

WORTH AN ARM AND A LEG: DISABILITY AND INTIMACY IN THE MAKING OF MADURAI VEERAN

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Disability discourses in India appear to be intricately intertwined with intimacy. One aspect of this entanglement is apparent in the familiar yet understudied trope of disability as punishment meted out for certain kinds of intimacies, especially those considered to be transgressive for various reasons. Leprosy serves as one instance. Early discourse of leprosy which designates persons affected with leprosy as ritually impure suggests that one of the reasons for being affected by leprosy may be 'bad actions' such as sexual transgressions or violation of kinship taboos. T.A.Wise's colonial commentary on Hindu systems of medicine documents leprosy being attributed to failure in observing prescriptions of abstinence; a man who 'visits his wife before food is digested' (Wise, 259) could contract leprosy. Just as in the leprosy case, bodies marked with impairments such as facial disfigurement or limb damage or amputation have been interpreted in terms of the transgression those bodies may have participated in. Acid attacks on women serve as a contemporary instance of a similar kind, where the retributive facial disfigurement may be perceived as symbolic of spurned love. The Supreme Court of India, invoking a fairly modern notion of disability as a socio response to impairment, recently ruled that acid attack survivors be given the status of disability so that they may benefit from the same socio-economic protections offered to other disabled people in the country. These instances enable us to inquire into what appear to be persistent interconnections between intimacy and disability to find out how each is constituted by the other and under what conditions.

Taking the figure of Madurai Veeran¹ as its point of focus, the present paper traces the figure through two Tamil folk traditions, *Nontinatakam* and *Madurai Veeran Kathai* that developed between the 17th and 19th centuries. With the aim of investigating the relationship between disablement caused by limb amputations and romantic

relations considered to be transgressive, the paper studies the plot, aesthetics and socio-cultural contexts of these two narrative traditions. Several caste-based communities in contemporary Tamil Nadu identify Madurai Veeran as their chief deity and hero.

Nontinatakam, a satiric performative tradition, is loosely translated as cripple-drama or lame-drama and is a monologue that narrates the adventures of a layman who is punished with limb amputations by the local king for his thievery and amorous escapades. Though the protagonist of the *nontinatakams* is not named as Madurai Veeran, it is widely believed that the figure of Madurai Veeran significantly influences the figure of the *nonti* (the lame man)² in the *nontinatakams*. The *Madurai Veeran Kathai* is balladic form sung in praise of the hero, 'Veeran' of Madurai who was known for his bravery in the face of different kinds of adversity. Madurai Veeran was punished with limb amputations similar to the protagonist of the *nontinatakam* because of his audacity to fall in love with an upper-caste woman, the king's daughter. Studying different aspects of these two forms and their prevalence in the Tamil socio-cultural landscape, the paper examines contextual distinctions related to the conceptualization of intimacy and bodily difference. The paper attempts to critically investigate *Nontinatakam's* common assignation as a morality play as well as the intersectionality of caste and disability in due course of the analysis.

Nontinatakam was performed outdoors before large and mixed audiences in front of temples and other religious shrines by a single actor who would perform with one leg folded and tied up at the back to signify his 'nonti' status. For this reason the *nontinatakam* is also known as *Orraikal Natakam*, literally, 'Drama on one and a half legs'. The solo actor, the narrator-protagonist or the *nonti* as he is often referred to would begin by introducing himself in terms of region, lineage, caste and action. He would then narrate, in a comic vein, his adventures related to stealing and thieving in risky situations before describing his romantic encounter with a *devadasi* which would be described in detail. The tale would turn into a lament as he recalled the way the mother of the *devadasi* cheated him by robbing him of his stolen wealth. Penny-less he escapes the house of the *devadasi* and in due course is caught and punished by the king for his thieving and romancing. His alternate arm and leg are severed off and he is left to die. He survives and travels, undertaking great physical hardship to the shrine/ temple and supplicates to the shrine of the deity. His devotion is rewarded and his limbs are restored. The narrative concludes with a song of elaborate praise for the local deity or local

ruler.

Given that *nontinatakam* developed as an independent genre, different performances are known by the different towns, shrines and deities the play is associated with. Each *nontinatakam* is usually known by the name of the deity and/or the name of the place it emerged from. The earliest known *nontinatakam*, the *Ceytakati Nontinatakam* was performed within the context of Tamil Muslim trading society in the early eighteenth century and one of its chief elements is the praise of the Muslim piety of the ruler of Kilakkarai, Citakkati (Vink 2015). The twentieth century *nontinatakams* took a turn towards nationalism; one of the two that belong to this period is *Gandhi Carittira Nonti Cintu* (*Nontinatakam* based on the life of Gandhi). It is estimated that there are 44 written *nontinatakams*, available as palm-leaf manuscripts, of which only fifteen have been printed; the others still exist in palm manuscript form (Maruthamuthu 1998). The present paper draws on two *nontinatakams*, *Tinkalur Arulmalai Nontinatakam* (late 18th century) and *Tiruppullani Nonti Natakam* (19th century).

