the body, reflect, refer to, and even arise from bodily experience, making the body, the female body in particular, the site where multiple systems of meaning meet.

This attention to the complex meanings of the body and of alternative 'cognitive styles' and ontologies hopefully allows us to hear subaltern feminine voices more fully. Honouring women as knowers and as knowers of their bodies, both individually and collectively challenges the belief that women's bodies are to be known by the male Other. Foregrounding these knowledge systems has implications for women's mental health and emotional well-being, and serves as a call for women to investigate the language of the sacred within traditions rooted in their own histories and bodies (their embodied histories), and for those spiritual voices to be given their due validity.  

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IX

THE FEMALE BODY OF POSSESSION: A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE ON RURAL TAMIL WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE

Kalpana Ram

THE PROBLEM OF 'OBJECTIVISM' IN THE STUDY OF POSSESSION

One of the primary features of possession is its capacity to allow more than one voice to emanate from the body. Any model that purports to describe and analyse possession should retain this elementary capacity. I have therefore adopted in this chapter a strategy that is analogous to Freud's

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1 This paper was originally presented at the National Seminar on Indian Women and their Mental Health organised by Aravasi Research Centre for Women's Studies, Osmania University, Hyderabad, 23-24 February 1996. I would like to thank the organizers for the opportunity to present my work to one of the most responsive and stimulating audiences I have ever experienced. My particular thanks to Bhargavi Dhar for the invitation and to Mary John for her thoughtful comments as discussant. I thank the Australian Research Council for providing the funding that made it possible to attend this conference and for funding ongoing field work in this area. The field work for this paper draws on my material gathered in the 80s and towards the end of 1991. I wish to acknowledge the help of my friend Stella in conducting the 1991 interviews. All authorial interpolations are presented in square brackets. The system of transliteration and diacritical marks used for Tamil words follows the system of the Tamil lexicon. Words widely transliterated into English, such as place names and Sanskrit words, have been left in their common spelling.
strategies in dream analysis. In re-working previous traditions of dream exegesis, he deconstructed the superficial narrative coherence of the dream in order to explore the workings of not one, but several psychic economies anatomised in the now famous trilogy of the id, the ego, and the superego respectively. Their most salient feature for my purposes is that each of them was theorised as operating on the basis of radically dissimilar principles even while Freud sought to show their combined effect on the subject. Possession can be analysed in an analogous fashion. While presenting a superficial coherence, possession provides ample scope to explore the workings of radically different explanatory principles, drawn in this paper from sociology, phenomenology and anthropology. This diversity of borrowings is unified by my purpose, which is to elucidate an understanding of female experience of possession as specifically conditioned by the more general experience of living as a woman in a male-dominated society—even as we increasingly recognise that there is no unitary version of what it is to be female.

'Objectivism' in social theory presents particular problems for such an enquiry. The original critique of the fallacies in objectivism comes from the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty. In the first stages of his attempt to develop an embodied account of human experience and intentionality, Merleau-Ponty (1986) in *Phenomenology of Perception* elaborates an insightful critique of behaviourist psychology and biologicist physiology. Instead of a scientific account of the body, he develops a rich account of the minutiae of meanings located in everyday acts of perception and bodily experience. Merleau-Ponty's critique has been subsequently generalised into the category of 'objectivism' by Bourdieu (1972). For Bourdieu, objectivism characterises all brands of social theory that break with the categories of the experiencing subject in order to reveal the laws and rules of the social structure that generates such experiences.

While Bourdieu argues, in dialectical fashion, for a new 'theory of practice' that will transcend both phenomenology and objectivism, there are specific reasons why we need to give priority to a critical stocktaking of existing scholarship on female possession. As my overview in this chapter elaborates, objectivist accounts of female possession have been developed at the expense of phenomenological accounts. This imbalance has itself created a situation conducive to male-centred perspectives that diminish or bypass the experiences of women. Even a framework like psycho-analysis, with all its rich promise of attention to the body and inter-subjectivity, becomes successfully diverted from attaining its goals by the triumph of objectivist tendencies. Psycho-analytical accounts of spirit possession—tempted, no doubt, by the easy transposability between spirit possession and psycho-analytical accounts of hysteria—deliver accounts disappointing in their reductionism. The affinity between hysteria and spirit possession was noted, with characteristic insight, by Freud himself in his introduction to 'A Seventeenth-Century Demonological Neurosis':

The states of possession correspond to our neuroses, for the explanation of which we once more have recourse to psychical powers. In our eyes, the demons are bad and reprehensible wishes, derivatives of instinctual impulses that have been repudiated and repressed. We merely eliminate the projection of these mental entities into the external world which the middle ages carried out; instead, we regard them as having arisen in the patient's internal life, where they have their abode (Freud 1973: 72).

Psycho-analytical constructions of the female hysterical have been regarded by feminist critics as one of the paradigms of modernity's phallocentric construction of woman. In the psycho-analytical cure, argue feminist critics such as Koffman, the woman comes to speak in the language of the psycho-analyst:

Thus although psychoanalysis may inveigh against the sexual repression to which women are subject, although it may invite them to shed their inhibitions and restore their right to speech, the remedy it offers is at the same time a poison, since it can cure women only by contaminating them, by forcing them to 'collaborate': to espouse the viewpoint of the other, of men, who are supposed to
possess truth. The psychoanalytical solution restores speech to women only the better to rob her of it, the better to subordinate it to that of the master. That is why there is no crime worse than silence (Koffman, 1985: 48).

Accounts of female spirit possession in the social sciences repeat similar moves. The accounts of female spirit possession produced by psycho-analysts (Kakar, 1982) and by psycho-analytically-minded anthropologists (Obeyesekere, 1981) typically narrow down the meanings of the rich material they assemble, to a ‘sexuality’ that remains at its core, obdurately preconceived. The framework in which participants themselves understand possession, of which religious meaning is an important component, becomes a purely external point of reference, powerless to alter the narrative teleology of the psycho-analytical drive. The female ascetics of Sri Lanka, studied by Obeyesekere, refer to their matted locks in richly varied fashion as their sakthi, as dhaatu (relic, essence or life force), as varana (boon), as something which hurts badly, and as prana and pāya (life force) (Obeyesekere, 1981: 22-32). In Obeyesekere’s master narrative, women’s language is altered to read as follows:

... psychologically, on the level of unconscious processes, the sublated penis emerges through the head. The matted hair, unlike the shaven head of the monk, does not represent castration for the ascetic, but rather stands for its very opposite: the denial of castration or loss of penis (Obeyesekere, 1981: 33-34).

Here, the sexual heterogeneity of symbolism in Hindu religious imagery—in which sakthi is not only not reducible to sexuality but is particularly incarnated in the goddess traditions of South Asia—is glossed over in the rush to get to the foremost conclusion, honing in on the male sexual organ. The further question of how female ascetics use the sexual heterogeneity of the tradition in order to signify their experience is marginalised even further. Just as the culture is to be monolithically represented by the phallus, so also the ascetic is prototypically male, represented by the general category of ‘the Hindu ascetic’. Yet Obeyesekere himself notes that one of the female ascetics gains her boon of divine grace only after her husband releases her from sexual obligations and prays with her to be reborn a man (Obeyesekere, 1981: 26). The material calls out for an analysis of how even a sexually plural religion ultimately valorises the phallus. For a woman, asceticism implies not only the codes of celibacy shared by female and male ascetics alike, but also subservience to codes that are gender-specific, and ultimately, aspirations to transcend female embodiment altogether.

