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LEENA MANIMEKALAI'S POEMS AND DOCUMENTARIES: PARTICIPATION AND PERFORMANCE

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Abstract: This essay analyzes the documentaries of the Tamil filmmaker Leena Manimekalai in the context of the controversies and critique surrounding them, to foreground both the strength and weakness of her activism-driven approach. The original title of her most famous film *Goddesses* (2007) in Tamil is *Devathaigal/Angels*, which showcases the history of three women living on the fringes of society. Since Leena gathers the ruins of patriarchy by gleaning through the predicament of women in remote and secluded communities as exemplified by her three major documentaries, *Mathamma* (2002), *Altar* (2006), and *Goddesses*, this paper draws from Benjamin's meditations on the angel of history and Baudelaire's prose to explore and interrogate the teleology of Leena's documentaries as the work of a provocateur-performer.

This paper uses the marginal figure of woman/female body, over which Leena mounts her critique of patriarchy and its exploitative traditions, as the discursive space to engage with Leena's significant documentaries to interrogate the way her leftist background, feminism and activism intersect. Since her role as a documentarian feeds into her poems, and the discourses surrounding documentary and subjectivity affect her poems, this paper analyzes her recent ones, which became the site of contention in the new media—websites and blogs. The essay argues that Leena's specificity as a feminist-documentarian emerges from the contested space between her role as a participant-documentarian and that of her subjects as o(a)bjects-performers.

This essay analyzes the documentaries of the Tamil poet/filmmaker Leena Manimekalai, in the context of the controversies and criticisms surrounding them to foreground both the strength and weakness of her activism-driven approach. This approach could be attributed partly to her background (she hails from a left-oriented family) and partly to the reliance on funding from

NGOs as the state increasingly withdrew support for committed. documentarians during the last two decades of globalization and privatization. The original title of her most famous and iconic film *Goddesses* (2007) in Tamil is *Devathaigal/Angels*, which showcases the history of three women living on the fringes of society. Leena gathers the ruins of patriarchy by carefully scanning the predicament of women in remote and secluded communities, as exemplified in her three major documentaries, *Mathamma* (2002), *Altar* (2006) and *Goddesses*.ⁱ This paper will engage with Leena's role as an activist/participant, which defines her persona as a poet/filmmaker, to explore the trajectory of her major documentaries. It will underscore how her early didactic approach is complicated when it comes to *Goddesses*, which undermines the hierarchy of the documentarian through the simultaneity of the forward/progressive and the backward/repressive movement of its protagonists. A detailed textual analysis of Leena's major documentaries, therefore, will throw light on the complex intersections of participation and performance both behind and in front of the camera.

Furthermore, this paper will interrogate the centrality of the marginal figure of woman/female-body to Leena's key films and poems. As she uses it as a frame to mount her critique on patriarchy and its exploitative traditions, it also becomes a window to engage with her work at the intersections of her leftist background, feminism and activism. Since the discourses surrounding documentary and subjectivity affect her poems, those which became the site of contention in the new media will also be analyzed in detail. Leena's persona has been the most provocative among Tamil poets and documentarians over the last decade, as exemplified by the irony of an event organized to defend her as a poet which had wide coverage both in the print and new media—websites and blogs—during 2010.

On 15 April 2010, at the ICOSA—Inter-Church Service Association—auditorium at Egmore, Chennai, a protest meeting was held to defend freedom of expression for writers.ⁱⁱ The meeting was called in response to a police complaint filed by the Hindu Makkal Katchi (Hindu People's Party) against Leena Manimekalai for obscene representation of women in her two poems published in the literary magazine *Manalveedu* and her blog. The organizing secretary of the Hindu Makkal Katchi, T. Kannan, had complained that Leena had written about women and coitus in a vulgar and nauseating manner, and therefore the obscene poems, including “Me” and “Me Him,” must be removed from her website and sales of her book *Ulagin Azhagiya Muthal Penn* (The First Beautiful Woman in the World) must be banned.ⁱⁱⁱ

The two “obscene” poems, which have been arguably the most discussed on Tamil websites and blogs, have been translated and posted on Leena’s blog:

1. “Me”

Me Leena/ I reside in / Lanka India China/ America...

I have a flourishing career/ to keep my legs spread/ at all times

They who demand new nations/ They who give the call to jihad/ They who look for revolution.../ They who evangelize commerce/ They who wear saffron...

I am trained to/ inflame their hardy lust/ with pruned labia/ groomed black hole vagina

My mother grandmother aunts/ they have instructed me/ from time to time/ on how to mop up...

