Gender, Space and Resistance

Women and Theatre in India

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Foreword

A Space to Resist

THE performing space, whether it is the proscenium stage or a raised platform in a village or the fields or the street, lies silent and quiescent like a sleeping snake. Then come bodies, movements and words. And the stage acquires a character. It becomes entertaining, engaging, enthralling, maudlin, vulgar, crass and thought-provoking depending on who is occupying it. When women's bodies enter the stage they carry with them the words written on them. Women have to work with them, around them or discard them and create new words, new bodies.

There are some extremely interesting essays, interviews and plays in this book which tell you how women revived characters marginalized in epics and rewrote the scripts of their lives, how women survived in traditional performing spaces, and how women and their contemporary lives and struggles for existence within the familial system and within fears, prejudices and pretensions of the society become haunting themes for playwrights.

Life is full of drama. But often, caught in routine life, we miss it. The performing stage unfolds this drama before us in abstracted ways that make us revisit and relive living or reading moments we thought we had forgotten with a word here, a gesture there and a movement of the body which alters the space women occupy on the stage. The performing stage can also become a loud and melodramatic space with exaggerated and twisted presentations of popular entertaining plays that will not allow you to forget the limits and restrictions of not only the stage but of language and how it places women.

Whatever character the performing space assumes, it is a space women must enter to succumb to it at times and to overcome it at other times and whenever possible, alter the space with subtle words and bodies or with bodies that grow as if in cosmic form to surprise

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Women and Theatre in India

Anita Singh

Once upon a time: where does Alice fit?

To begin, let me mythologize women's presence in theatre. Our tale opens, as all myths must, with a flashback to the early contribution of women in theatre, setting up Alice as our mythological child with special abilities. As it often happens in such stories, the hero finds her way. At first, the world she is in pushes her along an ordinary path. She has been growing and shrinking throughout the story, symbolic of the changes she's going through. But Alice does not fit; she is different. "Why is it?" when she is asked wistfully, "you are always too small or too tall?" Her sense of self goads her into *finding* her "muchness" — quest is always about self-discovery, it is underlined with an anger, a spirited anger to change the entire shape of things, not only saving the world.

Blueprint of the Book

Theatre is a public institution, a theatre performance a public event. On stage the theatre makers offer vision on the cultural and social conditions of a society and negotiate, so to say, with the audience (altering) norms and values of the society. Therefore a theatre performance is both an aesthetic, artistic phenomenon and a social and political event. Theatre in India has a long tradition. Women have performed roles that have ranged from writing plays to direction and acting, to criticism, research and organization, there is extensive material to show the presence of women in all these areas.

This anthology ventures to explore women's presence in and their contribution to theatre in the recorded history and provide a platform

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Laughing at Domestic Violence
On Viewing Gender Roles and other Comedic Complexities on the Tamil Popular Stage

Susan Seizer

In case the harvest they reap from representation is reality, we won't allow people to represent a woman as she hurls insults at her husband. — Plato, *Republic* (395d)

Socrates: And do you realize that when we see a comedy, here again the soul experiences a mixture of pain and pleasure.

Protarchus: I don't quite understand you.

Socrates: No, Protarchus, for it's somewhat difficult to see this mixture of feelings in our reaction to comedy.

Protarchus: Yes, it does seem difficult.

Socrates: Yet the obscurity of this case should make us more eager to examine it, for that will make it easier to detect other cases of mixed pleasures and pain. [...] Our argument shows that when we laugh at what is ridiculous in our friends, our pleasure, in mixing with malice, mixes with pain, for we have agreed that malice is a pain of the soul, and that laughter is pleasant, and on these occasions we both feel malice and laugh. — Plato, *Philebus* (48b, 50)

Preface

I had been researching the popular theatre genre of Special Drama (*Speshal Naatak*) in Tamil Nadu for a good two years before being disoriented by the performance I write about here. My familiarity with the genre did not prepare me for this experience. Staged as a comedic break in a night-long performance of the play *Valli's Wedding*

at a local Mariyaamman temple, this 3 a.m. scene was shockingly brutal. Yet the audience all around me laughed riotously, both women and men. I seemed to be the only person not laughing. Instead, I was incredulous:

> She's bashing him in the teeth! He's kicking her in the groin! Now he's stomping on her while she sobs on the floor. And the audience is laughing. What is funny about such pain?

