

Maadathy-An Unfair Tale: Caste, Space, and Gaze

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Abstract

This essay engages with *Maadathy* (dir. Leena Manimekalai, 2019) to explore how space is constructed as a marker of caste and interrogate the concomitant intersection of caste and gender in a divided community. Through the retooling of myth, *Maadathy* explores the horror at the heart of a patriarchal society that is invested in caste as a means of oppression, violence, and inequity. However, such a perverse agenda comes back to haunt the community, which is invested in destroying an adolescent girl without any concern for her desires and finally trying to deify her and find a way for the catharsis of their guilt. Untouchability runs as a subtext throughout *Maadathy* as Yosana and her family are marked, even more inhumanely and unjustly, as unseeable people, wherein the onus to be not seen falls on them. They are abused verbally and physically when they are going about their mundane chores. Nonetheless, the focus on the joyful demeanor of the pleasure-seeking Yosana through the Lacanian lens of the gaze initially enables the understanding of the yearning for subjective mastery from the other side of the village community whose men repeatedly target and try to contain her. However, Yosana's gaze does not allow itself to be domesticated. The jouissance of Yosana, marking her singularity as the casteless adolescent girl, troubles those who want to contain and destroy her effervescence and, even after her death, continues to haunt them as they are blind to the impossibility of knowing the secret of her desire.

Keywords

Maadathy, Leena Manimekalai, Tamil Cinema, Dalit Cinema, Caste, Gaze, Lacan

Introduction

This essay engages with *Maadathy* (dir. Leena Manimekalai, 2019) to explore how space is constructed as a marker of caste and interrogate the concomitant intersection

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of caste and gender in a divided community. *Maadathy* creates its own mythical space, which is timeless to examine the continuing hegemony of a relatively higher caste, just above in caste hierarchy, in the rigidly casteist Tamil society. Through the retooling of myth, it explores the horror at the heart of a patriarchal society that is invested in caste as a means of oppression, violence, and inequity. However, such a perverse agenda comes back to haunt the community, which is invested in destroying an adolescent girl without any concern for her desires and dreams and finally trying to deify her and find a way for the catharsis of their guilt. This essay will focus on the way *Maadathy* engages with caste and gender in the context of religion to explicate the way caste subsumes gender and is intricately intertwined with religion in enabling men to assault and pulverize women without any moral responsibility or legal scrutiny.

In *Maadathy*, areas surrounding Tirunelveli, particularly the forest region surrounding the Tamira Bharani river in Papanasam, are invoked by shooting on location and matching such a space in locations near Virudhunagar. According to director Leena, it was difficult for her to get permission to shoot in areas surrounding Papanasam, in Tirunelveli district, as Mundanthurai, with its tiger sanctuary, and the adjacent regions are reserved (forest reserve) areas, not accessible for shooting. Therefore, Leena has combined the shots of the forest and river in areas near Virudhunagar, where she was born, with the shots on the locale of villages near Papanasam.¹ Therefore, one could argue that *Maadathy*, like many of her other films, has a touch of the personal. The essay, thus, engages with Leena's intervention as a feminist filmmaker through the representation of female desire in a masculinity-driven, rigidly casteist space. The performative aspect of the film, mainly through Veni (Semmalar Annam), the mother of the protagonist Yosana (Ajmina Kassim), is analyzed through the Lefebvrian analysis of space as explicated by Ceri Watkins (2005) in the context of theater. Such an analysis delineates the otherwise overlapping categories of space as expounded by the iconic Lefebvre and sheds light on the performative aspect of Veni as she goes about her everyday life in quotidian spaces.

Untouchability runs as a subtext throughout *Maadathy* as Yosana and her family are marked, even more inhumanely and unjustly, as unseeable people, wherein the onus to be not seen falls on them. They are abused verbally and physically if inadvertently they fall into the view of the members, higher in the caste hierarchy when they are going about their mundane chores like picking up firewood as in the case of Veni or just wandering in merriment like Yosana or even when they are walking to the workplace of the spot by the river where they wash the clothes as washer people. The washing of the menstrual cloth is foregrounded in the film as we distinctly see Veni aggressively washing the stains by stomping with her feet and venting out the anger after she is cunningly isolated from her husband by the members of the community from the village on the other side, from where the dirty clothes arrive, and violently raped. Therefore, her gesture of silent but angry protest is not only against the debauched men but also the women who are silent enablers, despite her cleansing of their clothes of bloodstains that they do not want to touch. However, this is far removed from Yosana's silently walking away with the (stolen) shirt of a young

¹Telephonic conversation with Leena Manimekalai, 5 Oct. 2021.

man (Panneer), spread over her shoulder, subtly expressing her joy. Veni's gestures and behavior have an element of pathos, propelled by her heavy and gloomy heart, unlike the sprightly young Yosana, who is looking forward to the company of her (non-human) friends in the forest (Gopinath 2021).

The focus on the joyful demeanor of the pleasure-seeking Yosana through the Lacanian lens of the gaze initially enables the understanding of the yearning for subjective mastery from the other side of the village community whose men repeatedly target and try to contain her. However, Yosana's gaze does not allow itself to be domesticated. Later, the possessed woman in the village, who signifies the desire of the community, through her role-playing in a male-centric world drives the fantasy of a new temple for the village/caste deity. The final segment of this essay details how when desire and its source—the incomprehensible gaze of Yosana—are sought to be resolved through the fantasy of the temple, it leads to an encounter with the gaze and enables the eruption of the Real regarding the horror surrounding caste in *Maadathy*. The jouissance of Yosana, marking her singularity as the casteless adolescent girl, troubles those who want to contain and destroy her effervescence and, even after her death, continues to haunt them as they are blind to the impossibility of knowing the secret of her desire.