The *Madurai Veeran Kathai* also known as the *Maturai viracuamikatai* is a folk ballad form that narrates the story of Madurai Veeran, a bandit who became the hero of Madurai in the seventeenth century under the reign of Tirumalai Nayakkar between 1623 and 1659 (Shulman, 1985). Sometimes Veeran is mistaken for a member of the Kallar community which was known as a ‘bandit’ caste taking from the word *kallan* which means thief as well as a warrior caste known for their professional role as guards of royalty. However, in the story³ of Madurai Veeran, the hero is not born within this caste but is abandoned by royal parents and later adopted by a couple of the Cakkaliyar caste, a caste that traditionally involved in leatherwork and shoemaking and considered to be ‘untouchable’. Veeran grows up in the Cakkaliyar household. On duty as a guard of the princess Pommi (the daughter of Pommana Nayakkan) in the forest, he falls in love with her. After his assignment as forest guard ended and Pommi has returned to the palace, Veeran longs for her and steals into the palace one night only to escape with Pommi. The king’s army follows and finds the lovers and in the ensuing battle Veeran defeats the army and kills the king.

Madurai Veeran and Pommi move to Tiruchhirapalli where the king welcomes them and Veeran becomes responsible for subduing the bandit caste of Kallar who were known to trouble and rob travellers. Veeran’s valiant actions bring him to Madurai where the king Tirumalai Nayakkar appoints him once again to defeat the

Kallar. Veeran succeeds and to reward him for his victory, the king sends a troupe of dancing girls. Madurai Veeran falls in love with Vellaiyammal, one of the dancers and tries to abduct her from the Meenakshi temple. He is caught by the guards who mistake him for a member of the Kallars and he is punished with amputations of an arm and a leg. Both Vellaiyammal, his new lover, and Pommi, his wife rush to his side as he is dying. In the interim his true identity becomes known and Tirumalai Nayakkar remorsefully prays to goddess Meenakshi for Veeran's limbs to be restored. His limbs grow back but Veeran has resolved to die as he believes it was ordained by god. He beheads himself at the feet of Meenakshi. Pommi and Vellaiyammal with the consent of the king jump into a pit of fire.

On realizing that his death had not been ritualized, the dead Veeran laments to goddess Meenakshi. Instructed by her, he appears in the king, Tirumalai Nayakkar's dream as an untouchable and wanders through the city disrupting people's lives. When Tirumalai Nayakkar presents himself before the deities Siva and Meenakshi seeking redressal of the recent troubles he learns that they have been caused because Madurai Veeran's death was not suitably propitiated. The king then establishes a temple for the worship of Madurai Veeran and the worship of the hero of Madurai, installed at the entrance of several shrines across the city continues to date. Madurai Veeran is considered to be the kula deivam (caste deity) of several caste groups, to this day, in the Madurai region including the Kallar who he defeats as per the story. The hero's courage to transgress various boundaries, of social and sexual norms as well as caste norms, made him synonymous with fearlessness (Shulman 1985). The present paper refers to two other retellings of the Madurai Veeran story, the 1956 film *Madurai Veeran* directed by D.Yoganand as well as the Adundhatiyar historian Ezhil. Elangovan's account titled 'The Murder of Madurai Veeran and the Palace of Thirumalai Nayakkar' published in 2013 in *No Alphabet in Sight: New Dalit Writing from South India* edited by Satyanarayana and Tharu. The latter, it may be noted, firmly locates Madurai Veeran within Dalit historiography and as an important figure in Dalit cultural politics.

Disability-as-punishment

Disability studies discourse is critical of the discursive construction of disability as punishment and strongly criticizes such conceptualization as belonging to the religious model or moral model of disability. The conceptualization of disability in value-laden terms where the

presence of blindness, speechlessness or multiple limbs is recognized as symbolic of divine intervention either as blessing or curse is referred to as the moral model or religious model of disability. Disability historiography posits the moral model as chronologically prior to the medical and social models thereby characterizing it as a pre-modern discursive framing of disability (Hamraie, 2015; Anand, 2016). Disability scholarship on Christian traditions has delineated the history of the west as dominated by the moral model in the medieval and early modern periods. Studies of the bible explicate how divine interventions that heal an individual's body of diseases and deformities also absolve them of their guilt and sin. Charity, within the same discourse, figures as an act of absolution and enhances the status of the charitable person to a position of divinity or super-human capacity.