Dance, known as ‘attam’ in Tamil Nadu, figures as an important, if not central aspect of possession experiences, particularly among castes classified as ‘non-Brahmin’ in Tamil Nadu. The importance of dance in possession is a feature shared with the Sri Lankan region. Obeyesekere asks the woman ascetic how she feels when she dances. She answers: ‘A shaking, with my body all lifeless.’ A few pages later, Obeyesekere picks up only the phrase ‘shaking’, omitting the paradoxical combining of numbness and lifelessness with the shaking, thereby ruthlessly narrowing the experience of dance itself. He then proceeds to gloss the shaking as ‘orgasmic’, as a ‘religious substitute for what many ecstatics have not experienced in their ordinary sexual lives.’ (Obeyesekere, 1981: 34). The very drive to sexualise the body of the possessed woman, to see all her movements as ‘orgasmic’, or better still, as a substitute for the ‘real’ orgasm, allows the scientific regime of truth to double its voice at the expense of the woman’s.

The integration of the body into social theory is evidently an insufficient move in itself. We need to interrogate the terms on which this integration occurs. In the above accounts, the body has been reduced to the body of sexuality. In turn, we also need to critically examine the presumption that we already know what the category of ‘sexuality’ means in relation to the group of women who are central to my account of possession—that is, women from south India’s rural poor.
Possession and the Voice of the Woman: The Narratives

I have urged the importance of an enquiry into a female-centred phenomenology of possession. But just what does it mean to attempt to 'elicit the voice of the woman' in the case of possession? Possession is quite overtly predicated on the radical splitting of subjectivity. It is this which renders it particularly stimulating as a challenge in developing feminist methodologies. We are seeking to elicit the voice of the woman who experiences possession when she is, by definition, absent during the experience. Therefore, the woman must rely entirely on the narratives constructed for her by previous cultural narratives of what it is to be possessed, and second, on the narratives constructed by significant others in her environment, particularly the families and the therapeutic healers. The methodological contradictions that ensue are not to be simply resolved. Feminist methodologies have inherited the problems that attend Western subject-oriented philosophies. Moreover, these problems are not external but are located at the very core of feminism, which is sustained by the aspiration for a subjecthood hitherto denied to women. I have therefore tried to do justice to the complexity of the situation rather than seeking to resolve the tensions. In a sense, the problem of finding the woman's voice in experiences of possession is not utterly unique, but rather highlights a much more widespread problem for feminism. Women's narratives about their own experience, even in moments of heightened agency, are shaped and structured by the discourses generated by dominant groups. For instance, the women who participated in the peasant movement in Telengana lacked the language that was adequate to their female experience and the language that was available to them was supplied by the communist political leadership of that period (Stree Shakti Sanghatana, 1989).

At the same time, the very fact that no dominant discourse has been fashioned with female experience in mind gives feminist analysis a certain leverage even in this difficult situation. Female experience is always, in some sense, in excess of the dominant discourse. Although women rely on the possession narratives of others, they seldom simply reproduce a standardised cultural narrative of their possession experiences. Instead, they integrate possession into the particularities of their biographies. Both the women whose narratives I have solicited have experienced possession, not as a singular episode in their lives, but as a recurring pattern that has become woven into their lives and their social networks. In the course of this prolonged evolution, women develop a degree of communication between their conscious subjectivity and the world of spirits, and even some degree of control over the spirits. Some women are able to move in and out of possession states with sufficient control over the process to be able to heal others. Even those who do not achieve this level of control develop enough inter-communication to be able to recount visual sightings of the spirits and even conversations with them. Such developments, of course, ease the intensity of the methodological conundrum.

I have had to radically curtail the number of case studies and the quantity of contextual ethnographic detail due to space limitations. I have chosen two cases, which illustrate the contrasts and common elements linking two subaltern groups of women: Christian fisher women and Paniyur Hindu agricultural labouring women. They have also been chosen to illustrate the contrast between possession as affliction and possession as the road to healing powers. Readers are referred to my monograph on gender and capitalist transformation among the Mukkuvar coastal communities (Ram, 1992, 1998) for the first case study discussed below. The second case comes from more recent and preliminary work in Chengalpattu (MGR) District in Tamil Nadu. I return to these case studies throughout the paper.

Santi, 'Peikari' of Kadalkarai Uru,
Kanyakumari District

Santi's possession episodes started almost immediately after her marriage, twenty-five years ago. They lasted over a period of ten years, and many of the young
women I spent time with in the village, now in their twenties, remember running behind her as children in order to mimic her antics and shout excitedly: 'Peykari' (Demon woman) Santi is now forty years old, and has nine children. Santi was born in the fishing village of Poondurai, in Kerala, near Thiruvananthapuram. Her mother was a fish trader, and her father a fisherman:

I have four brothers and one sister. I was especially fond of my sister, but she died in childbirth soon after her marriage. I also lost one of my brothers by marriage. My father was a fisherman, and my mother a fish vendor. I had to work hard, but was very loved by my parents. Both were people of Poondurai, and I was very much a child of that village.

Her marriage to a fisherman in Kanyakumari reflects a wider pattern of intense social ties between the borders of Kerala and Kanyakumari in Tamil Nadu. There are Mukkuvar people on both sides of the border (cf. Busby, 1997), facilitating ties based on inter-marriage as in Santi's case, and also based on trade and visits to healers and shrines (Ram, 1992). The relationships continue to re-affirm a historical construction of 'region' that pre-dates the relatively recent division of Travancore into Kerala and Tamil Nadu in 1956. At the same time, the impact of schooling, media, politics, etc., is gradually 'Tamilising' the Mukkuvars of Kanyakumari creating divergences in the culture and political economy of Santi's natal and affinal villages: 'I came to this coastal village of Kadarkarai after my marriage—I had married by choice, I liked the look of my husband. In fact, he wanted to marry elsewhere. But I missed the security and support of my native home.' The official religious regime is that of the Catholic church, whose presence in the coastal villages originates with the Portuguese missions in the sixteenth century. While the church leadership provides a central axis of the identity of fisherpeople as 'Latin Catholics', popular Christianity admits of an intimate, if vexed, relationship with popular spirit cults of the region. The possession episodes describe a fluidity in the movement of spirits in and out of the bodies of villagers in a manner that belies the official boundaries of religious identities between 'Catholics', 'Muslims' and 'Hindus', identities that have hardened after nearly fifteen years of communalist political activity in the region. The ambivalence and hostility with which these spirits are demarcated as 'Hindu' cannot be attributed entirely to recent communalism. These spirits have acquired, for Mukkuvars, the stamp of missionary characterizations of popular religion, as 'Hindu' demonic beings (cf. Scott, 1994). In the case I am about to describe, the deities possessing Santi are not as overtly malevolent as the local village goddesses. They belong to the grander category of temple deities such as are seen in the regional Brahminic centres of worship at Thiruvananthapuram and Suchindram. This is attributed by Santi and other villagers to the fact that the house Santi married into is built over the site of an old Hindu temple. She speaks of them in notably distant terms, as 'Hindu' beings whose identificatory marks are known through temple iconography rather than through worship. At the same time, over a period of time, she becomes so familiar with her visiting divinities, whom she often sees in the form of a vision rather than only through possession, that she is able to tell me about them and also reports her chats to them.