People often say that humour is the hardest thing to understand cross-culturally, but I hadn't found this to be true of the buffoonery in Special Drama. Most jokes were quite transparent (for an example see Seizer 2005: 177-201). Here, however, while there was nothing particularly difficult to understand in the scene — its blows and beatings smacked of all-too-globally-familiar problems of domestic abuse — its humour escaped me, and I found the audience laughter as unnerving as the scene itself.

Known as "the *Atipiti* scene", this comedy skit is a powerful piece of performance in several senses: powerfully performed, powerfully enjoyed by its public, and itself a representation of domestic power relations. In pursuit of a better understanding of the laughter it evoked I began asking both audience members and drama artists about their experiences of the *Atipiti* scene. All with whom I spoke found it not only funny, but satisfyingly so. In trying to understand this response I began to look at spectatorial relations in Special Drama more broadly, finding that awareness of its very publicness is key to what makes this scene funny.

In this chapter, then, I use one scene from the Special Drama stage as a springboard into a larger consideration of the critical role that public exposure of less-than-ideal domestic relations — especially when these trouble normative gender roles — plays in defining public spectacle and inciting the full force of shaming laughter.

"Atipiti"

Atipiti is a made-up word. Its coinage is built on a base of standard Tamil grammar, that of a rhyming twin word comprised of two Tamil verb roots playfully joined together. The root *ati* means "to hit". *Piti* means to grab or hold. The *Atipiti* Scene is thus "the hitting-grabbing

scene", a blatantly descriptive name for an in-your-face comedy of domestic violence.

Atipiti is performed by Buffoon and Dancer, two of the repertory roles played by a male and female artist, respectively, in Special Drama. In form and content it relies heavily on social and spatial paradigms established in an earlier Buffoon-Dance Duet that opens a night of Special Drama, in which a young man and a 16-year-old girl bump into each other as strangers on the road and, in the course of a spirited contest of skills, fall in love and elope. *Atipiti* is the later, nightmare reality that brings to a screeching halt this earlier duet's fantasy of love marriage. *Atipiti* paints farce not as the blush of newlyweds but in the much harsher colours of marital strife.

Performed always in this wee hours of the morning, many in the audience are asleep when the comic actors enter the stage to perform *Atipiti*. The Buffoon may well jump down off the stage with a bucket of water in hand to splash awake sleepers, and those few who are already awake poke and shake their friends and family to rouse them. The audience rubs their eyes awake only to wipe tears of laughter from them under an hour later, the brutality on stage awakening the brutal powers of laughter itself.

The artists performing the *Atipiti* scene on 4 April 1993, in a drama sponsored by the Madurai Reserve Line policemen, were Dancer Sridevi and Buffoon Kalaiarasan. Kalaiarasan (this stage name translates as "Prince of Art") and Sridevi (her stage name translates as "Honourable Goddess") are a popular Buffoon-Dance Duet team from the town of Putukkottai frequently hired to perform together in Special Drama, though like all Special Drama actors each may also be hired separately.[1] The *Atipiti* scene is a large component of their popularity: the artists estimate that bookings where they are to play together make up 80 per cent of the performances they give each year. And whenever they are booked together, Kalaiarasan and Sridevi enact the *Atipiti* scene.

While the basic conceit of the *Atipiti* scene has been in standard

1. Artists who perform in Special Drama are hired "specially" for each event, from which derives the name of the genre itself. For a detailed description of how Special Drama is organized and a history of its development, see Seizer 2005, Part I, pp. 43-175.

usage in Special Drama since the 1950s, but these two have taken it to new heights. They claim for themselves the creative vision of the act's physicality:

> *Sridevi*: Before, it was something like this: the woman used to go and tell her story. Then the man used to tell his, then a small fight between them, but everything was conveyed through dialogues — not acting. They wouldn't hit each other. They'll just have a verbal battle, "How dare you say this?" etc., sing a song, and exit. We two are the ones who thought, "Hey, if at this point we did like this, it would be good," and brought this to the stage.

