of the middle class in India, particularly concerning the expectations placed upon women as they experience the changes involved in marrying into a family that is a higher class than their own. Using examples from the films *Raja Kaliyamman* and *Kottai Mariamman,* I will argue that the purpose of these representations is pedagogical; the films demonstrate *how to be* middle class, while simultaneously warning of the "dangers", such as a loss of religiosity and becoming overly westernized that are commonly associated with the middle class.

The history of the middle class in India: from colonial legacy to liberalization

Although the middle class as we now know it began to develop in the 1980s with the liberalization of India's economy, many of its characteristics are a direct result of India's colonial legacy.[35] Today's middle class is formed mainly of office workers who do non-manual labor and have attained some level of formal

[33] Estimates of the size of the middle class have ranged from 40 million to 200 million and recent questions on what constitutes middle-class status have affected these estimates as well. The disparity is evident even in the titles of popular news articles. See also Fernando (2010) and Shrinivasan (2010).
[34] These studies were conducted by the National Council for Applied Economic Research (NCAER) and the Government of India. They are reprinted in Fernandes (2006), p. 76, 81, 83.
[35] The process and effects of the liberalization of India's economy are discussed in further detail in Varma (1998) and Fernandes (2006).

education. This is in contrast to the old middle class, which primarily consisted of self-employed manufacturers or traders (Béteille 2001, 77). The concept of an Indian middle class first occurred during the colonial period, when those who were afforded an English education were among the few who had the opportunity for service and literary jobs and the socioeconomic benefits that came with them. As government controlled jobs were often the key to middle-class status, the middle class was seen as intricately connected with, and even semi-dependent on, the colonial government. However, it was not simply wealth that brought about middle-class status – rather, it was a combination of social factors *and* wealth that differentiated the middle class from the traditional wealthy elite.

The colonial-era middle class was not one, homogenous group, but involved a number of layers. Those who conformed most to British notions of respectability were highest in the class structure and were given the most opportunities for higher-tiered jobs, which required excellent English language skills, a decent socioeconomic status, and a respectable family history. As these were often only attainable for the higher-castes, much of the caste-based hierarchy and discrimination was simply replaced with a class-based hierarchy and discrimination, as high-level employment was limited to the middle class.[36] Since this was also linked to family status, even if non-elites attained an English education, their family history would disqualify them from higher-class occupations. Class status, therefore, began to be seen as an innate quality of a person, where the middle class were "...clean, orderly, and civilized..." and the non-middle class were "...slum dwellers and migrants..." (Fernandes 2006, 26). As a result, "…the different fractions of the dominant class distinguish themselves precisely through that which makes them members of the class as a whole, namely the type of capital which is the source of their privilege and the different

[36] Although class status technically should be 'divorced' from caste status, the two are quite intertwined. Although upper-caste elites may not necessarily be of the highest socioeconomic status, members of the middle class are generally from higher castes than the poor. This conclusion is based on a survey done by Cable News Network-Indian Broadcasting Network (CNN-IBN) and the Hindustan Times, which found that nearly thirty-seven percent of the three higher castes are a part of the middle class, and that only thirteen percent of the middle class is from the lowest castes (Ram-Prasad 2010).

manners of asserting their distinction which are linked to it" (Bourdieu 1984, 258). In order to maintain this distinction, many middle-class social projects focused on slum demolition and coercive sterilization of the non-elites. These programs asserted the middle classness of those involved, while simultaneously preventing the non-middle class from becoming middle class and limiting the numbers of the non-middle-class population.

Beginning in the 1980s, however, instead of being based primarily upon family history, education, and employment, the notion of the "middle class" became associated with the consumption of luxury goods and services. The liberalization of the economy meant that foreign investors and manufacturers were able to produce and sell their products in India. These products had previously only been available to those with relations or connections in Europe and North America, limiting it to only the highest of the upper classes. However, once produced in India, televisions, VCRs, and washing machines soon became necessities for families that called themselves middle class. The increase in status associated with the purchase of these commodities is part and parcel of the idea that "…money will not only buy one pleasure, security,…[and] guarantee admission to the desired college, but will also buy you social recognition" (van Wessel 2004, 100-101). It was this new availability of commodities, therefore, that influenced the identity of the middle class as consumption and commodity based.

The commodities themselves are not intrinsically valuable, as they gain value only as the desire to possess them increases. As Arjun Appadurai notes, "...the economic object does not have an absolute value as a result of the demand for it, but the demand, as the basis of a real or imagined exchange, endows the object with value" (1986, 4). The value of the object, therefore, is socially and culturally constructed - an object that is considered a valuable commodity in one culture may not be in another. Therefore, the demand, and as such, the commoditization of goods, is a part of social practice and classification, not necessarily based on 'need', but rather based on desire (Appadurai 1986, 29). This

desire can be intimately linked with the desire to project one's class status. In Margit van Wessel's study of the middle class in Baroda, she notes that the need for projection of class status is far greater than the need for the actual commodities; a refrigerator is needed in order to put ice in a visitor's glass of water in the summer, not simply to keep one's own water cooled. She says, "…one reason Jitesh wants to have a refrigerator is that guests 'notice' if they don't get ice in their water when they come to visit. The 'noticing' is a form of (d)evaluation" (van Wessel 2004, 97).