I know/ the secret of/ how the pricks of/ the knowledgeable the sick the artist.../ the husband the father the brother the son/ all look the same...

Brahman Vishnu Sivan Bud(d)han,/ Jesus Allah Indran Krishnan,.../ are nothing but/ the embryos/ stuck in my Womb...

nuclear bombs chemical warheads,/ rockets landmines/ the grenades flung at me/ may shatter my body.

but,/ the Vagina knows no death./ Nothing dies in the Vagina.

This provocative poem generated diverse responses in the print media; however, it was on blogs that sensational and insightful analyses and discussions took place. The observations of Perundevi, a well-known Tamil poet and academician, and Jamalan, a prolific blogger, shed light on issues central to the discourses surrounding Leena and her poems (as well as her documentaries). They underscored Leena’s disavowal of the singularities of sub-nationalism, and the generalization and cooptation of the differential imperatives of the state and its brutal mechanism, and those of the various revolutionary groups, in her attempt to posit a simple binary of the male-dominated world against Leena—the representative of all women—and her body. The positing of such a binary, they argued, erases the complexity of discourses surrounding contemporary socio-politics and gender, as it focuses on the effect rather than the cause, and consequently portrays women as passive beings waiting to be ravaged by the typified male, and such a reductive representation does not empower women as it undermines their resistance as individuals acting in the context of specific situations.^{iv} This critique epitomizes how the activist mode, which Leena adopts in her documentaries, where her identity as the participant-observer

remains distinct, is conflated in her enunciation as a poet; Leena wants to recycle recent history—the reality of war and the genocide in Sri Lanka—by positing a male-female binary to serve the purposes of her grand narrative about patriarchy and oppression, written over the body of women.

Leena's popularity as a documentarian precedes her reputation as a poet as her career in films started earlier than the publication of her first collection of poems.^v The beginning of the poem (Naan Leena/Me Leena) reveals how as a documentarian, even prior to the inscribing of the subject (Leena) into the poem, she announces herself as the enunciator ("Naan" in Tamil actually means "I" rather than "Me"), who is there to guarantee the truth concerning the genocide and trauma of recent history: it is significant that her recounting of the places she resides starts with Sri Lanka, and is followed by India and China—countries held responsible in varying degrees for the (State sponsored but contested) genocide of the Tamil civilian population in Sri Lanka, particularly during the previous two years. She simultaneously distances herself from those "who demand new nations," jihadists, and revolutionaries. This statement draws attention to the yet-to-be-released *Sengadal (The Dead Sea)*, her debut feature film which entered production in December 2009, the month of her writing and publication of the above poems.

Sengadal was shot in Rameswaram, near Madurai, with the bulk of the cast comprising fisherfolk and Sri Lankan Tamil refugees—non-actors playing themselves as in the documentary and neorealist traditions. Leena's chief collaborator, writer/novelist Shobha Sakthi, is known for his trenchant critique of the ideology of the LTTE—the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. Sakthi, an erstwhile LTTE cadre, now lives in France.^{vi} Thus, the simultaneity of the times of production of the poem and the film enables our understanding of the way in which Leena's preoccupation as a documentarian/filmmaker affects her poems, and of the motives behind the juxtaposition—the positing of the subject of utterance, "I," along with the subject of enunciation, "Leena."^{vii} Furthermore, her persona as an activist-documentarian, invested in (guaranteeing) reality/truth, has affected the docufiction *Sengadal* too: initially, it was denied its censor certificate on 31 December 2010, and after a long struggle with the Censor Board, Leena got clearance on 25 July 2011.^{viii} Though the film had been officially denied clearance due to the "unparliamentary language" and the "denigrative" references to politics/politicians, the obvious reason has been the provocative presence of Leena as the documentarian-protagonist in the diegesis, recording the vulnerable lives of fisherfolk caught between the indifferent and hostile

governments of Tamilnadu/India and Sri Lanka.”^{ix} Besides, the fact that both the ruling (ADMK) and the opposition (DMK) governments in Tamilnadu look at the Sri Lankan Tamil issue as a means for their populism and as a tool for their electoral politics, has made the only Tamil filmmaker thus far to trenchantly critique the silence of the State a prime target to be silenced on this issue.