My mother's cousin had married into this village before me. She also came from Poondurai. When she was brought to my mami's [mother-in-law's] home, she experienced possession. The same thing happened to me. Three days after my marriage, I came into one of the rooms in my mother-in-law's home, which was built over the site of an old Hindu koyil [Temple]. Everything around here was a forest in the old days. I saw a finely dressed man sitting on an ural [mortar]. I felt as if a blow landed on me, and I called out to others as I fell. The spirit demanded a paatukkai [full ritual], nerci [offerings], dhu [goat sacrifice]. I had the manam [fragrant odour] of a newly married woman. For the next eight and a half years, that spirit stayed in my body. I would see it as I see you—just there, it would stand. I would see other deities from the Hindu temple, dressed
grandly with conch, flowers and all seven insignia, just like in the temples.
At first there was no attam [dance]. The others [villagers] would take me to the kurucaat [the base of the Catholic Cross, at the village church], and leave me there without food. Once a policeman came while I was there and gave me medicine.
This place was infested with spirits. There were stories about how urns of water placed on the ground would be swallowed up. While I had the spirit in me, I would beat up anyone who touched me. Others in the house would go out to get some tea, and when they came back, I would be standing on my head. At night, I would suddenly get up and run outside. Things in the house, especially items of jewellery, began to disappear. My täli was lost in this way. The spirit would take them all. The täli was hidden in the walls of the old koyil [temple]. No one could find it. Then a mantravâdi [Hindu specialists in exorcism and en sorcellement] got the spirit to confess—the täli is here, the rest of the silver in the west of the temple!" Sure enough, there it was. We gave it to the koyil gâmiyar [lit church priest] and I wore it again only after he had done a mantra to it. Sometimes I would see jewellery lying on the ground and go to pick it up, and then they would turn into stones.

Then came the attam [dance]. Oh, but it was nalla attam [intense dancing]! In those days I would not have been able to sit and talk to you like this. The whole Irubulv [village, place] would gather and watch. I had gone for an adakam [funeral], to a relative's home. My periods started, my clothes were dirty. I ran down to change my clothes, and to clean my pauṭai [underskirt], when I saw on the ground, gold bangles, the conch, necklaces, and anklets just scattered there. I was really fated to die that day, but I didn't. Instead, I bent down to pick up the jewels, in my blood stained pauṭai. When I tried to straighten up again, I could not. I prayed—I said, please forgive me god, I did wrong—I told no one of this incident. They say, that if you talk, the vision will do you no good. The diety's voice said to me: This is my sari and my jewels. I had gone for a wander. This woman has tried to take them away, so now I will not leave her. It began to beat up my husband and father-in-law. I saw the beings as a couple, male and female. After seeing them so often, I gradually lost my fear of them.
Two or three months later, they came back. I had stopped to urinate near a Cettu temple [i.e., temple worshipped by Cettu, their caste], when they appeared. I said to them: 'So, you have come back to search for me, helped by my odour [of the urine]!'
My husband decided to take me to give offerings at Mandaikkadu [temple of Bhagavathi Amman near the village, and major site of pilgrimage from Kerala to Kanyakumari]. But my periods came and I could not go. I went to all the shrines of importance—Raja Urula, Manavalli- karai, St. Michael of Trivandrum, where I stayed for three days. The attam in those places would hug me against the stone walls. We went on pilgrimages to Velankanni, Eduttuvai, Kalikkulam, Ovadi, Veliatturil, finally, at the last one, a medium told me it was a temple spirit that had me, and that it would take its own time to leave. The diety also had some assistant spirits who lived in the cili tree in our backyard. I have been told by other villagers that she would run to this tree to ask the spirits to throw money down for her, so she could buy and use 'ice', i.e., sweet ice blocks, with it.

Once the children began to be born I could no longer go and stay in the shrines like this. I lost my first child to the spirit—the attam came while I was pregnant, and I lost the baby. Also the spirit would tell me whether it was a girl or boy I had in the womb. I lost two more babies to the spirit, one at four months of pregnancy, the other at two months. The abortions were cured only after a vañtiyar [healer, possibly of the Siddha tradition] gave me a tāñjattu [talisman] with medicine in it. I also had trouble urinating. After the last birth, I had a bloody and massive flow, with clots in it, as if I had given birth to ten babies. Now my periods have stopped—since my last baby was born. But I had mukavaṭṭa kanni [facial rheumatism, like a paralysis] and had to go to a special ward of Thiruvanan-
thapuram hospital. At this time, my face and neck were twisted right around.

By the time the spirits left Santi, she had been branded, beaten, her arm was broken and pepper had been repeatedly put in her eyes. As a result of these ‘ministrations’, she suffers from headaches and backaches. The last episode, for which she uses the term *vetti*, fits into the local category Siddha Vaidya category of *warmam*, which covers the effects of receiving a blow. The effects of *warmam* may be life-long, according to Siddha medicine.

Despite these marks that she retains of her experience, Santi is a relaxed and cheerful woman who describes herself as giving sage counsel to those around her, even if they unappreciatively regard this as taking on more responsibility than is her due.

**Muttamma, the Healer and Activist. Village of Poru (Pseudonym), Chengalpattu District**

Muttamma is a member of an agricultural labouring community I have only recently begun doing field work with. Muttamma belongs to a Paraiyar community of agricultural labourers in Chengalpattu District near Chennai. I met her through a local, women’s NGO which had organised a ‘Mātar Cankam’ (Sangam in Sanskrit) or Mothers’ Union, in a number of dalit communities in the area. Muttamma was an active member of her Sangam, and I have included her case study since it indicates that possession may be experienced not only as affliction, but as a means through which a poor woman can effect a transition into the status of a healer.

The extension of her role in the Mātar Cankam as the healer builds on the strong community presence she already enjoys.

Muttamma’s community is ‘Hindu’, although I wish to problematise the meaning of that term for subaltern communities later in the paper. Her father was a spirit medium. As she tells the story, ‘before either marriage or wisdom had come on him’, the spirit took him wandering far and wide, before it finally revealed itself. Unlike the characteristically affilictive relationship between Mukkuvars and ‘Hindu’ spirits, the spirit in this instance undertook to look after the father’s village, and asked that a temple be built in its honour. From then on her father stayed at the temple all the time, while his family looked after the little land he owned. There were seven spirits that spoke through him. They were: Muttu Māri Amman, Venkatacalapati, Konangi Perumal, Deva Muni, and Puvalikāri, literally, it means the spirit of a woman who has died a virgin.

A girl was given to him in marriage expecting that she could survive on the proceeds of the land. When Muttamma was three, she barely survived an illness. They were sure she would die since she had not eaten for days and was in a coma. They had already built the child’s bier, which was shaped like a cradle, when her father’s possessing spirit spoke through him. It said: ‘Give her my name, and I will possess her. Make two eyes for me, and I will open hers. Set the eyes in beaten silver and give it to my temple.’ Her name was then changed from Kanakambaram to Muttamma. She was also known as *cettam kanni* (eyes of the dead) and *cettukāṭu* (burning ground). Muttamma’s narration of the story from here:

To appease the spirit, a brick from our home was given to the burning ground after I was saved, and that brick was treated with all the due rituals for the dead, dressed with turmeric and kumkum. [So that the spirits would not feel cheated of her death]. As for me, I had *kōka mayakkam* (giddiness) till I was ten. The sound of the *mōlam* (drums, traditionally beaten for the temples by the Paraiyar caste) would bring on the āṭtam in me, but there was no *pēcu* [speech] until after I was married.

I was married to my attai pillai [father’s sister’ son] at twelve. He went away while I was still young, and then came and lived with us for a few years. I knew nothing of my marriage, and I wondered why they were making up a feast, and taking me to Chengalpattu [a town]. I kept running away from him. When it came time to be with him [have relations with him], I tied my sari to my aunt, so I would know when she tried to leave me. They had built a small hut for us near my aunt’s house, for us to be
together. He went off that evening to see a küttu [rural theatre performance] but his friends told him to go home and get together with his wife. He came home and saw me sleeping in his mother's arms. He lifted my arm, but I rejected him. I kept on rejecting him. Finally, he said he was going off to hang himself, and they tied a tāyattu [ensorcelled talisman] to my ūlī to change my heart. And, somehow, we got by.