It is obvious, therefore, that commodities have become an important factor in determining middle-class status. However, it is important not to disregard the importance of education, particularly English language education, as a marker of the middle class. Education is linked to job prospects, as it "…provides not only the skills but also the credentials required for entry into middle-class occupations…" (Béteille 2001, 77). Education, therefore, is often seen as one key to class status ascension, as shown in the example of a wealthy hotel owner who gave the opportunity of higher education to many of the children of his rural employees, "…so that in one generation they have become middle class" (Ram-Prasad 2010). Although this is a culturally accepted idea, in reality, education alone is not enough to attain middle-class status. "A degree must be accompanied by other symbolic attributes that make one a proper member of a higher class [such as]…dress, grooming, speech, and manners" (Dickey 2002, 224). For those who attend college, these attitudes and habits may be learned and adopted through the friendship of middle-class peers. Therefore the belief of education as a status improver should be linked with the opportunities associated with higher education, such as access to higher levels of employment and therefore an increased socioeconomic status.

This is representative of the dilemma in discussing the "middle class" of South India – there is no definitive method of classification, and therefore thoughts on who actually *is* middle class will vary. The Indian government has taken on this issue itself, perhaps in a bid to present India's middle class as a

viable market for foreign companies, with government-funded surveys designed to determine the numbers of the middle class. As a result, the Indian National Council of Applied Economic Research (INCAER) has designated the middle class as those earning from $4,000 to $21,000 per year – this is approximately 60 million, or 6 percent, of the Indian population. Another study, however, which was focused on commodity ownership, (whether a family owned a telephone, a motorised vehicle, or a colour television) brought the middle class to 200 million, or 20 percent, of the population (Ram-Prasad 2010). The large discrepancy (here, about 140 million!) leads one to believe that commodity ownership alone is not a significant enough marker to base middle-class status on.[37][38] Many who are not necessarily middle class own these commodities in an attempt to emulate the higher classes, even if years of saving are necessary in order to afford them. Consumption "…holds a promise of potential access to new middle-class membership that may otherwise seem too easily foreclosed by the linguistic politics of English" (Fernandes 2006, 71). Therefore, the ability to purchase commodities is seen as an equalizer among those eligible for middle-class status, as it is technically independent of family background or education. However, consumerism is still often marked as *the* distinguishing feature of middle classness, though the ideal member of the new Indian middle class should combine this consumption in conjunction with their Indian heritage. This is shown best in the figure of Raghunath, a young man interviewed for an article on the middle class in *Prospect* magazine. Raghunath grew up in a lower middle-class home, but he himself is now decidedly middle class. He is the son of a classical musician, and though he was also trained in classical music, he now works at an outsourced Microsoft office. "He speaks English with American inflections, and says dreamily that he would love to visit the West - but not live there. He has the

[37] Newspaper and magazine articles on India's new middle class, however, most often focus on these commodities as the marker of middle class. See: Schuman (2003); Desmond, Pratap, and Shah (1989); and Farrell and Beinhocker (2007).

[38] André Béteille notes that the emphasis on liberalization as the precursor to the development of the middle class tends to lead to higher estimations of numbers of the middle class, while those who minimize the significance tend to come to a more moderate view of its size. Unfortunately, there is very little data, especially from before the 1990s, to prove this claim (Béteille 2001, 75-76).

latest MP3 player, and listens to the South Indian classical canon on it" (Ram-Prasad 2010). Raghunath shows himself to be the ideal middle-class Indian – westernized in his occupation and dress, but still retaining his essential 'Indianness', which is here represented through his choice of music. I would propose that this example, with its emphasis on occupation and education, as well as commodities, contains the factors that should be considered when determining middle-class status. However, the use of commodities as the sole marker of middle-class status has prevailed and even within Ammaṉ films the viewer knows that the family is middle class because of the visible commodities seen in the home; the education, background, and employment of the family are never referred to. Although middle-class status is generally glorified, there are aspects of it that have been vilified, particularly in the media. Most often these elements are those that index the west, such as the idea of overconsumption and blatant materialism. It is this "type" of middle class that is shown in Ammaṉ films.

Ammaṉ Films as a Representation of the Middle Class

Ammaṉ films present not only the image of the established middle-class family, but also that of the new middle-class devotee, thus creating a narrative that is metonymic of social mobilization. The devotee, though born into a non-middle-class family, becomes middle class upon her marriage; it is within her new middle-class home that much of the action of the film takes place and where we eventually see the heroine become completely reconciled with the culture of the middle class. This mimics the reality and aspirations of many of the audience members, some of whom are recently ascended to the middle class, with the majority being non-middle class. For some, therefore, the films are a filmic iteration of their own realities, while for others they reinforce the possibility of social mobilization and simultaneously show the proper manner of conduct for those who call themselves "middle class". This goes against the views of the already middle class, who often cite class status as an innate quality that cannot be changed, stating that the non-middle class is synonymous with "...dirty, disease-carrying, and polluted" (Dickey 2008, 249). This belief in the "immutability" of

class status harkens to a deeper issue, the fear of losing a newly acquired middle-class status. Therefore, middle-class parents avoid leaving their children in the company of servants for long periods of time, fearing that they will pick up habits that could jeopardize their own class status (Dickey 2008, 240). However, it is this very insistence that proves the ease with which external, and sometimes unavoidable, factors do change a family's status. Here the importance of commodities becomes clear; they are as permanent a marker of middle-class status as is available.

Unlike other factors of middle-class identity, commodities are easily quantified and given value. For the middle-class family of Amman̲ films, in fact, they are the only clear marker of middle-class status. *Raja Kaliyamman* shows a clear example of this, as immediately upon entering the middle-class home, the camera sweeps over a fancy cabinet holding a large, flat-screen television set, while in *Kottai Mariamman* the living room is filled not only with a television set, but also a statue of a knight in armor and a number of other European style statues and vases, all artifacts associated with the upper classes.

