

Deconstructing Shakti: Investigating representations of the Hindu goddess in South Africa

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Abstract

Several scholars have investigated and attempted to categorise the Hindu goddess.¹ This Hindu goddess has never been a neat packaged entity, monolithic, singular or unchanging. Hinduism, itself, largely constructed from very diverse traditions is further complicated as practised in South Africa where the diaspora worship the goddess in various ways. Although this article shows a brief overview of some of the most popular of the Hindu goddesses, its main focus is on representations of Kali and Draupadi and the ways in which these representations might be interpreted as feminist, particularly within the South Indian *Amman* tradition in South Africa. Using a poststructural feminist theoretical framework I analyse various representations of Kali and Draupadi and juxtapose these with mainstream feminist scholarship in South Africa. Analysing, in this instance, the work of Alleyn Diesel, I interrogate how *Amman* goddesses, such as Kali and Draupadi (also referred to as fierce goddesses), come to be favoured by feminists, over goddesses such as Parvati, Saraswati and Laxmi (or 'benign' goddesses), entrenching a false binary between the categories, in order to promote a liberatory feminist agenda. I contend, first, that these categories of goddesses are not in simple opposition to each other, and that their representations are continually produced and thus dynamic and complex. Second, I argue that the valorisation of these *Amman* goddesses within feminist scholarship precludes the lived realities of the devotees themselves and that simply having a heroic feminist role model does not necessarily liberate women devotees from their multiple oppressions such as gender, class, caste and, in South Africa, race.

Introduction

The term *Shakti/shakti* in this article is used in two ways; first as representational of the Hindu goddess – encompassing the multiple deities and various traditions which venerate them – and, second, as the power attributed to the goddess. The idea of female power in Hinduism

¹ I use the term Hindu goddess (plural and complex) as an overarching term for the myriad deities who have become clustered together in the many texts attempting to classify and categorise them. The term is used here with some irony as the goddesses emerge from various traditions and are, as the paper will show, dynamic and difficult to compartmentalise.

is, of course, contentious especially in the scriptural² tradition where Hinduism claims to hold its goddesses in the highest regard while real women are still oppressed. While Shaktism has attempted to reclaim the feminine principle within Hinduism, it is not within the scope of this article to investigate this complex phenomenon. I interrogate, rather, the 'shakti' or power bestowed on constructions of the *Amman* goddesses, thereby imbuing them with feminist liberatory characteristics. It would be a mammoth undertaking to discuss all the goddesses in the Pantheon and even within the *Amman* tradition. Therefore, for the purposes of this article, I will focus on the interpretations and the worship of two goddesses in particular; Kali and Draupadi. The choice of focussing on Kali and Draupadi for this article is threefold. First, both Kali and Draupadi straddle the *Amman* and *Brahmanic* traditions. This is important as it subverts the idea that the two traditions are binarily different and dichotomous,³ and recognises that both traditions have influenced each other in the shaping of these goddesses.⁴ Second, both goddesses are still venerated in South Africa which is where I locate this article and critique some of their representations. Finally, these goddesses among other *Amman* goddesses are worshipped through extensive embodied rituals and sacrifices and are not purely based on scriptural discourse. This is particularly important in South Africa where *Amman* religious rites and rituals have largely survived through an oral tradition.

The indentured labourers who were brought to South Africa from India in 1860 were mainly from the South Indian village community. The villagers had brought their goddesses and forms of ritual with them, and, despite the political and cultural pressures prevalent in this country, the rituals have survived.⁵ *Amman* or mother worship, in the form of firewalking, trance, body piercings and even blood sacrifice is still very popular amongst South Indians in South Africa.⁶ These traditions had not been readily accepted within South Africa and *Amman* worship like many of the other South Indian traditions were regarded somewhat disparagingly;

² Scripture here refers to Brahmanical texts namely the Rg-Vedas, the Puranas, the Mahabharata, the Upanishads and the Ramayana

³ Stephan Lewis, "Goddesses in the Hindu Tradition." *Marburg Journal of Religion* 18, no. 1 (2016).

⁴ Lewis, "Goddesses in the Hindu Tradition," 1.

⁵ Ashwin Desai and Goolam H. Vahed, *Inside indenture: a South African story, 1860-1914*, (Durban, South Africa: Madiba Publishers, 2007), 237.