Importantly, *Maadathy* treads a contentious terrain—the caste hierarchy within the Dalit community. One of the reasons why there are no films or earlier documentaries on the Puthirai Vannar community; they generally remain on the fringes even in the discourse surrounding the Dalits. They are classified as Scheduled Caste by the State, and there is only a book about them in Tamil by Professors C. Lakshmanan and Ko. Ragupathi, *Theendamaikkul Theendamai: Puthirai Vannar Vazhvum Iruppu*/ Untouchability Within Untouchability: Lives and Times of the Puthirai Vannars (2016). The foreword for the book was written by Imayam, the Sahitya award-winning Dalit writer, who wrote about the Puthirai Vannars in his seminal novel *Koveru Kazhuthaigal*/Beasts of Burden (1994). Imayam's novel and *Theendamaikkul Theendamai* foreground Puthirai Vannars' predicament as being the lowest in the caste hierarchy. The latter's detailed research questions the framing of easy binaries regarding caste and sheds light on its complexity and intricate structure, as expounded by Dr. Ambedkar. For instance, the difficulty of proving their profession when the State requires them to bring a donkey and washing equipment to verify regarding caste certification. It does not take into consideration that generally, the Puthirai Vannars do not have a secure and stable place to live as they are constantly targeted and forced to be unseeable, thus often forcibly displaced and compelled to move from place to place. The book talks about how they used to wash the clothes and perform the cleansing of dead bodies for other Dalits, higher in the hierarchy. But Leena locates a small village in Tirunelveli district and focuses on the Puthirai Vannar community, where such activities and oppression continue. Nevertheless, Leena as an outsider and an experienced filmmaker, through her framing of the people inside/ from the village and those who are forced to live outside its limits, shifts the binary revolving around hierarchy into one of those drunk with caste, the caste-full and the casteless Puthirai Vannar community, in the spirit of Babasaheb and Periyar regarding oppression and self-esteem.

Apart from reframing hegemony and oppression as a binary between the caste-full and the casteless people, where the traditional (spatial) divide between *oor*/village and *cheri*/colony is rearticulated as the community inside and outside the village, the significance of *Maadathy* lies in it being the work of a woman filmmaker. Karthick Ram Manoharan, in his discerning essay, “Being Dalit, Being Tamil: The Politics of *Kabali* and *Kaala*” (2021), compellingly argues for how *Kabali* (dir. Pa. Ranjith, 2016) as a significant Dalit film is hero-driven, whereas *Kaala* (dir. Pa. Ranjith, 2018), though similarly having Rajnikanth for the hero, differs in the hero being the enabler of the community to unite and fight against its Hindutva antagonist. Karthick’s framing is also helpful for us to discuss Mari Selvaraj’s films: *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018) and *Karnan* (2021) regarding the hero/(Dalit) masculinity and the community. As Karthick astutely showcases in his essay, the discourse surrounding Rama/Aryan and Ravana/Dravidian has been profound for Dravidian ideologues and politics. Nonetheless, the predicament of Sita/women also has to be shed light upon and brought center stage. Leena does that with *Maadathy* by interrogating caste (instead of race). One could trace a link between Sita’s life in the forest and Yosana’s—their ecofeminist impulses uniting them. More importantly, not only being untouchable but unseeable as well as blindness plays a crucial role in *Maadathy*. Therefore, Lacanian meditations on (the encounter with) the gaze offer the rich theoretical framework to study the extremity/enormity of oppression surrounding caste, in the context of visibility/vision, in *Maadathy*.

The Context of Leena Manimekalai as a Feminist Filmmaker and *Maadathy* as Part of Contemporary Dalit Cinema

Starting from *Mathamma* (2002), Leena has two decades of experience as a committed filmmaker who began her career as a documentarian. While she has been making documentaries regularly, *Sengadal* (The Red Sea, 2011) and *Maadathy* mark her as a significant fiction filmmaker as well. *Mathamma* engaged with the Arunthaiyur community in Mangattucheri near Arakkonam. Arunthaiyurs belong to the Dalit community and are lower in the hierarchy, like the Puthirai Vannar community in *Maadathy*. One could see the two decades of work of a significant filmmaker being bookended by her preoccupation with the virulence of the caste system as it keeps destroying the lives and livelihood of people by oppressing them through exclusion and oppression both in the material and the mythic world in the name of inhuman sacrifices. In particular, those who are the lowest in the hegemonical and unscientific construct of caste hierarchy. Consider, for instance, the predicament of young female children who are offered to the deity in *Mathamma*, not unlike Yosana in *Maadathy*.

Additionally, there are many remarkable films in Leena’s repertoire that address the predicament of women at the intersection of patriarchy, gender, and caste system, as exemplified by *Goddesses* (2008)—the film which won deservedly for her the Golden Conch at the Mumbai International Film Festival, arguably one of the best in the world for documentaries, despite its politicization in recent years. Leena’s feat is unparalleled among documentarians in Tamilnadu. *Goddesses* engages with the lives

and times of three extraordinary women who challenge and subvert the patriarchal norms and gender hierarchy by successfully pursuing professions generally marked as male: fishing, grave-digging, and funeral-singing, not unlike Leena herself. Think of *Sengadal*, the first feature-length film to meaningfully address the Sri Lankan-Tamil issue in the backdrop of the predicament of fisher people in Dhanuskodi, Rameswaram. As with her engagement in foregrounding the plight of the almost invisible Puthirai Vannar community in *Maadathy*, Leena has always been a pioneer.

