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THE ETERNAL FEMININE IN THE WORKS OF A MODERN TAMIL WRITER¹

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Introduction

Ramamirtham's latest book bears the title *She (Aval)*. It brings together twenty-one of his already published works adding nine stories of more recent date that have not yet appeared in book form as well as an introduction on the theme of woman. As pointed out before (Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1995: 188), a bare look at his titles testifies to the female-centredness of his writings. Twenty-five female names, pronouns and kinship terms far outnumber their six male equivalents². If metaphorical titles were included this asymmetry would become even stronger.

In Western culture, 'she' almost unquestionably refers to a female human being. In the author's mind, however, while emphasis lies on woman the meaning of 'she' may extend to animals, as we shall see, for instance, below in one of his strangest creations. Most importantly, for Ramamirtham 'she' refers to the goddess. The creator of the cover design of the book has well understood this fact. He shows the goddess twice, while the little girl, the seductress, the modest unmarried girl or bride, the serious all-bearing wife and the aged mother are depicted only once.

Despite Ramamirtham's stress on woman female narrators are rare. 'She' is predominantly described from a male perspective that may present her in an erotic light. I shall therefore divide the instances of the 'eternal feminine' I have selected from his whole work and not just his latest book in 1) stories speaking of non-erotic affection 2) stories of erotic love, and 3) stories about the goddess that may or may not be erotically tinged.

1 A shorter version of this paper was-presented the 35th International Congress of Asian and North African Studies, Budapest, July 1997.

2 The difference with respect to Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1995 is due to the inclusion of Ramamirtham's latest book.

SHE AND AFFECTION

The Little Girl

The author frequently weaves his stories around children. Among child protagonists there is the little Brahmin girl Gaṅgā in his story *Mīnōṭṭam* (1978: 69-76), which I freely translate as *Play with fish*. The clever girl has taught herself the art of catching fish by making them swim over her upper cloth placed in a stream. She does so playfully, just to take them into her hand, stroke them lightly and let them go again. Her little Brahmin friend, who is about to leave the village, reproaches her for catching fish feigning not to know that she has no intention of harming or eating them. Guessing that he is envious of her skill she tells him so. He angrily slaps her back but immediately feels sorry so that tears come to his eyes. Seeing his tears she is moved to tears herself. To seal their reconciliation she teaches him her art of catching fish. Some years later he happens to come to the village during her wedding ceremony. Putting aside modesty for a brief moment she looks at him proudly. He, however, fears that her marriage to a rude groom will not be happy. His misgivings turn out to be right.

The little girl Gaṅgā shows compassion and naivete, two character traits comprised in the image of woman in India and elsewhere. Compassion for his mental pain made her immediately forget the harm he had done her. The young bride's triumphant look reveals her naivete and lack of foresight, partly at least determined by Indian culture. The social pressure on a girl to get married may be so strong as to blind her to possible negative consequences.

Two other stories in which little girls play important roles inspire the narrator's mystic vision. These stories, therefore, anticipate some aspects of the subject to be dealt with in the last part of this paper. In one of these the author going for an evening walk claims to have met a little girl sitting on the ground and gazing at a rope in front of her that seems to breathe. He snatches the child up into his arms but his feet refuse to move. In the triple conjunction of eyes: the cobra's, the child's and his own, he has the fleeting vision of the goddess (1995: 41-42).

In the introduction to the book *She* (1995: iii-vii) Ramamirtham tells of the visit of his beloved granddaughter, who has come with her parents. The purity and innocence of the girl make him again think of the divine. The association of child and deity is strong in both Vaiṣṇava and

Śaiva forms of Hinduism. The child Kṛṣṇa seems to be even dearer to the Tamils than the youth dallying with the *gopis*. The child Murukaṇ, though perhaps not the most important form of the god, is praised in the devotional poetry called *Piḷḷaittamiḷ*. Not only Kṛṣṇa and Murukaṇ, also the goddess may be conceived in childform. This freedom of the religious imagination favours the author's mysticism.