These depictions fall in line with much of what we will see in the examples presented throughout this chapter. Through their commodities, the family is placed into the stereotypical category of the evil and over consumptive middle class, a distinction that is also seen in the difference between the characterizations of the non-middle-class devotee and the middle-class women of her new family. The contrast between these characters is shown mostly by way of their physical appearance and actions. The devotee is portrayed as devout, while the middle-class women are shown as disrespectful, inappropriate, and, at times, evil. The devotee's desire to propitiate the goddess is seen as 'backward' and is a constant source of tension between the two classes. This tension is apparent in a memorable scene from *Raja Kaliyamman*, where the sister-in-law finds lemons intended for the worship of the goddess and purposefully steps on them. The goddess shows her anger immediately, as the sister-in-law's head is separated from her body and spun in the air, before eventually being replaced. This warning

frightens the sister-in-law only briefly; she continues her torturous treatment of the devotee and her disrespect towards the goddess until her death near the end of the film.

It is interesting to note that these depictions of the middle class focus solely on the presentation of the home, eschewing any focus on profession or education, two factors that have been shown to be highly important in determining middle-class status. This may be a result of two separate factors. First of all, as has been discussed earlier in this chapter, when reporters speak of the "evils of the middle class" it is most often in reference to their perceived over consumption. In trying to interpret and form a new identity for the middle class, film also becomes an obvious medium to use, as media is one of "…the areas where new identities are contested, where desires, pleasures and anxieties are given a face, narrative, and direction…" (Brosius 2010, 2). This family is presented as having become overly westernized in their attempts to be middle class. Their overconsumption thus marks them as separate from an idealized middle class in which traditional Indian values would still be at the fore. This is exacerbated by the visual medium of film, which can effectively show the background and status of the family through visual cues and stereotypes, without explicit mention of profession or education. As such, the presence of the commodities is seen as sufficient for the audience to interpret the family's class status on their own.

Changing religious practices and the wrath of the goddess

The middle class is often associated with a lack of interest in traditional religion, resulting in a fear that as traditional rituals are devalued and commodities more greatly prized, they will take precedence over the worship of the goddess. In some cases, this fear has resulted in a renewed need for "rational" yet "traditional" religion, with many elite urban Hindus "…eager to 'apply' Vedic principles in a tangible way" (Lubin 2001, 314). The emphasis on Vedic traditions demonstrates a desire to emulate upper caste religion. They may, therefore, "…adopt Hindu rituals that may not have been traditions in their own caste and kin group, in order to strengthen their identity as part of the general Hindu world"

(Saavala 2010, 158). Although there is a fear that the westernized middle class will perform these rituals at the expense of the goddess, who will be forgotten. As we have seen, these fears are mostly unfounded. Although her rituals may have changed, Māriyammaṉ herself has remained incredibly popular. Nevertheless, the trope of the middle class family that disregards Māriyammaṉ is still present within Ammaṉ films. This is shown in the following scene from the film *Kottai Mariamman*, where the devotee is prevented from worshipping the goddess until finally the goddess steps in and the middle-class sister-in-law receives her comeuppance.

> Following the devotee's new sister-in-law, the camera takes in walls adorned with artwork, before entering the family's sitting room, and settling in front of a piece of Western furniture that has been placed next to a bronze statue of a knight in armor. The sister-in-law asks her servant for her pistachio milk.[39] He responds that there is no milk left, "…it has been taken for *pāl abiṣekam*" The sister-in-law, visibly upset, calls the devotee into the room. As the devotee enters with the milk, the camera pans to meet her, passing over a television set and a built-in shelving unit filled with European-style glass vases and statues. The devotee is questioned about her use of the milk and responds that she will use it to propitiate the goddess (Fig. 3.1).

Figure 3.1. *The sister-in-law questions the devotee about her use of the milk while standing in front of the accoutrements of the middle-class home.* (*Kottai Mariamman*)

> This angers the sister-in-law, who immediately yells for her servant to bring kerosene. As she takes the kerosene from his hands, she says to the devotee, "Today, for a change, you will do a kerosene *abiṣekam*." At the moment these words are spoken, the scene dramatically

[39] *Pālam pistalam* ("Pistachio milk") is milk that has been boiled with crushed almonds and pistachios. Due to the high cost of nuts, this is not a feasible beverage for most Indians, and it is considered to be a middle to upper-middle-class drink.

cuts to a close-up of a sculpted image of the goddess, which is then shown intermittently with flashes of lightning, underscored by the heavy drum beats and thunder, which serve as the soundtrack. The music continues as the scene changes rapidly between the angry goddess, bolts of lightning, and the middle-class home, where we see the milk forcibly removed from the devotee's hands and replaced with the jug of kerosene. With another quick scene change, the devotee enters the family puja room, where the drums and thunder are replaced with calming sitar music. The camera, focused on a sculpted image of the goddess, slowly pans out to reveal several printed images of the goddess, as well as shelves containing a papier-mâché image of the goddess and European *objets d'art*. The sitar music continues as the devotee begins to speak in apology to the goddess. "Mother, what can I say, what can I do? I don't know what to do. I must obey." In resignation, she lifts the jug of kerosene, but as she begins to pour, the scene again quickly cuts to the image of the angry goddess, as her signature music repeats. The scene returns to the devotee, and though the jug is full of kerosene, it is milk that now splashes over the image of the goddess (Fig. 3.2).

