

Gendered Fictions: Media and the Making of the *Malaiyaha* Identity in Sri Lanka¹

Abstract

The plantation workers of Sri Lanka were brought over from South India as indentured labour in the 19th century by the British and were settled in the hill country of Sri Lanka to work first in coffee and later tea plantations. Disenfranchised by the Citizenship Act of 1948, the struggles of the community had been primarily in relation to wages and trade union politics on the one hand and on moves toward recognition of citizenship, on the other, which was finally granted to 'all' in 2003. The new millennium also saw the 'Bindunuwewa' riots in many parts of the plantation, in which the estate youth, Sinhala villagers and the police clashed. Taking this as the defining and restraining framework for the exploration, the paper looks at emerging identities of the community in terms of belonging and movement toward citizenship. It is an exploration of identity making among selected groups of the community, exploring the dynamics of their negotiation with the Sri Lankan state and its attendant violences, desire and the different emergences of belonging, nation, class, gender and community. Through a creative use of the popular cinematic medium, the research was structured around workshops and sustained group discussions which emphasized the processes of identity-making as a gendered mapping of individual subjectivity and political action.

Keywords: Malaiyaham; Identity; Gender; South Indian cinema; Trade unions.

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Gendered Fictions is a collaborative work that bespeaks the need for a participatory methodology in the Social Sciences/Humanities that questions the epistemological premises (and promises) of research, of the knowing subject and the object of research. In this vein, I have consciously underscored the limits of the researcher's understanding of a situation, foregrounding instead the production of knowledge as a contingent, dynamic and finally emancipatory act, the joy of which should be shared by all involved. While this does not necessarily do away with the power of the researcher, who is able to 'transcend' her social position at many levels, I have attempted to make that authority articulate itself in the narrative not only as powerful but also as fractured and even vulnerable at times. This I hope serves to open up spaces for other voices to engage with their own identities directly, through a certain content of self-representation.

In early 2001 I organized a workshop on exploring ethnicity for the people of Nuweraeliya, a predominantly estate/plantation area, with a dominant plantation Tamil population for National Integration Programme Unit [NIPU]. As a self-educative measure I conducted a preliminary workshop with a group made up exclusively of plantation Tamils. This was post-Bindunuwewa²; the anger and disappointment of the Bindunuwewa riots were still in the air. At the workshop, I met Vijayakumar³. Vijayakumar was quiet for the most part, but spoke of the Bindunuwewa riots. He and his friend had been putting up a poster about Bindunuwewa when the police had appeared and shot at his friend killing him. Vijayakumar had fled the scene.

A month later I conducted a five day workshop with a group of 20-25 rather young Sinhala and Tamil people from primarily the Nuwaraeliya district. The discussion on the ethnic conflict was openly fraught and at the same time unpredictable, which made that five-day session very valuable to me. The five day workshop was quite tense. When I asked Vijayakumar pointedly about the situation in the Nuwaraeliya district, he in no uncertain terms said there was no ethnic disharmony between Tamils and Sinhalese and that it was a peaceful region. Neither he nor I brought up Bindunuwewa there, though the spectre of Bindunuwewa continued to haunt us all throughout the workshop.

We continued to struggle and I used theatre as much as possible to get at a subjectivity that would complicate the simple binary of Sinhala and Tamil. On the first day of the workshop I had the participants do an exercise where each of us had to express herself/himself through some simple repetitive action,

² In October 2000, about 200 townspeople-with the alleged assistance of the police turned upon the inmates of an open rehabilitation camp in Bindunuwewa in the Bandarawela District (in the upcountry),-run for Tamil political detainees-(purportedly all of them belonging to the LTTE, but in actuality not so)-following a dispute between the management and the detainees in which 27 detainees died. One of the dead was from the plantation community. The incident sparked wide spread rioting in the plantation area in which both Tamil and Sinhala communities suffered. The police opened fire and killed some of the alleged rioters who happened to be Tamils.

³ All names have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

which would in turn be imitated by the entire group. When it came to Vijayakumar's turn I was puzzled to see a complicated action, one that was difficult for many of us to mimic. I then learnt that it was the signature action of the super star, Rajanikanth, where he flips the cigarette and lights it with his pistol, while the cigarette is still mid air. I was awe-struck not only by this impersonation of Rajanikanth, so well executed by Vijayakumar, but also by what the impersonation of this Robin-hood like hero's violence meant to this young man who had put up flags during the Bindunuwewa riots, seen his 'friend' get shot and killed by the police, and then at the workshop denied any allegation of ethnic disharmony between Sinhalese and Tamils in the Nuwaraeliya District. Rajanikanth is known for the violence in his films, most of which is achieved through obvious tricks of technology, but executed nevertheless with a heightened dramatization of the male body and an assertion of machismo.

Vijayakumar's expressive silence and dramatizations kindled in me a desire to become intimate with Tamil cinema, its possibilities and desires within the *Malaiyaham* and seek an articulation of the politics of belonging and the emergence of a social and political consciousness among the *Malaiyaha* people. In order to explore this more and my own location within it, I set out on conducting an interactive workshop on issues of gender, masculinity in particular, cinematic representations, and identity-making as Tamil and Man and the *Malaiyaha*⁴ (hill country) or Plantation identity. To me, these identities are dynamic ones, constructed in a negotiation with the state and within a consciousness of politics, political leadership and self. This opened up a whole new terrain of heroes and heroines, home and family, state and society⁵.

The workshops with the plantation youth ranging from 15 to 36 years of age were intense, intensive and involved several hours of viewing films, posters for films, discussion, theatre work, story telling, and writing, including creating story lines for films; it involved long hours of discussion on political leadership and even longer hours of interaction and camaraderie outside the workshop. At the workshop, during all the work and play sessions, the writing formations, the theatre and script writing sessions and the long and intensive hours discussing politics and political leadership, the participants came up with individual and collective responses. We present here a collaborative and negotiated work where the participants are the principal actors and speakers.

⁴ I have used *Malaiyaham* and *Malaiyaha* persons as the terms of reference for the participants and for the political region that the participants belong to. This was the most widely used term in the workshop, one that is in currency today. I have used it fairly consistently here, in order to mark the participants' departure from the longings associated with the more down to earth (down to earth for the workers) term, *thottam* or estate. While it has seemed the most useful and theoretically relevant for my purposes here I do not wish to privilege *Malaiyaham* over other referential terms. Given this, I have also used, plantation people and estate people, wherever I have found it useful and emotionally and culturally appropriate.

