

Queering Women: Disembedding the Maternal Script from Woman and Earth

Maheshvari Naidu
University of KwaZulu Natal

Abstract

The paper is positioned inside the theistic tradition of Hinduism and approaches 'body' in the form of the *Earth body* and *Woman body* as masculine constructions in the sense that control is exercised over both these 'bodies'. The paper queries these religiously connoted constructions, within Hinduism, and argues that they panoptically essentialise and mark women as child producing mothers, and are blind to the maternal objectification that strips other aspects of corporeality off the female body. Women are religiously 'disciplined' into having to biologically and socially fulfil a religiously authorized maternal role. There is thus a religiously sanctioned performance of discursive 'othering' or alterity that comes to be normatized. I argue that this conveniently confiscates much of the nurturing and mentoring responsibility away from the man, onto the woman in the same way as deifying the earth appears to work to remove ecological responsibility from us, with the claim that the ritually pure Earth Mother cannot be defiled.

The paper attempts a queering of Hinduism and women by applying the deconstructive lens of queer theory in challenging both the feministic and eco-feministic assertions in Hinduism, and the congealed normatives around women and earth. The paper maintains that these normatives come to be naturalized through tradition. The genealogy of tradition creates and normalizes the 'realities' through textual history, which is in turn sustained by the genealogy of ritual praxis. The paper begins by pointing out that the claim of eco-feminism and environmental consciousness, within Hinduism, is routinely confused and conceptually entangled with the notion of bio-divinity. In the final analysis the paper queries the possibility of transforming feminisms in the context of the Hindu religious tradition, by 'queering' and re-signifying both woman and earth.

Key Words: queering, woman, bio-divinity, disembedding, Hinduism

Introduction

It may appear decidedly odd at first glance, perhaps *queer* even (if we had to return the word to its original signification of 'deviant'), to 'queer' a religion like Hinduism. After all, this is a religion with a professed popular face featuring as many female goddesses as male gods, and with a popular perception of a matriarchal bent of spirituality manifest in the rich veins of mythological narratives and ritual performance. For porously running through much of the richly variegated and multiple stranded traditions that go by the generic of Hinduism, is the 'script' of the professed divinity of the earth as goddess and as Mother, and the divinity of the life-giving maternal woman who is (or who is to become) a mother.

Emma Tomalin (2004: 265) tells us that Hindu believers claim that the manner in which they (the believers) can be understood as perceiving and enacting themselves towards the natural environment can be traced to their religious beliefs and practices. One adds that this declaration is offered by the adherent, in the affirmative, that their religious beliefs and ritual practices engender and prompt environmentally sensitive behaviours. I would venture to add that one can just as easily say that the way in which many men perceive and socially enact themselves toward women, can be related to how they refract their religious beliefs and practices into social performances. This assertion would likewise find an assenting audience amongst Hindu adherents. However, while justifiable, neither assertion is to be seen as being flattering to either the course of feminism or ecofeminism.

I argue that '*body*' in the form of the *Earth body* and *Woman body* are to be seen as masculine constructions of disciplinary control. My understanding is that these religiously connoted constructions, hegemonically essentialise and encode a religious grammar of women as child producing mothers, and turn a blind eye to female corporeality and the female body. The earth is likewise ritually and theologically sacralised as life-giving Mother. The female within Hindu thinking and religious practices is religiously 'disciplined' *a la Foucault*, into having to biologically and socially fulfil a religiously sanctioned maternal role. This is in turn to be seen as opportunely marshalling much of the nurturing and mentoring responsibility away from the man, onto the woman in the same way as deifying the earth appears to work to confiscate ecological responsibility from us, with the claim that the ritually pure earth Mother cannot be defiled.

Let us turn first to the much professed notion of the Divine Mother Earth.