Today, it is so different—the baby comes along even before the marriage. In our Cankam, we are dealing with two such cases: the girl already has a baby, and the boy is willing to marry her, but his family wants him to marry elsewhere. In the other case, the girl has a baby, but the man is married with two wives! Nor does the girl really want to be with him. What has god given us this for [she points to her clothing]? To cover ourselves, to join our parts.

After marriage I was the victim of cūniyam [sorcery]. My husband's cousin called me to him [kūppitam, i.e., made sexual advances] I was a good looking woman. When I walked, I walked fine and strong. I also had a full set [of jewels] in those days. The man said: 'What I cannot have, will not survive,' and he kept cūniyam on me. Three of my children died. A fifteen-year-old son, studying tenth, got unca kattī [poisonous tumour], a daughter of three got whooping cough; and one son who had anaemia, died of fright—his time [nēram] had come on him. It was his fate [urit]. My husband's brother became sick and went into coma [mayakkam]. At this time of trouble, I had a dream in which Muttumari Amman came with agu [fire], it ātā [fire pot], kattī [knife] and cūlam [the tricūlam or trishul] in Sanskrit! She came to give me saktī. The devi placed the kattī and cūlam at my feet, giving me the sign that was to remain with me.

When Muttumari recounts this episode, describing the vision itself is enough for her to go into a trance. She yells, grits her teeth, and her son gives her a turmeric and water drink, which is kept beside her on a tray with kumkum and viputi (sacred ash) on it.

After this vision, I began the āttam [dance]. People said: is this a pēy or a sāmi [demon or deity]? Just then the sāmi came on a relative, to let the people know that I had the sāmi in me, not a pēy. That is how I came to speak and to become a diviner [kuri lottaratu]. But my troubles were not yet over—I had the cūniyam set on me, and I had a lot of menstruation bleeding. Finally, my pen uṭampu [womb] has been removed. But the goddess has finally punished my husband's cousin. She chased him and stuck her cūlam in the mud in front of him. He begged my forgiveness publicly, and my other children were safe after that.

Muttumari has three spirits speaking through her: Muttumari, Konangi Perumal, and Puvatikari who has become their kula devi [clan deity]. Muttumari told me that Puvatikari was a woman from their family now searching for someone to speak her desires through, and she gets attracted to particular kinds of individuals. It is a kind of love, Muttumari explains. In a curing session by Muttumara, the different deities may take turns to speak. The change of cast is signalled by her son pouring water over Muttumara. The deities respond to particular kinds of complaints; for instance, Konanki Perumal comes when the patient is in danger, whereas pēy or demonic possessions are dealt with by other deities.

I asked Muttumari about her role in the Cankam. She responded eloquently in the language of the Cankam:

Lourdes [member of the NGO] called on us to organise. She said the politicians were lining their pockets, and we should ask for a road, for light and electricity. Out of the four or five rupees we earn a day, we have to see to children's education, the food. We work all day, and we should ask for greater wages. Since the Cankam we have had a hand pump installed. We went to the current [electricity] office and asked for a patta [title] to our house, a pipe for the street. Our aniru [knowledge] was born, and grew. The vote buyer goes and sits in comfort, goes to America and the world. They get our votes and signatures, but my child is still in rags, the money has gone elsewhere. I am a
taalivar [head] in the Cankam, but this has brought me nothing to feed my child with. Other heads around here get fat, wear mancal and poti [turmeric and kumkum].
We sent a manu [petition] to Jayalalitha [the then chief minister], asking about price rise. How can we survive? You and your ministers squat around the place. We do not allow the sale of liquor in our village, for three years now. But it goes on in other villages, secretly.

I went to witness one of her healing sessions. She deals with a variety of complaints: from illness to the problems brought by women about menfolk who are alcoholic or missing to problems about missing items of jewellery. The healing session is held in open air, under the margosa tree, which is favoured by the goddess. In her hands, Muttamma holds a tiricilam, a clump of margosa leaves, and a long stick. Her son stands nearby holding a tray with camphor, kumkum and vippu. I will describe just one case, dealing with kutumpa kaleccal [family discord].

Muttamma exhales noisily, whirls with tiricilam in hand. The woman who has come to see her has lost her husband, and her eldest son has separated his household, under the influence of his wife. He now refuses to help his mother financially. Muttamma henceforth addresses her clients not as herself, but as the goddess, in characteristically ‘goddess-like’ imperious tonee, chastising and then graciously consenting to extend help to her supplicants:

Goddess: Where were you for so long? Didn’t people let you know where I was to be found? Will your children come to me?

Muttamma’s son helps to elaborate and translate the goddess’ questions, and the woman consults an older female companion, who conveys to the son that there has been no cooperation from the woman’s son.

Goddess: You feel as if you are on fire. For nine long months, for three hundred days, you carried this boy in your womb. You spent on him, you raised him, you had him married. Now, he treats you as if you were dead. He is not happy. You are in agony. But bring me your son. I will make him promise to care for you.

Woman [in tears]: You say all that is in my heart. But no temple of yours gives me solace.

Goddess: Bring your son to me. I will make him come to me.

Woman: He will not come.

Goddess: I will bring him here by next week. Take my lemon [wedged on the tiricilam she holds]. Give it to him to eat. It will bring him here. His temperly [pokku] I will subdue [adakkaren]. I will get a vakk [promise, word] from him.

She throws the margosa leaves in the air, shouts: ‘Who’, exhaling violently, stagers back, and is given a drink of turmeric water. The goddess leaves Muttamma.

Sociological Discourses on Female Possession

Social theory has attempted to claim the subject of spirit possession from the province of prior discourses such as theology, comparative religion and religious phenomenology. It has done so by reposing the question to be asked about the state of possession. No longer is it to be a matter of investigating the nature of the experience as articulated by the subjects of that experience, but rather an investigation of the function of that experience. Nor is this function to be located in the domain of ‘religion’ instead, it is relocated by social theory in the sphere of political power, in the maintenance and reproduction of leadership and authority. Early work in this area concentrates on the specialised and prestigious figure of the shaman. Eliade’s (1951) book Le Chamanisme, postulates that the sociologist’s proper concern is with the social functions of the shaman, the priest, of the magician: he will study the origin of mystical prestige, its role in the articulation of society, the relations between religious chiefs and political chiefs (Eliade, 1951: 8). In the 60s and 70s,
the burgeoning of second-wave feminism increased the sensitivity of ethnographers to the prominence of women in spirit possession. However, this prominence is registered initially as a curiosity encountered while pursuing categories of statistical significance: ‘What categories of persons most frequently succumb to spirit possession and figure most prominently in possession cults?’ (Lewis, 1966: 309) Women emerge as an epidemiological category ‘The literature’, notes Lewis, ‘is studded with references to the frequent prominence of women in these cults, and some explicit attempts have been made to explain, or at least comment upon, this sexual bias on the parts of the spirits’ (Lewis, 1966: 309) The ‘sexual bias of the spirits’ weaned the attention of anthropologists away from the specialised figure of the shaman to a study of possession as a symptom of deprivation. Applying the previously evolved framework of functionalism, anthropologists focused on different levels of female exclusion from the participation and exercise of power, studying exclusion as a form of dysfunctionality. Anthropologists such as Lewis (1966), and other anthropologists working specifically on India, such as Harper (1963), and Freed and Freed (1964), pointed usefully and pertinently to the proliferation of the levels of social power from which women are excluded. Women may not participate in the ceremonies and public life of the ‘great’ traditions—or, as we may now rephrase it, the hegemonic traditions—of religion. Women may not openly express emotional and sexual desires. Women are excluded, in the majority of patrilineal descent systems, from inheriting property and thus securing economic independence for themselves as men do. The concept of role conflict and role stress, which was actively employed by sociologists in the 60s and 70s to analyse gender in Western industrialised societies, was transposed by anthropologists to the asymmetries of gender relations in non-Western societies. Lewis characterises the ‘stock epidemiological situation’ for female possession in Somali playing with the notion of possession at the disease, gender inequality as the diagnosis and (male) anthropologist as the sympathetic but ironic diagnostician.