The physicality these two brought, others have since imitated, and the *Atipiti* sketch now involves blows and beatings whenever it is performed. No actors, however, are quite as impressive in the act as these two: there's a chemistry between them. Nor will either artist act the scene with anyone else. As Sridevi put it, for her "the scene would be insipid with others" (seen c[h]uppnu poyidum = tasteless, insipid). In selecting Kalaiarasan and Sridevi's performance to consider more closely, I have chosen an acknowledged crowd-pleaser; we are looking at a "hit" on more than one level.

Anthropologists Viewing Laughter

The experience of incredulous horror at the malicious laughter of others (to borrow Plato's terms) has perhaps been most famously treated in the genre of anthropological fieldwork narratives by Laura Bohannon, writing as Elenore Smith Bowen, in *Return to Laughter*. In this novelistic treatment of her experiences in West Africa, Bowen's revulsion at a local joke that poked fun at the helplessness of a blind man provokes a turning point in her otherwise compassionate relations with the Tiv amongst whom she lived, and likewise prompts the main philosophical conclusions of her book.

Appalled at the laughter of those around her, Bowen found herself exclaiming "Typical peasant humour, but I am not a peasant and you are a bunch of savages"; her experience was that "Their laughter at suffering was merely one symbol of the gulf between their world and mine" (Bowen 1954: 229, 231). For Bowen, laughter in the face of suffering was decidedly antithetical to her ideas of the entire civilizing process. Indeed, her attempts to fathom this "savage" laughter

amongst those she counted as friends unearth a whole painful anthropological epistemology: civility for Bowen requires belief in the human ability to change the world, while the only art of savages is to live fatalism gracefully.

Bowen's idea is that Tiv laugh as a means of getting through life. "In an environment in which tragedy is genuine and frequent, laughter is essential to sanity"; "I stood for a while, looking after them. They knew how to live at close quarters with tragedy, how to live with their own failure and yet laugh" (Bowen 1954: 295, 297). Sensible as this may sound, Bowen deems theirs a non-productive attitude: such laughter represents to Bowen an acceptance of human failure in a given world, rather than a performative engagement whose effects themselves structure the social world. The condescension in her attitude infuses the book's final passages:

> These people had developed none of the sciences or arts of civilization. They had not learned to change that which is, to wish for a better life so greatly that they would stake the familiar good that might be lost with the familiar evil. They were not, as we are, greedy for the future. We concern ourselves with the reality of what is, because we wish to direct change wisely, hoping thus to preserve the good on which we are agreed while yet attaining what we believe should be. They did not seek to learn thus purposely. If they knew a grim reality, it was because their fate rubbed it into their very souls. [. . .]
>
> These people know the reality and laugh at it. Such laughter has little concern with what is funny. It is often bitter and sometimes a little mad, for it is the laugh under the mask of tragedy, and also the laughter that masks tears. They are the same. — Bowen 1954: 296-7

These conclusions are sad in themselves: why does a concern for the future of civilization, the "wish to direct change wisely", necessarily preclude laughter? The proximity of tragedy and comedy is often not funny, but it may well be civilized. Bowen does not entertain the possibility that laughing at a painful reality might actually be directive, and socially constitutive, of the civilizing process, as the laughter that greets the *Atipiti* scene proves to be.

In contrast to Bowen's idea that laughter effects only acceptance, I understand laughter to be more complexly performative. In

particular, laughter at another person's suffering — that same laughter that I too initially viewed with incredulous horror — may well be an effective part of the socialization process. An audience member with whom I spoke about this scene considers the act a representation of fitting human relations into a Tamil mold, which she finds key to the "Tamilness" of the audience laughter. She took pleasure in the fact that only certain relations are sanctioned, so that others may be laughed at. In censuring the unsanctioned laughter is an active arm of social life and not, as in Bowen's view, a retreat into fatalism.

Bowen is unfortunately not alone in failing to think with, and about, all that the laughter of a given social situation entails. Spectators' laughter is all too often treated as foreclosing further speculation about a performance event, rather than prompting it. It shuts down anthropological observation rather than making us "more eager to examine it" as Plato advised. In too many fieldwork accounts, anthropologists allow laughter to cut a kind of firebreak at which they stop an otherwise burning interrogation of cultural difference.