Contemporary disability studies scholarship in India has identified different ways in which attributing one's disability to past actions has remained a persistent trope of engaging with disability in the Indian context. According to Anita Ghai disability is comprehended as "inherent in the mind or body" (Ghai, xix) with two dominant modes of cultural frames, one that conceptualizes disability as a 'lack' or 'flaw' and another that associates it with 'deceit, mischief and devilry' (Ghai, xix). Ghai explains that 'disabled people sometimes are depicted as suffering the wrath of God and being punished for misdeeds that either they or their families have committed—a kind of penance or retribution for past misdeeds' (Ghai, xix). Similarly, highlighting the dynamics of the "religious model", Nilika Mehrotra contends,

...in the South and South-East Asian context, *religious model* has been found to be influential in articulating disability beliefs and practices. According to this model, disability is seen as divine punishment inflicted upon the an individual as a result of the sin committed by the disabled person in current or the previous births and explains the source of disability as invested in the supernatural forces. (Mehrotra, 40)

While such association of disability with punishment is recurrent within mythopoetic thought, it is also known to shape everyday discourse and praxis of disability in several non-Western contexts. Mehrotra cites examples from Kenya and China where, much like the Indian context, the discourse of disability is dominated by discussions of causality thus making past actions a significant part of the discussion. Among the Maasai in Kenya, an impairment is viewed 'as a projection on the human body of social or cosmic disorder, a fact of life or misfortune, a curse, a result of sorcery or a consequence

of the behaviour of the father or the mother' (Mehrotra, 40). Within the more traditional Chinese context where the discourse of disability was also dominated by a narrative of causality, 'having a person with a disability was believed to bring shame and guilt to the family' (Mehrotra, 40). Thus everyday conversations about disability are governed by a focus on explanations for disability rather than on ways of addressing it.

In Anglo-European- American contexts, the discourse of disability is dominated by narratives of addressing or responding to disability. Responses to disability in these contexts are known to have shifted from the 'charity model' or 'moral model' where the response was a combination of pity, fear and charity was meted out to the individual, to that of medicalizing disability by making the individual with disability, the entity that had to be treated so that the disability may be removed, decreased or alleviated. Given this historical progression, the contemporary, more desirable responses to disability are framed as the 'social model' response where the action taken is on the physical and social environment of the individual with disability as well and not the individual alone. That all the three approaches to disability are approaches dominated by questions related to "solving" the issue of disability has not been highlighted in disability studies scholarship. Nevertheless, what has remained at the fore is the progression inherent to this framework, that there is evidence of a shift from a charitable response to a medical redressal to a social-contextual approach. Given the emphasis on progression, responses to disability in all cultural contexts have come to be evaluated on the basis of the progression, rather than in terms of the dominant discursive framework. The discursive dominance of certain narrative frames is, however, a significant constitutive aspect of culturally-specific conceptualization of disability (Devlieger, 1995). Delineating this difference of discourse is crucial as misconceptions or conflation accrued in designating both the Anglo-European American West's approach to disability and the approach of certain non-Western contexts to disability as belonging to the so-called religious model or "moral framework" may be avoided.

Disability-as-punishment is a category that emerges distinctly in different historico-cultural contexts. Given that every emergence of this category is particular to social, historical geographical and cultural factors, the present paper examines this category within the literary and cultural discourses pertaining to 17th-19th century Tamil discourse.

Nontinatakam's place within disability scholarship and the anxiety of conflation

M. Miles, a disability historian who focuses on disability in non-western traditions, particularly the South Asian context, compiled an annotated bibliography of sources in 2008 (*Glimpses of Disability in the Literature and Cultures of East Asia, South Asia, the Middle East & Africa. A Modern and Historical Bibliography, with some annotation*) which lists two entries related to *nontinatakam*. One is Kumor B. Selim's entry in the *Encyclopedia of Disability* (2006) which characterizes the dramatic form as 'morality tale traditionally performed as street theatre in South-East India, featuring a rascal who enjoys crime and immorality, before being punished by amputation of a leg and maybe an arm' (Miles, 2008). The second reference is to David Shulman's well-known critical work, *The King and the Clown in South Indian Myth and Poetry* (1985) which is annotated as containing commentaries on the prevalence of 'lame' and 'cripple' kings as a popular literary trope. *Nontinatakam* is translated as "cripple-drama" in the works that Miles refers to. Selim's encyclopaedia entry designates the performance tradition as a morality tale drawing attention to the miracle element in the plot when the limbs of the protagonist are restored as he reaches the temple built for the deity and appeals to be forgiven for his misdeeds. The characterization of *nontinatakam* as a play that presents the amputations as punishment for his wrongful actions firmly links it to the notion of disability as punishment. Tamil literary scholarship had consistently marked this minor dramatic form as akin to the morality plays of medieval Anglo-European society. More recently, *nontinatakam's* significance in terms of the moral or religious model of disability has begun to gain popularity among Tamil scholars.