⁶ Diesel, Alleyn. "The empowering image of the divine mother: A South African Hindu woman worshipping the goddess." *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 13, no. 1 (1998): 74.

and deemed noisy and unruly by the colonial authorities.⁷ Interestingly, however, it was within Hinduism that the ritual based traditions were viewed with the most condescension. The Hindu reform movement, circa 1909, was trying to distance Hinduism from ritual based traditions and ways of worship, arguing that they were not aligned to the principles of Hinduism.⁸ Hence, the South Indian goddess and the rituals associated with her were seen as uncivilised and primitive by the reformists who wanted to cultivate a purer, more modern, philosophical Hinduism.⁹ It is, thus, within this framework of race and caste opposition, amongst others, that *Amman* and her attendant rituals have had to survive and renegotiate. As Desai observes, “[t]hese [customs] were not simply inherited and transplanted from India, but often refashioned in a fluid and complex situation.”¹⁰

There has been a wide range of material written about Hinduism and more specifically the diverse Hindu goddesses. Not surprisingly however, the goddesses who are traceable through the scriptures of the Brahmanical or ‘great tradition’,¹¹ have been analysed in more detail than the popular goddesses who are more commonly worshipped in the local village traditions.¹² The great tradition, also referred to as the formal, Brahmanical, Aryan, Pan-Indian,¹³ and sometimes, the canonical tradition, is widely documented in scriptures such as the Rg-Vedas, the Puranas, the Mahabharata, the Upanishads and the Ramayana. Many scholars have noted that less has been written about the village or local goddesses despite the vast reach of their veneration both in India¹⁴ and in South Africa.¹⁵

Amman or mother goddesses form part of this lesser documented oral, village tradition, also known as the *gramadevata* tradition.^{16,17}

⁷ Desai and Vahed, *Inside indenture*, 237

⁸ Desai and Vahed, *Inside Indenture*, 229.

⁹ Desai and Vahed, *Inside Indenture*, 238.

¹⁰ Desai and Vahed, *Inside Indenture*, 229.

¹¹ David Robert Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition*, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2005), 2.

¹² Lynn Foulston, *At the Feet of the Goddess: the Divine Feminine in Local Hindu Religion*, (Brighton, England; Portland, Or.: Sussex Academic Press, 2002).

¹³ Stephan Lewis. "Goddesses in the Hindu Tradition," *Marburg Journal of Religion* 18, no. 1 (2016).

¹⁴ Lynn Foulston, *At the feet of the goddess*, 9.

¹⁵ Vinay Lal and Goolam Vahed, "Hinduism in South Africa: Caste, Ethnicity, and Invented Traditions, 1860-Present". (2013).

¹⁶ Lynn Foulston, *At the Feet of the Goddess*, 9.

¹⁷ Stephan Lewis. "Goddesses in the Hindu Tradition", 2016.

Sometimes the formal traditions are associated with North Indian practices while the village or *gramadevata* traditions have been linked to Dravidian religious practices. I make reference to the goddesses in this way because of the way two separate camps or clusters of apparently disparate spiritual strains seem to present themselves in literature, yet even though they “are two separate traditions emerging from an ancient goddess tradition...[they] influence each other.”¹⁸ Within the South African context, the relationship between North and South Indian, *Amman* and Brahmanical is even more porous, with the traditions strongly influencing and borrowing from each other.¹⁹ As mentioned before, although Kali and Draupadi seem to emerge from classical Aryan scripture²⁰ – Kali from the *puranas*²¹ and Draupadi from the *Mahabharata*,²² these goddesses are also firmly embedded within the extensive *Amman* (mother) tradition of Tamil rituals practised in South Africa.²³ In the *Amman* tradition, Kali is known as Kaliyamman and Draupadi, a queen, and wife of the Pandava brothers in the Mahabharata, becomes revered as goddess Draupadiamman, who walks through fire to purify herself.²⁴ In order to deconstruct the Kali and Draupadi it is necessary to delve into some of their representations and classifications.

The Hindu Goddess

So who is this Hindu goddess? In a society which has become eclectically enamoured with the divine feminine, it is crucial to first investigate the mythological origins of the Hindu goddess, and how these goddesses have been interpreted over time. Although, women (and men) have venerated the goddess within the various Hindu traditions, it does not necessarily conclude that the goddess, as textually constructed and reconstructed, contributes to a feminist and liberatory vehicle in the real lives of her worshippers. The goddess has been written into history for the most part by men or those in power. In fact, the early Hindu scriptures such as the Vedas²⁵ did not portray the goddesses as being

¹⁸ Stephan Lewis. "Goddesses in the Hindu Tradition".