Hinduism and Bio-Divinity

Any talk of the environment within Hindu religious circles is met with historical and religious instantiation and is invariably followed by a flurry of responses from within the tradition prodding our memory that 'Hinduism is a very much a mother-centred and matriarchal religion that emphasises the 'Feminine' aspect in the spiritual'. We are also prompted into nodding acknowledgement that Neo-Hindu monotheism speaks of a theistic Ultimate Reality as 'Feminine' within the doctrinal stream of *Shaktism*. There is, additionally a chorus of voices that seek to point out that there are also pronounced pantheistic strains in Hindu thinking that proclaim the immanence of god in all things, the environment included, where in varying degrees, various trees and shrubs are offered worship and ritual observances. In short we are vociferously reminded that nature and the earth itself, is deified as Goddess or *Bhuma Devi*, and that Hinduism is thus an eco-sensitive religion.

It would thus not be an understatement to say that the multi-stranded 'Hindu' tradition has drawn much attention within religious environmentalist literature, where commentators (religious adherents as well as some religious scholars) see a leitmotif of reverence for nature and environment in Hinduism, and argue for its (Hinduism's), innate sensitivity towards the natural world.

However, there is a major difference between what is conceived of as a bio-divinity (understanding nature to be divine in religious terms), and religious environmentalism. Emma Tomalin (2004) who has done much sustained work in the field of religion and ecology within the Hindu traditions, tells us that while bio-divinity, or divinising nature, has been a feature of many religio-cultural traditions historically, it is not to be comprehended as being synonymous with *religious environmentalism* "which involves the conscious application of religious ideas to contemporary concerns about an environmental crisis" (ibid: 266).

Likewise, the 1968 essay by cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan entitled, "Discrepancies between Environmental Attitude and Behavior: Examples from Europe and China", points out that while there is an abundance of environmentally sensitive beliefs in the religious and cultural traditions of China, the actual praxis of the Chinese have not lived up to the ideal expressed in the traditions (Tuan 1968: 178).

Returning to the context of the several Hindu traditions, two broadly constructed books that address nature and environment issues are, *Purifying the Earthly Body of God* in 1998 and *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water* in 2000. We are told that the latter volume is a product of the Forum on Religion and Ecology, which convened the scholarly series of conferences at Harvard from 1996 to 1998 that explored the convergences between religious and ecological topics (Van Horn 2006: 5). The list is impressively long in terms of the kinds of studies, textual and ethnographic as well as socio-political, that cover issues in Hinduism and ecology, many of which see the close relationship of Hinduism to ecology. However, later, more critical positioned works (see Larson 2001; Tomalin 2002 and 2004; Mawdsley 2005) have revealed the fallacies inherent in earlier articles that have confused bio-divinity for environmental consciousness in attempting to ambitiously forge contemporary conceptual and ideological links between the Hindu religion and ecology. Such scholarly critiques contest the notion of a 'nativist ecological consciousness', a term used by Mawdsley in her article "India's Middle Classes and the Environment" (2004: 83). Tomalin's (2002; 2004) continued work with the traditional priests on the banks of the Ganges River reveals the difference between bio-divinity and environmental consciousness, and shows that even though the Ganges River is worshipped as sacred, there is a vast incongruity between the theological understanding of ritual purity, and actually maintaining physical and environmental cleanliness of the river.

Hinduism, Ecofeminism and Feminism

In most of the multiple Hindu traditions, not only is the earth liturgically and ritually positioned as Divine and Female but she is also that which is to be revered, as Mother. "Mother Earth, known by one of her several names (*Bhu, Bhumi, Prithvi, Vasudha, Vasundhara* or *Avni*) is considered to be a *devi* or a goddess to be honoured and respected. The earliest sacred texts, the Vedas, have inspiring hymns addressed to Earth" (Narayanan 2001: 183). Growing up I was enthralled by the ritual opening and closing gestures contained within the South Indian classical dance of *Barathanatyam*. These ritual enactments of salutations (*namaskar*) were to the God Nataraj, the Goddess *Bhu* (Mother Earth), and the *Guru* (teacher). It was also a ritual 'asking' of permission from Mother Earth in anticipation of having to 'stamp' out the dance on her. This 'stamping' alludes to the rhythmic dance steps (*adavus*) for which the dancer sought permission. At the end of the dance recital the dancer in turn thanked Mother Earth for having allowed this 'stepping' on her. This

conceptualisation of the earth, as both a female goddess (*Bhu*), and as Mother Earth (*Bhuma Devi*) to be honoured and respected, runs through the breadth of Hindu thinking.