The censorship recalls the earlier oppression of Leena by the rightwing group and self-appointed cultural police, the Hindu People’s Party. However, the simultaneous violent protest by a few volunteers from a progressive left front—Makkal Kalai Illakkiya Kazhagam (People's Art and Literary Association), the cultural wing of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), which has been at the forefront of protests against oppression of all kinds, was unexpected: during the meeting organized by the Tamil Progressive Writers Association, some of the Communist Party volunteers violently disrupted the proceedings. According to Prof. A. Marx, after he gave his introductory speech, the volunteers rushed toward the dais and posed vulgar questions to Leena: how many kuris/signs (of male/pricks) of the members of the communist parties have you seen? (Marx, 2010). Reading Leena’s second poem helps to understand their reaction:

2. “Me Him”

At the peak of coitus
 with the squirting semen/ he inscribed my insides/ with the word/ Comrades
 then with a shake of his body/ he disentangled himself/ and blabbered/ Marx
 and gave the call/ Workers of the World Unite
 I yanked his head/ betwixt my thighs/ he parted my pubic bush/ calling it the surplus
 value/ swore at my navel for its relations of production
 he offered my vulva with/ Lenin Stalin Mao Ho chi Minh
 kneaded my breasts and exclaimed Che Fidel/ like an infant with a baffled mind/ sucked
 at my nipples murmuring/ Perestroika Glasnost...
 The Berlin Wall crumbled./ The Soviet collapsed./ Stand Erect he commanded./ Yelled
 America and rolled on a condom.
 wrestled him down/and asked him to lick the salt./ he mumbled Coca Cola
 hugged him till he swooned.
 into his mouth/ now drained of words/ i threw my pubic hair/ strand by strand...

In their response, Perundevi and Jamalana convincingly argue for the reason behind the unruly behavior of such outfits, attributing it not to Leena's radicality as a poet but to her conservatism as far as sexuality is concerned: all revolutionaries are depicted as emaciated after their sexual encounter with an *adhiyoni*/primordial vagina, thus returning the sexual act/body to the low status of where it always belonged. Therefore, the superimposition of such an abject figure of the lowly sexual act over the iconic images linked to an ideology was bound to provoke that ideology's followers (Perundevi 2010: n.p.). Nevertheless, although the above poem is trying to undermine men and their (macho) revolutions, it also posits the primordial vagina as the procreator of revolutions and as a witness to a century of lost causes and icons, which bemoans and cries out against the withering away of an ideology. Therefore, the attack on her by the left points to the general intolerance against an outspoken female artist in Tamilnadu; although the mindless cultural censorship of the Hindu right and the official censorship of the state are differential in their objectives, when it comes to a woman, all of them seem to be driven by an urgency to suppress.

Nevertheless, the collection of words/images—comrades, Marx, workers, surplus value, Lenin, Stalin, Mao, Ho chi Minh, Che, Fidel, perestroika, glasnost, Berlin Wall, Soviet, America, condom, Coca-Cola, pubic hair—while underscoring their deep impact on her psyche by her recounting of them during her moment of *jouissance*, also draws attention to Leena's past: she grew up in a communist milieu, wherein men were privileged as thinkers and activists, and women relegated to the background.^x Nonetheless, the men in both the poems above seem to have no specificity either in terms of their aspirations or character, whether it be an emperor or a revolutionary, capitalist or a communist, all they want is to wage wars and rape women. Such a reductive reading and representation of men could be traced to her experience as a documentary filmmaker: all her major documentaries are driven by activism, with the aim to explore and change the lives of women on the fringes or in closely-knit communities who are repressed in a patriarchal society.

However, the persistence of tradition creates a tension between her left-oriented activism and the mythos of religion and culture. In her poems, she is able to resolve this dilemma since the icons of Marxist philosophy and revolution are mythologized and appropriated, along with gods, by men whose sole purpose is to violate women. This phantasmagoria necessitates the reification of the witness/enunciator, and as a radical feminist she inserts herself (as a primordial

yonivagina): this dark and violent history is written over her body. But much of Leena's documentary work, primarily in the participatory/didactic mode, does not offer such possibilities for resolving through mythos the dialectics between the visceral and the material. Leena's interactive documentaries, therefore, beg detailed analysis as they shed light on the discourses surrounding subjectivity and otherness—issues central to documentaries.