Maadathy: Caste, Gender, and Mythmaking as Spaces of Oppression and Denial

The reception of *Maadathy* foregrounds the discourses surrounding Dalit *Chetna* or Dalit consciousness when it comes to writing about Dalits, whether in literature or films. Sharankumar Limbale, in his path-breaking book on Dalit criticism, defines it as “the revolutionary mentality connected with struggle” (2004, p. 12). For him, “Ambedkarite thought is the inspiration for this consciousness ... Dalit consciousness is an important seed for Dalit literature; it is separate and distinct from the consciousness of other writers. Dalit literature is demarcated as unique because of this consciousness” (p. 32). He leaves no room for ambiguity: “By Dalit Literature, I mean writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness” (p. 1). Laura E. Brueck, the eminent scholar on Hindi literature, gives us an idea about the complex and diverse ways the concept of Dalit *Chetna* is harnessed: “It can, at times, refer to the notion of political *awareness*, in the sense of consciousness-raising among certain sections of the Dalit population, and at other times refer to a collective notion of *identity* among diverse Dalit communities” (Dalit *Chetna*). In this context, the response of Dr. Thol Thirumavalavan, the Dalit activist/thinker and the leader of *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi* (Liberation Panther Party) from Tamilnadu, attains significance. He responded to *Maadathy*, after watching the film at the Chennai Independent Film Festival on Leena’s invitation, by appreciating the film and pointing to the space needed for the agency of Dalit women.² Leena is a feminist writer/filmmaker who has a rich corpus of work over the last decade. She has many dimensions, like being a poet, publisher, and activist.

Against this backdrop, I am invested in analyzing *Maadathy* regarding Leena’s locus as a committed filmmaker who is invested in anti-caste and feminist discourses, whose earlier award-winning documentary *Goddesses*, like much of her other films, engages with caste, class, and gender. In this essay, I want to focus on *Maadathy*’s representation of caste and gender through space for its critique of masculinity and the misogynistic Tamil culture. Anindita Datta draws from Joan Wallach Scott’s definition of gender as predicated on “perceived differences between the sexes and a primary way of signifying relationships of power” (Scott, 1988, p. 42) and Judith Butler’s “styles of the flesh” (Butler 1990, 1993) to foreground how gender is socially constructed not through biology but performance or performing gender to be more precise, and in the case of *Madaathy*, through an “incessant activity performed... with or for another”

²Ibid.

(cited in Datta, 2021, p. 2) to argue for how such performances, which have their own history and are socially determined, are rooted in particular spaces and geographic locale. Thus, according to Datta,

the nature of space or location by itself determines to a large extent the manner in which ‘the styles of the flesh’ or gender are performed. Conversely, these performances of gender may then, in turn, go on to constitute specific kinds of gendered spaces ... Essentially, therefore, both gender and space eventually co-create each other (2021, p. 2).

Datta posits the idea of regional genderscape, particularly in the context of India, which has resonances for the way gender is constructed through space in *Maadathy*. Veni’s performativity and the space in *Maadathy* are intertwined, as discussed in detail later. However, even regional seems too broad a term to engage with the plight of the adolescent protagonist Yosana of *Maadathy*, who is marked in the film as the lowest in the caste hierarchy and personifying the most virulent oppression from men. Since we do not see her with other friends or relatives, any kind of rubric to explain her loneliness, alienation, and exploitation in terms of caste or gender seems inadequate to fully understand her predicament in a dangerously violent and ferociously casteist society. The official press kit of the film informs us about Yosana as belonging to the “unseeable” among the Dalits:

Puthirai vannaar is an ‘unseeable’ Dalit caste group, in southern India. Their forced occupation is to wash clothes of other Dalits, the dead and the menstruating women. This film is a tale about a young girl who grew up in Puthirai vannaar caste group and how she came to be immortalised as their local deity, Maadathy ... India is a land of Subaltern deities. Each deity has an unique legend and these legends are often interwoven with socio-historic tropes of India.

—(*Maadathy*, 2019)

Anavan Kudiyiruppu, the area around which a significant portion of the film was shot, is not far off from Papanasam, which is easily accessible through buses—there are direct buses from Chennai and all the big cities and towns in Tamilnadu and Bangalore City and Trivandrum. Yet Anavan Kudiyiruppu, the small village, on the other side of the Ghats is not known much in Tamilnadu. Along with her casteless people.³ It also undermines the general notion of the contemporary surveillance era

³As I go onto focus on and analyze *Maadathy*, I prefer using the term “casteless” for Yosana and her family belonging to the Puthirai Vannar community, as all of them are not *Vannars* or washer people, though donkey as a signifier is ubiquitous in the film. For instance, according to Leena, Mr. Murthy, who plays the village head in the film, is a retired govt. officer. Similarly, for the people on the other side of the village, I have used “caste-full” to indicate their being intoxicated with caste pride/arrogance. They are not marked in the film as Dalits, though the extra texts like the press kit, says so. Besides, some among the *Devendrakula Vellalars* in the area are also questioning the label of Dalit to address their caste identity.

where nothing escapes the possibilities of looking at and gazing back in return. Caste and its tentacles defy the ubiquity of the Foucauldian panopticon and its reach in this digital era, where Tamilnadu is notorious for its CCTV culture, even in rural areas. More importantly, *Maadathy* set in contemporary times foregrounds the failure and betrayal of the majoritarian Hindu society to fulfill the spirit of Babasaheb Ambedkar instilled in the Indian constitution regarding the various means to achieve economic democracy (Jadhav, 1991).

The plot revolves around the lives and times of Yosana (Ajmina Kassim), her mother Veni (Semmalar Annam), her father Sudalai (Arul Kumar), grandmother (Stella Raj), and the wandering mystic—her grandfather. In her quest, the lonely Yosana too wanders into the forest and the river and seeks company with animals and birds. She identifies and sympathizes with a foal—the baby donkey that has moved away from the group, just like her, to explore the landscape secretly. This quiet side of Yosana's life in a pristine and mythical landscape is contrasted with the lived reality of her mother's anxiety surrounding Yosana's future and her carefree and vivacious nature. Her mother goes about the chore of washing clothes with the help of her father and steps out only for work and hurries back home not only because she is "unseeable" but mainly to keep away from the eyes of depraved and debauched men. She similarly wants to protect her daughter, who would not share her concerns in her pursuit of the mysteries surrounding nature as well as desire. One of the remarkable scenes in *Maadathy* is when Yosana is hiding behind a rock and later, desiring a closer view, moves further and ducks underwater as she sees a young man, relieving himself of his clothes, jumping in nude head-on into the water, and swimming. Such a scene shot from an adolescent girl's perspective is unparalleled in Indian cinema in the way it punctuates the female desire to explore the mystery surrounding the male body and sexuality. She would later be grabbing the stolen shirt, which Panneer had left to dry on the rock after washing, and walking away smelling it. Such tender scenes are juxtaposed with the harsh realities of her mother washing the clothes with menstrual blood and working hard to prepare the fire for steaming a considerable load of clothes, and later, her father waiting in the vicinity but yet hiding from the pyre of the corpse awaiting the clothes of the dead to be washed with a bottle of country liquor as the tip. Besides, her mother inadvertently attracts a curious woodcutter's attention as she rushes to hide behind the tree with her. Nevertheless, his hypocrisy is revealed, when after looking back and searching for her in vain, he spits on her vessel that she left on the way while rushing to hide.