The Mother and Mother-like Figures

While the equation of child and deity is optional in Hinduism, the goddess as mother is codified in the very Tamil term *ammaṇ* whose meaning covers goddess, mother and woman. Worldwide perhaps the most important role of woman is that of mother. Ramamirtham's love and respect for his own mother reinforces the cultural stress on the motherly nature of woman. His mother was an emblem of selfless love and compassion. He recalls how her embrace dispelled a frightening daydream he had had as a child (1986a: 206-208). Her kindness did not stop at her family members but extended to the whole of nature. He had the impression that there was silent talk between her and the okra plant she grew and the cows she raised in a rented house. When the house-owner finally objected to her transforming the backyard into a *govardhan* (a metaphor referring to the mountain Kṛṣṇa held up to shelter cows) they had to sell their cows. However, his mother could not bring herself to sell also her first cow no longer in milk knowing that she would immediately be taken to the slaughterhouse. One day the old and sick cow broke her rope, ran up to his mother and licking her hand, died (1986a: 185-192).

Two early widowed women in the author's stories make their nephews the object of their motherly love. In one case, known only from hearsay, an aunt beyond child-bearing age is said to have embraced her feverish little nephew cooling him with the milk that suddenly gushed forth from her breast thus making him survive (1975: 177).

If a woman's greatest desire is to be a mother the loss of a child almost inevitably steepens her in grief. Ramamirtham describes the spectacular expression of this grief in his character Sāvitrī (1972: 174-199), who became separated from her little son Jambu in a festival crowd and never found him again. For days she refused all food and water screaming and hitting her head at the wall. For a long time afterwards she could not even

bear to hear the word 'jambu fruit' reminding her of her son's name. Sometimes when worshipping the goddess Akilāṇḍeśvarī, Jambukeśvara's consort, "a shadow like the wings of a bat seemed to fly in front of her eyes."

Motherly love is almost co-terminous with forgivingness. "May you be happy wherever you are" the mother mentally blesses her daughter who eloped with a man, presumably of lower caste. But it took her years to arrive at this serene state of mind (1981: 153-161). In *The oblation* (1964: 53-63) a mother's forgiveness takes a homely yet touching form. She lovingly prepared a sweet pudding for her two sons returning from boarding school for the holidays. Since the boys came to blows, however, she felt obliged to slap them. When the older son, in a fit of pique, refused to eat the pudding, she poured the delicious dish into the garbage bin. Seeing her fury, all her children embraced her imploring her to forgive. To show that she had indeed forgiven them she prepared the sweet again the same evening.

In this story two expressions of motherly love are separated by a brief moment of fury. A loving mother has also to educate her children and correct their misdeeds, which in India means to mete out corporal punishment much more than in the West. This everyday observation widened into a religious-philosophical concept becomes the goddess who both bestows and destroys, with emphasis on the latter action in the case of Kālī and other ferocious village goddesses. Coupled with belief in the power of curse this view may have induced one of the author's ancestors to pronounce a terrible curse on her son (1984: 311). In the novel *The son* (1965) a mother hurls at her daughter-in-law a similar curse with blighting effect. Presumably angry because her son set up a separate household with his wife she curses her not to give birth to any son, but if, by chance, a son were born to her he should not survive long. With this curse, which comes true twice, she destroys not only the young couple's happiness but also her patriline "like a snake licking out her own eggs".

However, the vengeful destructive mother is exceptional in Ramamirtham's works. Normally the mother showers her love on her children during their lifetimes and even beyond. The protagonist of *Nameless* (1990b: 193-214) lost his wife and suffered a stroke. Confined to a wheelchair he remained deeply depressed for a long time, but one day, in a state between dreaming and waking, he heard his mother advise him to marry

again. He admits that what he heard may have been a hallucination but following his disembodied mother's advice he found happiness again.

Motherly love, as we have seen, is not restricted to true mothers, nor is people's respect for older women restricted to their own mothers. In the eyes of a young wife the oldest member of her conjugal family, who resides on the top floor of the house like the elephant-god Ucci Pillaiyār resides on the hill-top overlooking Trichy, is a venerable figure. In this joint family the old woman is almost deified during her lifetime. More commonly, the deification of family members occurs after their deaths. In *The tulsi plant* (1995: 290-301) a boy believes that his dear grandmother has been reborn in the sacred tulsi plant that sprouted where he had buried some bones stolen from her funeral pyre. He spends much time near the plant-grandmother and is convinced that she has helped him resist seduction.