In the *nontinatakam*, the *marukal-marukai* (alternate arm and leg) amputations is imposed as a punishment on the protagonist for the robbery he commits at the king's palace as well as for his romantic involvement with the *devadasi*. But it is important to think of the disablement he experiences in context to see this text in the light of the disability discourse. While the dominant reception of the plot within the disability discourse places it as a linear narrative of 'moral' punishment for his 'immoral' actions of thieving and adultery, a contextual reading of the text within the tradition of Tamil literary culture and as participant in the caste discourse enables a more layered understanding of disablement due to bodily difference.

In the *Tinkalur Arulmalai Nontinatakam* (Maruthamuthu, 1998), Pakaletti, the protagonist-narrator appears to be a trickster-bandit

whose profession it seems is to steal from the rich. He travels from kingdom to kingdom, travelling as far as Brindavan, stealing the riches of the palaces, and in each episode he invokes the local deity but most often Muruka of Arulmalai to assist him in his endeavours. He tricks guards at palaces and other vigilant people by frequently disguising himself as a mendicant traveller. Each episode of thieving is followed by his return to the temple-dancer or *devadasi*'s house where amorous episodes of lovemaking between Pakaletti and the dancer, Kettimutal are accompanied by the dancer's mother robbing Pakaletti's loot. Kettimutal and her mother are presented as scheming and conniving opportunists who take advantage for Pakaletti's penchant for the dancer. Assuming the disguise of a fakir he enters the cavalry barracks of General Hussain, near Mysore. He steals the most physically perfect horse from these barracks when he is chased down by the guards. Pakaletti considers the destiny enforced by Shani, the god Saturn as responsible for his getting caught. While the soldiers who catch him demand his death as punishment, the benevolent general restricts his punishment to severing his right leg and left hand.

The pain that Pakaletti suffers makes him realize that this was his punishment for stealing and he invokes the deity of Arulmalai. As the plot progresses, Pakaletti meets Brahmins travelling from Benaras who are on their way to Tinkalur Arulmalai to visit the deity. Having learnt of the reasons for Pakaletti's amputated condition, they advise him to visit Murukan of Arulmalai and worship him so that his limbs may grow back. They treat his wounds with medicinal herbs and make a crutch out of a tree-branch so that he may walk to the shrine. The lame Pakaletti, with crutch, completes his journey to the shrine of Murukan and supplicates before the deity praising his greatness and benevolence. His prayer is answered and his limbs grow back and he is given the title "The Nonti of Tinkalur", literally, 'the lame of Tinkalur'.

On reviewing certain key aspects of this *nontinatakam*, we find that it is Pakaletti's particular action of stealing a horse from the army that brings him the fate of the amputation. The amputations may also be regarded in the context of his horse-riding, something he could not have done with the limb amputations. While the pain of amputation teaches him that he was being punished for his stealing of the horse, there is no moral that is drawn out within the text itself as the play proceeds to give an account of the author in first person and concludes with the 'nonti's wedding celebration. It may be significant to note here that the protagonist's invocation of various

deities before he executes his burglary indicates that certain forms of stealing were considered professional practices and not designated as immoral action as in the Western-Christian tradition. In the *Palani Nontinatakam*, the deities invoked by the protagonist assist him in identifying houses that can be burgled. These include houses that do not feed refugees seeking shelter and houses of people not committed to the worship of god as well as those who terrorise noble citizens (Jayalakshmi and Maruthamuthu 2007). Intriguingly the protagonist is instructed to avoid, among others, ‘helpers of poor and needy weaklings’ (Jayalakshmi and Maruthamuthu, 49) probably a reference to the Nonti serving as a test case so that people responding to his disabled status could be identified appropriately.

The protagonists of most of the *nontinatakams* appear to belong to the Kallar community of professional burglars (Jayalakshmi and Maruthamuthu 2007) and this is explicitly stated in the text of the *Tiruppulani Nontinatakam* where Coracuran the hero introduces himself to the crowd as a member of the Kallar community in the early part of the play. Given these evidences within the texts it can be argued that thieving within the context of the *nontinatakam* and the Tamil socio-cultural context of the time is not to be mistaken for thieving as it is conceptualized within the Western normative sense as an immoral or criminal act that elicits divine or legal punishment but as a way of life ensconced within ethical action. Criminalization of the Kallar community has been variously attributed to colonial forms of governance that were prevalent at the time (Blackburn, 78; Pandian, 2005). Comprehending the *nontinatakam* within the frame of the “moral model” of disability appears to be inadequate in the light of the contextual conceptualizations of acceptable and appropriate actions. ‘Nonti’ it may be noted is an honorific title presented to Pakaletti. As Martha Rose suggests in her study of bodily conditions in the context of Greek antiquity, individual instances of punishment have to be regarded within specific context and not assumed to be normative or normal (2003). Rose draws attention to different social responses that were elicited by the same kind of impairment to make a case for contextual understanding of impairment where the disablement experienced may be related to the cause of one’s impairment and what one’s position is in society (2003). Her contention may be extended to be indicating the problem of universalising that appears to be inherent to disability theorizing as ensconced in the models approach.