⁵ In order to frame the discussion and for a theoretical and historical basis for the research project and paper I consulted a variety of documents and writings on film, media, the *Malaiyaha* community and its history of struggles. My reading includes *Landscapes of Malaiyaha Tamil Identity* by Daniel Bass, Valentine Daniel's *Charred Lullabies*, B.A. Kader's "Genesis of the Main Unions," "Meenakshi Ammal's Songs in *Inthiyarhalathu Ilankai Valkkaaiyin Nilamai: Songs written by Mrs. K. N. Meenakshi Amma*, T. Sabaratnam's "Out of Bondage: The Thondaman Story," Saral Nadan's biography of Natesaiyar in *Thesapakthan Ko. Nadesaiyar: Oru Varalaatru Ativu* and *Perettil Sila Pakkangal*, for his list of leaders of the *Malaiyaham*, Dharendra Vivek and Tejaswini Niranjana's "*Kaadalan* and the politics of Resignification. Fashion, Violence and the Body," Christine Gledhill's edited volume of *Home is where the heart is. Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's film*, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

Home and Country: Desire in the *Malaiyaham*

Malaiyaham literally means hill country home. *Malai* is hilly or mountainous region. *Aham* means interior. It is a domesticity contained and shaped by the hill country, its history, geographies and economies. A defining feature of the *Malaiyaham* identity is that of the *layam*, the line rooms, rows of semi-detached two roomed houses (roughly 10 in one line) that the workers live in for life. The dwellers in these houses call them *layam*. Home, the *layam*, is a mark of one's political subjecthood and subjectivity.

When the British brought Indian people here as labour, they wanted them all to stay in one place, within their control and not mix with others, not live in the villages, spread out and scattered. They would have thought there would be comfort in living together as well. There would be unity in living together. If the worker lived on his/her own, s/he would start thinking for herself and differently. The *layam* contributed to bringing everybody under one system of discipline. This is how the management thought. The *layams* are shrouded in darkness. It was important to keep the worker in the dark, so that s/he would just survive in the home, work, cook, eat and sleep, and not engage in other activities. There is no space to think about one's condition there. They (the management) wanted to exploit the worker. They introduced liquor, alcohol and the habit of drinking. This would stunt any desire to struggle against their condition. People could have taken to drink because of the cold as well. But the primary reason for popularizing drink is to make it act as a deterrent toward revolutionary activity. The worker continues to live in the *layam*. The newly built houses are also built in the same style as that of the *layam*. Now there is an additional floor, that's all.

The *layam* encompasses both the community as a boundless space of love and compassion and the bounded space of the tea plantation, the politics of negotiation, of the trade unions inside the two rooms, of remunerations that come from brethren working in Colombo that might contribute to an iron in the home, a TV, a sofa set. It's about obtaining running water, of toilets and about voting. The idea of Colombo is vital to the discussion of both geographical and social mobility. Colombo welcomes the youth of the *Malaiyaham* with open arms. For men, there is work, coolie work, in eating houses, jewellery places and hotels. For women, there is work as receptionists and as cashiers and of course as house maids--but work as house maid is the least desired. The availability of work for men marks the desirability of Colombo. The youth look to Colombo and not Jaffna or the north for succour⁶. People did migrate to Jaffna and to Killinocchi (northern town) at one time to work in the fields as labourers. People go to Kandy (the hill country capital) too. But work means Colombo. It draws one to its fold. But Colombo is a place that lacks humaneness, human feeling. It's a difficult place, a dangerous place. Bombs go off suddenly. You may be an educated person, and still do coolie work. On the other hand, even without education, you may be in a very high position. That is Colombo. Whatever its problems *Malaiyaham* is a place of relaxation. In other words it's home. In all of the participants' narratives of home, the physical home, one finds touching moments of the love and camaraderie that they enjoyed within its confines. But at the same time, there was a yearning to

⁶ In the north and the east 'Sri Lankan' Tamils (distinct from the Tamils of *Malaiyaham*) and Muslims are the dominant communities. Jaffna a city of the northern province was until recently a dominant centre for Sri Lankan Tamils.

move out and move away, for expansion of space, for one's own room. The understanding of home as a place of love and peace was not uniform. For women and young people home can also be a place of disruption. One woman longs for peace in the family. A place where there is no friction, generational friction. For many home is always too small.

The father is the *Thalaivar*⁷, head of the home, as far our house is concerned. He has the mammoth task of guiding our family and fulfilling our needs. There are seven rooms in our home. We have electricity, but not too many electric gadgets. My father and mother work in the tea plantation. At night my grandmother recounts tales that gladden our hearts. We have in the surroundings trees that bloom and birds that live in those trees. We are always happy to have these sights among us. My mother works hard in the mornings. This is one sad thing among us—my mother working hard at home, cooking for all at home, to send them to school. There is this picture of "Mother's Love" that hangs on the wall in our house. I am touched and disturbed by this picture of a woman feeding her baby. My mother too would have looked after me like this when I was a young child.

My dream home. A five-roomed house, surrounded by a flower garden in bloom and fruit trees, with sunlight pouring in and with plenty of ventilation. A home for me and for my beloved. In the front room, the pictures of my film idols Vijay and Simbu. My bed room will have beautiful drapery, and the dining room, the picture of Mona Lisa and Taj Mahal. A small radio, in the bed room; and always near me, the photographs of me and the one I love.

I like my home. It's small, but I like my family. But there are issues. When the radio blares my mother pounces on me. I have the picture of my favourite actress on the wall. But nobody says anything. It is sad that we do not have the beauty of nature, a flower garden, in the surroundings of our home. I would like to fraternize with my friends at home. But because it's too small it's not easy to do this with ease. I would like to keep parrots, mynah and such birds. I like Ajith. Ajith is my hero. He is a versatile actor, but none of the directors has exploited his talents well. I make up story lines for films of my own where I would cast Ajith as the hero. I would like to meet him. When I do so I will offer my stories to him. I will request him to play his role the way I want it. Ajith is no. 2 now. I want him to be no. 1. I keep his picture on the wall. My sister's favourite is Vijay. This leads to endless squabbles between us.

Desiring Women and Angry Men: Identity-making in the *Malaiyaham*

"A woman who desires excessively and a man who is angry beyond himself have never conquered this world/have not won in this world."

A much quoted saying of Rajanikanth from the film *Padaiyappa*, one of the films much discussed at the workshop and a quote that elicited a slew of responses from the women, many of them angry. Our workshops operated on the understanding that there was an implicit relationship between identity-making and the media within the trajectory of a longing, a desire, for home and home-making, for culture and society, for a place within and outside the estates and for citizenship within Sri Lanka and outside it. Where does the man belong in this and how does

⁷ *Thalaivar* also means political leader, head of an organization.

he yearn and subvert? Who is the (*Malaiyaha*) Tamil Man, his identity? Is it necessarily one that develops in relation to the Tamil woman and other women?