More sadly, all of her mother's apprehensions come true when she is molested on her way to work and raped against her will. Later Yosana, too, is subject to the same fate by a group of young men who were at odds till then, in the backdrop of the festival to celebrate the new temple built by the village community. Leena bookends the film with the myth of Maadathy, the village deity who took her form from the tragic narratives of a young woman like Yosana, whose life was nipped in the bud in a casteist and conservative society which does not seek the truth behind the dark realities of its cathartic rituals. Her anxieties regarding a grown-up daughter mark Yosana's mother, and her behavior recalls Bordieu's concept of the habitus as "the way society

becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act in determinant ways, which then guide them” (Wacquant, 2005, p. 316, cited in Navarro, 2006, p. 16). Additionally, Bordieu was invested in exploring the cultural phenomenon of “misrecognition” to foreground the possibility of “reflexive sociology,” which according to him, “while uncovering sources of power and illuminating reasons that explain social asymmetries and hierarchies, offers a good chance of producing real knowledge about a given context and, as a result, is a powerful tool to enhance social emancipation.” (Navarro, 2006, pp. 15–16). Nevertheless, such reflexivity and emancipatory possibilities are foreclosed for Veni due to the massive burden of work and the isolation of her family from the larger community in the name of caste and the denial of interacting with her kith and kin who live on the other side of the river. Veni’s “propensities to think, feel and act” are thus subsumed by the helplessness of living in a porous bubble that is prone to violent attacks by the virulently masculine universe outside undergirded by the gradations of caste hierarchy and hegemony.

Yosana’s world is far removed from her mother’s. Her pristine world is mythical as it encompasses the colorful flora and fauna, though it keeps reminding us of the dangers lurking around the corner in its emptiness, where often we see her alone, for relatively long stretches of time. We get the sense of reality only through the intrusion of people from the village, like when Yosana stealthily watches Panneer who comes with his donkeys and swims. After the bath, Panneer comes out of the water and searches for the shirt he had left to dry on a rock nearby in vain. He also looks for the missing young donkey in the group that he had brought with him to bathe. Thereafter, he reluctantly moves away with the other bathed donkeys, searching along the way for the lost young one. Meanwhile, we see Yosana moving away from the camera with the shirt spread over her shoulders and back. This is a poignant moment in the film where tactility of cloth is used as a signifier of desire in contrast to the general use of clothes by a washerwoman, like her mother in the film, and the Marxist alienation of labor where the source of oppression could be traced through the huge pile of clothes to be washed. More importantly, the casteist oppression is punctuated when Veni breaks down after her rape by one of the lecherous men who gets her husband drunk and violently pulls her away and rapes her when she is hurrying to avoid the anticipated tentacles of caste and its violent and ghastly masculinity. All she could do to take out her anger and helplessness was shout at her husband, whom she had forewarned, and scrub hard with her feet the unyielding bloodstains on the menstrual cloth in the river water. Veni’s reaction is thus an affirmation of the foreboding sense of gloom she projects as someone who could foresee the way caste structure plays out, foreclosing any hope or agency for someone like her. This contrasts with Yosana’s vivacity and throbbing of life in her exploration of nature, seeking friendship with animals, and looking for human contact and warmth. Because of this element of the natural and uncontainable energy in her, she is loved by her grandmother, who coddles her by treating her injured barefoot with herbal paste when she visits her after one of her strolls into the forest. We also see her mystical grandfather suddenly arriving at the door, uninvited and unwelcome by her grandmother, who offers a small packet

(probably with the sacred ash), and her grandmother reluctantly accepts it and adds the content to her mix of the paste. The grandfather who has deserted the family seems to use the garb of the mystic to become visible/seeable to the casteist world outside where such irrationality resonates. Nevertheless, in one of the critical moments in the film, as Yosana is on her stroll, she suddenly comes across this older man—her grandfather—in front of her, and she is astonished, like us, to see him fall flatly (at her feet) on the ground at a distance. His reverential gesture of falling with head down and hands folded up in front of her prefigures her later transition to the deific Maadathy. In stark contrast is the mundane and predictable world of Veni, where caste seems to offer no reprieve and the expansive nature, unlike in the case of Yosana, seems to close in and become increasingly confining, stifling, and claustrophobic. It is as if the entire nature, encompassing her permeable and wall-less home, has become a haunted house, and she is performing to the diktats of this dark dystopian figure—caste (oppression/hierarchy/hegemony).