In a seamless sliding of semiotic signifiers, this is mirrored in the traditional teachings, as to how women, as mothers, are equally to be honoured and respected. However, this respect is afforded *within* the context of marriage and motherhood. This, to me is a significant point of tension. Amali Phillips (2003: 21) argues that “marriage in Tamil culture is the most celebrated rite of passage for a woman, and fulfils the purpose of her being”. Devika Chawla notes that the thematic tenor of many religious scripts was that “marriage was a duty and a religious sacrament that was required of all women” and that this was the “objectified and prescribed role for women” (Chawla 2002: 30). Marriage is made out to be divinely ordained and articulated as part of the scripturally sanctioned *varna-asrama dharma*, or rules for right living and is the *normal* state of being, for a woman.

It is argued that ecofeminism, as understood in the West, grew out of a Western association of the female, or woman with nature. In Hindu thinking there has always been a close association with the feminine principle and nature, as with (the heterosexual) female and motherhood. Gaard (1997:120) tells us that queer theorists, who explore the natural/unnatural dichotomy, find that the so called ‘natural’ is invariably associated with the procreative. This notion of procreativity lies closely knitted to that of the sacred, and both woman and earth are seen as life giving ‘mothers’. Such deeply embedded Hindu religious grammar gives new meaning to Simone de Beauvoir’s assertion that the ‘woman is not born, but made’, except according to Hinduism, the woman is born that way, or born to be that (maternal) way. Part of this plastic cultural shaping of the Hindu woman is through public religious “panopticism” (Foucault 1977: 206) of ritual and social practices (such as the public ceremonial marriage and obligatory motherhood, with its own rituals) which produces “docile bodies” normalized and homogenized in society. Panopticism is of course a reference to an all inclusive visibility, in this instance a heightened visibility that is brought to bear on the maternal identity of the woman, through ritual and social practice.

Queering Hinduism

‘Queer’ as a deconstructionist theory, contests that which appears ostensibly normal, but may well be *normative* and hegemonic.

Queering feminisms within the context of Hinduism is likewise meant to be at odds with and to interrogate the dominant and normative discourse of maternal grammar imposed on the Earth and the body of the woman. I argue that the deconstructive deployment of 'queer' theory embraces the possibility of disrupting hegemonic notions, and in doing so, potentially rupturing spaces for new voices and liberatory possibilities to emerge in Hinduism. Queer theory allows an examination of the performative role and character of religious ideological constructs that create and maintain identity, in this case for both the earth and the woman.

Schippert (2005: 94) gives me my entree into the queer poststructural project by reminding us that in the field of religion, a queer theoretical insistence on resisting the production of the so called *normal* provides a starting point to study religious practices, identities, ethics and the study of religion itself. For me, it affords the theoretical nudge to query the maternal identity imposed as 'normal' on both the earth and woman. The theoretical usefulness of 'queer' lies in the destabilizing and deconstructive questions it allows us to pose. Ki Namaste (1994) and the more recent work by Barbara Voss (2000) also show their confidence in the theoretical relevance of 'queering' across disciplinary foci. According to Voss,

[The] emphasis on 'opposition to the normative' and on the simultaneous destabilization of the normative are aspects of queer theory that allow great interdisciplinary mobility, as they permit theoretical concepts initially applied to issues of sexual identity and the oppression of sexual minorities to be deployed in studies of other social subgroups ... and other products of culture" (Voss 2000: 184).

These 'other products of culture', in my opinion, are the constructed notions of the earth and of the woman. Most practising Hindus would decry the project of queering and the attempt to detangle and dissociate both the earth and woman from the essential identification of 'sacred' and 'mother', seeing these two appellations as affirmations of the ontological value afforded to both. However the discursively constructed link between Goddess/Mother and Nature/Earth which is echoed in the link between goddess/mother and female/woman, I argue, works to in fact, devalue both the earth and the woman. Most queer theoretical work adopts a sceptical stance toward the modern organization of power and seeks to construct interventions (in texts or practices) that might resist the pervasive influence of normalizing power operations (Schippert 2005:94). My sense is that much of these normalizing power operations reside and find refuge in the noble claim and cloak of sacrality and divinity that is offered to earth and woman within the signification of 'Mother'.