In her interviews, Leena often talks about her entry into documentary filmmaking as an extension of her interest in activism, which she imbibed through an upbringing in a milieu devoted to communist philosophy: her grandfathers and uncles were actively involved in party activities, and her father Prof. Ragupathy inspired her to read Marx and the poet Bharathiyar. This led her to “look for social issues” and select those that had not yet been addressed as the field of her inquiry and intervention;^{xi} similarly, she was excited about digital cinema as “a democratic, independent space not dictated by market” (Kripa 2010: n.p.). Leena's interest in and commitment to social issues recall Baudelaire's ragpicker. Walter Benjamin, in his analysis of Baudelaire's “The Ragpicker's Wine,” discusses the fascination with the ragpicker during the era of high capitalism in mid-19th century Paris: “The eyes of the first investigators of pauperism were fixed on him with the mute question as to where the limit of human misery lay”(Benjamin, 1983, p 18-19). Such a description in contemporary times suits the activist-documentarian more than the poet.

Benjamin, however, also sheds light on the limits imposed on the ragpicker: the counterculturists—artists/writers and revolutionaries—can see themselves in the ragpicker in their revolt against society, yet the ragpicker can never be a part of their bohemia (Benjamin, 1983, p 20). Significantly, such a distinction gets blurred in the case of observer-participant documentaries wherein the ragpicker is also the artist/activist. Nonetheless, in Leena's early films the observer who records the plight of her subjects, and the activist who wants to change it, dialectically drive the voice of the documentary. Leena, who is neither a part of the social consciousness of the government nor an ideology-driven collective, is a digital documentarian with scarce means, and mirrors her subjects in being on the fringes; while she empathizes with their condition as an observer, she is impatient with their predicament as an activist.

Thus, in 2002, upon learning about the practice of devoting/sacrificing young girls to a deity—Mathamma—in the village of Mangattucheri, in Arakkonam district, about 43 miles from Chennai, she went there with a digital camera to record and actively intervene. *Mathamma* opens

with a montage of the village women—working in the fields, cooking, drawing water from the pump—and the children playing. Then, as the camera zooms in on a young girl sitting outside her home in red clothing, a voiceover describes the Arudhati community of Mangattucheri and their practice of offering up their female children, like cattle, to their deity Mathamma. The authoritative voice-of-god narration is in contrast to the nostalgic film song sung by women layered over the earlier montage.

After the voice-over, the handheld camera roams through the village streets to reveal people either busy in their work or relaxing outside their homes, till it reaches the temple of Mathamma, where two men are beating the drums in worship. After the pooja, we see a middle-aged woman dancing with a wreath of neem twigs and leaves in her hand. Later, she is framed with her daughter in medium shot as she reveals her story: she was five when she was offered by her family to the deity to save her ailing mother. After her mother's death, she was abandoned and left to fend for herself. She recounts how an elderly woman from the neighboring village tied a yellow thread around her neck and "marrie[d]" her off to the deity. Subsequently, now named Mathamma, she is forced to survive by dancing in festivals where men pinch her inappropriately, pin currency notes to her, and force her to have sex. She chose to live with a man who liked her, but later he fell sick, married someone else, and left her.

This interview is intercut with interviews with two other women—all addressed as Mathamma once they are married off to the deity. The woman in the light green saree describes being offered to the deity when she fell ill as a child. Now, she has four daughters and a son with a man who has, since, abandoned her for another, and who cannot be held accountable as she is not his legally wedded wife. She also describes the low wages paid in agricultural labor, which forces her to seek other men to make ends meet. This vicious cycle of sexual and economic exploitation of women in the name of god is recapitulated in the voice-over.

Towards the end, when the subtitles describe the social worker Shanti as "activist Shanti," from the Village Women's Liberation Movement for example, Leena's desire to make a direct intervention becomes clear. However, after outlining the challenges of ushering in a cultural change in traditions related to religion and patriarchy, Shanti talks incoherently about poverty and malnutrition as the cause of their sickness; thus, her voice seems disconnected from the lives of these women. Significantly, this disconnect in sound parallels that of the visuals in the intercutting between the possessed ritualistic dance of the people in the temple,

emblemizing the hold of tradition, and the highly individualized framing of their deeply personal narratives, and foregrounds the difficulties inherent in looking at the Other. Nonetheless, the prosumer digital camera renders the film in a quotidian, home-movie style, and the bleeding colors and the uncontainable sunlight generate grainy contrast befitting the proletarian protagonists, and thereby foregrounding the improvisational nature of their dance and undermining the rigidity of the ritual and the hierarchical status of the observer-participant.

Four years later, in 2006, Leena ventures again into the lives of women in another closed community—this time the Kambalathu Naickers in the village of Desiyamangalam, in Karur district, central Tamilnadu. *Pali Peetam/Altar* explores child marriage and incest within the endogamous Kambalathu Naicker tribe. Though the methodology of intercutting between the ritual (music and rites) of the bullfight and the interviews with the participants are similar, this film differs vastly from the previous one in Leena's foregrounding of the subject of utterance: she uses her own voice for the voice-of-god narration, and participates as the provocateur/activist interviewing the community herself. This technique, while conducive to didactic activism, also creates tension between the intentionality of an immediate solution in Leena's voice, and the stronghold of (patriarchal) culture and the persistence of tradition in an endogamous tribe.