Rajanikanth, one of the most misogynistic of the film icons in his film appearances, keeps the desires of the woman in check. He achieves this by what are seen as punch lines that become popular sayings among the film viewers. But there is a subtext to this curtailment of female desire; his misogynist lines, framed as chiding the wealthy desirous woman, lays stress on the act of taming the shrew, but does so only by invoking the figure of one of the most powerful female figures of the South Indian film industry and political landscape: Jeyalalitha, a super star, girl friend of MGR and former chief minister of Tamil Nadu. In one of the discussions on Rajanikanth's misogynistic quote like the one quoted above, it transpires that many of his catchy anti-woman statements are aimed at Jeyalalitha, whose desires are excessive. Yet, Rajanikanth as an icon is able to define gender binaries beyond that of Jeyalalitha. Many of the participants, including a few women, saw in Rajanikanth and his violent salvationism a corrective to the corruption of wealthy desiring women. Rajanikanth is a working-class hero, not unlike other icons like Vijay and Ajith. But he is also seen as a Tamil nationalist figure; though not Tamil, he gives prominence to Tamil and Tami Nadu, the birth place of his film career. His respect for mother figures in the films is another point of adulation. His initiation into the political world is welcomed by some of the participants who see in him a model for political deliverance.

The plantation youth's identifications with the body of Rajanikanth is not simple and linear. It is mediated by several steps of displacements. But in the end, the borrowing of the body motifs of Rajanikanth helps fashion a bravado, a bravado that makes desire possible in the male and in the female. Responses to Rajanikanth's films were contradictory and evoked a great deal of argument. The intellectual and rational within the participant laughed at the claims of the hero. But all were fascinated by the fantasies evoked by technology. It was also the technological dazzle of these films that evoked the identification, not a facile one-to-one relationship with an unmediated maleness.

The image of the Tamil woman haunts our workshop throughout, shaping the entire discourse on cinema and the images it throws up. The idea of the Muslim woman is more ambiguous, a marginal entity, an other. In analyzing the overt gendering of the subject in cinematic representation, we as a collective laughed at the stereotypical ways in which men and women were cast: the assertions of masculine identities and the passivity of the female. But at the same time, in appropriating these images we also discovered how difficult it was to beat the stereotype, the familiar spectacle, particularly in the performative mode. While women may see in Rajanikanth a curious admixture of a comic display of body and a zealously violent expression of a vigilante salvationist masculinity, the bodies of Vijay and Ajith, more youthful ones, invoke the pleasures of the body more directly. The display of the body as a violent working class expression of deliverance and as those of angry men, particularly in the case of Ajith, as the speculum of violence appeals to both men and women. Other political and cultural icons range from Shah Rukh Khan to Michael Jackson. Michael Jackson belonged to the world at large and created a longing, a desire, that went beyond the boundaries of *Malaiyahan*. None of the participants recognized the picture of Bob Marley, while that of Yasser Arafat was recognized by only one.

The *Malaiyaha* identity is shaped and negotiated in its relation to the tea bush, the estate, and the place of residence, the *layam*. But its external

manifestation is the *kolunthu*; the iconography afforded by the image of the *kolunthu*. The *kolunthu*, two leaves and a bud (the tender leaves of the tea bush), is the defining symbol of the plantation in the outside world, which to a good extent has been appropriated and internalized by the *Malaiyaha* people themselves. In saying this, I of course am assuming that it is primarily an external symbol. But this assumption at another level is subverted or checked and reformed by the predominance of the female workforce in the plantation, engaged in the labour intensive work of plucking the *kolunthu*.

To get back to the tea bush, tea plucking carried out for the most part by women, is the defining symbol outside and inside. The construction of the primary worker identity of the *Malaiyahan* pivots on the idea of the woman as the tea-plucker. As one of the participants pronounced, at one time, tea earned 85% of the revenue of the country and there were altogether 185 tea estates in Sri Lanka. I of course cannot vouch for the accuracy of this assertion; nor do I think that this included small holdings by private individuals. Nevertheless this is a significant assertion as it claims a central role for the tea estate, its peoples and for its women. The large workforce of women enables the woman to be perceived as the fundamental wage-earner within the *Malaiyahan*. Yet her wages are low and are valued less than male labour. The figure of the female tea-plucker is one of beauty, she does her work with great care. The tea basket is full of the best tea buds. There are men who go for tea-plucking these days, but their work is not as good. They go for quantity and not for quality. It is important for the woman to work. She can do any kind of work. But it should be work that preserves her dignity, preserves Tamil culture. The identity of the *Malaiyaha* male complements that of the tea plucker. The encroachment of the male worker into this bastion of female labour is another sign of the evolving *Malaiyaha* identity besieged by lack of work, migration, outsourcing and mechanization. The iconography of the female tea-plucker is one that fixes the *Malaiyaha* woman as working class, bespeaking immobility, and is rooted in the idea of the tea bush and the estate. The realities for the participants may be different as many have hopes of becoming teachers, doctors, NGO activists and of leaving their working class identity behind. There were also among us women who had been to West Asia on work assignments as house maids. But the dreaming is also rhetorically curtailed and couched within the male/female split, modeled on the sentiments expressed by the heroes in the films we watched. Women as labour and as representing the foundation of the estate economy is framed and contained by masculinist sentiments that bespeak an anxiety too of the dominance of the woman within the *Malaiyahan*.

***Uthaman*: The Abject as Heroic**

In our discussion on various figures and subjects which included people like Prabakaran, Ferial Ashraff, *Malaiyahan* and Saumyamoorthy Thondaman, the question of *Uthaman* also cropped up. *Uthaman* is the title of a film. Very few knew about this film, but the figuration of *Uthaman* runs throughout the narratives of heroic cinema. *Uthaman* is a masculine personification of the virtues upheld by society, necessary for a society. The virtues of a society are centred on the figure of *Uthaman*. They are active ones, not passive, in the sense that he embodies these virtues centrally, hegemonically. The figuration of *Uthaman* can be found in school textbooks and in the reading material of children. The leader as a moral person overtakes the political and social imaginary, while the political arena remains fraught, impure, fragmented, and contested. This takes me to another

salient icon, not just in the *Malaiyahm*, but in the entirety of Sri Lanka, and for the nationalist imaginary.