It is within the value of (female) 'mother' that the earth is conceived of as beyond defilement on the subcontinent of India. And this perception in turn allows for behaviours that assume, amongst many of the traditional Hindus, that there is no need for environmental intervention as far as the earth's rivers and land is concerned. This attitude strips the material reality off the earth. It is the similarly mirrored perception onto the body of woman, that sediments a maternal value onto her, whilst stripping her of the materiality of her sexual body. On the surface, these divinity scripts may appear to foster reverence and respect for the earth/environment and for women in general. However, rather than engendering social relations of environmental consciousness toward the earth and gender consciousness toward the woman, I believe that these scripts of 'divinity' work performatively and reiteratively to write and characterize a particular identity of passivity and submission for both the earth and woman. The scripts help congeal logic of (divine) maternal identity and order that comes to be acutely woven into social practices.

Catriona Sandilands tells us that "there is always a gap between political", in this case, religious constructions "and the lives of actual women" (Sandilands 1997:19). She points out that feminism functions within this gap, which is seen as the space necessarily left open between the constructions and the actual lives of women as 'sexed' creatures, as opposed to *just mothers*. To me motherhood, as defined within the Hindu traditions is very much a religiously performed production of the female body. Equating the so called natural with the procreative has been used in a variety of attempts (in different traditions) to manipulate women back into compulsory motherhood and so-called women's sphere (Gaard 1997:121). In the context of the Hindu society, the female body comes to be appropriated and matrimonised, as a sacrament (*samskar*) thus positioning her body as a "site for (heterosexual) normative marriage" (Ussher 1997: 3). The female body is appropriated as a site of marriage to be followed by motherhood and she comes to be deemed auspicious by the act of the obligatory religio-cultural transaction of marriage (Naidu 2008).

The Jaiminiya Grihya Sutra 1.22 puts it thus,

On the fourth night [!] after the marriage and prior to first intercourse the groom addresses the bride with the verse: "May Vishnu prepare the womb, may Tvashtar mould the embryo's form, may Prajapati emit seed, may Dhatar place the embryo. Place the embryo, Sinivali, place the embryo, Sarasvati! May the Ashvins garlanded with lotuses provide the embryo, the

Ashvins with their golden fire-churning sticks, the embryo that I now place for you to bear in ten months" (Earhart 1993).

Both (heterosexual) women's sexuality that *do not* end in motherhood and homosexual/lesbian women's sexuality that *cannot* end in motherhood would be deemed deviant within the orthodox tradition. The Butlerian (1990) argument that the materiality of the body is produced within "regulatory regimes" of (maternal) heterosexuality finds a neat home within traditionalist Hindu thinking about women.

What I ask for is a serious re-look at this myth of identity, of the 'earth with mother', and 'woman with mother', together with the semiotic slippage of signifying, both the earth, and woman-as-mother as being Sacred, in a general sense and specifically, within Hinduism. Of course we can be (if we so wish) and some of us are indeed, mothers. I am weary however, of this discursive link, which acts as a discursive othering, and point out the obvious, that the category of (sacred) mother is not a fixed stable identity, nor does it hold any epistemic and ontological coherence, *except in religious sentiment*.

Fortunately, as Mallory tells us, the body is the site of the sedimentations of regulatory practices, *as well as the potential site of their rupture*, "the place where conventional ideas about women and nature can be transgressed and transformed" (Mallory 2008: 5). The queering project brings back into sight, both the so called deviant female bodies, the "fuzzy" (see Naidu 2009) gendered women or eunuchs, as well as lesbian women and indeed all other kinds of gender, not tidily fitting the heterosexual signification of body. Thus, one way of catalyzing agency and shifting how bodies are materialized and affected by power is by shifting the fictive bodily signification and reiterative production of 'mother'. The materialization of gender is of course "not a voluntary or singular act", but is rather "compelled through highly complex and regulated practices within the constraints of the heterosexual matrix" (Schippert 2005: 95). My point is that the ultimate articulation of this heterosexual matrix within traditional Hinduism, is through the mother label and (obligatory) motherhood.