In *Altar* too, we don't get to know the names of most participants, especially the last two women, whose interviews mark *Altar* as different from *Mathamma*. Here, there is an imbrication of the interviews and Leena's critique of incestuous marriage in the Kambalathu Naicker community where girls are married off to their maternal uncles, and boys to their nieces. After a brief sketch of the history of the community as having migrated from the neighboring state of Andhra, Mantha Naicker, head of the village, talks about the significance of the rules and regulations as well as of the rituals wherein women fall at men's feet and do the poojas before the beginning of the bull fight festival. Subsequently, we are shown the rituals performed to a drumbeat and hear Leena's voice describe her concern for the plight of women, particularly of the young girls "untouched by civilization," and speak of her anxiety in seeing the "magalsutra" or yellow thread around their necks. However, Leena is in for a shock, along with us, when she interviews a middle-aged woman: the woman, married, at the age of seven, to a forty-year-old man, is proud about being the mother of three daughters, two of whom are teenagers married to their (older) maternal uncles. Leena then asks 16-year-old Sumathi, who has studied up to seventh grade, if she is interested in pursuing higher education; she responds by saying that her

parents will not allow it, as she would have to travel far to study. Her mother interrupts and expresses her mistrust of education, and her conviction that it is enough if her children know the history of their caste and their traditions. Leena's questioning of their relationship structures is met with a disavowal of modernity and the benefits of higher education. "You trust in education to earn money," says the woman, "we believe in agriculture, and we are willing to toil with our hands and feet on our land to make money."

Acknowledging woman as the primordial farmer (*adhivivasayi*), Leena goes onto explore their place in a community that practices "fraternal polygamy." She interviews a forty-eight year old man with a nineteen-year-old wife who now plans to wed a sixteen-year-old girl to beget a child. When interviewed, the wife points to her lack of education as the reason for her acceptance of her husband's behavior. Thus justifying the significance of education, a concerned Leena—in her voice-of-god narration—points to the role of incestuous marriages in destroying the lives of women and children. However, even as she wonders if the "God of this society is woman. Is the altar of the society also a woman?", her dramatic voice strikes us as incongruous, particularly in the context of our being presented with a reverse case history—that of a young boy married to two of his older nieces whose mother cites the necessity of helping hands to carry on the household chores as the reason for the marriage, and even points out that the boy can marry whoever he wishes as he grows older but that his wives cannot. Through her interview, Leena is able to elicit that it is obedience to their respective fathers' diktat as the primary reason for such marriages; however, her imperative to portray their tradition as a sacrificial altar for women is undermined by the assertion that the women in this community have the right to bear children with any man they choose, while their husbands remain the (legal) father of those children.

The Kambalathu Naicker community which claims an ancient lineage, epitomizes the inversion of exogamy in a tribe, but Leena's focus is not on their specificity as a community but on the unfamiliarity of their married lives. The adherence to such an arrangement is explained as a filial obedience of their father/symbolic law, who/which is invested in their early marriage. Thus, the aspirations of young girls for higher education are crushed, as are the desires of a widow to remarry and have children. The high point among the interviews is one with a widow in a neighboring village ostracized by her community for becoming pregnant with the man she has chosen to live with, and sums up the plight of young girls forced into child marriage and early widowhood. Her poignant narrative of being barred from meeting her mother, who herself

has been cheated out of the lands they own, recalls an early sequence in the film wherein a thirteen-year-old girl is forced out of the village during her menstrual period because of “pollution.” *Altar*, therefore, succeeds in shedding light on patriarchal exploitation, and on the irresponsible men/husbands who abandon their wives and children under the guise of tradition. Moreover, as the penultimate interview in the film reveals, the continuity of tradition is itself based on a myth—ancestral wealth, which necessitates the incestuous marriages for its protection, is nonexistent in most cases.

Goddesses, Leena’s recent documentary, has more of a teleological affinity to *Mathamma* and *Altar*, and to the two poems discussed in the beginning, than to her other works. In *Goddesses*, Leena is just an observer of her three larger than life protagonists, and is overwhelmed by her material, just as we are as an audience. A celebration of three older and marginal women the film is the apotheosis of Leena’s search for the continual ruins left by the untamable evil of patriarchy, and is certainly her most honored work—it was the first Tamil documentary to win the prestigious Golden Conch at the Mumbai International Film Festival in 2008 (Manimekalai 2010: n.p.).