The figure of Gandhi: Gandhi, in the imaginary of the Tamil nations occupies a seminal place. Cinematic projections activate and mediate the meanings of *Uthaman* in the case with both Gandhi and MGR, whose political and social significance will be discussed later. *Uthaman* cleanses the icon, the political hero, of all political impurities, its messiness, its immorality, even as the immoral becomes a hegemonic sign of masculine morality. Gandhi fought for the independence of India. Disassociated from the independence struggle and its avowedly Indian nationalist character, and from his insistent appeals for Hindu-Muslim amity, the figuration of Gandhi within the Tamil imaginary in Sri Lanka, be it the north-eastern Tamil one or the *Malaiyaha* one, is one of the heroism of the culturally superior, the pious, the austere and the 'Hindu.'

Who is the *Uthaman*? *Uthaman* literally means the truthful, honest and straightforward person, who is also a shining example to others; one who serves others as well, though this meaning is arrived at only by implication and by practice and is not inherent to the word itself. I was intrigued to find out about how much the example of Gandhi as *Uthaman* is promoted or proposed by cinematic figurations that extol the virtues, the collective and leadership traits of the hero. Tamil cinema, until recently, was pedantic and cherished the values of the morally upright and self-abnegating male while the female was both temptress and sacrificial, the sacrificial part of the female being taken for granted more or less. This was the predominant trend in the moralist-commercial cinema up to the '80s. On top of it, within the gender dynamic of the moral order, the hero is an active reformer. MGR here fits the bill in many ways; while he had obviously drawn upon this popular and populist narratology coming from the sanctifying lives of poets, saints and others, he himself, in his rise to eminence within the cinematic and political world of South India, helped shape this discourse. The spill over from the world of cinema to the social world where the hero on the silver screen in fact becomes an active force in the social and in his case political world, is facile; in turn the spill over helps shape socio-cultural and political identities as well. One may hitch *his* identity wagon to this awesome shooting star. The moral recedes, while the modern hero marks his individuality by distance and identification with the cinematic idol. In becoming the spectator, he (and she) mark themselves as subjects of the *Malaiyaham*.

Our discussion on Gandhi was in that sense deliberately diabolical in its frivolity, where we emphasized the discursivity of the figuration rather than the historical. The understanding of *Uthaman* was not one of total acceptance and Gandhi as *Uthaman* was challenged by some. As one of the participants said, like the figure of the disappointed lover, who expresses his sorrow by visibly turning to drink, these figurations are given to us, and we accept them rather thoughtlessly. Within this thought/lessness there could be other negotiations for the *Uthaman*; carrying a meaningfulness that goes beyond that of the sterile figure of Gandhi as the abstaining ascetic. (This too was questioned by the participants, the value of his sexual abstinence). How does Gandhi become an *Uthaman*? By what token? Is it because of his loincloth attire? What is the sign of that masculinity here? In discussing the signifier, particularly those promoted by cinema and popular literature, we began to explore the salience of the Gandhi as *Uthaman* to our identities in the making.

In the continuing process of dialogue, the appropriations of Gandhi as a figure becomes much more contradictory and fraught than we had imagined it to be before, though continuing to be hegemonic. On our way to the house of one of our accomplices in this project, who happens to be a fan of MGR, we lost our way and found ourselves at a turn off to an estate. At a distance I saw a statue that vaguely reminded one of Gandhi, but one that exuded an earthy 'well-fed' look. It turned out to be Gandhi; in fact, a more Bacchanalian Gandhi than the one we are generally accustomed to. In my own 'characteristically' politically incorrect manner I asked whether this was a beef eating Gandhi. Beef eating is a surreptitious act within the predominantly Hindu-Tamil *Malaiyaha* community and one of our conversations on what it means to be Tamil and a Tamil woman took place in a lower middle class-working class eating house in Hatton⁸, in the midst of my wolfing down very nice roast beef quite nonchalantly in front of some of the other participants. One of them said that he ate beef, but did not eat any at that moment. We were all eating in a Muslim 'hotel', where beef was available. Our conversation was largely about, though not actually related to my eating beef, on my seeming non-Tamilness. My comment later on at the sight of this nice Sri Lankan-*Malaiyaha*-Tamil-MGR-like-statue of Gandhi was prompted by this recall of the conversation at the eating place just a few hours before. What does it mean to be ascetic and not half starve oneself? What does it mean to be ascetic and not half starve oneself?

The figure of the wholesome Gandhi brought up many questions for me, which may sound fanciful and self-indulgent, but important nevertheless in framing issues of marginality and subversion. What are its differentiations, how does it mark its boundaries, politically and socially? What are the emergences? Is there a subversion of Gandhi, or an appropriation of Gandhi, a working class figuration of Gandhi, where the asceticism of the moralist discourse vanishes? What is it to be replaced with or by? What does it mean to be *Malaiyaha*, Tamil, plantation Tamil, working class, estate labourer, dweller of the Layam, man, woman, youth or child?

Domestic Fictions and the Making of the *Maliyaha* Identity

The *Malaiyaha* identity pivots on the idea of a political unity brought on by the political proximity of trade union politics to the identity of the worker. The politician of the *Malaiyaham* is one of their own, not a distant entity, not belonging to a different "class" of people, and there lies the rub. It's this closeness, this near-total identification with the worker and the *Malaiyaha* person (man) that bedevils politics in the *Malaiyaham*. Is the relationship too close for comfort to be meaningful in terms of political deliverance?

Who is the politician? *Malaiyaham* has not produced a selfless politician to represent the people. They do not do their duty by them—unlike in the west where political parties are well developed, and where leaders work for their people. Not so in our country. Here, the politicians work only for themselves. When leaders are chosen at elections, when people vote for them, one should look for somebody who will work for the people, vote for educated people and not choose those whom we know or belong to our place, etc.

⁸ A central town of the tea plantations, where we had the workshops.

Political leadership of course is a fraught issue and while the pressing concerns of the *Malaiyaham* hinged on discussions on actual leaders, both male and female, and their contribution and non-contribution, including that of Prabakaran, the rhetoric surrounding leadership hinged on the specularity of the male body, differentiated from the female body. The male body, decorous or not, exposed or not, violent and individualized, family-bound and middle class or wandering/lone and outside-class/urban-working class, differentiates itself from a figure conjured up as the singular body of the Tamil woman. This of course was hotly contested by many of the women (and also accepted), but not dislodged. Female leadership, that of Chandrika Bandaranaike and Jeyalalitha, was admired, but it did not speak the idiom of deliverance to the participants except on rare occasions. While cinematic representations are not accepted as true, real or even meaningful, they bespeak a truth about the *Malaiyaham* in identity forming, a truth that transcends the working class 'reality' of the people. That this truth is abjectly male and masculine is needless to mention here; it contradicts and in turn overrides the reality of the woman worker and the fraught nature of the *Malaiyaha* economy, focused so heavily on female labour both in iconography and in political mobilization of trade union activity.