One example is in James Peacock's brilliant study of Ludruk, the Javanese genre of proletarian theatre he analysed in *Rites of Modernization* (1968). Even in this otherwise lucid study, laughter muddies the waters. In discussing the nature of spectatorial relations in Ludruk, Peacock chronicles some six types of spectatorial response, as recorded in audience response reports. He enumerates these responses, presenting them in terms of the frequency with which they occurred in the audience surveys.

> The most frequent type of response (51) described or imitated physical motions. . . . The next most frequent response (47) expressed empathy with a character's role or feelings. . . . Thirty-one responses passed moral judgement on a character. . . . Sixteen responses were technical comments, twelve were aggressive shouts, seven were admiring.
>
> — Peacock [1968] 1987, 69

This informative accounting then abruptly ends with the statement "*and by far the most frequent response was simply laughter*" (ibid., emphasis mine). Simply laughter? Why should laughter be differently quantified, and differently qualified, than any other response? What is simple about laughter?

A similar blind spot arises in the work of another otherwise

supremely careful ethnographer, Esther Newton, who, in writing of her 1960s U.S. fieldwork with gay male drag queens, notes that "one of the most confounding aspects of my interaction with the impersonators was their tendency to laugh at situations that to me were horrifying or tragic" (Newton 1972: 109). But rather than push to understand this experience further, Newton is willing to simply see the impersonators as laughing to keep from crying, a position that allays her own confusion by assuming that, at bottom, the drag queens have the same feelings of horror or tragedy that she has, but just cover it up better.

Unwilling to assume any of these attitudes — either that this laughter entailed fatalistic acceptance, or that it was somehow an unqualifiable response, or that everyone around me was equally horrified as I but managed to laugh anyway — I decided to further interrogate the laughter I found so disturbing.

It may well be that laughter itself is uniquely resistant to intellectual understanding. Perhaps the appreciation of paradox and incongruity is itself a mental process inherently other than, and opaque to, intellectualization. Or perhaps it is in the nature of symbols to confuse an otherwise sober account of the world by enabling human affects to cathect onto objects; symbols "unite the organic with the sociomoral order" and end up "making the Durkheimian 'obligatory' desirable" (Turner 1969: 53). There is no dearth of possible reasons why, phenomenologically speaking, laughter might foreclose examination rather than making us more eager to examine it; recall Freud's observation that jokes "bribe us with their yield of pleasure into taking sides without any careful examination". But regardless of whether and why the experience of laughter is difficult to scrutinize, analysis of the social uses to which laughter is put need not be obstructed by this difficulty.

Rather, I see the examination of humour in use as an ethnographic project precisely because "humour is an event, not an utterance" (English 1994: 5). Laughter can take many forms, enact widely differing functions, and take on any hue. It can be malicious or supportive, a socially divisive agent in some situations and a cohesive one in others. And it can be a mix of pleasure and pain. The laughter that greets the *Atipiti* scene is as specific to audience-performer relations in Special

Drama, as we shall see, as it is to the adherence to normative gender roles that seems to so typify popular Tamil public discourse.

The Ritual Frame of the Atipiti Scene

Officially, the *Atipiti* scene fills the slot of a short comedy break in the middle of a night of Special Drama, scheduled to occur from 3:00-3:15 a.m. In actuality, the scene takes a full 45 minutes of the 3:00–4:00 a.m. hour, providing an extended break in action on several levels. First, it is a hiatus just prior to the long concluding debate scene of the drama. It is a change of pace for the musicians, who drink tea, rest their hands, take this opportunity to stretch their legs and, as we shall see, generally banter and joke rather than sing (as they do for a dramatic scene) throughout the comedy sketch.

The scene is considered a free-standing, self-contained act. Framed as an interstice, the figures populating its interstitial world are themselves seen as liminal, betwixt and between. But as now-classic theoretical considerations of ritual suggest (Van Gennep 1904; Turner 1967), liminality is precisely that phase in the progress of a ritual enactment that exposes the cracks in the more stolid states that surround it. In true ritual character, the *Atipiti* scene pokes at the underbelly of all the scenes that precede and follow it. The meeting of Buffoon and Dancer here as beleaguered Husband and Wife parodies the earlier meeting of Buffoon and Dancer as young bachelor and dancing girl. The parody flips the earlier sweetness of fantasy on its head: where a young man bumps into a carefree girl, here an all-too-worldly Wife crashes into her careless husband. And where that earlier meeting led to love and elopement, this meeting leads to crashing blows and repentent tears.