In the ethnography of South Asia, the situation of the young bride stands out in particularly sharp relief among anthropological characterisations of the ‘epidemiology’ of possession. Anthropologists explore the specific burdens that the kinship system imposes on her at this particular moment of the female life cycle, producing valuable insights into the kin-based nature of female oppression: virilocally patterns of residence, for example, require newly married women to make the difficult transition to a distant village with no networks of social support, while simultaneously occupying the lowest and most vulnerable position in the hierarchy within the household [Grey, 1982; Macintyre, Morpeth and Prendergast, 1981; Sharma, 1980]. In following through the consequences for women, of particular forms taken by kinship, anthropologists detail the toll taken by hypergamy and norms of seclusion.

Most of these ethnographies are drawn from the north of India. This is no coincidence. The south not only diverges from the pattern of hypergamy and strict exogamy (that is, the insistence on marrying girls a good distance from their natal village), but positively prefers a pattern of repeated marriages within the same group of kin. If we refer back to Muttamman’s narrative, it can be seen that she not only weds her father’s sister’s son—according to the ‘preferred’ pattern of cousin marriage—but has this cousin living with her for a few years when she is very young. These variations have been shown to have a relatively enhancing consequence for women’s status [Kapadia, 1995; Karve, 1994]. If we refer once again to Muttamman’s case, such practices give someone in her position the socially derived strength to resist her husband’s sexual advances even as a newly married bride. They also allow her to seek security as a child-bride in the arms of her mother-in-law. In the north, this would be unthinkable; but for someone in Muttamman’s situation, her mother-in-law is also her aunt. There are limits to this social strength—the aunt does not provide the bulwark against her husband’s sexual advances that Muttamman seeks in her; and she, like brides all over India, must learn to ‘somehow get by’ with the husband she initially rejects.

The Brahmin castes of the south, however, carry through pan-Indian Brahminic kinship values privileging hierarchy (Gough, 1994), although their practices have become coloured
by the south Indian kinship patterns. An analysis of possession based on the sociology of kinship oppression has therefore been extended with relative ease to south Indian Brahmin women. Harper (1963) finds that 10-20 per cent of the women in the Havik Brahmin caste of Karnataka experience possession at some time in their lives, many of them while in the situation of the newly married woman. He asks what alternatives are open to women who do not, unlike the majority of Brahmin wives, adapt to the restrictions with obedience, hard work and anticipation of eventual rise in the female hierarchy. He envisages three options. The first is suicide, described in clinical terms as a species of 'adjustive behaviour'. This stark choice on the part of the woman creates community feeling against the affines. The second option a woman has is the refusal of food, which also causes gossip about the treatment she is receiving at the hands of the affines. The third option is spirit possession:

A woman who is ill (kata), i.e., periodically 'attacked' by a spirit, is shown deference and accorded appropriate special attention—she is indirectly able to influence the behaviour of others towards her. Not only does she temporarily gain preferred treatment, but both she and the members of her affinal family are given a breathing spell in which to reattempt adaptation to the situation. A woman who is possessed is not only blameless, but the state of possession itself is symbolic of her femininity. Women are believed to be weak and may be thus easily attacked by spirits. Also spirits are said to come on a woman because she is beautiful and irresistible. (Harper, 1963: 175)

There are considerable strengths to such analysis, strengths of the kind that materialist attention to power confers on any analysis of consciousness. Marx's analysis of consciousness, and in particular his re-articulation of certain forms of consciousness as class ideology, remains, both the paradigmatic instance of such analysis and a measure of its power and scope. We can usefully attend to social relations of unequal power to the two case studies. I have introduced Santi experiences her first episodes when making the transition into more challenging and difficult life situations. Marriage takes her from the security of her natal home in Kerala to a fishing village in Kanyakumari. The village of Kadalkarai is far more isolated and provincial than the metropolis of Thiruvananthapuram, and thirty years ago would have been relatively small for a coastal village. Muttamma's possession, on the other hand, follows a different trajectory. Her narrative bears all the marks of possession as a divine gift rather than as an affliction and therefore calls for a different treatment. However, I have already indicated that in her case, some of the relative strengths conferred by a more female-centred kinship system can also be elucidated by the use of such anthropological analysis. Both case studies in this paper make it clear that feminist analysis cannot do without careful attention to the larger patterning of social relations of inequality, which largely determine the range of possibilities and life chances open to women. Feminist anthropologists have found sociological analysis valuable in demonstrating not only the victimhood but the agency of women in spirit cults (Boddy, 1989; Constantinides, 1978).

However, certain tendencies in social theory can be positively misleading unless accompanied by a reflexive awareness of the baggage that accompanies each strength. I have referred already to the tendency in the language of the social sciences to turn social relations into reified, thing-like entities. Even this can serve to hit off the intractability of power relations. However—and especially when combined with a functionalist turn of mind—it can dictate a mechanical view of the world we live in, as a 'structure' which must be balanced in respect of its mechanical parts, as a machine endowed with an agency and will of its own which leads it to seek 'safety valves' for the tensions which have built up. One of the problems this mechanical view of society has bequeathed to social theory is an inability to dwell sufficiently on the specificity of the phenomenon under analysis. Rituals—whether of rebellion, of inversion, or of cohesion—all become so many means of reinstating the social norm. Inequality is postulated as a source of stress and tensions, both for the individual and for society, but the reasons for this are not theoretically addressed. Relief for this build-up of stress can
be supplied by any number of responses—illness, ritual, or rebellion. The specificity of both the form of 'stress' and of its 'relieving agent' disappears in this form of analysis. Possession, resistance and suicide all emerge in Harper's analysis as different 'options' available to the stressed individual to be assessed in terms of a rationalistic economic adjudication of the differential costs and benefits accruing to each. No doubt women do, from time to time, consider the choices available to them in patriarchal society. But female subjectivity cannot be adequately accounted for by the specific and narrow form of subjectivity described by rational choice theory. A phenomenon such as possession, predicated as it is on a radical splitting of consciousness, poses a particularly acute problem for an exclusively rationalistic approach to the world. I return to this problem below.

The Female Body of Possession

The gender specific nature of the consciousness which women bring to possession disappears under the weight of rationalism. Although Harper notes that possession may be symbolic of femininity, the significance of this insight is not explored. His rendering of the choices between the three alternatives facing a young bride is redolent of the problems that haunt the subject of Reason in Western philosophy—there is seemingly no body, either male or female, attached to the cogito which reflects and makes choices. Feminist philosophers such as Lloyd (1984) have successfully elicited the body which implicitly structures such philosophical accounts. It is a masculine body, which has rarely had to concern itself with acknowledging the consequences of human embodiment, and therefore, has seldom had to confront the limitations and partialities which necessarily accompany being located in a particular body in a specific time and place. Even less is this masculine rationalist suppression of embodiment able to cope with the specificities of female embodiment, which may be located most spectacularly, though not exclusively, in sexual-cum-reproductive embodiment. Such feminist deconstructions of Western rationalism have given a substantive meaning to the generalised notion of the 'Man of Reason'.

Despite wishing to account for why women are so prominent in possession cults, the implicit masculinism of the dominant version of reason evacuates the female body which shapes the possession experience of women. We find that despite noting the specific forms of social inequality suffered by women, the sociological accounts of possession hinge on a notion of deprivation which could be generalisable to any underprivileged group.