¹⁹ Pratap Kumar. *Hinduism and the Diaspora : A South African Narrative* [in English]. 2013.

²⁰ Kumar. *Hinduism and the Diaspora*, 6.

²¹ Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses*, 117.

²² Alf Hildebeitel, *The cult of Draupadi*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

²³ Alleyn Diesel, "Tales of Women's Suffering: Draupadi and other Amman Goddesses as Role Models for Women," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* no. 17 (1) (2002): 5.

²⁴ Alleyn Diesel, "The empowering image of the divine mother: A South African Hindu woman worshipping the goddess," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 1, no. 13 (1998): 75.

²⁵ The Vedas, particularly the Rg-Veda, are said to be the earliest known scriptures containing mantras, hymns and descriptions of various deities.

particularly significant.²⁶ Kinsley notes that only a few female deities are mentioned in the Vedas and those who are mentioned, are not central to the narratives and rarely appear in later scriptures.²⁷ Later versions of Hindu goddesses were written about extensively by anthropologists and ethnographers from the west, in an attempt to understand the phenomenon of goddess worship. However, all of the attitudes towards, and the interpretations of, Hindu goddesses are significant in that they present conflicting and complex theories surrounding goddess mythology. The plurality and multi-layered versions of the goddess suggest that even though she is embedded in ancient tradition, the Hindu goddess is not conceptually bound or static.

The origins of goddesses and female deities within Hinduism, pre-scripture, have not been firmly ascertained, although several female figurines have surfaced from archaeological findings in the Indus Valley.²⁸ Although inconclusive, these findings, according to Foulston, point to a possible, rich goddess heritage in the rural and indigenous tribes of India and could have influenced later versions of goddess worship.²⁹

Most popularised among the goddesses in the scriptures are the 'essentially benign goddesses' and the 'essentially fierce goddesses'.³⁰ Although these categories seem to suggest a binary between the two, the goddesses are never completely from one or the other.³¹ Therefore, even though the characteristics of these fierce and benign goddesses are described as so dissimilar and contrasting, they are complex, their interpretations nuanced, while they sometimes overlap in characteristics.³²

In contemporary Vedic Hinduism, the popular benign goddesses include Saraswati, Laxmi, Parvati, Sita and Radha.³³ Their beauty, nurturing characteristics and devotion to others, is said to represent the ideal towards which all Hindu women ought to aspire. They seem to be a personification of what constitutes "the ideal, selfless, submissive wife."³⁴

²⁶ Foulston, *At the feet of the goddess*, 6.

²⁷ Kinsley, *Hindu goddesses*, 7.

²⁸ Kinsley, *Hindu goddesses*, 216.

²⁹ Alleyn Diesel, "Tales of Women's Suffering", 5.

³⁰ Foulston, *At the feet of the goddess*, 16.

³¹ Foulston, *At the feet of the goddess*, 16.

³² Kinsley, *Hindu goddesses*, 17.

³³ Kinsley, *Hindu goddesses*, 16

³⁴ Alleyn Diesel, "Tales of Women's Suffering," 8.

Venerated for their accomplishment and power whilst remaining exemplars of duty and devotion, these so called benign goddesses, encourage and facilitate the path to righteous living or *dharma*. In other words, worshippers seek the benevolent grace of these goddesses. These goddesses have, however, been described in many texts as being faithful consorts to powerful and more significant gods, yet “none of them rivals the great male gods in these texts.”³⁵ In comparison to their male counterparts they are usually smaller in stature³⁶ and secondary in nature. They all possess creative attributes of their own but are mainly represented in relation to their male consorts.³⁷

A mainstream feminist perspective is critical of this notion of the ideal wife, especially given that most of the scriptures are written from a “high caste, educated, and predominantly male”³⁸ perspective. Do these goddesses encourage a narrative of subservience in women which precludes them from exercising agency? Several feminists of Hindu origin call for a more nuanced approach to feminism which examines the notion of *bhakti* or devotion within the context of Hinduism as a possibility for liberation.³⁹ Narayan argues that equality and rights are problematic terms within a Hindu context and that the precepts of Hindu principals were based more on righteousness, duty and *Bhakti*. This concept of *Bhakti*, is personified by the benign goddess who is “viewed as the supreme devotee.”⁴⁰ Narayan puts forward an argument that this supreme form of devotion has the possibility to destabilise the hierarchical and patriarchal constructs embedded with Hinduism. I will later discuss the importance of this idea of devotion in the lived realities of women who worship *Amman*.