Devlieger points out that, culturally specific notions of bodily difference and disablement may be gleaned by noting the nature of

disability discourse and rhetoric in different contexts. He finds that in Songye society, the nature of the discourse related to disability is predominantly focused on causal explanations. Western discourse of disability, in contrast, is centred on addressing the disability. These discourses are related to distinct epistemic frameworks that have distinct ways of making sense of bodily difference. Devlieger's observations enable us to ask whether the designation of *nontinatakam* as part of the moral model discourse is a result of discursive framing that is inherent to Western epistemology.

Costs of intimacy

Intimacy between the *nonti* and the *devadasi* in the *nontinatakams* and between Vellaiammal and Veeran in the *Madurai Veeran Kathai* present themselves in various forms through the narratives. Protagonists of the *nontinatakams* describe their erotic encounters with the *devadasi* in explicit detail. In the *Tiruppullani Nonti Natakam*, Coracuran, the protagonist is punished for kidnapping a *devadasi* and is characterized primarily as a womanizer. When the protagonist-narrator recalls his encounter with the *devadasi*, before the audience, the sexual attraction in their intimacy is narrated in great detail. Parts of the *nontinatakam* take on the traditional mode of *sringara*, the performative expression of physical beauty and erotic love which was a major part of *devadasi* performative traditions.

The *Tiruccentur Nontinatakam* details the lovemaking between Matappuli (the protagonist) and Citampararatnam (the *devadasi*) by emphasizing seduction strategies employed by the *devadasi* while simultaneously underscoring the heartlessness of the *devadasi*'s mother who fulfils the caricature of the recurrent figure of the *vesyamatr*, literally, the mother of the *devadasi* (Shulman, 374).

Inter-caste romance seems to be the centre of the *Madurai Veeran Kathai*. Retellings of the *Madurai Veeran Kathai* highlight the mutual love between Veeran who was brought up in a Chakkaliyar (an 'untouchable' caste) household and the daughter of the king. While the *nontinatakams* foreground the transgressive nature of the romantic relations that the heroes have with the *devadasi* and other women, the *Madurai Veeran Kathai* celebrates the risks that Veeran takes which serve to endear him to Pommi and underscore his valiant character to the audience of the story. The *Madurai Veeran Kathai* highlights two transgressive romances—one, Veeran's romance and elopement with Pommi, the daughter of the king; two, Veeran's romance with Vellaiammal, the *devadasi* in the king

of Madurai, Thirumalai *Nayakkar's* court. The latter is framed as a transgressive act because most retellings portray Vellaiammal as Thirumalai *Nayakkar's* favourite danseuse and in some she is also identified as his lover. Narsappan, Pommi's suitor and the king's advisor, enraged by vengeance later tricks Thirumalai *Nayakkar* of Madurai into punishing Veeran by framing the latter's sympathy and infatuation towards the dancer as a transgressive act that amounts to 'stealing' Vellaiammal, the king's favourite dancer.

Yoganand's film *Madurai Veeran* (1956) illustrates the instances of caste hierarchy and untouchability explicitly. Early in the film when Veeran saves the drowning Pommi, she is warned not to inform the king about the true identity of her saviour as that would result in her being excommunicated from the kingdom as she was touched by a lower-caste man. In another instance, she causes great anxiety to the army chief by visiting the *cheri*, that section of the town where the 'untouchable' communities lived. Nevertheless, it must be recalled that Veeran, in the dominant narrative, is after all a man of royal birth and so these transgressions of caste boundaries (Shulman 1985) are in fact not transgressions at all! In the film, the portrayal of the second romance betrays that Vellaiammal had no knowledge of the king's interest in her. She falls in love with Veeran and is shocked to learn subsequently of Thirumalai *Nayakkar's* romantic interest in her.

Yoganand's film highlights the tragedy of Vellaiammal cinematically with the use of a dramatic monologue in which Vellaiammal, in love with Veeran but forced to be Thirumalai *Nayakkar's* beloved, contemplates suicide. The dancer's anklets suddenly appear to her as a prisoner's ankle cuffs, her ornate bangles nothing but a poisonous snake and the gold necklace but a noose. She questions the position of the court dancer as the king's prisoner, a mere toy through whom he demonstrates his authority and power. Her liberation then is only possible through a dagger that would end her life. It is at this moment that Veeran comes to her rescue and takes her as *manavi*, literally meaning soulmate but also used to designate wife.

Veeran, in Ezhil Elangovan's non-fictional account is reclaimed as the rescuer of Vellaiammal who is predominantly represented as the court dancer that Veeran falls in love with and abducts. It is most likely that the *nontinatakams* draw on this episode of Veeran's life for their main storyline. Elangovan's account critiques these characterizations because they serve only to falsely justify Veeran's actions as deserving of brutal retribution.