Such a generalisability is also not without its analytical uses. Too often, women's responses are left unanalysed because they are seen as simple expressions of femininity. In this context, it is important to be able to point to similar responses that men come up with when placed in parallel situations of marginality. Men from castes that have been historically designated as 'untouchables' are prominent in possession cults (Beck, 1981; Kapadia, 1995). At the informal 'court of appeal' presided over by spirit healers, the various categories of the dispossessed meet—not only the women but the men who are poor and low caste. None of these groups expect to find justice in the more formal venues of dispute settlement such as panchayats and state courts (Moore, 1993). Among the Bedouin, young men who are only temporarily placed in the situation of marginality share in the specific performative genres of poetry with which Bedouin women express a lifetime's suffering in poetic code forms that make them publicly acceptable (Abu-Lughod, 1986).

The accounts of the women do not permit the analyst to quite so entirely dissolve their possession experiences into a generalisable sociological notion of inequality. The female body, mediated by cultural constructions of what it is to inhabit such a body, keeps erupting in their narratives. However, it is not exclusively the romantically sanitised body in Harper's account of the beautiful and vulnerable woman. It is equally the female body of smells and odours, of the blood of menstruation, parturition, and miscarriages, the secretions of sexuality and the flows of urine. The spirits make little distinction between the body of reproduction, the body of
sexuality and the body that eliminates wastes. They are avidly interested in all bodily emanations. Santi recounts her first sighting of the deity as one where the deity was attracted by the smells of her newly released sexuality as a newly married woman. The second sighting occurs on a visit to a funeral which requires in Santi a state of purity which is, however, sullied by the arrival of her periods. Her attempt to pick up the jewels strewn by the diety at the stream once again brings together her polluted state with the elevated realm of the deity. The third episode involves the chance coincidence of her urinating at night in an area that is near a Hindu temple. The tensions experienced by women are not only sociological ones, but are also borne by the body of the woman who is valued primarily as fertile but who must keep her reproductive fluids from impinging and disrupting the realm of the sacred. She experiences enormous social pressure to produce babies—preferably male—and exclusively within the bounds of marriage, while at the same time experiencing the body of fertility primarily as a creature of the whims of fate and destiny. Fertility and sexuality come up over and over as the primary areas of contradiction and concern in women’s accounts of possession.

Santi progresses, while she is pregnant with her child, from an initial state of possession in which she sees visions to one where the spirit gives her attam or dance. The spirit speaks to her of the sex of the unborn child, but she loses this child due to the spirit dancing her and she goes on to suffer another two abortions as a result of the dance. The spirit, in mischief, also seizure her talit, symbol and key instillator of her married status, and hides it in its own temple.

In Mutumma’s case, the narrative is part of a wider cultural narrative about possession as the ‘road’ to healing (Obeyesekere, 1981). Typical of such cultural narratives is the inheritance of the power to heal. Here Mutumma inherits the gift of divining from her father, and is even visited by many of the same spirits that spoke through him. Mutumma’s narrative, however, does not stay at this level of generality. Her narrative gathers up the general ingredients, the elements of spirit genealogy she shares with her father as an inheritance, and integrates the spirit’s visitations into a biography which is not only about her social circumstances as a woman, but about a sex-specific embodiment as a woman. The sorcery which is placed on her by her husband’s cousin is for rejecting his sexual advances to her, a woman who walks—in her own estimation—at the height of her attractiveness. The effects of the sorcery are felt directly through her maternal and reproductive embodiment in the death of three children, in her greatly swollen outflows of blood and clots after the birth of her last child, in a uterus which is so swollen it must eventually be excised in a medical hysterectomy. As a young girl, she rejects her husband’s sexual advances, when he attempts to consummate a marriage she has been enjoined to before attaining her puberty. She clings to the last vestige of childhood security, poignantly retold in her story of her lying her sari to her aunt’s sari while she sleeps. Mutumma still resists him successfully enough to make him want to hang himself. The family ties a magical charm to her tahl to change the course of her desire.

The spirits that possess Mutumma and Santi further tie their biographies to those of other women, who also experienced injustice in sexually specific, embodied ways. Local notion of injustice refer us not only to unhappiness born of persecution, but to a life lived incompletely, where desires have not been satisfied. For a woman, these notions refer us typically to a life lived without experiencing marriage and maternity. Mutumma is possessed by the spirit of a young woman who died a virgin, and became a family deity. Santi’s possession as a young bride is preceded by a parallel experience of possession that overcame her cousin who came into the same village as a bride. Through possession, women illuminate the commonness of the horizon of expectations and disappointments that shape the lives of women known to them or near to them.

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

We may draw on the phenomenological work of Merleau-Ponty (1986) as one of the starting points at which to develop an account in which consciousness is treated as necessarily
embodied, where meaning is located as much in the body as in the mind. Indeed, his account promises to undermine such dualisms, since it is only in and through the body that we can establish any kind of relation to the world. These capacities of the body need not be treated as purely biological or natural attributes, but as products of complex cultural and historical situations into which men and women are born and within which their subjectivity takes shape. His concept of habit is a particularly fruitful one for a feminist investigation of possession. Merleau-Ponty distinguishes between the customary body or the body of habit and the body of the moment. At any given moment, the body of the moment utilises as a background, the body of habit. This background is apprehended in the light of an almost impersonal being, but which has some of the momentum of existence and on which we rely for survival. The 'customary body' which we take for granted and draw upon at any given moment performs an act of synthesis between past and present, an act of synthesis performed by and in the body. His ideas on how this customary body is created in the first place, and in particular, his account of the cultivation of habit can be crucial in demonstrating how a feminine subjectivity is created and fashioned through the cultural disciplinings of the body.

This is not simply a matter of applying Merleau-Ponty to the female body. It is equally a matter of reading him against the grain. The relationship to the world which Merleau-Ponty describes in his summation: 'Consciousness is in the first place not a matter of "I think" but of "I can" represents a remarkable departure from traditional, cogito-based philosophical paradigms of intentionality. Equally, it represents the confident universalisation of a masculine attitude to the world. It provides us with a measure of the degree to which women must be specifically disciplined to suppress this seemingly universal, human orientation in themselves. By contrast, feminist philosophers have described the feminine attitude to the world as a broken, interrupted and self-arresting movement into the world, containing both the impulse to accomplish an act or project and a self-censorship and self-doubt as to one's capability (Young, 1990).

We may usefully draw on Bourdieu at this point since he has taken inspiration from Merleau-Ponty, but has also tried to link the notion of embodied habit to culturally specific contexts. Under the category of bodily habitus, Bourdieu (1977) seeks to describe the production of bodily dispositions which transmit cultural specificity in a mode which is barely accessible to everyday consciousness. In the cultural habitus of South India, puberty represents a crucial time at which this self-arresting splitting of the girl's embodied relation to the world is definitively set in place. The public ritual as well as the ritualistic advice that is given to young girls by older women at the time of first menstruation or menarche is a site that yields rich results on feminist investigation (Ram, 2000). The advice explicitly entails an arrestment of female movement out into the world. The girl is told not to go out of the house too much, to stay indoors as much as possible both to avoid social censure and gossip. The ritual of puberty also encourages the girl to colate menarche with the sexed identity of a beautiful adorned being imbued with the qualities of modesty and a dawned self-consciousness. All of these qualities, named as 'feminine' and admired in a woman, reinforce the self-censorship, self-doubt and the splitting of the fundamental orientation of 'I can' towards the world.