Veni's performance, unlike Yosana's spontaneity, begs the question of performance in the context of space. More importantly, because all her fears regarding Yosana's future ultimately come true despite her garrulous nature of speaking her mind and expressing her concerns and anxieties, as if to ward them off, and scoffing at the nonchalance of her husband and the dispassionate mother-in-law and the ebullient Yosana. It also recalls Ceri Watkins's "Lefebvrian analysis" of space in the context of theater. The representation of space, the first one in the triad, which is not concrete, "is the dominant space in society and is a conceptualized space constructed out of symbols, codifications and abstract representations" (Watkins, 2005, p. 209). Watkins sees parallels in "the text or script, the Deputy Stage Manager's book, the composer's score, and various 'notes' from the director, producer, composer, designer, etc." (p. 212). In films, we may translate this as the shooting script, which, like a blueprint, includes the details of the backdrop and the dialogue for the scenes, apart from the notes of the chief technicians like the cinematographer, music composer, choreographer, production designer, among others. Spatial practices, the second one in Lefebvre's taxonomy, which "embraces production and reproduction, and the particular locations and spatial sets characteristic of each social formation" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 33), resonates with, according to Watkins, "the accepted and acceptable spatial practices of the theatrical context, on which the actors draw, along with the representations of space, to develop a framework for the performance" (Watkins, 2005, p. 213). It includes accepted norms of the theatre, like "'knowing your lines well enough' and 'giving the right cue,' or definitely 'not grandstanding or upstaging another actor.'" (Ibid.) In cinema, we can see the parallels not only in taking and giving the cues for other actors, particularly in close-ups and remembering your lines, but also taking the lights, generally from the catwalks above, by getting to the right marks on the floor. Spaces of representation, the last one of the triad "are the space of lived experience, it is space 'as directly *lived* through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of "inhabitants" and "users"' (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 39, original emphasis; Cited in Watkins, Ibid.). Watkins links this to the "awareness of the cast to the role that actual physical space ... plays in any performance" (Watkins, Ibid.) She also points to the

“the emphasis the cast placed on the final rehearsals taking place in the same physical space, with the same costumes, props etc. as the final performance” (Ibid.).

Semmalar Annam, playing the role of Veni, attracts our attention through her performance because of all the reasons enumerated earlier. She is dramatically intense in her delivery of dialogue, and her retorts are sharper, reflecting her finesse and sharpness with cues as a professional with more experience than others, but the last one—spaces of representation is significant for us. In *Maadathy*, the actual physical space is the unlimited space of the forest, the actual physical space of the film, often delineated by the space that opens in front of the camera. The diegesis horizontally is limited by the frame but vertically extends, as it is a natural landscape, often till the horizon. In significant scenes, we can see Yosana wandering away or towards the camera in her joyful explorations, or in contrast, Veni often hurrying to her work spot with clothes or rushing back to her home with Yosana by her side or trying to evade the men, warning her husband from joining them, as she is on her way to the river. While the actual space inhabited by Yosana parallels the expansive forest region with the river, Veni’s is constrained and narrow, often contained by the enclosed path surrounded by the trees. In critical moments, like the rape sequence, she is framed from the back walking away from the camera. Her looks (back at the camera) allude to the constant fear caused and the threat posed by the thing behind her. The danger is personified by the men who intrude into her terrain to lure her husband away and violate her in isolation, thus breaking the casteist and social taboo of her “unseeability” when it does not fit their salacious nature. The relatively softer version of the woodcutter, too, expresses his depravity through the action of obnoxiously spitting (at her belonging).

It is remarkable that the only glimpse we have of the other side of the village, as opposed to the green but barren landscape inhabited by Veni and her family, has to do with the process of the construction of a temple for Maadathy, the village deity. It begins with the woman who is possessed during what seems to be a day of festivity and through the spirit of the goddess that has come to occupy her orders for a temple to be built. We see the village men and the priest standing in reverence in front of her and obeying her orders by promising a bigger temple (in place of the smaller one behind them). Since this is the only sequence, with a linear progression of scenes—the possession to the process of gathering the money and the building of the temple—that is in parallel cut with the quotidian lives of Veni and Yosana, and later, the tragic and violent gang rape of Yosana on the very day of the temple festival to install and consecrate the statue of the goddess in the newly erected temple, it attains significance as the space of casteist virulence and oppression which was unseeable for us from Veni’s perspective thus far. The possession of the village woman provides the entry as it mirrors Veni’s performance, bordering on the neurotic, albeit the difference is in Veni as a casteless and helpless woman around whom the tentacles of caste are increasingly tightening its demonic and inhumane grip. Her doppelganger, the privileged and “caste-full” woman, engulfed by the charged and frenetic people of her caste, marked by the devotion to the common deity, too, performs neurotically as the possessed woman to give vent to her feelings as a woman, who has shifted the gear from being a slave to the sacred at the intersectionality of gender and seems to regale herself at the obeisance

of the symbols of patriarchy—the enforcers of the illogical caste hierarchy, who are hypocritical and morally corrupt, recalling Lacan’s words, “the subject in question is not that of the reflexive consciousness, but that of desire” (Lacan, 1998, p. 89). Nonetheless, she is intoxicated with caste, as her utterances are rhetorical. She has no uncertainty about the point of her enunciation at the intersection of caste/religion, thus recalling Ambedkar and Periyar’s theorization of caste as intricately intertwined with Hindu religion (Ambedkar, 2011; Manoharan, 2020, p. 10). Her gender-bending is at the aural level since the possession offers her the “masculine” voice to order rather than suggest or request. Thus, she symbolizes the schizoid woman at the intersection of caste and gender. Her caste-fullness is in polarity to her powerlessness as a woman who could only connive and be an enabler of the casteist lechers around her. More importantly, she is a signifier of caste who has solidified without the renewal or re-institution of desire, and possession could be read as a momentary interruption.