Figure 3.2. *The kerosene changes to milk as the devotee performs* pāl abiṣekam. *(Kottai Mariamman)*

The music changes to a *stotra* ("Sanskrit hymn") and the devotee's formerly morose visage registers surprise and joy. This joy is mirrored, as we then are shown the anthropomorphic form of the goddess, calm and joyful, with milk bubbling up from between her toes. The camera rests on her face for a brief moment, before the scene abruptly cuts to reveal the sister-in-law sitting in the kitchen, again requesting her milk. Her father brings her the milk and as she lifts the glass to drink, the scene again cuts to the angry goddess, complete with lightning and beating drums, now accompanied by the addition of an ominous violin. Although the liquid in the glass appears to be milk, upon leaving the glass it is shown to be blue – the milk has changed to kerosene (Fig. 3.3).

The sister-in-law begins to expel smoke from her mouth and ears, as her face registers her panic. As her father yells, "What is this goddess game? [Tamil: Itu enna tiruvilaiyatal?]" the scene ends.[40]

Figure 3.3. *The sister-in-law receives her comeuppance as the milk she is drinking changes to kerosene. (Kottai Mariamman).*

The filmography of the scene becomes very important to placing the family in the middle-class context. The use of an establishing shot[41] enables the audience to see the middle-class accoutrements of the household as soon as the scene begins, while the tracking shot[42] of the sister-in-law and her servant gives a view of the sitting room, kitchen, and the artwork-adorned walls of the home, immediately setting the scene in a middle-class context. This also slows the pace for the beginning of the scene, resulting in a greater contrast when quick, close cuts become the norm.

The devotee's desire to propitiate the goddess through *abiṣekam* is laughed at; it is a non-elite practice that this middle-class family does not take seriously. The sister-in-law, in particular, shows no respect for the needs of the goddess. Her choice to replace the milk with kerosene is particularly disturbing, as milk is ultimately used in this ritual to *cool* the goddess. Kerosene, a toxic

[40] *Kottai Mariamman,* VCD. Disc 1, 00:37:01 – 00:39:30

[41] An establishing shot "shows the spatial relations among the important figures, objects, and settings in a scene. They are generally used as the first few shots in a scene in order to introduce the audience to the location and characters (Prunes 2002).

[42] A tracking shot accompanies the character as she moves along the screen. It is different from a pan because it follows the entire range of movement of the character, whereas a pan mimics a turning head" (Prunes 2002).

substance generally associated with flames and fire, would presumably have the opposite effect. The sister-in-law, however, does receive fitting retribution – in the end she is the one who feels the effects of the kerosene, not the goddess. The presence of kerosene is also yet another marker of the middle-class home, as its existence in the kitchen shows that a certain measure of financial security has been attained. The sister-in-law herself also becomes an artifact of the middle class – her insistence on drinking her pistachio milk marks her as a part of the middle classness that is being critiqued.

By setting this scene within the home it is possible to repeatedly reinforce the middle-class status of the family. As the camera focuses on televisions, furniture, and even the family servant, all of the performed actions – and their consequences – can be applied to the middle-class family. We are presented with an idealized view of the non-middle class as well as an exaggeration of the ills of the middle class; the non-middle-class devotee is represented as a dutiful daughter-in-law who is unfailingly devoted to the goddess, whereas the middle-class family, and in particular the sister-in-law, are shown as neglectful of all moral and religious responsibilities. As a result, whereas the devotee is 'rescued' by the goddess from having to perform the kerosene *abiṣekam*, the sister-in-law consumes burning kerosene instead of milk. This imparts the need for the new middle class to maintain religious practices, with the underlying message that if the goddess is not properly respected and propitiated, the result will be disaster for the middle-class family. This family, however, has not yet learned this lesson, and as a whole, they show great disdain for the practices that the devotee is hoping to perform. Rather, they seem to delight in the fact that as a dutiful daughter-in-law, she is required to do what they say, even though her sister-in-law's command fills her with horror. As a new member of the family, her sole duty, which comes above even her devotion to the goddess, is to obey her husband and his family. The fact that the kerosene ends up changing to milk serves to prove this point, as it shows that in the goddess' vision, the devotee has performed her duties properly. It is also representative of the pure bhakti that the devotee possesses, which is shown through the sincere apology that she gives to the goddess even as

she is about to pour the kerosene. This does not mean that the goddess does not feel any anger, however. Rather, the full force of her wrath is directed at the sister-in-law, as seen when she replaces the sister-in-law's milk with kerosene. As the audience watches smoke erupt from the sister-in-law's ears, it becomes clear that the devotee must trust in the goddess to right any wrongs – it is not her duty to attempt retribution.

The "evil" women of the middle class

The idealized roles for men and women of all classes in India have remained relatively unchanged since colonial times. In order to thrive within the colonial milieu, while still retaining the essential principles of India, men were required to adopt western attitudes and culture to further their positions in business and society, while women were expected to maintain "the traditional values" of India. These social norms are often referred to as the "interior" world of women and the 'exterior' world of men, most notably by Partha Chatterjee.[43] According to Chatterjee, these distinctions became necessary as colonial expectations meant that men who wished to advance in business and society needed to minimize their Indian roots and adopt Western habits and dress. Although this was recognized as a necessity, it did not lessen fears that it would eventually cause a complete loss of essential "Indianness". It became accepted that the only way to avoid this was to ensure that each night the man would return from his "exterior" world, the business world of the west, to the "interior" world, that of his Indian home. "In the world, imitations of and adaptation to Western norms was a necessity; at home, they were tantamount to annihilation of one's very identity" (Chatterjee 1993, 121). Therefore, women, as the guards of the interior world of the home, were expected to avoid westernization in order to maintain Indian traditions. As the primary caretaker of the children, her duty is to instill Indian values and culture in them, a priority amid fears that India – and Indians – are becoming Westernized. She must also ensure the proper practice of