Elangovan's reclaiming of Madurai Veeran as an important figure

of Arunthaiyar history discredits the high caste birth of Veeran by not acknowledging that element of the story. His account focuses on how the dominant narrative circulated by scholars of the palm leaf manuscripts about Veeran is grounded in caste hierarchy as it charges him with abducting Vellaiammal variously presented as the king, Thirumalai Nayakkar's lover, as a court dancer, a maidservant and as his daughter and by doing so tries to justify the quantum of punishment given to Veeran. He contests each of the several identities that Vellaiammal is cast in by drawing attention to the casteism inherent in these characterizations.

Examining the hypothesis that Vellaiammal, according to some of the manuscripts was a maidservant, Elangovan alleges that maid servants were treated poorly by the royal families and it is unlikely that the king would serve punishment of such a harsh variety to someone who abducted a woman of such low status. Discrediting the accounts of Vellaiammal being a woman of the king's harem Elangovan states that women of the harem would have been in pursuit of the king's wealth and not have found elopement with Veeran attractive given his low economic status. He dismisses the idea that Vellaiammal may have been Thirumalai Nayakkar's daughter because of the difference of region and language evident in the Tamil and Telugu names of Vellaiammal and Thirumalai Chavuri Nainu Ayyalugaru (Thirumalai Naykkar's original name) respectively. However, if Vellaiammal is taken to be a court dancer, he states, the story of Veeran taking Vellaiammal is then an act of rescue and not abduction. The hardships she may have faced due to the pathetic conditions the *devadasis* lived in cannot be ignored. They were nothing but sexual slaves of upper-caste men. Feminist historians and critics have severally underscored the exploitative nature of the *devadasi* tradition as practiced in different parts of India (Anandhi, 1991; Nair, 1994; Pati, 1995; Chakravarti, 2010).

Devadasis who were known as "*tevaradiyals*" or "slaves of the god" in the Tamil region, later came to be known as "*thevadial*" meaning prostitutes, thereby carrying negative connotations that were absent from the previous designation (Anandhi, 739). The *devadasis* were committed to the temple by a ritual ceremony of marrying the deity of the temple before they attained puberty. Another nuptial ceremony was performed after a *devadasi* attained puberty by which she acquired the status of *nityasumangali*, 'one who is free from widowhood' (Anandhi, 739). A *devadasi* chose her patron hereafter, someone who would also be her sexual partner without having to marry her; the patron was usually a person controlling the temple

income, a Brahmin or a non-Brahmin landlord (Anandhi, 1991). In the medieval period, the *devadasis* enjoyed a high status as well as positions of power as they were primarily associated with temples. Part of the temple's wealth was considered to be their property. Anandhi contends that some of the *devadasis* "were even entrusted with the temple management as trustees and as administrators of temple funds" (739). Later, trusteeship of the temples was grabbed by Brahmins and the *devadasis* lost their high status (Anandhi, 1991: 739). A point of interest to us would be the way in which sexual relations that the *devadasis* could have were prescribed by landed patrons (Anandhi, 1991). S. Anandhi provides details of how the *devadasis* could not maintain sexual relations with the men who surrounded them:

These men of the *devadasi* community were known as 'melakkarars', 'nayanakarars' and 'nattuvanars', who were either born to *devadasis* or recruited for temple service as musicians. Among these musicians, the 'cinnamelam' (small drum) group was associated with *devadasis* dance and music performances. Sexual contact between this group of men and *devadasis* was prohibited. The 'periyamelam' (big drum) group, known as nagaswaram players, provided music for other ceremonies and rituals and thus were not entirely dependent on the *devadasis* tradition. They had to depend on the landed classes for patronage. This again prohibited any sexual contact between *devadasis* and these musicians. In short, it was not a free flow of *devadasis*' desire which marked out the system, but its almost exclusive control by the landed patrons. (739)

Vellaiammal's desire for Veeran is also a prohibited desire as he was after all a *dalapati* or chief of the king's army, not a landed patron or a Brahmin controlling a temple's wealth. The tragedy of not being able to possess the one she desired and loved is at the heart of the *Madurai Veeran Kathai* tradition. Her sacrifice of giving up her lover is however, overwhelmed by the story of Veeran's sacrifice for the safety and security of the kingdom.

The disability of marukal-marukai amputations

Disability studies discourse is dominated by studies that resist portrayals of disability as an unfavourable or undesirable condition given the academic discourse's commitment to the "movement framework" or a rights-based approach. The very emphasis of the social model framework is to reject social constructions of disability as undesirable and reform processes that constitute disability negatively. Given this predominance, drawing attention to the story of Madurai

Veeran where disability emerges as an undesirable condition, would be an unpopular move in the scholarly climes of disability research. Retaining its attention on the fact that disability and disablement may be conceptualized differently in different cultural contexts, it might be significant to examine closely the contours of the emergence of disability caused by alternate limb amputations as an unfavourable condition. Being located at the intersections of two other conceptual axes of caste and intimacy, it is imperative that disability be studied here as constituted by and constituting the other two conceptual discourses and not independently. What follows is a review the *marukal-marukai* amputation as manifest in the lives of the different protagonists as well as its social configuration given the literary and cultural responses their stories attract.