Laura Mulvey’s theorization of all gaze (man and women) as that of male while watching a Hollywood film is instructive here (Mulvey, 1975). However, one could stretch the linear understanding of the mastery of the (Lacanian) gaze further. In this case, too, one could argue the possessed woman is performing to the men around and their scopophilia. However, through her appropriation of agency through a spirit, she denies any pleasure of looking at her body, although she draws attention to her performance. Instead of being commodified on the screen, she inhabits the subjectivity of men to order and force their subservience to her roleplaying as an agent of the divine or the imbiber of divinity. Her ephemeral posture of power works because of the seamlessness between the point of address and reception. There are no questioning or doubts about her authority as the uniformity of caste and its unquestionable faith in rituals erases any possible rupture. Thus, caste (and religion) precedes and subsumes her identity as a woman, marking her as one full of caste pride/hegemony, flaunting her commitment to caste/clan through her being the chosen one of their *Kuladeivam/Kuldevata*—the deity for their *kul/clan*, thus acceptable to the men around her, as they comply with her orders by agreeing to build a temple instantaneously. It is important to note here that such a performance in a milieu of generally lecherous men, as exemplified by the actions of men in the film, is possible only under an altered state of being possessed by a spirit from elsewhere. To that extent, her agency is contained as she is not behaving on her own accord as a normative woman from a traditional village. Ultimately, she is allowed her freedom as a member of *kul/clan* or, more precisely, caste in this case. One could argue that this space, like the house of Norman Bates in *Psycho*, is gazing at the haunted Veni. But it complicates our understanding of the subject and the object. Here the inanimate space of the object is animated as it is occupied and marked by the (hierarchically above) caste/ people inhabiting it, thus occupying the subject position. The oppressed Veni and her family are objectified as exploitable and expendable.

Todd McGowan responding to, Joan Copjec’s criticism on the misconception of the gaze and claim that “film theory operated a kind of ‘Foucauldinization’ of Lacanian theory” points to the way it changed from the idea of mastery in his early essay on the mirror stage to the way it becomes “objective rather than a subjective gaze” later

when it “becomes something that the subject encounters in the object.” (Copjec, 1994, p. 19; McGowan, 2003, p. 28). After addressing the limitation of the reductive reading of Lacan regarding the mastery of the gaze and interpellation of the audiences into the dominant ideology, McGowan points to Lacan’s investment in the mysterious/obscure object posited in the Other. For Lacan, “desire is the desire of the Other.”

The subject posits the objet petit a as the point of the Other’s secret jouissance, but the objet petit a cannot be reduced to anything definitively identifiable in the Other. To paraphrase Lacan, this object is in the Other more than the Other. The jouissance embodied in this object remains out of reach for the subject because the object exists only insofar as it is out of reach (McGowan, 2003, p. 32).

This later Lacan’s theorization of desire as motivated by objet petit a has relevance for the understanding of the core of *Maadathy*. One thing which remains uncontainable in the film is the jouissance of Yosana despite the tentacles of caste spreading around her, intruding into her innocent life, and finally raping her to death. Lacan describes jouissance as “not purely and simply the satisfaction of a need but as the satisfaction of a drive” (Lacan, 1997, p. 209). It is thus not reducible to the satisfaction of something instinctual. Literally, in the case of Yosana, it is exemplified in the way she cares for the lost baby donkey after the scene where she walks away with the shirt. She is more bothered about leading it back to its fold as she could not bear its isolation and tears. However, it would be normal if love were to be her primordial need at that age, particularly after the scene of her surreptitious body-watching. But her instinctual needs shift to caring for the foal, which seems in consonance with her love for the fishes, monkeys, and the rabbit. Her joie de vivre driven by empathy is in contrast to the death-drive driven aggression of the people from the other side. Only when we see the possessed women, *Maadathy* offers the reverse shot of the people in the village. Retroactively, it dawns on us it has been from their point of view—the people of caste—the casteless Yosana and her people have been showcased thus far. Though Yosana’s strides in the outdoors on uneven terrains mirror her free-spirited interiority and are not anticipating any onlookers. On the contrary, the source of Veni’s anxiety is revealed as the community which gathers around and is tied through caste. The signifier gets displaced from the woodcutter to the rapist to the libidinous and neurotic community, wherein a woman is allowed to perform in the public sphere only when there is an imbalance between the body and the spirit, particularly at the intersection of religion and the invocation of the spirit from above, alluding to the line between inclusivity and exclusivity marked by the irrationality of caste. What is absurd here is the yearning for the sensorial experience of a spirit that is otherwise untouchable and unseen by a community that wants to segregate people in the name of caste and the pretext of untouchability and unseeability. Veni’s gazing back, however, is not troubling for them. Extending Mulvey’s thesis, predicated on early Lacan’s theorization of the mastery of the gaze, Veni’s performance is in their comfort zone of lending herself to their subjective mastery of her gaze, thus enabling her cooptation into their ideology of an oppressive caste structure and hegemony. In contrast to Veni’s submissive nature,

Yosana's pursuit of happiness and her *jouissance* troubles them as they cannot find the key to the secret of her *jouissance*, which they lack and want to possess, not unlike the alien spirit that comes to animate their dispirited life. Yosana's gaze eludes their grasp. "Even when the subject sees a "complete" image, something remains obscure; the subject cannot see the Other at the point at which it sees the subject. The gaze of the object gazes back at the subject, but this gaze is not present in the field of the visible." (McGowan, 2003, p. 33).

The framing of Yosana in the film exemplifies her as the object gazing back but "not present in the field of the visible." For instance, when she unexpectedly comes across someone, she hides behind an adjacent tree, and we see her getting admonished through the sound/voice. Such a reaction is seen in tandem with her mother as well. Later, when she is raped, it is nighttime, and she is in darkness—we could hear her exhausted and feeble pleas to the drunken young men to leave her. When she is with the monkeys, she is composed from a low angle. During other key moments, like when she is watching Panneer swim, we see her hide behind a cavernous rock and later under water. At home, too, she is sleeping as her mother and father stealthily move away when they feel amorous. When her grandmother is applying the herbal paste for healing her wounds, she is again composed in low light from the only source of the lantern inside the house. Similarly, we see her sneak away from the camera with the shirt, albeit joyfully. The mythos-driven representation of Yosana is framed within the film as a *mise-en-abyme*—the scene that prefigures the narrative trajectory of the film—when we see her own grandfather prostrating in front of her. However, we are precluded from knowing her response since the reaction shot is denied to us. Additionally, and more importantly for our discussion here, the source of Yosana's *jouissance*, the *objet petit a*, is obscured as she inhabits the realm of the sacred, particularly in the shot where we see a parrot resting on her left shoulder as she walks away from the camera, recalling the iconic goddesses like Madurai Meenakshi or Andal, and the profane, marked by her curiosity regarding male nudity, simultaneously. The desire of the Other thus remains indecipherable, though the milieu in which she lives, and the low lights and angles in which she is framed are suffused with sensuality and desire. Yosana—the casteless object in this case to the caste-full subject, occupying the village sphere—disallows the perception of her (returning) gaze through the multiplicity of the porous/overlapping spaces she occupies, ranging from the physical and sensorial to the mythical.