Nature as an "artefact" Catriona Sandilands tells us, is "a social product of the power-laden and power-producing interactions among humans and nonhumans" (Sandilands 1997: 139). What I am arguing for is thus a dual re-signification of both the body of woman and the earth body that retrieves and returns agential responsibility back to the woman, and back to us as eco-sensitive humans. The female body is capable of "resistance through altering the

performances”, or heterosexual/mothering around which “identity is congealed” (Mallory 2008: 2). These bodies are sites where meaning is made and eco-social relations configured, or reconfigured, and as Mallory (2008: 2) puts it “in ways that have material consequences for people and other beings of the earth. The usual essentialistic ways that feminists have talked about our relationship to the earth and nature are held in dubious regard by many feminists themselves. Notwithstanding the vital work of women such as the noted Indian eco-philosopher Vandana Shiva, essentialist notions of Mother Earth, or the privileging of women’s standpoint in social relation or location to the natural world seem to have been relinquished as feminists like Bonnie Mann (2005: 47) tells us. However, for the compelling shift needed, in fact demanded, the attachments of religious ‘maternal marks’ need to be relinquished within the Hindu tradition itself, even if this means also possibly giving up the cherished notion of the earth as Mother.

It was Catriona Sandilands in her work, *The Good Natured Feminist* who queried whether it was beneficial to identify the earth or nature as female. To me it is of even less benefit, in terms of ecofeminist concerns, to identify the earth with (Divine) Mother. Hindu religious tenets in describing and constructing a divine, feminine and maternal identity for the earth work towards what Sandilands (1997) has referred to as a “performance of affinities”. This a reference to seeing ‘divine’, ‘feminine’ and ‘maternal’ as being performatively the same. Sandilands, writing about the western tradition of associating woman with nature asserts,

“[T]here is respect for a certain tension between gendered representations and the solidity of nature, but there is also a collapsing of the tension into metaphorical unity. Thus, in the end, I am compelled to offer a metaphor against that collapse (Sandilands 1997: 137).

Ecofeminism does not speak in one (ideological) voice, nor do some of the ecofeminists themselves speak amongst each other. This is of course exacerbated by the fact that there is a certain level of plasticity and rupture in the term ecofeminism. Like much that is articulated in the postmodern moment, ecofeminism thus emerges as polyvocal and shows itself as being positioned along multiple faultlines. Even so the one thread undergirding the ecofeminist agenda is the tacit recognition that “dominant theoretical traditions in the west have connected, through language and practice, particular oppressed and vulnerable groups” (Mallory 2008: 3). Mallory asserts, and this point is vital to me, that ‘women’ and ‘nature’ have been seen as being similar and oppressed for similar reasons, through association with the devalued body (ibid). Yet in the Hindu traditions, women and nature have also been seen

as similar, with the adherents professing that this semiotic similarity of 'Goddess' and 'Mother' ascribes reverence and sacrality to each (earth and woman). One declares however, that this sediments and inscripts onto both nature/earth, and woman a critical 'de-value'. While it may be perceived in some contexts as affording the ultimate sacrality to the earth, as seeing it as Divine Mother, one can counter, rather provocatively, that is also perhaps a form of ultimate domestication.

As identities and experiences are forged and entangled within complex networks of norms, these inscribed female identities Schippert (2005: 97) tells us, are always mediated in ongoing processes of production. In terms of Hinduism, part of the production and performance happens with the theological wrap, the liturgy, the mythology, the ritual practices that embed the understandings of the woman within a maternal determinism. I argue that far from blessing the Earth and Woman with sacrality, such semiotic similarity holds the danger of religious essentialism that is inverted in social practice. Obligating the woman into articulating, primarily (through religious grammar and coding) a maternal identity sediments and "marks a value" (Twine 2001: 32) of procreativity with an incumbent nurturing script for her to socially enact. Likewise discursively linking earth and mother pathologizes an expectation of similar care and sustenance from the earth. We are divested of the ecological responsibility of caring for the earth, for, in the believers' understanding, as Mother, *the earth is meant to take care of us*.