The almost institutionalized closeness between alternate generations in Indian society may have induced the grandson to vest his grandmother in the supernatural garb of a sacred plant. Normally, however old people who lived a full life do not become family deities but only family members who died an untimely death. This is the case of Lakṣmī, the protagonist's elder sister in *Jamadagni* (1963: 57- 101). When Jamadagni as a little boy put his finger into boiling syrup, Lakṣmī rapidly pulled his hand away, whereby the contents of the whole vessel poured over her own hand. She never put any blame on him but seemed to love him even more after the accident. Her refusal to hide the ugly scars on her hand from a prospective groom resulted in a quarrel with her father that gave her high fever³. She died in her beloved brother's lap. For Jamadagni his deceased sister became fused with the sacred lamp as his family deity.

SHE AND EROTICISM

The Seductress and Enchantress

Probably everywhere in the world the multifaceted image of woman includes the seductress. Ramamirtham's works contain several seductresses who, however, rarely succeed in their intent.

3 Fever as a consequence of mental shock is likely to occur in malaria infected persons.

In *The tulsi plant* (1995: 290-301) a college going girl, four years older than the protagonist, proposes to him to elope with her. However, since changing her mind she does not come to the rendez-vous she spares him the decision to refuse. This fortunate turn of events he attributes to his plant-grandmother's supernatural influence.

In *The waves never stop* (1995: 383-396) the narrator promises to come again to the house of the widow, whom he met under strange circumstances but then does not keep his promise. He apparently thinks that there is a limit to the pity he had first felt on hearing her sad life-story.

In two further tales a man's family sentiment helps him resist seduction. The Indian view of marriage as a potential self-sacrifice more commonly applies to woman but may also refer to man. In *Dust* (1978: 22-41) the widower is deeply in love with the actress who invites him to pay her a visit. But his sense of responsibility towards his little daughter and respect for his uncle induce him not to accept her invitation and marry again a cross-cousin even though his first marriage to her sister was not happy.

The story *The kiss* (1995: 364-382) starts with a bachelor dreaming he is kissed by an unknown woman. This pleasant dream might seem to suggest that he had better look for a wife. He, however, recalls the kiss his mother gave him shortly before she died. This episode reminds me of a scene in Wagner's *Parsival*. Ramamirtham's character living on his own has had little contact with women after his mother's death. Parsival had not known any woman other than his mother before he met Kundry. The association of mother with another woman offering love would therefore stand to reason in both cases. However, there is no evidence whatsoever that either hero projects erotic love onto his mother, as Freud fancifully concluded from this association. In Ramamirtham's story the recipient of the dream kiss realizes that a Christian office colleague abandoned by her husband heavily flirts with him. To escape "being swallowed by her", as he puts it, he accepts his sister-in-law's offer to arrange his marriage to a girl he has never seen "to give her life", according to a suggestive Tamil idiom.

In the four preceding stories the woman was defeated in her attempt at verbal seduction. In the novel *Somewhere in Kerala* (1988) defeat is on both sides. The Brahmin protagonist left his wife and grown-up children to dedicate himself to spiritual pursuits as a modern *vānaprastha* (forest-dweller). A Kerala Christian girl, beautiful like the heavenly dancer Urvaśī

and the goddess Kanyākumārī, takes care of his meals. One night she comes to his room embracing him. In a state between sleeping and waking he thinks her for a moment his wife whose charms he has not forgotten. Realizing his mistake he pushes the girl away involuntarily causing her death. He tries to flee but is fatally bitten by a snake, whom he identifies with the *avātara* of his deceased mother Nāgammā. He had met the cobra before at his mother's death anniversary, when it refrained from biting. Therefore, I interpret the fatal bite not only as his *advaita* merger with the divine, as the end of the story seems to imply, but also as punishment for not having been completely immune to seduction.

While the first three would-be seductresses mentioned desired companionship in addition to sex, the Kerala Christian girl introduces the sexual theme as such. This theme is accentuated in a side story of *The game of dice* (1995: 463-486). A young man, who had wanted to remain a bachelor for much longer, is almost forcibly seduced by a married woman. The event has been such a shock to him that he decides never to marry. The seductress, however, has not been satisfied and tells him so. This story thus plays on the Indian idea of woman as *śakti*, the embodiment of energy or matter opposed to passive and spiritual man. According to this dichotomy, woman is more sexually demanding than man. This uniquely Indian idea is also uniquely paradoxical, since in India, as elsewhere, man is given greater sexual freedom than woman. Of course, neither lesser nor heightened sexual desire in woman can ever be proven, since sexual behaviour cannot occur uninfluenced by culture.