Over time, we can see these ritually and socially inculcated disciplines and practices becoming incorporated into the female body of habit. Merleau-Ponty describes habit both as a re-arrangement and a renewal of body image. Fresh instruments such as clothing, activities such as using a tool become appropriated and express our power of dilating our being in the world. 'To get to use a hat, a car, or a stick is to be transplanted into them, or conversely, to incorporate them into the bulk of our own body (Merleau-Ponty, 1986: 143). We can trace this incorporation in the way we experience our feminine bodies in culturally specific ways. The girl who wears a sari for the first time at the puberty ceremony also comes in time to incorporate it into the bulk of her own body, to the point where it becomes difficult for her to comprehend the questions of a non-sari wearer as to how it is possible to wear a sari while performing complex and vigorous
physical activities. We can see the same habituated integration in the way we come to perform many of the grooming activities of femininity, from plaiting one’s long hair to wearing a potli or bindi without a mirror. However, we also integrate into our very body of habit the restrictions and contradictions of living within patriarchy—how to stand in crowded buses in ways that will avoid contact with males, ways of taking on the tasks of self-surveillance that will allow us to avoid censure and the male gaze. We can look back at the work of existential feminists like Simone de Beauvoir (1972) and find there quite a brilliant evocation of the tensions imposed by the splitting that occurs when women have to live their bodies both as agents and as objects within patriarchy. We come to experience our bodies as a thing which is other than it is, a thing like other things in the world. But at the same time, we continue to experience ourselves as a constituting subject, living our bodies as transcendence and intentionality, that is, not as a thing like other things in the world.

How does possession relate to this relationship between the body of habit and the body of the moment? At one level, possession seems to offer itself as quite a brilliant metaphoric language with which to express the fundamental splitting that is imposed on women’s capacity to move into the world. The ontological distinction between the spirit and the woman’s body, the occupation of the woman’s body by the agency and desires of a radically different being, the fracturing of the woman’s voice by the narratives of others who must fill in the gaps in the woman’s narratives about her possession experiences—all these seem nothing more than heightened dramatisations of the existential condition of women in patriarchy. The concentration of the metaphors of possession on the sexual and reproductive embodiment of women seems to illuminate this condition even more effectively, emphasising that it is in these aspects of one’s existence that women come to experience, most radically, the splitting of their own subjectivity between objecthood and subjecthood. It is in this area, possession suggests, that we look for what women experience as the most fundamental constitutive features of their own sexed identity.

The Specificity of Subaltern Religion

The south Indian ‘habitus’ of communities like Muttamma’s and Santi’s pose challenges of their own to the Western roots of existentialism and phenomenology. These roots are exposed whenever these philosophies regard splitting as fundamentally pathological. We have seen that these premises, shared with Western humanism, are capable of delivering a profound critique of social conditions, as so many ‘deformations’ of the integrity are inherent in humanness, but denied to women and other oppressed groups. Nevertheless, they present important limitations when viewed from the perspective of women like Muttamma and Santi. To the extent that feminism itself comes to view the splitting of the self as an index of the fundamental crippling of women in patriarchy, and implicitly posits a unified and continuous self as the aspiration of a feminist sense of subjecthood, we stand the risk which is acute in a country such as India—that of ceasing to be able to apprehend the voices of women who situate their experience within a religious framework. This in turn violates what is equally one of the constitutive features of feminist ethics, which would entail developing the capacity to listen to the voices of women telling of their experiences, however radically differently situated from those of the listener and interlocutor. To the extent that feminist analysis retains its ethical commitment to making its analysis retain an organic link with female experiences rather than simply replacing them with an alien discourse, then we have to investigate the various layers of religious meaning that feed into possession states among women. The narratives of these women recount their histories of possession in a way that does not pathologise their experience. Possession certainly is regarded as a source of considerable affliction and hardship. Nor is it visited on all. But it is not regarded as anything more than the operationalisation of forces and desires that are already in place between humans and supernatural beings.

To speak of ‘religion’ as a unitary discourse is itself an elite assumption. Rather, possession draws on layers of
religious meaning and sentiment that keep alive in the present the dynamics of marginalisation and incorporation that have characterised elite/subaltern relations in India over centuries. The supernatural beings that possess human bodies—goddesses such as Icakki Amman, Muttumari Amman, as well as beings who are now worshipped as supernatural, but who began their biographies as mortal women who died as virgins or by experiencing an unjust and violent end—take us into some very old sediments of religious emotion and understanding. For us to enter them is to go well beyond the more familiar tensions between Sanskritic forms of religion, and popular bhakti understandings of religion which modelled themselves on more intimate and primary relations of love. Bhakti is often made to stand, particularly in the current political context of mobilisations against 'Hindutva', for the entirety of subaltern religion. The religious cults devoted to goddesses such as Icakki and Muttumari depend centrally, not on expressions of love by the goddess, but on direct possession of their devotees. Unlike Sanskritic deities, these goddesses are not characterised by any clear distinction, let alone a polarity, between auspicious power and demonic power. Rather, they represent a view of power as amoral, as efficacy incarnate. They are capable of bringing rains, harvest and plenitude if appeased and propitiated (but even this is no guarantee). Equally, they bring the opposite; diseases of heat, such as the 'pearls' [muthu] of smallpox, which are the dreaded sign that Muttumari Amman has taken her chosen human.

Regional differences are important here. In the north, the parallel figure of Sitala Devi who brings the pox is the opposite of auspicious Sanskritic goddesses such as Lakshmi. In north India, female supernatural figures such as the churel are responsible exclusively for malevolent designs on the lives of infants, driven by unsatisfied desires. In Kanyakumari and erstwhile Travancore, this moral polarisation of good and evil is not as salient in local understandings of village goddesses. There are certainly continuities to be remarked on. In Tamil Nadu, as in the north, the powers of the goddess continue to be experienced with particular keenness in the realm of human bodily states such as disease and fertility. Women's inability to conceive, to sustain a pregnancy, to successfully deliver a live birth, and even to successfully nurture children in the critical early years of infancy, may all be taken as evidence of the powers of the goddess. In the Tamil stories of Icakki Amman—lovingly collected by the local folklorists in Kanyakumari such as A.K. Perumal (1990) for the regions of Kanyakumari and adjoining Kerala—the goddess deals out destruction to women, even ripping the foetus out of pregnant women. However, goddesses such as Icakki Amman are capable of attracting great devotion and fervour. For the devotees, these goddesses are complete in their meanings; they are capable of nurturance as well as destruction. These twin but interrelated aspects of the south Indian village goddesses are brought out vividly in the large clay statues of Icakki Amman built outside her temples in Kanyakumari. The icons erected as large clay statues outside her temples show her in two images—one icon beams brightly and nurses a child, the other, with ferocious countenance, has a half-eaten infant dangling from her mouth. Occasionally, these twin aspects of the goddess are represented as siblings with contrastive natures and requiring appropriate forms of devotion—one based on vegetarian offerings and the other on blood sacrifices.

Caste differences between the elite and subaltern shape possession experiences. When Brahmin women in Tamil Nadu worship the goddess and even become possessed by her, it is the sanskritised, exclusively auspicious goddess—as-spouse who enters them. Even in possession, Brahmin women edit out elements that are crucial to the possession experiences of women like Santi and Muttamma—the attam or dance characteristically disappears, along with the goddess' appetite for blood offerings, to be replaced by lemon and curd rice (Hancock, 1995).