Female desire has the potential to be demonic but so is that of the Sinhala male, that of Mahinda Rajapakse. President Rajapakse's regime and rule belonged to Sinhala majoritarianism and does little good to the *Malaiyaha* people. The figure of Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, the former President, is one that invites more admiration and acceptance. But both Chandrika and Mahinda Rajapakse symbolized Sinhala majoritarianism at one level. President Mahinda Rajapakse is a dictator of majoritarian chauvinism and means no good to us. At the same time the female figure of Chandrika invited ambiguous responses.

It was a remarkable feat to be a woman and to lead a country, like her mother. She managed to keep all the ministers and MPs under her control. She did a lot for the people of the *Malaiyaham*. She instituted schools and sports events in the *Malaiyaham*. But this is a problematic narrative of exaltation from the *Malaiyaha*-Tamil point of view. Chandrika was good, good to the Tamil people before she became the President, but not afterwards was an alternative reading. In the words of one of the participants, a woman:

'I am a member of the *Malaiyaha Munnodi Illaignar Sangam* (Organization of Pioneer Youth of *Malaiyaham*) and the annual Conference was held in Ginigathena (a town in the hill country) once. I attended it. There was a district-level election, and at one point seeing that no Tamils were being elected I proposed the name of a Tamil, who was present there, as an office bearer. This started off a controversy.'

This government has done little to the *Malaiyaham* people. Chandrika belongs too securely to the dominant Sinhala majoritarian polity to mark a point of deliverance or hope.' The turn to political leadership, predicated inevitably on the masculine, turns us ineluctably toward MGR.

MG Ramachandran, popularly known as MGR, hails from the hill-country capital, Kandy, Ceylon. Of *Malaiyaha* descent, he made his way to

South India, made his way into the movie world, and had a meteoric rise within it. He joined the ADMK and became one of the legendary political figures of South India. Later, another son of *Malaiyaham* [Chandrabhabu by name] was to make it in the movie world. He rose to prominence, but was not successful in the same fashion. A sustained account of Chandrabhabu may provide one with a counter narrative to MGR.

The immobility historically associated with the *Malaiyaham*, the plantation economy, the social seclusion and alienation of the community from their Sinhala neighbours, locked them within the working and geographical environment of the rising hills all around them. Do the movies offer a way out? Do they make desire possible, desire for social mobility?

Masculinity and Political Iconography: MGR and Estate Sociality

MGR continues to resonate with the people of the plantations, not so much with the youth and not so much as a star of contemporary cinema, as with a middle to older male estate worker clientele. MGR's legacy and his contemporaneity lie with the political messages of upliftment and salvation that his films propagate. The political salience of MGR lies with the use political parties put his films and particularly his songs to today—to make a rallying call to working class people, call up a collective consciousness of the working people and their struggles. At political rallies, songs like *Naalai Namathe* (Tomorrow is ours), *Pattali* (Comrade) etc., set to catchy and often rousing melodies can be heard.

But the MGR fan club is of a slightly different order. What does it mean to belong to the MGR Rasihar Mandram (MGR Fan Club)? We set out on our search for this group, our curiosity aroused by the still continuing popularity of a hero, whose 'naive' political messages and amateurish acrobatics are overshadowed by the glitz and glamour of contemporary cinema's rendezvous with (digital) technology. Also, the topographical resonance of MGR, by way of statues set up for him, his continued popularity among the people and the way he is still remembered as a champion of the working people—this set us off on our search for the MGR Rasihar Mandram.

The MGR Rasihar Mandram is situated in the 'interior' of 'Mayfield Estate' and has a membership of 100-odd persons, mostly men. We meet in the home of one of the adherents which was by the side of a small Catholic chapel/church and a courtyard. The man, Anthony, and his wife held office there while men continued to turn up. It was a dark night. I asked where the women were, the female members.

Members of the Rasihar Mandram had staged plays modeled on MGR's performances, reenacting the scenes of sword fighting that were seen as the hall mark of his spectacular appearances. This was in the '60s and '70s. The actors were mostly male and played both male and female roles. One wonders here whether the kind of drama played by MGR in his films lent itself to street theatre performances and a collectivized stylized theatre that was also part of the cultural scene of the collectivized existence of the estate population. They would go to the jungle and play-act the hunting scenes of MGR, scenes from *Vettaikaaran*. These of course are not popular today but the members did possess photographs of their performances. The photographs bore testimony to the care they had taken in adopting the detail of an MGR performance. The plays were scripted by one of the actors, a teacher, who was not present at the meeting. The Rasihar Mandram was originally called Anna Mandram (named after Annadurai, the predecessor of MGR

in spearheading the ADMK movement in South India). They first started performing Anna's (durai's) plays. It was after MGR's death that the name was changed to MGR Rasihar Mandram. MGR was a leader who served the people. He donated books, exercise books and other kinds of supplementary reading material to children in the *Malaiyaham*; donated books to libraries. They had not received any such books themselves, but they had heard about it.

MGR is a great model for all. He does not smoke or drink. He does not abuse women in films. But it's difficult to live like that in real life. 'We are working men. When we come home and the woman will not give us tea, we do feel a great anger.' But our youth will not smoke in front of the statue; some have even taken a vow by the statue against drinking. He is a great leader.

They celebrated MGR's birth and death anniversaries with tea parties and *shramadana* [voluntary donation of labour for good causes]. There would be a moment of silence and his statue would be garlanded and worshipped. They did not invite any politician to grace these occasions. They would also screen his films on those days. There is a light constantly burning at the statue. People from outside visit the estate to look at the statue. When politicians come they would look at it. People from outside are curious about it. Sinhalese people also come on these occasions. There are about 6-7 Sinhalese 'devotees' of MGR. The fan club did have female members, had had many in the past. But the activities of the Mandram are in decline at the moment. In the past they had done quite a lot of social service, such as road construction and other services that benefited the whole of society. But at present, with the rising cost of living, it is difficult to do much. When there is a funeral house among them, they get together and try to help out; prepare food and make other contributions. There was also a youth wing named after MGR's mother which carried out social work, *Sathiya Mandram*. Our children study, but then if they fail in one or two subjects they go to the estate for work. Our daughters too go to school. There were women in the *Mandram*, but after marriage and with children, it's difficult for women to take part. But they only did the cooking at these public events.

During the Temple Festival (Amman Kovil Temple), there would be contests on MGR's life and history, a public quiz held on the grounds of the Temple. People from all over the country, from Colombo too, come for our Temple Festival. But now it is under repair and we have not been able to hold the festival for some time. Yes. They did like him because he was from Ceylon. It is not possible for anybody from Ceylon to reach a position of dominance and command in India. But MGR achieved that. When MGR was shot at by M. R. Ratha (another actor who in fact played villainous roles in MGR's films), it was like death to many here. There was one among the group who tried to set fire to himself by dousing himself in kerosene oil.