Gāyatrī, the representative of air in the author's *pañcabhūta* stories (1963: 149-219) might better be called an enchantress than a seductress. She shows kindness to him but does not chase him. It is he who falls prey to her almost supernatural attraction. Her freedom to roam around and artistic talent—she is an accomplished flute player—as well as her mother described as a terrible hag (no father is mentioned) suggest that she is a former *devadāsī*'s daughter. Despite his father's objection that Gāyatrī is not the right woman for him, he insists on marrying her, but his happiness does not last long. Feeling imprisoned by his excessive love she leaves him to die alone from tuberculosis. Although she represents the element air and its freedom, she may also be considered a Mohinī-like enchantress. In the Indian imagination in fact, Mohinīs cause the ruin of the men who succumb to their fascination.

The Loving and Beloved Woman

Circumstances induce the narrator in the novel *Apitā* (1970) to leave his adolescent friend Śakuntalā, of whose love for him he is not consciously aware. Śakuntalā, a temple priest's daughter, is married to another temple priest by whom she has a daughter called Apitā. When years later he returns to the village where he spent his youth, Apitā tells him that her mother had had always tears in her eyes. One day she was found dead embracing the *liṅgam* of the hill temple where her father and husband officiated. Nobody knows whether she committed suicide or simply willed her death to come.

Dākṣāyaṇī's overwhelming love for her music teacher brings serious problems but does not have tragic consequences. In defiance of her parents she took the first step to marry him, obviously a person of lower caste. At one point of their marriage she nearly succumbed to the strain of separation from her family, poverty and her husband's illness. She would have left him if she had not missed the train; but taking this event as a good omen she overcame her temporary weakness (1995: 161-187).

In this story music added to Dākṣāyaṇī's infatuation with her teacher, in *Evocative sound* (1995: 20-253) a woman's voice makes a man fall in love with her. For several days she rings him up to converse with him mostly about spiritual matters. She knows that he is married and she herself will soon contract an arranged marriage. She therefore refuses ever to meet him wanting to remain in his memory in the formlessness of sound.

In the novel *The vulture* (1990a), a sort of *Bildungsroman*, the youthful protagonist is attracted by three women one after the other, but none of these relationships develops into physical love. When, as an adolescent orphan he ran away from his foster mother, he met Jānā, several years his senior, who offered water to the thirsty. Her father then invited him to a meal in the house and allowed him to spend the night on the verandah. He has never been able to forget Jānā's eye that rested on him for a moment before he went to sleep. He compared this new emotional experience to pure spring water flowing over a rock, which filled him with an almost religious awe. Later he met Kōmu, a married woman who became his spiritual companion with whom he shared the love of music. The woman, however, who left the deepest impression on him was his manager's daughter Bālā. She too was older than he, but this difference of age was not the main barrier between them. Although she may have been fond of him she never spoke to him. The shock of an earlier experienced rape had rendered her

mute. Her extraordinary beauty and the mystery surrounding her instilled in him not love, as he diagnosed his feelings, but a sweet ecstasy unbearable as if he had swallowed a star that continued to twinkle in him (1989: 171). A mystic experience, however, does not allow direct contact with its object. The youth's stay in the house came to an abrupt end when, slipping on the muddy ground in the garden, he accidentally fell on her. The contact revived in her the memory of rape and made her flee in horror.

The Wife

The ideal of the devoted wife is prominent in Ramamirtham's works. Pūraṇī (1963:102-148), the representative of earth in his element-stories, is abandoned by her husband who follows a dubious holy man. She bears her fate for several years but then vows to commit suicide if he does not return after a stipulated period. He does return, if by chance or owing to the miraculous power a wife may acquire thanks to her absolute devotion to her husband, remains open. She then mentally equates all the simple services she does for him like bathing and feeding him with temple rites such as anointing the idol and making food offerings to it.

Ramamirtham also wrote stories of a wife's devotion unto death, particularly touching is the case of *Amali* (1995: 188-201). Talking about their future the aged couple foresees that their children will soon ask for partition of property so that they will have to stay alternately in the homes of one or the other. Then it occurs to the old man that their children might divide them, one taking care of the father and another of the mother. The thought that she might be separated from her husband comes as such a blow to Amali that she struggles for breath. She reaches for her husband's hand, which he holds tightly. When he loosens his grip her hand falls down limply. His shouts do not wake her up again.