[43] This idea of the interior and exterior world is commonly found in studies of colonial and post-colonial India. See Chatterjee (1993, 120), Hancock (1999, 15-16) and Sarkar (2001, 39).

religious rituals, which often become interwoven with her domestic duties, for example, when cleaning the house or preparing food, it is said that she is also simultaneously purifying the domestic shrine and preparing ritual food offerings (Hancock 1999, 26). As such, women are seen as the maintainers of the traditional values of India, including language, doctrines, and religion.[44]

In the years since colonialism, the ideas of the interior and exterior roles have remained and have, in fact, become increasingly important as the middle class has increased in size. Although middle-class status itself is held up as a glorious achievement, it is feared that a focus on western commodities could easily lead to a rejection of indigenous culture. This fear is summed up well by Pavan Varma, who states "There is nothing wrong *per se* in the attributes of a western lifestyle, but the worrying factor is that these are emulated so unthinkingly and effortlessly so as to completely erode the cultural roots of large sections of the Indian elite" (Varma 2001, 91). Although both genders are implicated in these statements, it is the women who are held responsible for keeping their families from overt westernization. As such, it is seen as increasingly worrisome when women are seen to fall into western paradigms, whereas men are generally excused on account of its necessity in the "exterior" world. Both the men and women of the middle class are portrayed as somewhat westernized in Amman films, but it is the westernized middle-class woman who is the most problematic. While men are expected to carry western characteristics, based on their involvement with the exterior world, a woman with the same characteristics becomes a threat to India.

In Amman films, the audience is presented with two distinct archetypes of middle-class women: the 'evil' middle-class woman (usually the sister-in-law) and the 'proper' middle-class woman, represented in the character of the middle-class devotee. Most often, both are depicted wearing traditional clothing (in contrast to the Western clothes of the men in the film), though there are some instances in which the 'evil' middle-class woman is shown in Western clothes.

[44] A more in-depth discussion of the proper roles of womanhood was discussed in chapter 1.

Nevertheless, the two characters are easily differentiated, as the first is shown as having disregarded all religious practices and Indian traditions, while the second maintains her relationship with the goddess while still acting as a dutiful wife. Although neither of the women is shown as the ideal representation of the middle class, it is the devotee who is clearly cast as the role model for the audience.

Earlier in this chapter the two female characters were discussed as stereotypes of non-middle and middle-class women in regards to their religious practices. Although mentions of religion will occur in the analysis of the following scenes, both from the film *Raja Kaliyamman*, they are not presented as a means for discussing religious practices, but rather in order to give the reader an idea of the archetypes of women that are shown in Amman̲ films. In the first scene, we encounter the devotee in the context of the village temple:

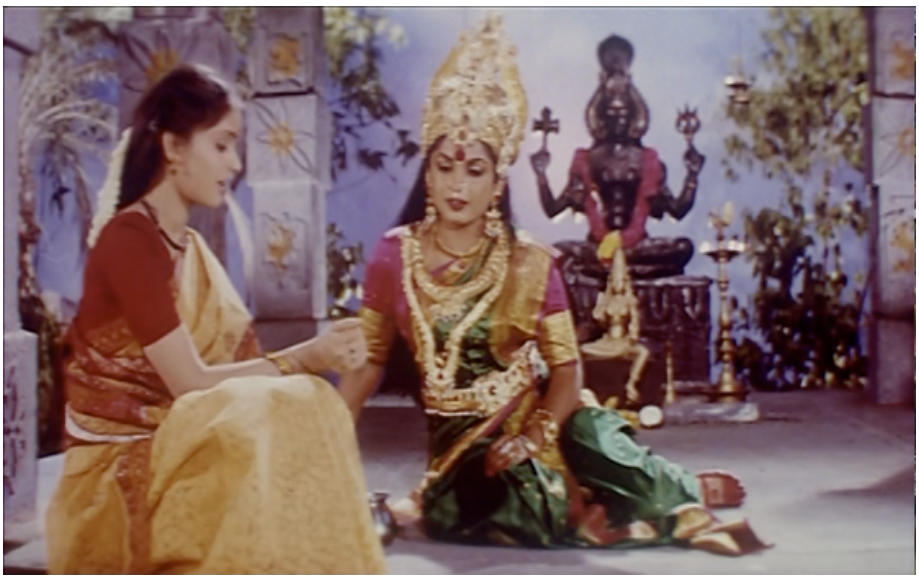

Figure 3.4. *Meena flips a coin in order to decide whether she or the goddess will eat first. (Raja Kaliyamman)*

The devotee, carrying food, arrives at the temple and calls to the goddess. The temple is outdoors, made up of a stone floor and four stone pillars, with a small altar in the center upon which a sculpted image of the goddess sits. The devotee is dressed in a sari with her hair bound and adorned by jasmine. On her forehead she wears a *poṭṭu*, around her neck a string of small beads, and on her arms a small number of bangles. As the

devotee is calling to her, the goddess appears suddenly beside her in her anthropomorphic form. She tries to feed the goddess, but the goddess insists that the devotee eat first. The two gently fight until the goddess suggests that they flip a coin to determine who will eat first (Fig. 3.4). The coin is flipped into the air, but upon 'landing' on the steps of the temple, it spins for a few seconds before ultimately resting on its edge, rendering no decision. The devotee laughs and says that the goddess has performed a magic trick, and the scene ends with the food uneaten.[45]

In the second scene, we meet the sister-in-law, who is shown outside of her home.