In *Goddesses*, Leena chooses to focus on three women, living in disparate places and engaged in different occupations. Here, Leena abandons her usual style of juxtaposing ritual performance with the documented reality of women on the fringes, and weaves together the narratives of the three protagonists.

The first protagonist, Lakshmi, is a professional funeral singer who lives in Tiruvannamalai, a place famous for the mythos surrounding its mountain, which symbolizes fire within the *panchabhootas*/five elements. The fiery Lakshmi’s past recalls both *Mathamma* and *Altar*, as she was married at a young age to her maternal uncle and bore six children. She had to support her family through agricultural labor, but her husband forced her to brew (illicit) liquor with him. Soon he became an alcoholic and started physically assaulting her, so she left him and struggled for survival: she had to sell fruits, vegetables, and beef, making her way through fifty villages. Next, we are introduced to Sethuraku, who lives by the sea in Rameswaram, and is shown rowing a fishing boat with her coworkers. She talks about the hazards of fishing, in particular injuries caused by crabs and jellyfish which take a long time to heal. Later in the film, she reveals that she was not aware of fishing till she was twelve as it was considered a man’s domain. It was her uncle who taught her swimming and fishing. She details the loneliness and

risks inherent in the life of a fisherwoman struggling to support her family. The third narrative is about the life of the gravedigger Krishnaveni, who collects unclaimed and discarded corpses and buries them. The apathy and apprehension of the world toward the dead, and an abject figure like Krishnaveni, renders the narrative poignant right from the beginning. She informs us that every cop in Pondicherry knows her, and describes how she is called day and night to gather unclaimed bodies from roads, hospitals, rivers and the sea. She does her job singlehandedly, as those who come to help her desert within two or three days; she has even burnt tires to cremate decaying bodies at midnight.

These women's overwhelming occupations disclose Leena's desire to collect the ruins of patriarchy through talking-head interviews. Although the film starts with Leena's signature composition of a woman (Lakshmi) sitting on her doorstep, the camera then follows her as she walks to the market with a bamboo basket on her head loudly singing and berating her "good for nothing," husband who "ill treated" her, and the "motherfuckers" who have branded her a whore. Similarly, the camera follows Sethuraku as she is walking to the sea with her colleagues and as she goes to fish in her boat "like a man," and Krishnaveni, who is pulling a cart with a corpse to the graveyard, as she voices her indispensability to the people and the police of Pondicherry. Thus, these women, past their prime, emerge not as mere ruins (of patriarchy) but as witnesses of change/progress, and invoke the Angel of History (Benjamin, 1969, p 257), as alluded to by Leena's original Tamil title *Devathaigal* (*Angels*). The domestic sphere in remote villages, where the Lacanian real of child abuse/incest lay in *Mathamma* and *Altar*, and where Leena could not enter beyond the doorstep, is replaced by small towns and cities and their public domains of streets and the sea/shore in *Goddesses*, as the focus shifts from sexuality to death and decay.

The piling of the debris (of patriarchy) in front of these angels is detailed through sequences that stand out in the film. The theme of the reversal of gender roles, which runs through *Mathamma* and *Altar*, through the representation of the mothers supporting their families in the absence of the father, comes to fruition in *Goddesses*, where it is the women who call the shots and even support disabled and alcoholic men. The traces of patriarchy which accumulated through Leena's probing questions about absent men in the earlier films, here accumulate as ruins when irresponsible and abusive men are reduced to weaklings admonished by the protagonists—the performative Sethuraku makes fun of her inebriated husband, who is pleading for money, by drawing attention to the video camera, which she humorously warns

might disseminate his (drunk) image throughout the world; Krishnaveni cannot control her laughter at the confessions of the alcoholic, who once tried to ban her entry into the graveyard, as he acknowledges that she is his savior and weeps. Gender roles are not only reversed by these women by their treading into territories marked for men, but also in the way that the women make fun of men's crumbling egos. Besides, their effort at directly disciplining the men in front of, and for, the camera reflexively draws attention to their connivance with Leena in the dismantling/deconstruction of patriarchy. For her part, Lakshmi is the leader of her troupe, and through her canny business acumen she bargains and dictates how much the other (male) members will get. She is aware of her star-status, and her performativity during the funeral, and for the camera, includes her call to photograph the (obstructing) audience inside a tent. Thus the camera, and the magical space it creates, epitomize the modernity that enables and drives the performance of Lakshmi/Leena.