To my dear friend (1995: 56-86) is couched as a man's life story. This frame, however contains what might be called 'the song of songs' of a wife's love for her husband in two versions. Anu, the wife of the protagonist's friend, told him about her native family. Her grandfather did not talk to her grandmother for three years, but when he suffered a stroke she devotedly nursed him, even though she was not in good health herself. One day, noticing that his condition worsened, she took an oilbath, put on a silk saree, lit the sacred lamp and stretched out under the swing in the hall never

to get up again. A few hours after her death the grandfather died, so that they were cremated together. Some time later Anu called the narrator, because her husband had caught a high fever. He heard her pray for her husband aloud, then when she noticed him grow pale and cold she threw herself over him screaming. A second later the sick man opened his eyes again. At this moment the protagonist fell in love with her not in any physical sense, but because he had seen her soul or life force (*uyir*) naked. In the letter he wrote to his friend and then tore up he intentionally avoided the term *ātmā*, probably because of its metaphysical connotation. This experience and the regret of not having won such a wife made his life seem to him even more pointless than before. Back in his room he reached for a box with sleeping pills swallowing one after the other.

The protagonist of this story wondered whether his friend happened to have overcome his crisis or whether Anu's *śakti* had brought him back to life. The husband himself was unaware of the events. Fortunately, one might say, because a Hindu may accept divine power in a human woman, but she cannot be his wife. The legend of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār (Pulavar Arasu 1979: 174-180) makes this distinction quite clear. Realizing his wife's supernatural powers the husband was willing to worship her but went to live with an ordinary woman.

In some of Ramamirtham's stories this incompatibility of roles disappears after the wife's death. In *Mīnākṣī* (1990b: 25-43) an old man, who had not treated his wife Mīnākṣī kindly during her lifetime, is thrilled when a tame parrot flies into his house. His mind fuses the three meanings of Mīnākṣī: his wife whose *avatāra* the parrot might be, the generic Tamil name for all parrots and the goddess Mīnākṣī with whom the green parrot is associated. He touches with awe his daughter-in-law's shoulder on which the parrot has alighted.

Ramamirtham does not, of course, claim that all wives correspond to the cultural ideal of the husband's devotee. In *The game of dice* the husband one day invites his wife, who has long been estranged from him, to a game of dice refusing to reveal what the stakes are. When she wins he tells her that henceforth all his wealth will belong to her, he will leave the house (presumably to become a world renouncer). These words induce the wife to abandon her pride and implore him to stay. They become reunited. The autonomous wife eventually submits and resumes her traditional wifely role. Although the author does not say so, one is reminded of Kālī who challenged her husband Śiva to a dancing contest and had to accept defeat.

Other wives in his stories prefer to return to their native homes because they are unable to get along with their husband or in-laws, even though they know that society condemns the *vālāveṭṭi*, the wife living apart from her husband. In *Wedding music* (1986b: 143-188) the wife's bad character and almost pathological jealousy makes her spread the false news of an incestuous relationship between her husband and sister-in-law. She thus ruins the latter's health and the happiness of the whole family. In *The keynote* (1966: 26-55) the wife goes further. She deeply loves her husband. He, however, has married her not of his own free will but to pay his debt of gratitude to his uncle who had brought him up. Although he does not hate her he longs for freedom. When she realizes that she can no longer hold him, she poisons him.

THE GODDESS

So far we have mainly seen characteristics universally attributed to woman, which sometimes acquired the more culture-bound dimensions of deification and mystic vision. Ramamirtham, however, also elaborates the Hindu concepts of *avatāra* and the idol personifying the deity.

In *Jananī* (1995: 122-160) the goddess Pārvatī playfully decides to be born as a human child even though this means that she will have to suffer. Abandoned as an illegitimate child Pārvatī-Janani is adopted by a childless Brahmin. When her foster-mother later gives birth to a son, she is jealous of him and first causes and then cures his attack of smallpox. Her true suffering starts after her soldier husband leaves her before the marriage consummation ceremony. When after years of absence, during which rumours of his dissolute conduct have reached her, he tries to touch her, she violently pushes him away. In falling he fatally hits his head. Jananī's mind becomes deranged, but in this state she begins to realize her true nature. After her release from asylum she lives on alms, which people willingly give her, because they hold her to be auspicious. She dies peacefully in her sleep.