Wearing an expensive-looking silk sari, the sister-in-law has bound her hair and adorned it with jasmine. She has a *poṭṭu* on her forehead, and is wearing a large gold necklace, a gold *tāli*,[46] gold earrings, and many golden bangles. With her home in the background, she lounges on a garden chair, her foot resting on the table in front of her. Her hand holds a small mirror, which she uses to apply lipstick and fix her hair throughout the scene. Her first words are used to call her servant, who she asks to lower her foot to the ground (Fig. 3.5). After he has done so, he leaves the scene and the camera pans to the right, revealing the sister-in-law's brother (the devotee's future husband), who is wearing Western-style shorts and a polo shirt, an outfit that is completed by the lit cigarette hanging from his mouth.[47]

Figure 3.5. *The sister-in-law puts makeup on while her servant helps her to place her leg on the ground. (Raja Kaliyamman)*

[45] *Raja Kaliyamman* 00:09:27 – 00:11:02
[46] The significance of the *tāli* ("marriage cord") is discussed in chapter one.
[47] *Raja Kaliyamman* 00:11:21 – 00:12:16

These two scenes provide an interesting look at the stereotypes of non-middle and middle-class women found within Amman̲ films. Simply based on the images shown above, we can see that both of the women are dressed in traditional Indian saris, with their hair bound, though the second woman's sari appears to be of higher quality than the first, and her large *tāli* is noticeably contrasted with the prayer beads of the devotee. Therefore, at a first glance, both seem to embody the culturally accepted ideal for Indian women.

However, on considering the actions of the scene, the differences between the two become markedly obvious. The devotee is marked here by her fulfillment of the ascribed religious duties. Not only does she bring food for the goddess to the temple, but she also shows her ultimate selflessness when she refuses to eat any food before the goddess does. This is in step with her duties as the keeper of the interior world, as she maintains the family's connection with the goddess and her religion. In contrast to this, we see the actions of the sister-in-law. This woman is shown portraying what are thought of as the myriad evils of the middle class; she spends much of the scene looking at herself in a mirror while putting on makeup and she is so lazy that she is unable to lift her own foot from the table without the help of her servant.

These vignettes show common stereotypes – the non-middle class is selfless and hard working, the middle class is lazy and selfish – and reassert views that it is the non-middle class who will remain 'Indian' while the indolent middle class will soon become completely westernized. It is important to note that this middle class refers only to those who have become overly westernized and have forgotten their "essential Indianness". The sister-in-law furthers the stereotype as she is shown using a hand mirror to apply her lipstick, showing both her own vanity and the western products that she has grown accustomed to. This is seen as sufficient to criticize middle-class women, who have often been ridiculed due to their use of makeup, their blatant wealth, and the presence of seemingly useless luxury, all of which are present in this scene (Chatterjee 1993, 122). The sister-in-

law's inability to lift her own leg from the table to the ground is a pure mockery of the indulgent wealth of the middle class and is a clear signal to the audience that the middle-class woman is not an example to follow. The devotee, on the other hand, adheres to the tenets of the interior world as she shows herself to be obedient to her husband, yet still faithful to the goddess. It is she, humble and willing to serve, who should be emulated.

Purpose of the Middle Class in Amma̲n films

Although the bulk of the Amma̲n film audience is made up of non-middle class women, the major plot points of the movie are presented within the middle-class context. At first, this is puzzling – why would a film aimed at the non-middle class be filled with middle-class characters? This can partially be answered by looking closely at the character of the devotee, whose life is a reality for many Indian women who are currently marrying into the middle class. For these women, the marriage is often represented as both a boon and a hardship – their lives are expected to improve in many ways, but they will also have to quickly adapt to a new way of life, particularly concerning the habits and attitudes of their new families. According to Anjali, a non-middle-class woman hoping to marry a middle-class man, "I will have to change to fit with the way they are. That's all. It will be a bit difficult in the beginning. But I can observe what they are like, and I can change" (Dickey 2002, 222-223). This is a common sentiment among young women of the non-middle class, many of whom seek to "marry up" in order to mitigate some of the difficulties that they have encountered in their own lives. Thus, Amma̲n films serve a multifold purpose; they not only provide a space where women can see a cinematic interpretation of their own realities, but they also teach them *how* (or sometimes more importantly, *how not*) to be middle class. It is important to note that the non-elite viewers of Tamil films do not see attending films as a learning experience. However, "…most of them believe that cinema can serve a purpose, or have effects, other than the immediate and conscious ones that draw viewers to the movies" (Dickey 1993, 139).

Ammaṉ films also provide a sense of possibility for non-middle-class Tamils who hope to attain middle class status. Sara Dickey argues that Tamil cinema as a whole "…provides viewers with a sense of utopia…first, through a portrayal of luxury…and second, through resolutions of many of the viewers' most persistent and deep-seated anxieties…" (1993, 110). This is certainly true of Ammaṉ films in regards to the anxieties felt over the Westernization of Indians and the idea that the middle class are losing the religion and culture that makes them Indian. At the end of Ammaṉ films, when the middle-class husband repents and remembers the importance of his religion and Indian roots, the audience can heave a collective sigh, since they are shown that it is possible to be both middle class and "traditional", or "essentially Indian".