McGowan points to the general tendency of Hollywood in using fantasy as a trope for closure and the resolution of the dichotomy between desire and gaze as encompassing its lack in *objet petit a* after analyzing *Duel* (dir. Spielberg, 1971) [Ibid., pp. 33–40] and *Citizen Kane* (dir. Orson Welles, 1941) [pp. 35–37] for the way they remain true to the obscurity of the gaze by concealing the antagonist truck-driver and secret regarding the rosebud. Initially, film theory engaged with Lacan to interrogate "the relationship between fantasy and ideology (fantasy and the symbolic) rather than on the relationship between fantasy and the gaze (fantasy and the Real)" [Ibid., p. 39]. Therefore, fantasy was deemed negative as it offered the space for spectators to be deluded and interpellated, and the theorists took upon the responsibility of revealing the ideological underpinnings of the symbolic and alerting spectators to the dangers of

pleasure. However, according to McGowan, “when we focus on the gaze as objet petit a, fantasy ceases to be simply negative. Fantasy, for Lacan, has a double role in the experience of the subject” (p. 40). In *Maadathy* too, the fantasy of building a temple—an imagined space, an enormous and ornate alternative to the existing rudimentary functional one—is seen as the resolution to the issue of the obfuscation of the objet petit a—the secret of the object in the gaze posited by the community at large, outside Yosana’s family. The possessed woman’s desire is posited against Yosana’s gaze, and the solution is sought through erecting a temple. As the signifier of the voice of the community, the possessed woman mobilizes through her rhetorical utterance the entire village to participate in collecting funds and building the temple. Since Yosana’s divinity is already alluded to, the fantasy of the temple seems like a logical extension. Consider, for instance, the scene where after performing a small ritual, the team from the village with the priest leave after having measured and chosen the piece of rock for what seems to be the first pillar of the temple to be constructed. After they move, carrying the chosen piece of rock covered with the yellow cloth, we see Yosana arriving at the rock and looking down at them from the top. Her attention is drawn to the offering for the goddess they left—the guava, pomegranates, and bananas. Yosana’s acceptance of what is offered to the goddess is juxtaposed with her jouissance of relishing the fruits and sharing them with her friends, the monkeys, who relish them like her. The saintly (offering) and the sensorial (gratification) are juxtaposed in positing Yosana as grounded and simultaneously ethereal—one of the ways the objet petit a is obscured. However, objet petit a itself is a product of misrecognition, particularly when we think of it as presence rather than as absence in a subject:

Desire for Lacan, as it is manifest in the mechanisms of language, is the attempt to attain or understand that which is missing from the being of the subject, which is the *objet a*. The *objet a* is that around which desire circulates, that upon which fantasy is constructed, and that which is the product of *méconnaissance*. (Lacan, 1977, p. 22).

(Hendrix, 2019)

Therefore, between desire and its lack, as objet petit a, in gaze, fantasy is invoked for resolution. In a film like *Schindler’s List* (dir. Spielberg, 1993), the protagonist Oskar Schindler himself plays the fantasy figure to resolve the obscured gaze of the Nazi commandant Amon Goeth (Ralph Fiennes). McGowan details how “Goeth’s gaze does not remain an impossible object throughout the film. Through the [father] figure of Oskar Schindler (Liam Neeson), Spielberg domesticates this gaze and thereby deflects its trauma” (p. 38). Schindler is thus able to free a thousand Jews and shield us from Goeth and “the Real through the enactment of a fantasy” (p. 39). But as detailed by McGowan, like in the case of *Blue Velvet* (dir. David Lynch, 1986), fantasy need not always be regressive, deployed in the service of ideology (pp. 41–42). “Even though fantasy is a retreat from the gaze and a screen obscuring the gaps in the symbolic order, cinema has the ability to employ fantasy in a radical way” (p. 43). It could also enable our encounter with the gaze, like in the case of *Maadathy*, wherein

the domestication of the gaze of Yosana is denied, despite the increasing aggression against her, from the verbal to the physical. Her violent death also provides the transition of her family members to the public sphere of the space around the temple, right at the heart of the village. Until then, as spectators, we are the witnesses to the events on both sides—the caste-full village, inhabited by people full of their caste arrogance/aggression, and the casteless Yosana and her family with a porous home posited in the outskirts amidst a forest with a river running through it. But Yosana's traumatic death erases the divide and paves the way for her family to directly encounter the village people in front of the newly built temple. The gaze of the community looking at Yosana's family as they mourn their irreplaceable loss is emphasized in this sequence.

It resonates with the catastrophic preceding sequence, wherein Yosana's rape and death are parallelly cut with the rituals in the newly constructed temple, signifying the closure of the gap between the village and the outskirts/forest area and the folding of the disparate places, revolving around Yosana's home in the forest and the village sphere, into the space in front of the temple where villagers are forced to see and react to the unseeable Yosana's family's lamentation of her loss. When the sequence begins, we see Yosana with the shirt (of Paneer) in her hand, taking shelter under a cavernous rock. After a while, as it gets darker, we see four young men arriving with bottles of liquor and empty coconut shells, and they start drinking. Through their discussion, we come to know that Paneer and his rival, who quarreled and fought because of money, before realizing that the village headman had cheated them during the fund collection for the temple, are also part of the group. However, they come together, ironically, in their show of masculinity against the helpless Yosana. As they take turns to violently rape her, it is dark, and with the torchlight on their hand, we get a feeble glimpse of Yosana before we see the torch rolling over on the ground. The fleeting close-ups of her frightened and quivering face covered with her hair are juxtaposed with sound from the speaker in the temple where the song praises the hair and the tresses, and the heart and the (thousand) eyes of the goddess Maadathy. Paradoxically, she remains blind to the plight of Yosana, who is pleading with her savage rapists to let her go. In this scene, too, Yosana as object gaze is rendered obscure through her disorientation due to terror and dismay and the simultaneous glorification of the body parts of the deity—desecration and consecration are juxtaposed.