Fierce goddesses fall into the second broad category of Hindu female deities. There is very little which is appealing about the fierce goddesses who seem, on the surface, to personify the very opposite of the benign goddesses. Durga and Kali are two of the most formidable and recognised of these fierce goddesses and they are associated with war, death, destruction and blood sacrifice. Most importantly, these goddesses are portrayed as being independent of male consorts.⁴¹ The

³⁵ Kinsley, *Hindu goddesses*, 17.

³⁶ Foulston, *At the feet of the goddess*, 16.

³⁷ Foulston, *At the feet of the goddess*, 16.

³⁸ Kinsley, *Hindu goddesses*, 2.

³⁹ Vasudha Narayanan, "Brimming with Bhakti, embodiments of Shakti: Devotees, deities, performers, reformers, and other Women of power in the Hindu tradition," *Feminism and world religions* (1999): 26.

⁴⁰ Foulston, *At the feet of the goddess*, 16.

⁴¹ Foulston, *At the feet of the goddess*, 17.

most popular and iconic of these fierce goddesses is Kali, described by Kinsley as “terrible”, “frightening” and one who “gets drunk on the hot blood of her victims.”⁴²

A third group of goddesses which Foulston and Kinsley make reference to, are the village or local goddesses. These goddesses, who emerge from the *Amman* tradition, are less written. Foulston asserts, however, that there are definite associations and relationships between *Amman* and Brahmanical goddesses. We see this clearly in how Kali and Draupadi have been localised in Tamil traditions. The lack of inclusion of these local goddesses into mainstream Hindu scripture is notable as it elucidates the hierarchical disdain with which the non-Brahmanical traditions have been viewed. However, the local deities have been more popular amongst the lower castes and those worshipped in the villages were, by and large, female with each village usually worshiping its own unique deity.⁴³ The goddesses of the village were regarded as protectors of the villagers in matters pertaining to agriculture and health. So the goddesses were significant within a particular context, place and season. Yet despite *Amman*’s contextual veneration, the indentured carried this worship into South Africa.

Underlying all of the dynamics of hierarchy and oppression are representations of the Hindu goddess who has changed and been shaped by the traditions and conditions around her. Some of the village goddesses have become “Sanskritized” or “Brahmanized”⁴⁴ over time. Brahmanisation, as described by Foulston, “involves the gradual changing of a deity, often with strong tribal, indigenous or non-Brahmanical characteristics,”⁴⁵ into a more palatable version of goddess, with characteristics which could be likened to the Brahmanical goddess – smaller, lighter skinned, benevolent. Not only did the local goddess take on the physical characteristics of more mainstream Brahmanic deities,⁴⁶ but *Amman* practices were being ‘cleansed’ of the more ‘impure’ rituals such as animal sacrifice. Although, Sanskritisation had, and still has, an impact on local goddesses, the reverse has also been taking place. Village devotees have been appropriating the Brahmanical goddesses and worshipping them as *Amman* goddesses. As mentioned earlier Kali

⁴² Kinsley, *Hindu goddesses*, 116.

⁴³ Kinsley, *Hindu goddesses*, 198.

⁴⁴ Foulston, *At the feet of the goddess*, 92.

⁴⁵ Foulston, *At the feet of the goddess*, 92.

⁴⁶ William Harman "From Fierce to Domesticated: Mariyamman Joins the Middle Class," [In English]. *Nidan : International Journal for Indian Studies* 24, no. 1 (2012): 41-65.

and Draupadi are two such *Amman* goddesses who seem to have their origins in scripture yet are also embedded in South Indian Hindu rituals.