As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, the new middle class is associated with great anxiety over the possibility of losing the status they have worked so hard to attain. In order to avoid this, it is necessary to understand and imitate what are perceived as middle-class habits and to avoid anything that could cause this status to be in jeopardy. This is particularly relevant in the context of the differences between lower and middle-class religion. In Ammaṉ films, the middle class is depicted as devoid of faith and devoid of respect for the goddess. It becomes clear, however, that this is not an example to be followed, as the middle-class family is subject to great hardships due to the wrath of the goddess. However, in middle class circles, much of what the devotee does to propitiate the goddess, such as *aṅgapradakṣiṇā* or *tīmiti*, is not seen as respectably middle class. Nevertheless, the devotee is seen as a character to emulate throughout the films, and it does become clear, by the end, that she has become fully reconciled with her middle-class status. This character, who has retained her devotion for the goddess while simultaneously behaving in the manner of the most dutiful of wives, thus becomes a role-model for the mostly female audience. This is made particularly clear at the end of the film, as both the middle-class family and the devotee have reaped the "rewards" of their actions. While the devotee's situation has considerably changed for the better, the in-laws have been punished for their misdeeds and the sister-in-law has been killed at the hands of the goddess.

Although the husband lives, it is recognized that this is not a result of his own merit, but rather is due to the devotee's loyalty to the goddess and her desire to avoid widowhood.[48] Even then, the husband does not live without repercussions. In the last few minutes of *Raja Kaliyamman*, for example, the goddess plucks the husband's eyes from his head, leaving him alive, but blind. Although he then repents and becomes a devotee of the goddess, his blindness remains as a punishment for his actions. By showing a woman who so clearly maintains her *sumaṅgalī*hood under difficult circumstances the films highlight the respectable qualities of the non-middle class.

The representation of these characters through the lens of religion should, of course, not be ignored. Although the films do appear to perform a pedagogical purpose, I would propose that they have also been instrumental in the development of middle-class religion, particularly related to the goddess Māriyammaṉ.[49] Māriyammaṉ is traditionally recognized as a non-middle-class goddess, but in recent years she has become extremely popular among the middle class, as her followers have essentially brought her into the middle class with them. However, amid fears that the middle class will soon completely disavow religion, there is a need to ensure her continued viability. In my opinion, Ammaṉ films do just this, as they reach out to the non-middle-class and the new middle-class audience by showing them the horrors that will occur if the goddess becomes less important than the newest of commodities.

In order to continue with worship of Māriyammaṉ, however, it was necessary that she and the worship practices towards her be changed. This is seen most easily in the Māriyammaṉ temple at Melmaruvattur, at which Bangaru Adigalar is considered to be an incarnation of and conduit to the goddess. At Melmaruvattur, rituals that were previously associated with Māriyammaṉ, such as animal or blood sacrifices, have been removed, whereas other rituals, such as possession and *aṅgapradakṣiṇā*, have been greatly changed. In place of most

[48] This scene is discussed in great detail with reference to widowhood in chapter 1.
[49] For an in-depth discussion of the goddess Māriyammaṉ and her rituals, see chapter 2.

rituals, patrons show their devotion to the goddess through donations of cash or jewels, which are used for charitable organizations such as the Adhiparasakthi Charitable Medical, Educational and Cultural Trust, which has, in turn, funded the opening of many hospitals and schools.[50] According to the temple's website, some of these charitable activities include: performing free marriage ceremonies for the poor, giving loans to farmers, and providing free homes for the poor (omsakthi website: charities). As such, those who are giving money to the temple (and indirectly funding these activities) mark themselves as decidedly *not* poor, thus reasserting their middle-class status. The sheer number of charitable acts that have been performed shows the success of this temple, both in promoting Māriyamman as a middle-class goddess and in promoting monetary donations as a proper manner of showing one's devotion to the goddess. In addition to charities, the Adhiparasakthi Trust has also funded a number of Amman films, including films that explore the life and miracles of Bangaru Adigalar. When this is considered in light of many of the realities that we have discussed in terms of views of the middle class and their representations in the films, the purpose of using the middle class in the films becomes clearer. The use of the middle class in a film aimed towards the non-middle class results in the message of the potential evils of the middle class being dispensed *before* middle-class status has been attained, thus increasing the chances that when these people become middle class, they will remember the horrors that result when religion is not maintained. Therefore, as critics of the middle class continue to state that they are turning away from religion, Amman films seek to effect the opposite. By consistently reiterating the importance of religion, while simultaneously offering a new form of worship that removes all non-elite platitudes, Bangaru Adigalar and the Adhiparasakthi Trust appear to have created a niche in which both the new and well-entrenched middle classes can maintain their religion, and thus, their Indianness, in the face of globalization.

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[50] In July 2010, the Adhiparasakthi Trust was investigated by the Indian tax authorities. In a raid on Trust-funded colleges, the agencies found 20 crore rupees (approximately 4.5 million CAD) that had been unaccounted for. The agency also found that funds donated to the Trust had been used to purchase properties in the names of members of the Trust. See: "Rs. 20 cr. Recovered in Income Tax raids on 2 colleges." *The Hindu*. 3 July 2010. Web. 15 Aug. 2010.

Conclusion

The rapid growth of India's middle class over the past twenty years has been a double-edged sword for many. The liberalization of India's economy in the 1990s brought foreign goods and employment to India, but it also brought a host of anxieties for the middle and non-middle classes of India. Those who have attained middle-class status are fearful of losing it, while those who are non-middle class are often preoccupied with obtaining the effects of the middle class. Although there are a number of factors that influence the label of "middle class", the most prominent is arguably the possession of western commodities, such as colour televisions, motorcycles, and washing machines. As a result, even those who may be considered non-middle class by other signifiers, such as income or education level, will strive to purchase these commodities in order to appear to be middle class. This focus on material goods has prompted major criticisms against the middle class, as critics state that in their focus on commodities, they have become politically apathetic and willfully ignorant of the plight of the poor. In addition, as western commodities, dress, and employment become the norm for many, there is an increased fear and anxiety that they will become western, losing their essential Indianness in the process.