MGR and the ambiguities of moral masculinity are overshadowed or shaped by a political morality, political masculinity, that is not so 'ascetic' as that of Gandhi. MGR did not to all intents and purposes practice sexual abstinence. And one of his lasting legacies is the rise of his long-time girl friend and fellow traveler in the film world, former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, Jeyalalitha into political prominence and leadership. No moral condemnation followed his acts of infidelity or of her dominance in the political arena.

The members of the fan club do see in him, MGR., an alternative to the corruption and political shenanigans associated with the dominant parties in the *Malaiyaham*. There is no politician in *Malainadu* like MGR. The politicians

here use the name of MGR to obtain votes. They play his songs, from *Vettaikaran* and other films at election rallies. We believed in them at one time, no longer. There are some politicians who donate material like books and other gifts, but on the whole they do not do anything concrete for the *Malaiyaham*. They use his name. We do vote for one or the other party. If there is no representation, somebody to speak for us, we get nothing, absolutely nothing. So we vote for them. There is no leader like MGR. President Premadasa is the only one who can be compared to him. Prabakaran has done a lot for his people. But he has no meaning for the estate-the *thottam*.

Ramaiah showed us his 'deformed' hand. He had entered into a bet with a fan of Sivaji Ganeshan. The bet was about the moral superiority of one's own hero; the test of the superiority lay with who, which fan, would dare slash his hand. We did not meet with the fan of Sivaji Ganeshan, but Ramaiah showed us his 'twisted' hand as testimony of his devotion. For us used to the 'reported' spectacle put on by suicide bombers and reckless mini bus drivers, whose show of bodily violence seems to have a collective purpose, the excess expressed in this display seemed quaint and unnatural. We stared in disbelief and incomprehensibility.

There is something touching about the Mayfield fan club and their adherence to MGR. But we do not have to stop there. MGR is still a country and culture away. The mythology of MGR gives a certain kind of space for these men and women to operate and form themselves into groups. But for how long one wonders. And to what end? As we leave, we make a donation of Rs. 1000 to the club, hoping at the same time that they will not drink it away. Such are my superior moral musings!

A Counter Narrative: For this particular fan of MGR, he meant little as a political figure. A retired worker, Palaniandi, 62 years of age, lived with his wife near Kottagala by the side of the Hatton-Nuwaraeliya main road. Palaniandi was a musician and played the accordion at musical programmes, at temple festivals and the Sinhala *Perahera* [religious procession]. 'I was a keen follower of MGR. His politics did not touch me. I was not drawn by that. It was the sword fight, his skill in sword fighting that drew me to him.' Going to see MGR's films was a social event, carried out in the company of other male friends. It produced male camaraderie. Nor did he go with his wife to see any of MGR's films. He went with her to see films with religious themes. He did not go to see English films. They were not of good morality. When he was young his family would not let him watch English films. The women were not dressed properly and so.... Those films were not appropriate for family viewing.

His wife Latchumi joined us later, and entered into the conversation. She said she had seen MGR's films. Her husband asked her in mild surprise when and how? 'I went with you,' she told the husband. 'Did you really?' was his mild response. Domestic bliss and hegemonies are contested territories. Do memories lie? Or is there more than one kind of remembering? What is actually contested here? The moral texture of MGR's films, the romance of the man and the woman going to see MGR together, and/or the assertion of masculine social spaces and their contestations by alternative memories? The fiction of domesticity, masculine domesticity is remembered, hallowed and contested through the figure of MGR here.

Prabakaran (the leader of the banned north-eastern Tamil militant group LTTE who was engaged in a relentless and violent war against the state) like George Bush is a distant figure.⁹ But unlike their distaste for George Bush, the participants at the workshop admired Prabakaran. In this, they encountered a virulent opponent in me and a less vociferous but equally convinced opponent in my collaborator from the north-east, but this did not deter them from voicing their admiration. For us, the two facilitators, who had lived deep within the tyranny of the LTTE, the discussion on Prabakaran, which was largely adulatory, was fantastical and difficult to see as a realistic discussion on politics. It had the feel of watching and discussing one of the heroes of a film in action.

What would Prabakaran be like if he were the President? He would deliver people from their misery. He has indulged in many murders, killings and commands an army of suicide bombers. He wants all, everyone else, to operate under him. There is too much violence there. But his goals are good. After liberation (from whom was not spelt out), this situation will change. There is a book about him which one of the participants has read. In that book he states "It's the environment that has shaped me. After me there will be a leader who will be full of feeling and compassion." I asked to see this book that I had not heard of. I/we spoke eloquently and forcefully about the way children in the north and the east have been forced away from their homes to fight in battle by the LTTE and how mothers in the east had been struggling to hold onto their children, to keep them away from forced conscription. In response to this, one of the participants, a young mother, said that she would definitely give up her child to fight for the land, for the people.

Prabakaran has put the name of Tamil on the world map. He has held the state hostage. What about the eviction of 75, 000-85, 000 Muslims from the north? Embarrassed at the presence of a Muslim from the East, the other facilitator, they kept silent until encouraged to speak uninhibited. It could be the case that the behaviour of the Muslims necessitated such action on the part of the LTTE. But is that not unlike what the government or Sinhala chauvinist groups say about Tamils, that they are traitors and do not work for the benefit of the country? How is it different from that logic? I ask. The participants were not familiar with the popular mode of summary justice meted out to anti-social elements, including 'traitors' by the LTTE, popularly called lamp post killings. When this phenomenon was explained to them there was no shock or disapprobation. LTTE as a demon or enemy is too distant an idea, too unreal. Lamp post killings are not too unlike the open-shirted violence of Rajanikanth, Vijay, and Ajith, admixtures of Robin Hood and vigilante populism. The discussion of the politics of the body, of the LTTE and cinematic representations, brought on a discussion of Bindunuwewa. During the riots following the Bindunuwewa massacre, one of the participants had been shot at which crippled his right arm. He had just gone out to see what was happening; he had not fully comprehended the situation and had merely followed some others who had asked him to come along. In the face of this meaningless violence of the

⁹ When I was conducting the research the war was still on and seemed poised to drag on for quite some more years, which fact might have a direct bearing on some of the research material presented here. Nevertheless, as the *Malaiyaha* community was never integral to the war syndrome in the same way other Tamil and Muslim communities from the north and east were, this has in the final analysis little bearing on the approach or other fundamentals of what is presented here.

state, the purposeful violence of Prabakaran suggested a politics of deliverance, not too unlike the politics of the much adulated film icons.