Kali

Like most of the other goddesses, Kali only emerges in Hindu mythology after the Vedas were written. When juxtaposed to these other goddesses, she is atypical to say the least. Her “terrible” appearance, which interestingly includes being dark and “dishevelled”⁴⁷, is further exacerbated by her shadowy existence in graveyards, her blood thirsty demeanour, and an inability to control her rage and murderous ways. She is associated with Shiva but her relationship to him is not one of dutiful and devoted wife. On the contrary, Kali’s relationship to Shiva is unconventional, carries a strong sexual undertone and, is significant in that Kali seems independent of Shiva, showing dominance over him rather than devotion to him.⁴⁸

The *Shakti* element – in this case synonymous with energy, power and potency – is embedded in Kali’s characterisation. Even though the benign goddesses are said to represent the *shakti* principal too, it is strong within Kali. The most popular of Kali’s creation myths is that she emerged from Durga’s fury, in the midst of a battle. Kinsley makes reference to the battle in which Durga, the warrior, must slay two demons. When Durga manifests Kali to help her win the battle, Kali is described as “represent[ing] Durga’s personified wrath.”⁴⁹ It is interesting that these warriors are all women and that Durga’s rage produces another woman, Kali. Kali, it seems, personifies the antithesis of essentialist female characteristics. The Kali in Kinsley’s findings is not a voluptuous, ample breasted, motherly or creative type, but is, instead destructive, thin and fearsome.⁵⁰

Kali as a terrifying and murderous destroyer is an important element in the philosophical issues of *Moksha* or liberation from the cycle of life and death. In mainstream Hinduism, a soul is said to return eternally until it has learnt the lessons of this embodiment. Only then is the soul able to be liberated. Kali who is so starkly different from all the other goddesses, is said to facilitate such liberation for those who worship her, by representing all that is dark, dangerous, uncomfortable and deadly. The devotee is forced to confront these inevitable truths and in so doing

⁴⁷ Kinsley, *Hindu goddesses*, 198.

⁴⁸ Kinsley, *Hindu goddesses*, 119.

⁴⁹ Kinsley, *Hindu goddesses*, 118.

⁵⁰ Kinsley, *Hindu goddesses*, 120.

“remind...Hindus that certain aspects of reality are untamable, unpredictable, and always a threat to society’s feeble attempts to order what is essentially disorderly.”⁵¹ Hence, Kali is not only presented as a liberating prospect for women but a destabilising concept to the construct of the goddess, in general. Kinsley’s Kali forces her devotees to acknowledge that alternatives exist outside of “predictable dharmic order.”⁵²

Her nonconformity extends to her blackness, further emphasising her anomalous goddess status in a religion concerned with caste and colour. Rajan posits that these very qualities enamour Kali to many feminists or unconventional women who may find themselves on the edges of society.⁵³ Kali, black or dark, is also visibly representative of a very low caste. The rest of her attributes become synonymous with her blackness, her ‘uncivilised’ behaviour and appearance, everything wild and marginal. This description carries an underlying implication of the denigration of the lower castes.

Her ‘otherness’ may be one of the reasons that many lower caste and non-Aryan people have adopted Kali as mother or *Amman*. Even though the original depictions of Kali describe her as devoid of maternal and nurturing tendencies, as *Amman*, she is associated with healing and protection, somewhat different to the gaunt and ‘terrible’ creature described by Kinsley. The devotion of Kali worshippers in South Africa, is often manifested in a Kali trance, where, through invoking the goddess, the devotee becomes the her.⁵⁴ In a Kali trance, a woman takes on the fierce and ‘wild’ qualities of Kali, empowered to offer blessings to other worshippers.

Draupadi

Draupadi, also a significant *Amman* goddess in the Dravidian rituals, has somewhat different mythological origins to Kali. This goddess, who is famously worshipped by the firewalking ritual both in India and South Africa, has also undergone a reimagining from Brahmanical heroine in the *Mahabharata* to fire walking *Amman* goddess.

⁵¹ Kinsley, *Hindu goddesses*, 129.

⁵² Kinsley, *Hindu goddesses*, 130.

⁵³ Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, "Is the Hindu Goddess a Feminist?", *Economic and Political Weekly* (1998): WS35.

⁵⁴ Rajan, "Is the Hindu Goddess a Feminist?", 11.