According to a Hindu belief not shared, of course, by all Hindus but common to both Sanskrit and folk religion, the idol is the deity incarnate. In Ramamirtham's story *Kamali* (1995: 350-363) a childless Śaiva priest, who has taken care of the goddess Kamalāmbikā for many years, has come to consider her his daughter. He has a beautiful dream in which the goddess

in human form comes to his house as if she were his married daughter who returned for a while to her native home.

Peruntiru, a form of the Śaiva goddess, residing in a temple at Lalgudi near Trichy, is the author's family deity. According to a legend told in his family this goddess once played with his great-grandmother for a *maṇḍala* (forty days). The illiterate woman could suddenly recite the *Vedas* and other sacred scriptures. His father's words "she is our only wealth", when standing with him as a child in front of Peruntiru's image, has left a deep impression on him (1984: 36). This unswerving trust in the family goddess who cannot refuse to help her devotees he has put into several of his stories. The idol, however, lends itself to different interpretations. The protagonist of the novel *The smile of the stone statue* (1987) wanting to commit a theft for altruistic reasons thinks that the goddess smiles at him encouragingly but is badly mistaken.

The worship of pan-Indian, local and family deities in male or female form may be quite sober and pragmatic. But in persons with a mystic bent these divinities may also suggest visions. The sacred lamp (*kut-tuvilakku*) was Jamadagni's family deity, as we have seen. Its female association—it is brought by the bride to her new home—readily offers itself to such visions. The author writing in the first person singular relates that he once saw the goddess descend in the lamp and put in her hair the red cotton flower with which the lamp was decorated. He did not, however, see her clearly (1995: 397-399).

The creator of the cover design of the book *She* has well understood the fact that mystic visions (or hallucinations) cannot be clear. While 'she' in her other forms is shown clearly in bright daylight, the goddess has the same dark colour as the background. A flash of light only partly illuminates her dim image.

In the author's view mystic visions occur outside time. It is not accidental, therefore, that the narrator meets the girl Apitā, who inspires in him mystic visions, when she has exactly the same age as her mother Śakuntalā had when he left her in his youth. Her striking resemblance to her mother makes it seem to him that time has stopped or run backward. The mystic vision does also not obey social conventions. In one of Ramamirtham's latest stories (1995: 46-55) a Brahmin youth comes with his bride, whom he secretly married, to his father asking for his blessing. The young woman does not know how to prostrate herself but kneels in front of her father-in-law. This fact and her name suggest that she is a Muslim. On

seeing her, however, the old man has the impression of recognizing the woman whose face he recently saw next to his own when looking into a well. The experience lasting only a few brief moments had filled him with immense joy.

Just as the mystic's goddess is not bound by time and social conventions so she transcends the human/animal divide. She may, for instance, assume snake form, as in the triple conjunction of eyes mentioned at the beginning of this paper, in which the erotic sentiment had no part. A sub-chapter of Ramamirtham's *Stream of Thought* (1986), an autobiography enriched by imagination, as he admits, is entitled *The female (Strī)* (1995: 407-411). He relates in it a dream-vision or hallucination, in which the goddess appears as a gazelle. He feels her breath on his face and her horns and hoofs hit his body. Her hindquarter and the tail rising from it captivate his heart⁴. He asks himself whether his desire is not perverse, but then recalls that Hindus commonly worship an erect stone and offer milk to the deadly snake, that form (*vaṭivam*) is only an outlet (*vaṭikāl*) for feeling. Given the Hindu's freedom to choose his favourite deity he prefers to see the divine in female form. (Would it have been different if I were born a woman, he wonders). For him all of nature from the inanimate to the animate, from plants to humans, contains a female part, *śakti*. For mystic love, therefore, it does not matter whether its object is a gazelle (*māṇ*) or a human being (*manītan*).

The gazelle-goddess was Ramamirtham's idiosyncratic religious view. I end this selection of the 'eternal feminine' in his writings by returning to a collective image, that assumes however, particular significance for him. The collectivity in this case is the audience listening to Tjagaraja's devotional song *You are my refuge* (1989: 79-104). The audience is overwhelmed both by the singer's rendering of the song and by its contents. In a personal note the author asks his readers to pray to the goddess that he may be allowed to listen to this song at his moment of death (1984: 322).