Nonetheless, Lakshmi's vigorous chest-beating along with the family members of the diseased recalls an earlier sequence when she is preparing hot water to massage her tired body. Though she is proud of having kicked a man who tried to misbehave with her, and boasts of her defective ("hurricane lamp") eye as a blessing from goddess *Kaali*, the only time she seems to be quiet and peaceful is when she is away from human beings—feeding buns to the monkeys. Similarly Sethuraku, though a revolutionary fisherwoman, is in danger of being evicted from the seashore where she has lived all along. She laments the plight of the fisherfolk, as mechanized fishing and prawn culture has led to a change in ecology: fish has become scarce, and she has to struggle with her children to collect conches and other shells for a meager income. Krishnaveni too, finds her solace only in the dead people around her in the graveyard, as she finds them trustworthy to converse with. Thus the reversal of gender roles and their individual challenge to patriarchy seems feeble when compared to the force of rubble—the detritus of an apparently progressive society which vehemently excludes these marginal women—continually assembled in front of them, and which forces them to be alone on the path they tread. Thus the predicament of these angels invokes Walter Benjamin's meditations on the Angel of History, whose face is turned toward the past, but the storm of progress, "propels (her) into the future to which (her) back is turned, while the pile of debris before (her) grows skyward" (Benjamin, 1969, pp 257-58)

Thus, Leena's plight as the biographer/historian who wants to trace the past through the present by an examination of the rubble/ruins—her protagonists—left after the catastrophe of

history, mirrors that of her objects of enquiry. On the one hand she celebrates Lakshmi, Sethuraku and Krishnaveni as goddesses for courageously taking on the challenges of an indifferent world; on the other hand, as exemplified by the film's climax, Leena laments their isolated world where any cathartic release is possible only in a moment of heightened possession. The climactic sequence in which Lakshmi invokes the Mother Goddess by chanting her various names, gets possessed, laughs, walks in a trance, and falls flat on the ground with her back to the camera, underscores *Goddesses* as a unique documentary: it effectively straddles the harsh reality of its protagonists' lives (for instance, Lakshmi's efforts to get into the lorry/ Sethuraku's painstaking collection of the underwater shells/ Krishnaveni's struggle in burying a corpse) and the intangible world of their interiority (Lakshmi's conversation with goddesses/ Sethuraku's faith in the sea/ Krishnaveni's proximity to the dead). As the handheld camera tries to frame the possessed Lakshmi's spontaneous but unpredictable movements, she suddenly turns away from the camera and falls to the ground. The nimble digital camera goes low to reframe her with the sky in the background, and this final shot becomes the defining image of *Goddesses*: it signifies Lakshmi's temporal relief through trance/transcendence, while at the same time marking with her fall the containment of her desire to escape the quotidian by the (earthly) reality that surrounds her.





In addition, this dialectical image and the “small particular moments” it frames enables us to uncover the “total historical event” in which is embedded the provenance of the present (Buck-Morss, 1989, p 71). Reflexively, it leads us not merely to Benjamin but to Baudelaire as well, and their ambivalence about modernity; Lakshmi’s falling on her back, as it recalls Benjamin’s Angel of History, also leads us to the origin of that idea in Baudelaire. The digital-documentarian, whose technology epitomizes the ephemerality of modernity, in her desire for the beautiful, frames the (eternal) evening sky along with the fleeting moment of the falling of Lakshmi,^{xiii} and evokes Baudelaire’s cry for beauty amidst the accumulation of debris (Baudelaire, 1981, p 403). In *Le Mauvais Vitrier*, (the performative) Baudelaire throws a “small pot of flowers” on the glass-seller in a poor neighborhood, and the fleeting moment of its fall enables the possibility of art, not unlike the (wandering) Lakshmi’s falling to the designs of Leena and her (digital) documentary impulse:

Well, you’re an impudent wretch! You dare wander about in poor neighborhoods and you don’t even have windows that let us see life through rose-colored glasses!’ And I pushed him roughly to the stairway, into which he stumbled, muttering as he went.

I went over to the balcony and snatched up a small pot of flowers, and when the man reappeared at the doorway, I dropped my missile perpendicularly down on the hooks of his pack; and as the shock of the blow threw him down backwards, the end result was that he crushed under his back all this poor ambulatory fortune, which made the startling noise of a crystal palace pulverized by lightning.