While this may appear a naive rendering, I refer again to the work of Emma Tomalin (2002; 2004) where she shows that for the people visiting the Ganges, there exists a pronounced concern in the ritual purity of the river Ganges that sits comfortably alongside a nonchalant disinterest in the physical cleanliness of the river. Aside from pockets of young activists informed by contemporary ecological imperatives, the popular masses rest easy in their belief that the sacred river, as part of the sacred Mother Earth, cannot be defiled, but will instead be perpetually and eternally present to wash away the sins (ritual dirt) of her children. One might counter that this is only the mindset of traditional Hindus locked to the subcontinent. Yet a recent spate of newspaper accounts of ritual residue left polluting a New York lake

performing as the Ganges, remind us that this disposition of belief, extends into diaspora spaces created by a transnationalised Hinduism¹.

Conclusion: Queries on Queering

While queer theory reveals the ‘nakedness’ of normatives such as the maternal script inscribed on body of woman and earth, we are still left with the emancipatory exercise of a transformative feminism within Hinduism. As feminists, not removed from those we offer liberatory advice to, we are compelled I believe, to offer the transformative alternative in a way that does not completely alienate the Hindu adherent. To me, feminist theorising should not remain confined to text and should not speak in a language that cannot be understood by the very groups of people to whom the emancipatory discussion is offered to. It is more than mere theory that one wants to liberate. The discussion has to make sense to people *inside* the religion. While it is of course naïve to attempt to think that the entire population will be converted or emancipated, it is very plausible to reframe the discussion so that *it does make sense* to many practicing Hindus. It is a kind of policing of the sort of feminist theory that we see fit to offer.

This is where I find Anthony Giddens notion of ‘disembedding’ (Giddens 1990) offering a plausible possibility. For Giddens, disembedding can be used to lift previously fixed local notions, (social and in this case, ontological) to be restructured across a time-space distanciation (Giddens 1990: 21). According to Giddens, disembedding removes local spatial-temporal context from the social relations (Giddens 1990: 28). In terms of our discussion, what this means is that the maternal script can be disembedded from ‘earth body ‘and woman body’. The grammar and coding of maternal as a ‘fixed local notion’ can be lifted out of the original context. ‘Disembedding’ allows knowledge produced in a particular time and locality, to be reproduced, that is, elastically stretched and re-embedded, far from its place of origin (Hill 2003: 93). Giddens proposes that these lifted notions can be later re-embedded. (Giddens 1990: 79) For Giddens, re-embedding processes can act to either support or destabilize the power of the disembedded structure.

¹ Recent April 2011 headlines in ‘The New York Times’ blaring out, ‘*Hindus Find a Ganges in Queens, to Park Rangers’ Dismay*’ and ‘*A Hindu Ritual Creates an Environmental Problem*’ bring this into closer gaze (<http://www.nytimes.com>).

Destabilizing normative oppressive structures is of course the professed project of queer theory. Voss reminds us that imperative to the post-structuralist employment of ‘opposition’ in queering, is the tenet that what is ‘normative’ is actually assembled through reference to ‘deviance’. Hence it is ‘deviance’ that is foundational and against the ‘normative’ (Voss 2000: 184). Imperative to the project is thus a forceful re-understanding of the transgendered person, the lesbian woman and the childless female (by choice or circumstance) into popular consciousness and acceptance. This is possible through normalising mechanisms such as being routinely scripted as *normal* characters in both advertising storyboards and in the scripted narratives of that other religion of the masses, the celluloid ‘reality’ of the cinema world. This I believe holds the possibility of returning the marginalised woman, the un-mother back into full recognition of ‘woman’, by men, and other women, themselves holding onto and articulating a maternal grammar. There is thus a simultaneous disembedding and re-embedding in arguing for a corporeal re-inscription and “valorizing” (Mack-Canty 2004: 161) (of the many kinds of) women and their bodies.