4 While Bharati's bird heroine in *The song of the koel* (1982) praising the beauty of her monkey lover's tail is considered extremely comic (cf. Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1992: 132) in Ramamirtham's mind this detail has nothing of the comic.

DISCUSSION

In his book *She* Ramamirtham has set himself the task of probing into the nature of woman. He recalls that since even Tolstoy, who wrote *Anna Karenina*, claimed he had not yet understood woman's mind (1995: xxxx) 'she', remains an unfathomable subject of continued interest. Ramamirtham shares with Tolstoy and Goethe, who in his *Faust II* spoke of 'the eternal feminine', the conviction that there exists some female essence. This conviction is not, of course, based on any empirical observation but on the pre-conceived idea that everything must have an essence. Essentialism that has dominated Western thought for more than two thousand years has come under attack only in this century (Wittgenstein 1976; Needham 1972 etc.; Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1981 etc.). This essentialist conviction is especially surprising in the author who accepts the relativity and indeterminacy of things (Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1995: 148-158) and has pointed out woman's different and opposite roles throughout his work. He knows that there are both good and bad mothers and even women who have no desire to become mothers (for instance the enchantress Gāyatrī); that wives may or may not be devoted to their husbands and that women may be seductresses but more often are victims of seduction⁵.

Gentleness is the major female characteristic in his stories. This view of woman as the 'gentle sex', also found in the West, may originally derive from her motherly role, but has certainly been emphasized by culture. Even though the relative influence of nature and nurture on mentality and behaviour can never be clearly assessed, the fact that, with growing emancipation, women assume more and more roles formerly believed to be innately male seems to tilt the balance towards the side of nurture.

Naivete, a form of ignorance, which Ramamirtham attributes to some of his female characters—there is even a story thus entitled (1978: 42-52)—has nothing specifically Indian. However, the belief that woman is by nature more *realistic* and *materialistic* than man seems to be uniquely Indian. Ramamirtham stresses this belief explicitly or implicitly with regard to several of his female characters for instance the actress in *Dust* and the wife in *Somewhere in Kerala*, who was abandoned by her husband attempting to become a modern forest-dweller. "She is the one who knows

5 The seduced woman is of little interest to the author. An implicit instance occurs in *Streamlets* (1990: 1-12).

on which side the *chapati* is oiled and thus becomes the winner in the battle of life", he writes. He is aware of the contradiction in considering woman all-knowing and yet naive, "more delicate than silk but strong like a silk thread" and wonders whether this conjunction of opposites is not her mystic quality (1995: xxxxi-xxxii). However, while the conjunction of opposites is typical of mysticism everywhere, this particular conjunction is clearly a culture-specific construct.

Everywhere in the world women had and mostly still have more limited access to education than men. Confined to the house they also have had a narrow outlook like frogs in a well, as a saying in Tamil and other Indian languages runs. This social fact has been readily construed as a natural fact. Also cross-culturally, i.e. sporadically appearing in various parts of the world, the earth may be a metaphor for woman, probably due to her birth-giving quality. Only in India, however, this association has made her the embodiment of *matter*. As if to stress or maintain this association, until recently she was forbidden to study the sacred texts, which thus remained the domain of spiritual man.

Rajanarayanan, a realistic farmer turned writer, has claimed that the poets in glorifying women have cheated them by covering up their miserable condition (1989: 109-115). In a sense he may be right, but I would not speak of intentional cheating. Rather the Hindu poets and religious philosophers have compensated or overcompensated women by declaring them *śakti*. Goddesses of various competences people the pantheons of most ancient and modern religions, but the goddess who absolutely surpasses the god may exist only in Śaktism. In Indian culture spiritual compensation for material powerlessness is not limited to woman, it is also evident for instance in untouchable castes' religious privileges. "Play with opposites", as I have called it (1983), such as "the last will be the first", ignoble death on the cross is victory, etc. we also know from Christianity but the view that a wife by being totally submissive to her husband may acquire the supernatural power of saving him, alluded to twice in the stories discussed, is again a uniquely Indian version of the human delight in imagining a paradoxical, inverted world. Ramamirtham goes further in this association of ideas. For him 'she' in all her forms is not only *śakti*, she is also a legitimate form which the Absolute may take in the eyes of the mystic, a form that inextricably fuses the beautiful with the divine.

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