While the importance of possession states in the worship of the south Indian goddess is widely attested, (Beck, 1981;
Blackburn, 1988; Kapadia, 1995), what has not been as well explored is the particular capacity of fertility—like its better explored counterpart, disease—to provide a highly appropriate medium for the non-elite meanings of the goddess. It is not that Sanskrit religious meanings are entirely absent in her worship. It is simply that human experiences like fertility and disease provide a brilliant medium to demonstrate the limitations of dharmic regulations. The ballads I heard sung at the door of Ickaki’s temples of Kanyakumari by her Nadar bards repeatedly drove this message home. They tell stories of how even the most powerful of humans—the royal couple—cannot control fertility. These couples follow every conceivable dharmic practice in order to earn better karma and redress their problem of childlessness. They feed pilgrims and the hungry, they behave ethically and so on, but to no avail. The message is that there is little human agency possible in the realm of fertility—here one must throw oneself on the uncertain mercies of the goddess, appease her arbitrary desires, and hope for the best.

Not only are the powers of the goddess, in this sense, beyond the moral binary oppositions of good and evil, but the relations between humans and divinities are also far more fluid and amoral than they are in the bhakti cults. Unlike bhakti, which is characterised by the absence of the divine and the devotee’s consequent elaboration of the experience of vrāha or separation, in these subaltern cults, the goddess and her accompanying supernatural beings are only too present. They can be experienced directly in ritual states but they also present themselves in ways that are unlooked for and are even unwanted, randomly possessing individuals who are merely going about their ordinary lives. The goddess is at the apex of a hierarchy of supernatural beings such as demonic warrior guardian figures, demons and spirits who are to be distinguished from the goddess not by any moral distinction, but only by virtue of having lesser powers. All lurk close to human affairs, fascinated and easily drawn by human odours, and bodily outflows of urine and of sexual efflorescence. These outflows are hardly distinguished by the beings—or for that matter by the humans concerned—from the reproductive flows of menstruation, pregnancy, post-partum and lactation. This fascinated nearness of the supernatural world, with its apotheosis in direct possession, is matched by a complementary cycle of human beings who turn divine. In a study of what he calls the ‘cult of the dead’, Blackburn details the transformation of heroes and heroines from local castes, low in the Sanskritic hierarchy, into deities. These are represented through pitāms: obelisk-like statues of clay or brick that are covered with lime paste and worshipped during goddess festivals with even greater emotional intensity than even the goddess can command. Blackburn (1988) stresses that these cults are not to be confused with the Sanskritic cult of ancestors, whose spirits need propitiation in order to cross the liminal status of pīṭr. Nor are they malevolent demons. Rather, they are powerful gods and goddesses who can also be invoked back into life through possession. Similar cults of the dead are found not only in other parts of South India and in Sri Lanka, but also in Rajasthan and Gujarat. However, they are hardly represented in the literature on religion in South Asia.

What is once again of particular interest to an exploration of the gender-specificity of possession is the sex-specific route by which even this transformation of humans into deities occurs. Men are typically warrior heroes, whose lives are the epitome of an idealised clan leader—brave and virile. They are cut down in their prime in violent ends engineered through treachery and cunning. The women who become goddesses are beautiful and desired also cut down in their prime by committing suicide while trying to protect their chastity, or murdered by the very man who is the object of their chaste fidelity. The fluidities of the situation are such that even my earlier attempts to classify the transformation of humans into demons as distinct from the transformation of humans into deified objects of worship proved beside the point. Women who die while giving birth—some understood to have been killed by the goddess herself—may initially

This particular construction of gender unifies a wide variety of regional genres, from the ballads to Ickaki Anman to the ‘high’ classic literary Tamil traditions of the Cankam period (Lakshmi 1990), or the epics of the Telugu speaking region (Narayana Rao 1986).
return as pēy (demon). However, they are then ‘upgraded’ fairly easily since in any case appeasing a pēy (demon) is not intrinsically so different from rituals of worship. Therefore, in time, a clay mould can become a full-fledged temple. Similarly, Blackburn’s distinction between avatar cycles and the cult of the dead breaks down in practice. Some of the stories of the descent of the goddess into human avatar represent only a later stage in a narrative cycle that begins much earlier. It begins with the wrongful murder of a chaste woman, who then ascends to heaven to ask Siva for the boon of returning to earth as a goddess, in order to avenge her murder.

The links between the goddess and women therefore is far more intimate than is allowed by a notion of bhakti devotionalism. Muttamma, speaking as the goddess, enunciates the precise emotional experiences of maternal embodiment to her female devotees: she ‘knows’ what it is to carry a child in one’s womb all those months, to nurture him, only to have him cruelly turn away and deny reciprocal nurturance when he is an adult. The speech brings tears to the eyes of the woman who comes to her as client—the goddess has said all that is in her heart.

The intrinsic ambivalences that occur in this particular stratum of subaltern religion, shifting between demon and diety, human and divine, structure the common understandings of possession itself as a matter of endless speculation and controversy. Initially, in my fieldwork, I assumed possession was controversial only from the perspective of the secular rationalistic modern. But even for those within the religious framework, possession is indeterminate and open-ended. At the very least, it leaves open the question: possession by what? Is it pēy or diety? Is it a sign of grace or a sign of ensorcellment? Does it enable curing and healing or does it have to be cured? In addition, there is considerable local scepticism which asks: is it possession or conscious deception? The answers to these questions do not remain fixed either. As an evolving process, the meanings of possession can transform over an individual’s life span. An individual can begin his/her possession ‘career’ as possessed by a demon and then be identified as experiencing possession by a diety. It can begin as an affliction that the individual has no control over and then transform itself, as with Muttamma the healer, into a state that can be ritually controlled and induced in order to permit healing and divination. The process of identifying the nature of the spirit itself marks various stages of the individual’s possession career. The more a spirit begins to communicate its desires and intentions, the more it can be brought under control—either to leave the individual, or else for the individual to be able to control the spirit enough to heal others. The most troublesome phase is therefore the initial one, where the spirit remains mute. The phase where the spirit makes the individual ‘dance’ is a step up in communication, but it is only when the spirit gives voice through the intervention of another more seasoned medium or healer, that the individual and the community gain some control over the process.

I have suggested in this chapter that we can explore the language of possession within a feminist framework without it requiring us to posit a rationalistic understanding. Nor do we need to consider the splitting of subjectivity in possession as a sign of disease in order to extract something of more general significance for the understanding of how femininity and gender are constituted under specific social relations of patriarchy. The language of possession, and more generally, the language of the particular layer of religious experience that possession belongs to, is already gender-specific. The demons, gods and goddesses, attach themselves, not to disembodied consciousnesses, but to specific smells, odours and flows of human bodies. Within this they are attached even more firmly to female bodies which are constructed primarily in terms of a field in which sexuality and fertility are conjoined. Women in turn follow sexual-cum-reproductive routes to deification and into possession. In my previous analysis of possession among Mukkuvar women (Ram, 1992), I emphasised the relation between the sexually specific disciplining of female movement, of clothing, of language and hair, and the performative engagement and ‘play’ with these codes by women in states of possession. Subsequent field work on possession has made me confront the prominence of reproductive disorder and irregularity in the women’s
recounting of possession experiences. They point to the centrality of reproductive sexuality in the construction of femininity in Tamil Nadu, and possibly more widely in India. Discourses of sexuality which separate sexuality from reproduction—and this includes the psycho-analytical exegeses on female possession in South Asia—fail to comprehend the specificities of this semantic field of meanings.

We can retain the sociological insights that point to the generalised lack of power in women's lives. They only add further insight into the drama that surrounds women's reproductive sexuality. Unsuccessful fertility and an inability to smoothly make the transition from one ritually prescribed phase of womanhood to another carries with it both material and psychic suffering. Modern regimes of reproductive 'planning' have done little to alter this fundamental experience of powerlessness over fertility at the level of the individual woman who must bear the child. Instead, contemporary experience must add further potency to a religious discourse which suggests that fertility and its consequences in human suffering and joy are beyond the control of human agency, but are rather the effects of divine power both in its playful and in its dark, terrorising aspects.