If Veeran is a Kallar then the retribution of *marukal-marukai* imposes severe limitations on the profession of burgling or of keeping guard (*kaval*), both identified as occupations of the Kallar at different times and in different accounts of Veeran. It may be recalled that thieving was located within a social system that did not problematize it within moral or legal domains. This would be true of all the *nontinatakams*. Given that the *nontinakam* best fits the description of popular culture, the *marukal-marukai* amputation has a performative significance that cannot be overlooked—the performer is known to have tied one leg behind his back to perform the *nonti*. *Nontinatakam* is located within *Cirrilaikiyam*, or minor literary traditions, in the context of Tamil literary history. The performative form belongs in the literary category of *Cintu*. Aesthetically, it is identified as belonging to the category of *ellal* or ridicule. Was being *nonti* or lame then constitutive of the comic element of the time? What exactly was the object of ridicule? What was laughable—elements of the plot, the ribaldry of the narrative or the performance that may have bordered on slapstick and clownery? If it was indeed the plot, then was it that a thief had been amputated and could not thieve anymore? Or was it that a thief was being in-turn robbed by the *dasi*⁴ and her mother's cunning? Or was it that a womanizer had been amputated thus sounding the doom of all his cavorting? If not the plot, then were the comic elements dependent on individual performers and their rendition of the tale—the buffoonery of hobbling while narrating a tragic-comic tale? The script of the play throws up several moments that may have unmistakably caused the laughter—the descriptions of the *nonti* stealing into the houses and palaces to steal their riches; the thief being robbed by the *dasi* and her mother; the preparation of the magic potion that makes the *nonti* unconscious and his subsequent

waking up to the fact of being robbed; a reversal of fortunes as the *nonti* and the *dasi* stealthily robbed each other in turn.

The *nontinatakam* tradition frames disability as undesirable in another way as well, if we consider the fact that the play may be read as a miracle play. Every *nontinakam* concludes with the amputated limbs of the protagonist being restored by the local deity, thus bringing glory to the deity who performed this miraculous act. The story of the *nonti* then stands as a “narrative prosthetic” (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000) that only consolidates the desire for a whole body. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder argue that disability’s persistent presence in literary and cultural texts serves as a corrective narrative that is forwarded to ‘resolve or correct—to “prostheticize” [...]—a deviance marked as improper to a social context’ (53). The protagonist’s *nonti* status is improper considering that the social context portrayed in the *nontinatakams* is one that does not accommodate, if one could call them, at the risk of sounding anachronistic, orthopaedic disabilities such as those of the *nonti*. The deity, be it Murugan as in the *Tinkalur Arulmalai Nontinatakam*, or Thirumal as in the *Tirupullani Nontinatakam*, or Meenakshi if we consider the *Madurai Veeran Kathai* resolve the disablement experienced by the *nontis* with the boon of limbs. The corporeal restoration of the *nonti* also corrects the social disablement of the *nontis* evident in the fact that his condition of *marukal-marukai* amputations is a cause of textual and metatextual mirth symbolic of social derision.

The audience response to the *nonti*’s limping on stage seems to be offset by other roles that the *nonti*’s disabled status serves. Take for instance, the Brahmin pilgrims in the *Tinkalur Arulamalai Nontinatakam* who don’t ignore the *nonti* writhing in pain but fashion a tree branch into a crutch for him and take him along with them on their pilgrimage to visit the deity of Arulmalai. Here, we can say, drawing on Ato Quayson’s typology of disability representation (2007), the *nonti*’s disability works as test of the Brahmins’ ethical action. The pilgrimage assumes a symbolic significance fitting the familiar trope of “journey as destination”. Thus the spiritual fulfilment the pilgrims attain is not by reaching the destination of the temple but by performing ethical actions along their long journey. The interaction between the *nonti* and the Brahmins is reminiscent of the Jaina tradition of *nirvicikitsa* as well, where one’s response to the sight of disability enables the Jaina a higher spiritual status. Not responding with disgust to another’s disfigured status facilitates the Jaina’s overcoming of disgust as an affective state thereby taking the individual closer to the achievement of detachment from worldly

emotions, a desirable spiritual state (Miles 2000).