Thereafter, the depleted and ebbing Yosana musters enough of her feeble energy to crawl and climb over a nearby donkey, almost dropping dead on it. The donkey transports her to the village.⁴ Here one could argue that the fantasy regarding the temple reaches its limits. If the temple signifies the most unpolluted of the space dreamed by the people of the village as their ideal spot regarding purity, the presence of the corpse of Yosana at its entrance creates a rupture. Additionally, the heartrending lament of her mother and grandmother not only intrudes and creates a rupture in the dividing line regarding touch and visibility but by their transgression into the temple space pollute

⁴The parallels with the donkey in Bresson's acclaimed *Au Hasard Balthazar* (1966) are striking here: Both the donkeys "bear the burden of mankind" (Vaux, 2004). See for details, on Bresson and *Au Hasard Balthazar*: Vaux, Sara Anson (2004), Divine skepticism: the films of Robert Bresson, Retrieved Nov. 15. 2021, from <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Divine+skepticism%3A+the+films+of+Robert+Bresson.-a0125407684>

and blur the boundaries of the sanctum sanctorum of caste and its hierarchy/structure, punctuated by the cursing of the community by Veni and her mother-in-law, who throw their handful of mud on them. The caste-full people overcome the momentary inertia due to the shock of having been touched by the untouchable and seen the unseeable, and they call upon each other for responding to the shattering of social norms and taboo by violently punishing Veni and her family. Thus, the fantasy regarding a space of purity reaches its limits and snaps on its edges, mainly because of the presence of Yosana as the stain. Such an image of the limit of fantasy enables an “encounter with the gaze.” We see the goddess whose eyes (in the newly sculpted statue) were opened through a ceremonial ritual the night before, watching the pristine pillars and roof (carved out of stone) collapse around her. Her face too gradually morphs into that of Yosana—the Maadathy now. The free spirit of Yosana finds a seated/stable body in the statue of the deity: the object (which returns the) gaze becomes visible now. Nonetheless, the jouissance of Yosana/Maadathy will not allow her circumscribing within the narrow space of the interiors marked by the pillars and the roof—the key to the secret of her jouissance far exceeding the limiting and dichotomous idea of purity. Here it is important to note Lacan’s engagement with painting, particularly the anamorphosis—the distortion in art that requires a particular angle or device to view—in Holbein’s *Ambassadors*. The large skull depicted by Holbein clouds the painting and is decipherable as such only from a “radically oblique angle.” (Iskin, 1997, p. 55).

In *Maadathy*, the precarity of Yosana and her subjectivity casts a shadow disallowing our perception of any intent look. Furthermore, unlike in a painting, or a sardine can, which is static, the movement of the camera is compounded by the meandering subjectivity of Yosana in *Maadathy*. Only when her face/head is morphed onto the body of the statue does the slanted view become possible due to the fissure in the transposing of the human with the inanimate. More importantly, the encounter with the gaze leads to the eruption of the Real: as the entire village, drunk with caste pride, aggressively marches with (mud and stones in) their clenched fists toward Veni and family, they are frozen and simultaneously blinded. It is not possible to belong to a caste and see the reality around as it is, uncolored by prejudice and irrationality. Yosana as Maadathy, therefore, renders the world unseeable to the caste-full people. The people propelled by their death drive, exemplified by their repeated (and only) acts of aggression, finally turn in inside and self-destruct themselves, as explicated by Freud (Smith, 2010). Indeed, they cannot have a clue about the world of Yosana throbbing with life, let alone the secret of her desires. Caste as a signifier of the horror of darkness within human hearts blinds people to see the unfillable void in their objective to oppress and destroy, thus, leading them to rape and kill and look in futility to the key for jouissance elsewhere, and in envy try to appropriate the unfathomable/uncontainable.

Nevertheless, the Real escapes language or signification in terms of the profound impact it produces. Particularly in the end when, as part of the framing device to conclude the story, we see the woman who comes looking for her husband who had gone to the nearby thatched hut to get a piece of cloth for his (suddenly) menstruating wife, at the very beginning. We discover him, too, blinded among the people of the

village with a red bloodstain on the back of his shoulder in his white shirt, frozen in the concluding painting—the narrative had begun with the first one in the row. The bloodstain, a signifier of the menstrual blood, thus, runs as a subtext providing the canvas to weave a narrative on the jouissance, of an adolescent girl, which eludes the grasp of an unwaveringly casteist society that is blind and frozen/dead. Finally, as the young wife rushes out in horror from the thatched hut, the camera pans on the mountain to frame the tranquil Yosana, quietly standing there at a distance, uncontainable and undefiable.

To conclude, I would like to refer to Roja Suganthi-Singh's insightful review of *Maadathy* (2021, p. 409). Recalling the free and wandering spirit of Yosana and her intricate ties with the fauna, she points to the presaging of the alluring “cave-tomb” by Maadathy's narrative where all the apprehensions of her mother turn into reality in a casteist society: “Ever since Yosana emerged from her womb as a girl, a Dalit girl, a Dalit Vannar girl—she knew that the stars lined up in that order to determine her fate.” While her mother's fears come true to haunt us regarding the inescapable stranglehold of caste, the concluding shot of the “water lover” Yosana among the mountains, her natural abode, recalls the rabbits, quails, monkeys, donkeys, and the parrot, and punctuate her ecofeminism, thus alluding to the other much-needed and hopeful alliances to realize the objective of Babasaheb Ambedkar regarding the annihilation of caste.

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