Yet, unlike Kali who is represented as independent and unconventional, Draupadi is a goddess known for being a dutiful wife to not just one husband but five. Like Kali, however, she is also described as dark skinned. In the classical *Mahabharata*, Draupadi is born from a fire ritual performed by her father.⁵⁵ While Draupadi's trajectory in the *Mahabharata* has been referred to as a 'text of terror', Draupadi's marriage to the Pandava brothers has also, ironically, been deemed as indicative of her own agency.⁵⁶ The epic, most known for documenting the battle of Kurukshetra, is strewn with incidences of sexual harassment towards Draupadi.⁵⁷ As the wife of the five Pandava brothers, who are the heroes of the epic, she is exposed to abuse and harassment, as a consequence of the actions or inactions of these husbands. The disrobing of Draupadi is probably one of the best known and core scenes of the *Mahabharata*. After Yuddhishtra, one of her husbands 'loses' her to Duryodhana, his enemy and cousin in a dice match, Draupadi is dragged to the centre of the court where she is publicly humiliated. Attempts are made to strip her off her sari, and this, in front of her husbands and the rest of the court. Draupadi is also said to be menstruating at the time. This incident is central to the epic, because the Battle of Kurukshetra is in some ways linked to Draupadi's need for retribution and revenge. Draupadi is vocal about all of the violations upon her body by men and about what must amount to betrayal by her husbands, in the light of their choices and perceived impotence.⁵⁸

Black describes Draupadi as, not only, a goddess and victim of sexual violence but interestingly, as a scholar.⁵⁹ Draupadi, does not only fall prey to an enormous amount of gender based violence, says Black, she is also able to theorise her anger at the injustices in a way which interrogates certain core aspects of Hindu thought, such as *dharma* or duty and righteousness.⁶⁰ Yuddhishtra and the other Pandava brothers resist protecting Draupadi because they are bound by *dharma*, having fairly lost the dice game. Draupadi, says Black, not only questions their commitment to *dharma* but her own as well. She presents herself as deserving of justice because of her exemplary dutifulness and virtue as a wife and queen.

⁵⁵ Brian Black, "Draupadī in the Mahābhārata," *Religion Compass* 5, no. 7 (2013):169.

⁵⁶ Diesel, "Tales of Women's Suffering", 9.

⁵⁷ Black, "Draupadī in the Mahābhārata", 39.

⁵⁸ Sally J. Sutherland, "Sītā and Draupadī: Aggressive Behavior and Female Role-Models in the Sanskrit Epics," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 1, no. 109 (1989): 63-79.

⁵⁹ Black, "Draupadī in the Mahābhārata", 169.

⁶⁰ Black, "Draupadī in the Mahābhārata", 174.

In the Mahabharata, Draupadi is not represented as a goddess but in the South Indian representation, besides becoming an *Amman* deity, she is transformed into a phoenix-like goddess⁶¹ who is able to cleanse herself from her past abuses by walking on fire. Through a South Indian interpretation, Draupadi 'had attained the status of the fierce South Indian goddess of fire, who requires propitiation, but can also bestow great blessings on her devotees.'⁶² She, like Kali, is revered as the mother or *Amman* goddess. Many of her worshippers still participate in the fire-walking ceremony as part of her propitiation.

Alleyn Diesel, amongst others, assert that Draupadi's worshippers, largely female, could find solace and empowerment in Draupadi's narrative of suffering as a women and her ability to overcome and transcend her pain.⁶³ She further asserts that if the historic narratives behind the Draupadi mythology was better understood by female devotees, these devotees would be able to change the circumstances in their own lives. In some ways re-telling the Draupadi narrative could empower worshippers of *Amman*, yet in many ways those who practice the rituals are offered solace in the embodiment of their faith. Access to written narratives has been denied to worshippers through a fragmented history, thus worship has had to be renegotiated and reconstructed in the South African context.

The benign goddesses have been portrayed as those in a "wifely role", usually physically smaller than and, subservient to their husbands,⁶⁴ the great gods Vishnu, Brahma and Shiva. Diesel asserts that,

[t]his human situation is reflected in the two kinds of Goddesses: those who are married, the consorts of males to whom they are submissive and obedient; and those who are independent, 'virgin', uncontrolled by males, and therefore potentially threatening to the usually accepted stereotype of gender relations.⁶⁵

The underlying, not uncommon, sentiment here is that the consort goddesses reflect the "traditional status of Hindu women,"⁶⁶ if not the

⁶¹ Alf Hildebeitel, *The cult of Draupadi*.

⁶² Alleyn Diesel, and Patrick Maxwell. *Hinduism in Natal: A Brief Guide*. University of Natal Press, 1993.51

⁶³ Diesel, "Tales of Women's Suffering", 6.

⁶⁴ Foulston, *At the feet of the goddess*, 16.