Social contexts portrayed in the texts studied, cannot be adequately assessed by viewing responses to limb amputations as reactions to impaired conditions alone. Let's take the case of the figure of Veeran as a member of the "untouchable" or Chakkaliyar/ Arunthatiyar community to see his amputated body as a marker of caste-based violence. The *marukal-marukai* amputations serve as retribution for aspiring to transgress one's caste boundary. What is being punished here is the "audacity" of a lower-caste man to aspire to romance a princess and to take the king's lover as his own. The corporal punishment of wounds, torture and amputation serve their metaphorical purpose of reminding the transgressor and all other potential transgressors to the cost of violating caste boundaries. The loss of an arm and a leg would not only limit the Chakkaliyar's professional activity of leather work and other manual labour but it would also result in him bleeding to death. *Marukal-marukai* amputations here are euphemisms for a painful and violent death. Elangovan's account stresses the death of Veeran as a crime, as "murder" (2011) of a lower-caste man by powerful upper-caste people.

In the tradition of the Madurai Veeran Kathai, it is the tragic vein of literary representation that brings to the fore his impaired body as symbolic of the so-called "downfall of the hero" brought about unfairly by the king, Thirumalai *Nayakkar*. Veeran's subsequent death from the amputations is presented as martyrdom, as a sacrifice he makes for the members of his community. Yoganand's film presents this sacrificial figure of Veeran as meeting an unjust end. Pommi and Vellaialammal's mourning of his death, in the text of the film, is framed within the melodramatic form thus accentuating his death as sacrifice and heroism. The public spectacle of his bleeding amputations lead the spectators to become awe-struck—the amputations then appear to facilitate his heroic status.

The theme of sacrifice runs through the different retellings. Shulman's summary of the *Madurai Veeran Kathai* tells us that Veeran's ghostly presence haunts Thirumalai *Nayakkar* after Veeran has died from the amputations. Veeran's death was not propitiated according to custom and he returns to demand an explanation. Driven to account for his failure in appropriately propitiating Veeran's death, Thirumalai *Nayakkar* seeks goddess Meenakshi's forgiveness and asks for the restoration of Veeran to life. Upon returning to the world of the living, Veeran decides to give up his life in an attempt to take rightful responsibility for his transgressive actions. His

sacrifice is thus celebrated. Elangovan's recovery history of Veeran characterizes his sacrifice as one that symbolizes his fight against casteist violence meted out to the Arundhatiyar. Elangovan's primary contention is with the writers of the palm-leaf manuscripts who he accuses of neglecting Veeran's role in ending casteist violence in the kingdom of Thirumalai *Nayakkar* and not duly acknowledging the heroic role played by Veeran in ending ritualistic human sacrifices of Arunthatiyar men, women and children by the king's builders (2011).

Apart from being symbolic of Veeran's sacrifice, can the *marukal-marukai* amputations not be read as symbolic of punishable intimacies? Veeran's amputations, it may be noted, mark the end of Vellaiammal's desire as well. They punish his body but also her daring to desire his body. What is undesirable is not just Veeran's physically amputated condition but the impositions those amputations simultaneously place on Vellaiammal's desirability. The disability experienced as a result of the amputations is not configured as an individual person's experience of corporeal disablement but is reflective of how disablement within the Tamil context of these cultural texts works as at the level of inter-connected body selves.

Conclusion

Adopting a disability studies approach to *Nontinatakam* and *Madurai Veeran Kathai*, two literary-cultural traditions that have been extensively studied as part of folk culture, Tamil history and more recently within Dalit studies, this paper has argued for a contextual understanding of bodily differences and their worlds of signification. Motivated by the question, "how do different historic-cultural contexts frame disablement", this paper has attempted to explicate how two Tamil cultural traditions based on the figure of Madurai Veeran have framed the disability of *marukal-marukai* amputations. Finding that the discourse of cross-caste intimacy is deeply intertwined with disabling retribution, the paper has sounded the limitations of disability studies approaches to categories of "undesirable disability" or disability-as-punishment. While acknowledging the anxiety inherent in engaging with the trope of disability-as-punishment the paper seeks to enliven close-reading of instances of disability-as-punishment, as a way of moving closer to understanding how corporeality is conceptualized differently in relation to other social axes such as caste and sexuality.

NOTES

1. A note on spellings: The paper uses the spelling 'Madurai Veeran' as the English transliteration of the Tamil name while it acknowledges other existing spellings such as 'Maturaiviran' as used by David Schulman and others. Similarly, the spelling 'nontinatakam' is used in the paper in order to adopt a standard use across the paper while other spellings such as 'nondinatakam' and split usage such as 'nonti natakam' are also acknowledged in English transliteration. The transliteration Pommi is used while Bommi may also be prevalent in usage.
2. The language of disability used in this paper, especially words used for disability have been used descriptively and not evaluatively, unless specified. Well aware of the debates on the language of disability in the field of disability studies, certain terms that are rejected by the larger discourse such as 'lame' have been retained to capture their descriptive essence in context.
3. The story summarized in this paper primarily draws on David Shulman's account in *The King and the Clown in South Indian Myth and Poetry*.
4. *Dasi* is used synonymously with *devadasi*.

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