Amman films create a narrative around these realities, as "Films…do not simply provide their audiences with a momentary experience of luxury and ease: they also suggest that wealth and the comfort it buys are within reach" (Dickey 1993, 111). The primarily non-middle-class audience is thus exposed to a life that is different from their own, but it is shown as a lifestyle that can be aspired to. By displaying the story of a non-middle-class woman who becomes middle class, the films mimic the realities of many women who have found themselves in a different world than the one they were born into. Although Amman films can be said to show or even contribute to the desire for wealth and luxury, these are tempered by the perceived results of such blatant materialism as they warn of the dangers associated with placing such a strong focus on matters of materialism and excess. The films can be seen as not only pedagogical tools, but also as societal

commentaries meant to encourage the audience to maintain middle-class notions of “tradition”.

Conclusion

The development of a large middle class has been conceded as one of India's greatest achievements in recent years. Families that have only become middle class since the 1990s have by now established themselves and their children in the cities, amid the markers of the middle-class life, such as satellite televisions, washing machines, and cars. With the bustle of the city behind them, many of the current middle class have developed a nostalgia for village life and traditions, though they may have never lived in a village themselves. In many areas, this has resulted in the formation of heritage sites, such as Kanchi Kudil or Dakshinachitra, that hearken back to earlier days and contain village homes set up to look as they would have a century ago (Hancock 2008, 6). Mary Hancock views this as a response to city boundaries beginning to overtake villages; "…changes in social space have engendered an anxious nostalgia among those elite city dwellers and their diasporic counterparts for whom 'the village' is both a touchstone for familial and national pasts and a wellspring of national heritage" (2008, 13).

This sense of nostalgia is equally present in Amman films. The films undoubtedly present the middle-class home as the "normal" home and the middle class itself is glorified and valorized, but there is likewise a romanticization of village traditions. Within the films, the presence of scenes in the village serve to idealize village life in some ways, but village existence is never promoted as aspirational for the audience. Rather, the presence of village rituals is a way to remember village life in an idealistic sense; it is a way to memorialize and thus "retain" a notion of heritage. Sara Dickey has previously noted this phenomenon with reference to Tamil cinema as a whole, when she notes, "Even those movies with supposedly realistic settings, such as recent films shot in villages, are 'hyper-real'…to the extent that their portrayals are actually romanticized or nostalgic stereotypes rather than accurate representations of most rural or urban environments" (1993, 69).

In this thesis, my overarching theme has been one of the "middle classness" of Amman films. In the first chapter, I discussed contemporary constructions of Tamil womanhood, focusing particularly on the figure of the *sumaṅgalī* ("auspicious married woman"). I argued that within Amman films, the *sumaṅgalī* is used to reify "traditional" expectations for the middle-class woman, while simultaneously serving as a call to the audience to protect the notion of an ideal *sumaṅgalī*. In the second chapter, I focused on Amman films in the context of the goddess Māriyamman and changing middle-class religion. I concluded that Amman films index traditional village rituals to Māriyamman, while also reminding viewers of the importance of propitiating the goddess, even if the "traditional" rituals are modified or replaced. In the third chapter, I discussed the overall "middle classness" of Amman films. I focused particularly on the portrayal of the middle and non-middle class characters in Amman films and argued that, as a whole, Amman films have a pedagogical purpose, in that they teach the recently ascended middle class how to be middle class.

Studies of the middle class in India have become increasingly popular in recent years, particularly as scholars have realized that government surveys of the numbers of middle-class members vary widely due to disagreements in what confers middle-class status. Scholars such as Fernandes (2006), have taken this opportunity to explore the history of the middle class in India and to determine what it is that truly determines middle-class status, while Brosius (2010) and Saavala (2010) focus on specific case studies in order to determine the changes that a large middle class has brought to India. Media studies have also experienced a surge in popularity and scholars have increasingly focused on the analysis of regional Indian films (Velayutham 2008; Ram 2008; Lutgendorf 2002). However, with the exception of Dickey (1993), few have focused on the intersection of films and the middle class. As Dickey herself says, "Class identity bears strongly on viewers' participation in Tamil cinema, and issues of class, elite cultures, and subordinate cultures are highly significant in understanding the relationship between film producers and consumers" (1993, 11).

Amman films present a unique area of research, in that their study must stand at the intersection of class studies and media studies. As such, this study engages both fields. In future research I hope to elaborate upon the themes discussed in this thesis with the use of a broader range of films. I hope then to combine this analysis with ethnographic work in South India with the audiences and producers of Amman films.

Amman films, as we have seen, stand at the confluence of a number of real and imagined transformations of culture. As sites of cultural nostalgia, however, their future seems instable and uncertain. Mary Hancock notes that in heritage venues "…rural settlements are cast in contradictory terms. They are both living examples of a past of virtuous rusticity as well as stagnant residues of a past that is soon to be abandoned" (2008, 13). In Amman films, depictions of village life, goddess worship and all that is "traditional" resonate as an imagined, common heritage for spectators. Despite its engagement with the peculiar modernity of post-liberalization India, the Amman film genre remains tremendously marginal, as do all forms of religious cinema in twenty-first century India. Perhaps the Amman film, like the village, as a stand-in for India's past, is consigned to remain there, as the globalized world continues to affect radical cultural shifts in the Indian context.

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