The politics of vigilante heroism and nationalist/community-based heroism is couched within what is apprehended as a politics of terrorism, which is necessarily that of the state. All of the *Malaiyaha* people are perceived as terrorists by the state. After the terror of the '83 riots people felt insecure in the plantation area. Tamils have to struggle for protection and their place in order to feel safe and secure. Security is not a given. Is the LTTE to be perceived within this scenario of anxiety? Prabakaran is not too unlike a film hero?

There were of course counter-points to the dominant narrative of adulation. 'What about Karuna? Prabakaran only created Karuna, and now Karuna (the leader of the rebel LTTE, which later came to be called TMVP under the leadership of Karuna and Pillaiyan) is against him' says one woman. But Karuna is a lackey of the Government. Prabakaran is not like Karuna. He is persevering and untiring in his mission. He is also well-versed in many things. He has knowledge. He could have settled for an easy life, maybe abroad, with his children. But he has dedicated himself to his country's people. People in the north and east worship him like he's God.

"But doesn't he speak only of the north-east? He speaks for Eelam, about Eelam [a state for Tamils in the north-east]. His struggle is about Eelam only. It means nothing for us in *Malaiyaha*." I would like to close the discussion on Prabakaran on this seemingly marginal question. We will come back to this: what do any of these people mean to us in *Malaiyaha*? One participant says "I was told that in Jaffna and in other parts of the north east, upcountry people are marginalized and humiliated; they are called *Vadakkathaiyan*.¹⁰" But some others did not think that such a situation still existed. Such discrimination against the *Malaiyaha* people in the north and east was seen as a thing of the past.

Unlike Prabakaran, George Bush gets an unsavoury beating from all the participants, as all ills in the world are laid at the door of America. They thrashed his politics of imperialism and invasion. Then we posed an unseemly question: "What if America decides to support the armed struggle of the *Malaiyaha* people in their bid for a separate state?" There was dead silence for a moment, and then somebody tentatively came forth with an answer: "Well, that's a different scenario altogether. It presents a very different prospect." Then wise counsel prevailed, and the conversation turned to how such a move would ruin the *Malaiyaha*, the people, and make it subordinate to American imperialism. But I want to hold onto that moment of uncertainty, of ambiguity, and the contrariness of our responses in our desires of identity-making. After all, all of us would like to go to America if the opportunity arises.

¹⁰ Means, literally, Northman, a derogatory term of reference among northern Tamils with regard to those from India, in particular, South Indian Tamils, and more specifically, plantation Tamils.

The Sweet Scent of Spring: Narratives of Liberation

The dominant logic of liberation, sieved through the prism of cinema, appears hegemonic. In one of our final sessions, the participants embarked on an exercise of writing scripts/story lines for films for "potential" production. The scripts were accompanied by posters for the film. The groups presented the scripts to the rest of the group, who discussed the different logics of the three films. I discuss here in detail one of the scripts with a glance at another.

Vaadiya pookal thirumbavum malarum (Withered flowers will bloom again); The story line for this film concerns an inter-caste romantic relationship opposed by the politician-father of the heroine. The poster that the participants drew up presents a very interesting iconography. A temple festival occupies the central position in the poster. The festival is the site of conflict that forms the central theme. Unsurprisingly the conflict here is of a romantic nature and the villain belongs to the dominant business and 'political' class. A sign of his villainy is his overt religious piety. The film has its climatic phase enacted at the Temple Festival, which is figured prominently in the poster. The festival site, according to the story tellers, stands for the carnivalesque, where taboos are broken and boundaries trespassed; where the unspoken can happen. The challenges posed to the dominant order, caste-wise, are channelled into a narrative of heterosexual romance and love. Also, importantly, the woman is stereotypically upper-class and 'sophisticated,' following popular narrative trends of South Indian Tamil cinema. The story pivots on the social action of the hero. The script writers hoped to cast the film with popular South Indian film idols. They also said that as this was their first film and they wanted to break into the industry, they could not hope to reverse traditional types of film making. With such vaulting ambitions, how can they even begin to plot a programme of resistance that subverts or skirts the popular narratology of resistance displayed through individuated masculine valour, in which the woman is rendered, if not as passive, as the object of desire. The temple festival becomes a sexualized space, where the male, resistant and marginal, as opposed to the dominant villain, can exert his prowess and gain full manhood. The villain, the father of the heroine, appears in the film smoking a cigarette with his forehead streaked with holy ash, a sign of piety, and in popular cinematic signification, a sign of false and villainous piety. If the *Malaiyaha* man wishes to attain self hood, it has to be fought for on the terrain of culture and for control over the instruments of culture, which provide him with the imaginary to contest and refashion himself as a romantic hero. How does this desire coalesce with the dreaming for a different leadership, for a different kind of home, for one's own space, for more teaching appointments, for political delivery from trade unions and from Sinhala majoritarianism? How does it deliver one from the gender hierarchies imposed on a person and its intersections with caste and class hierarchies? The emergent middle class man stumbles upon one of his arch rivals, the political leadership and dominance of trade unions, and the business community. But the dynamic self that emerges both contests current political leadership and works in tandem with it.

Another script, *Puthiya Parvai* (New Horizons), was interesting for the reason that it incorporated a Sinhala person as one of the three protagonists in a revolutionary struggle of four convicts. The inclusion of the Sinhala compatriot was considered important by the participants. In *Malaiyahanam*, "we always think of Tamil and Sinhala as separate entities. We saw this during Bindunuwewa. There

are Sinhala people in the estate. We must go to them, incorporate them in our activities.”

In addition to the film scripts they/we also engaged in creating play acting scenes on themes that touched upon the identity of the *Malaiyaha* person that had been discussed before. One of such scenes discussed trade union relations between leaders and workers: Trade union leaders meet with the workers; they are busy with many other pressing issues. Finally they consent to meet with the workers and hear their complaints. The workers put their stories, the difficulties of their lives, to the leaders: about the rising cost of life. The Trade Union leader said that he had informed the government of all of this and that he would speak to other unions and also with the President of the country. He asks the workers to sign a petition and hand it over to him. The workers go back to their life of toil and economic hardship. The trade union leaders continue in their life of comfort and luxury. This is a common narrative. In the multiple theatre workshops that I have conducted for both workers (women), students and others, one finds this predominant theme of condemnation of trade unions. This takes us to perhaps one of the most salient figures shaping identity in the *Malaiyaham*.