And, intoxicated by my act of madness, I shouted furiously to him: ‘Let us see life as something beautiful! As something beautiful!’

(Vollmer, 2005, p 210-11)

The imagery evoked by the line “he crushed under his back all this poor ambulatory fortune, which made the startling noise of a crystal palace pulverized by lightning” represents modernity’s debris, and Baudelaire’s repeated plea “Let us see life as something beautiful! As something beautiful!” gives it a dialectical forward thrust. It thus enables our understanding of the provenance of Benjamin’s thoughts, especially his backward-facing and forward-moving angel, and Leena’s exaltation about the intervention of her goddesses, as well as her lamentation about their predicament, and her efforts at representing the beautiful amidst the debris. The climactic image of the lone Lakshmi, while epitomizing simultaneously the poet-documentarian’s exhilaration and torment, also invokes Leena’s poignant isolation as exemplified by the title of her collection of poems—*Ottraiilaiyena (Solo, as a Lone Leaf, 2003)*, *Ulagin Azhagiya Muthal Penn (The First Beautiful Woman in the World, 2008)* and *Parathaiyarul Raani (The Queen of Sluts, 2011)*.

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Notes

ⁱ Leena’s documentaries can be purchased online through her blog: <http://ulaginazhagiyamuthalpenn.blogspot.com>. The poems discussed in this paper, translated by Ravishanker and edited by Leena, are also available there.

ⁱⁱ Leena has posted the details of the chronology of events and the protest meeting on her blog: *En Kavithaikkuthal Endru Peyar Vai*. (Manimekalai, 2010).

ⁱⁱⁱ For a copy of the police complaint filed by T. Kannan of the Hindu Makkal Katchi, see: Web. *Hi Ma Ka Policil Koduththa Fax Prathi*. (2010), *ibid*. Also see: <http://cis-india.org/internet-governance/dit-response-2nd-rti-blocking>

^{iv} For a detailed critique of Leena’s poems by Dr. Perundevi and Jamalana, and Leena’s responses, see: Perundevi. (2010). *Kavithayin ‘Naan’ = Kavignarin ‘Naan’ Allathu Aan x Penn*, in Perundevi’s blog. Also see, “Arasiyalsari Nilaiappaattukkum Kavithaiyaaga Arivikkappattirukkira Pirathikkum Idaiye Sila Vaarthaigal,” *Adavi*, 4 (July 2010), 41-2, for Perundevi and Jamalana’s critique and disapproval of the efforts to suppress a writer and curb freedom of expression.

^v Leena's first documentary *Mathamma* (2002) was released earlier than her first collection of poems, *Ottraiilaiyena* (*Solo, as a Lone Leaf*, 2003). *Mathamma* made her well-known as a filmmaker upon its release.

^{vi} My telephone interview with Leena, 10 June 2010. For details on the film see www.Sengadal.com.

^{vii} The shooting of *Sengadal* began on 10 Dec. 2009, the same month when the poem was published in *Manalveedu*, a bimonthly Tamil literary magazine.

^{viii} For details of Leena's hard-fought clearance of *Sengadal* by the Censor Board, and the iconic documentarian Anand Patwardhan's call for its release, see: Sahani, Alaka. (2010) "Troubled Waters," www.Indianexpress.com.

^{ix} My interview with Leena and cinematographer Sunny Joseph on 1 January 2011. Also see several news clippings in Leena's blog about the censorship of *Sengadal*. The legendary cinematographer Sunny Joseph has collaborated with Indian art cinema icons like G. Aravindan (*Vastuhara*, 1990), Shaji N. Karun (*Piravi*, 1988), and Buddhadeb Dasgupta (*Janala*, 1999).

^x My interview with Leena, prior to the screening of *Goddesses*, at Prasad Studios, Chennai, on 22 Sept. 2007; see Leena's interview for the details on the men and women in her house: Krupa, Lakshmi. (2010), *Miss Socially Sensitive: Leena Manimekalai*, on Leena's blog.

^{xi} In my interview (2007), Leena detailed her career as a committed activist/feminist looking for a "platform" to express herself and a space to narrate the lived realities of people, rather than as a trained documentarian exploring the form and aesthetics. See Ashok Kumar (2006) for the centrality of social issues in her oeuvre.

^{xii} Leena's portrait of her three protagonists recalls Baudelaire's endorsement of the eighteenth-century paintings of "the goddesses, nymphs and sultanas," as "portraits in the spirit of their day." For Baudelaire (1981, p. 403), "Modernity is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is one half of art; the other being the eternal and the immovable."

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