⁶⁵ Alleyn Diesel, "The Suffering Mothers: The Hindu Goddesses as Empowering Role Models for Women" *Dalam Alternation*. (2005). 42

⁶⁶ Diesel, "The Suffering Mothers",44.

essential Hindu woman. *Amman*, then, is the antithesis – a fierce, anti-male feminist. Describing Draupadi, Diesel says,

Although she was a devoted wife, Draupadi's polyandrous relationship with five husbands represents a powerful role reversal in traditional Hindu culture. She was certainly not meek and submissive, but determined and courageously outspoken in her bitter denunciation of her husbands' behaviour, ultimately gaining victory over all male attempts at violation and intimidation. She can be viewed as an Amazon-like matriarch who, when her husbands gambled away the family fortune, took control of the situation, refused to be reconciled to exile in the forest, and led the family to vengeance and exoneration at the great battle of Kurukshetra.⁶⁷

I suggest that Diesel's quest for an empowering Hindu feminist theodicy not only valorises *Amman* goddesses, but also exoticises the *Amman* tradition as one which is "ancient, and possibly pre-patriarchal."⁶⁸ While Diesel seems to suggest that Draupadi is an agent in her polyandry, her marriage to the five Pandava brothers is far from empowering or an act of her own agency. By trying to present the *Amman* tradition as pre-patriarchal and the *Amman* goddess as an "anti-male" role model, Diesel infers that the tradition itself is static and unchanging.⁶⁹ In the process of valorisation, thus, the traditions are not seen as evolving and dynamic, influenced, as they are and were, by politics and relocation. Furthermore, the ways in which women devotees of the *Amman* goddess negotiate their realities and are agents in practising their faith becomes secondary to the overall mainstream feminist agenda.

Rajan warns against western scholars 'idealising' the Hindu goddess because of apparent lacks in western theodicy⁷⁰ as this also implies that a cultural practice is exotic in its otherness. In framing religions and practices as ancient and somehow pure, there is also an assumption that the goddesses, who have actually evolved and changed through worship and scripture, remain embedded in a "pre-patriarchal" past. The vast interpretations of the goddess have, as mentioned before, been written by various people in power, and still are, sometimes with the view to empower the marginalised women through a feminist reading of the scriptures and the rituals around them. Some scholars have maintained,

⁶⁷ Diesel, "Tales of Women's Suffering", 13.

⁶⁸ Diesel, "Tales of Women's Suffering", 16.

⁶⁹ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes" Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist struggles," *Journal of Women in culture and Society* 28, no. 2 (2003): 499-535.

⁷⁰ Rajan, "Is the Hindu Goddess a Feminist?", WS35

however, that the term 'Hindu feminism' is a contradiction of terms.⁷¹ A western understanding of feminism applied onto Hindu goddesses can result in a glorification of the goddess that doesn't necessarily translate into the real lived experiences of Hindu women. The liminality of Kali or the revenge of Draupadi cannot always translate into a realistic liberating hermeneutic for ordinary women. Hindu women worshippers may not see Draupadiamman as anything other than the divine, the object of their devotion, as mother and as protector. The rituals and observances are, then, less about liberating her as a woman, and more about the worshippers' devotion for this divine.

Conclusion

While the *Amman* goddess represented within western feminist readings contributes in many ways to feminist scholarship, the lived experiences of women who devote themselves to *Amman* must be addressed. While *Amman* seems to offer western feminism a tantalising, anti-male, warrior-like, vengeful and pre-patriarchal goddess, these characteristics first, preclude the other oppressions facing women devotees of *Amman* (such as race, caste, class). Second, there is a suggestion that a matriarchal society must once have existed. This idea reproduces exoticism of the other which glosses over the elements of patriarchal and other forms of subjugation. Third, the goddess traditions are often shown in opposition to each other – the feminist goddess, as opposed to the acquiescent, dutiful goddess. This false binary is troubled by Kalamman and Draupadiamman who straddle traditions, and whose representations are considerable and varied. Kali and Draupadi show how traditions borrow from the each other, how hegemony is resisted in embodied and non-intellectual ways. Women seeking liberation through the Hindu goddess can be certain that this goddess is as fluid and as complex as they are as devotees and that their realities and oppressions are uniquely different to those of their ancestors in India.

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⁷¹ Rajan, "Is the Hindu Goddess a Feminist?", WS35.

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