The narratology of liberation needs to pay heed to perhaps the most discussed, criticized and valorized figure within the *Malaiyaha* identity, Saumyamoorthy Thondaman, the founder-leader of the Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC), which has dominated trade union politics in the plantation from the '50s. Any discussion of plantation leadership, of activism and politics, inevitably turns to the figure of Saumyamurthy Thondaman. Thondaman is a figure of intimacy, for he belonged to the plantation sector, the son of a *Kangani* (overseer and middle man). He is loved or hated by the people. Though CWC's hegemonic monopoly (there were other radical left wing unions) of plantation trade union activity has been broken by the emergence of the breakaway trade union, *Malaiyaha Makkal Munnani*, it's still a formidable force to contend with and is at present headed by Arumugam Thondaman, the grandson of Saumyamoorthy Thondaman, who is part of the coalition government.

Why is he (Thondaman Sr.) maligned so much? This is an ungrateful society. He gave refuge to so many, to my own family, after the '83 riots. He used to say that if the people of the *Thottam* (Plantations) were to stand tall and walk erect, they needed to build up their strength, physically and otherwise. He had a great vision for the plantation people; he had visions of how we would be in the year 2000 and worked toward it. He instituted teachers, police officers, *Gramma Sevakas*, from the plantation community itself and also drew up so many programmes for the upliftment of the people, such as popularizing the livestock industry, computer training, etc. He may have had his foibles in his private life. He had a weakness for women I hear. But he was good to us, the people. This narrative from a follower of the CWC brought down the wrath of many, the entire spirit of the *Malaiyaham* upon the speaker. Thondaman's politics and the legitimacy of his politics were questioned and challenged. He is responsible for bringing people of Indian origin as labourers to this place. He was a *Kangani*. His father was in that trade, and after that he too was involved in that.

That is an unfair allegation. His father was a businessman and had dealings with white folks. There were others like Ramasamy who brought over the people. Thondaman was asked to serve in the Indo-Ceylon Congress as a member. He has suffered and was humiliated by Sinhala politicians. Once, in '52 or '53, when he was on stage D. B. Wijetunge, Sirisena Cooray and JR (leading

Sinhala politicians of whom two are former presidents of the country) had grabbed hold of his *vertti* [cloth] and beaten him, humiliating him. He had vowed then that no person from the plantation sector would be subjected to such humiliation again. He worked hard for the people.

He was too individualistic and appointed himself to the leader's position. Instead of solving the problems of the estate people in unity, bringing all together, he made them take their problems to him and thereby obtained dominance among the people. That's how he amassed his wealth too.

We have to look at this historically and Thondaman too historically. Do you know how the subscription was collected in those days? They went from house to house and collected 5 cents from each house or worker, opened a book and recorded it. There was no bank account and such sophisticated things at that time. That's how they began. They organized the workers in estates and asked the people to maintain those organizations themselves. In those days, one could not even speak against the white man, let alone fight him. After Thondaman entered the parliament there was that kind of status. At the beginning it was very hard. There are biographies of Thondaman. There are contenders today, challenging the dominance of Thondaman. Chandrasekar of *Malaiyaha Makkal Munnani* is one. But this contention is a part of personal politics and personal ambition and has no bearing on the CWC or Thondaman's integrity.

The figure of Thondaman conjures up the image of somebody in command, doling out advice; it is the figure of a politician, on an election poster, asking for the people's mandate; of an elder statesman gifting an eight-year old with a single anklet without its twin at a concert. Thondaman is a contested figure within the emergence of the *Malaiyaha* identity. His preeminence in *Malaiyaha* politics has been eroded by widespread accusations of corruption, splits within the party, and a still persistent left-wing radicalism which though marginal has found a niche for itself in the emerging middle classes of the estate working population. School teachers schooled by an older generation of left-wing educators are still active on the cultural scene. Along with this we see the rise of the NGO sector and a womanist and feminist consciousness, not radical but reformist that seeks to find an outlet for the plantation women's voices. CWC's trade unionism and politics of patronage have had to navigate within these competing forces of mobilization.

Within the gaps, the faultlines, within the 'violent shuttling', to borrow a phrase from Gayathri Chakravorty Spivak, between these countervailing trajectories of desire and loss of desire and between vilification and adulation, there could be counterpoints of identity-making that could have meaning upon shaping desire. Here I give in full one of those desirous moments of history making, a counterpoint to the masculinist ideal of leadership represented by Thondaman.

Meenakshiyamma, the wife and partner of the trade union leader Natesa Iyer of the Indo-Ceylon Congress, was active in the 1940s in politics. When the workers of Indian origin were being driven out of the country, she fought against it. She fought for their right to citizenship. She is a feminist par excellence, was involved in trade union activism and fought against the capitalist leadership of the estates. She composed songs that were meaningful. I am also a singer and would like to sing her songs and take them to the people. In the play *Payanangal* (Journeys) I sang a song composed by Meenakshiyamma. I would like to create plays based on her work and struggles. Why cannot we have women like this born among us again? She occupies such a place in the worker's struggle.

If I were to conclude this paper with such a rhetoricity of vision, it would be grossly and willfully misrepresenting the ambiguities and anxieties embedded in the articulations of the participants in my own searching. Desire, gendered, is not only fragmented but also non-linear; the appropriation of Meenakshiyamma's activism and politics itself inhabits an ambiguous area of gender- and class-crossing. Here, I wish to stress the disquietitudes of identity making that reside within the visionary, within the programme of feminism that is so pronounced in the narrative given above. At the end of one particularly long and exhausting session of writing and discussing, I posed a question to all, a question that I termed dumb and naïve on my part, but important nevertheless (to me): 'Which of the following persons did the participants see as the most meaningful to the *Malaiyaha* people?' The participants had to choose one from the figures of: MGR, Thondaman, Prabakaran, Chandrika and Rajanikanth. While one woman said she had no liking for any of these persons, another chose Chandrika and two others (male and female) chose MGR; all others by some kind of tacit consent voted for Thondaman. I was happy to note that nobody had chosen Prabakaran. At this point, I want to go back to the quote cited earlier, a query posed by one of the participants, recalling that moment of quizzical assertion:

"But doesn't he (Prabakaran) speak only of the north-east? He speaks for Eelam, about Eelam. His struggle is about Eelam only. It means nothing for us in Malaiyahanam."

My stress at this point is not on Prabakaran; it is on Thondaman and yet not on Thondaman alone. Vilified and adulated at the same time, he means something to 'us.' This is the fraught figure of intimacy and distance, of achievement and failure, of fulfillment and loss. This is the vanishing point in our mapping of place and its economies, of belonging, citizenship, the state and its attendant violences. This is the point of closure for a theoretical inquiry and the point of disclosure for a political quest of identity-making for and among the sons and daughters of *Malaiyahanam*.

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