Disembedding the notion of ‘earth as Mother’ is somewhat harder. In attempting to dislodge the religious cultural norm of ‘mother earth’ in this instance, calls for a particular re-embedding so that, that ‘space’ is not left ‘empty’ in terms of the adherents’ understanding and religious sensibility. Bringing back and *re-embedding* the so called deviant and single, unwed wild goddesses that permeate much of indigenous or village Hinduism, or the non-Sanskritic Little Tradition, into mainstream conceptions of the earth, holds the promise of shifting back the signification of ‘wild’ and *not to be messed with* earth. Just as the so called wild and untamed village goddesses demanded responsible behaviour from their believers, lest some catastrophe be unleashed, so too would such a perception shift back environmental responsibility onto the believers. For gone would be the Divine Mother Earth, charged with the well-being of her children and who was beyond defilement. In her stead we would have the untamed Earth goddess/es. Although these goddesses were also referred to as *Amman* or mother, the relationship here can be construed as a kind of perpetual and reverential fear of unwittingly transgressing and angering the goddess, and so unleashing some local calamity, that had to be in turn, ritually appeased. In rural Indian villages a local goddess is the one to whom rituals and propitiation is offered. This goddess is linked to particular geographic locations and particular villages and is seen to be intimately tied to the welfare of the village. She functions as the protector, provider, and most important for our reconceptualization project, as the punisher of the village, and must be constantly propitiated, worshipped, and

consulted in order to assure order and avert disease and disaster. During my research in the outlying villages of Madurai in South India, I was able to observe many instances of such expressions of fear and rituals of appeasement to goddesses such as *Sitala* and *Mariyamman*. Many of these goddesses were also imaged differently from the 'softer' Brahmanic goddesses. They were, in some instances, dramatically 'emaciated', 'old' and 'haggard', 'wild' and 'untamed', beautifully '*deviating*' further from the *normal* aesthetic of goddess and female.

Such a re-embedding I argue, would force a radical re-ordering of the way the earth is conceptualized and a re-ordering of the way we respond to this kind of 'untamed and unpretty, mother', who ought not to be transgressed. This kind of re-conceptualisation would return a measure of ecological responsibility to the individual. It is vastly different to the complacency that accompanies the mantric belief that the 'Divine Mother will take care of us'. It is in some ways, allied to the notion of "deliberative citizenship" of which Sandilands (1999: 219) speaks, and what Roopnarian (1999: 40) refers to as being a "citizenship of the environment."

As a parting note, I point out that it may appear that I am performing a certain level of injury by surrendering a link (yet again) between the earth and these goddesses and further framing an ontological connection between earth and woman/female. This is something I concede to. However, it is a concession that I feel compelled to offer. I need to point out that I have approached the discussion in this paper, from different angles of the 'inside' so to speak. Although I do not consider myself a Hindu anymore, having been raised as a Hindu in a Hindu household, I can claim to have in some ways, intimate knowledge of the religion, as only one naturally wrapped and raised by the tradition could have. Having been trained in comparative religion, and specifically in Hindu Studies, I have within my gaze, the discourses that inform and frame the study of Hinduism. Applying some of the queer theoretical insights directly to Hinduism, appeals to the feminist in me. However, the comparative religionist in me is fully attentive to the fact that that the believer should never be completely alienated in our feminist (re)understandings of his/her religion.

Speaking from such an 'inside' space, I am obligated to point out that, notwithstanding the earth/goddess or earth/woman connection being a discursive social construction within the patricentric tradition, and a historically propped religious arrangement, it is nevertheless a connection that most Hindus, *male and female* would profess as being (by now) woven into

their (appropriated) worldview. Any transformative exercise needs to be cognisant, I believe, of *where the believer is at* and how to elicit some measure of affinity to whatever ‘shifts’ and transformative thinking we are offering. The theoretical insights of queering allow us in the final analysis, to queer not merely the religious frame of Hinduism, but also the Hindu goddess herself. However, the true transformative nature of such an enterprise lies in the extent that it can resonate with the believer. For it is the believer who holds real transformative power in lifting theory into praxis.

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