Dreams are places where transfigured figurements live and die; the 3:00 a.m. comedy slot is just such a place. Here unrelated and yet similar figures, elements, and themes appear reworked and altered, transformed and transfigured. The sketch itself opens with the wife recounting a dream, albeit one that quickly becomes her nightmare before spectators' eyes.

Atipiti is a break in another way as well. Its focus on domestic conflicts between a husband and wife disrupts the steady, linear progression of pre-marital life-stages otherwise offered throughout

the night, in both dramatic and comedic formats. It leaves behind the pretense of unknown young men and women meeting, messing, and marrying, and lurches instead directly into a scene of marital strife. As such this scene reaches beyond the confines of anything else that has happened or is yet to happen onstage. It further breaks dramatic decorum by locating its action not in a mythic palace, an enchanted forest, or even on a generic road, but instead squarely within the working-class home of a squabbling couple.

The *Atipiti* scene is thus offering the night's first look, and a cynical one at that, at what may lay ahead in married life, beyond the other action of the drama.. It is a sudden and raucous reality check, a kind of splat to earth after several hours of high-minded celestial (and lower, not-so-celestial) romance.

Such a sudden drop-down into more brutal realities is a tactical mainstay of comedy, exploiting all three canonical paradigms of humour theory: incongruity, superiority, and relief (see Morreall 1987; Clark 1987). Its incongruity lies in its anomalous place in the progression of life-stages otherwise presented in a night of Special Drama. Some relief can be found in its unromantic look at the husband-wife dyad, otherwise treated as sacrosanct. And it certainly engages judgements of superiority: who in the audience could not behave better than these two wrecks?

But none of these paradigms of humour theory altogether accounts for the utter hilarity into which this scene plunges the audience. Its performance also clearly taps into the energies of carnivalesque traditions of bawdy, violent physical comedy. Bakhtin writes of "the great style of popular-festive forms" at play in medieval Europe, whose parodies were reversals of reigning relations of power (Bakhtin 1966: 212). However, while the "grotesque body" in European traditions of carnivalesque humour signified rude eruptions into relations of state, the initial violent reversals of physicality and thrashings enacted in the *Atipiti* scene ultimately reverse nothing. In Bakhtin's idealistic rendering of the power of the carnivalesque, "Every blow dealt to the old helps the new to be born" (Bahktin 1966: 206). Violence and role reversal also characterize the style of the *Atipiti* scene, but they result only in a rebirth of the old order: the publicly applauded spectacle is the act of taming the grotesque female body

— in the form of "modern woman" or "worst possible wife" — and bringing her into line with reigning social conventions of gendered domesticity.

That is, here order itself is celebrated, not its toppling. What is repeatedly struck down is the uncivilized, transgressive body, while what is born anew is none other than a renewed commitment to the established order. In this sense the *Atipiti* scene makes a mockery of Bakhtinian idealism, which sees carnivalesque laughter as "a great progressive force, the expression of an ideology that opposes the official and authoritarian languages that dominate our surfaces" (Booth 1982: 61). The only thing overturned here is the insurgent voice; what is repeatedly laughed at and beaten down is the (wife's) dream of a different domestic relationship. Perhaps most frightening of all, the *Atipiti* scene ultimately presents domestic violence not as a problem in itself, but rather as an appropriate solution to gender problems in the home.

The Atipiti Scene

The scene has three acts. Their order reverses that of the presentation of the earlier comedy scenes. There the Buffoon began with a comedy scene in which he was alone onstage interacting with the musicians. This was followed by the entrance of the dancer, and was joined by the Buffoon when she was already onstage. In the *Atipiti* scene, this entire sequence is reversed: the dancer enters first, as wife, and interacts alone with the musicians. She exits. The Buffoon enters next, as her husband, and while he is still onstage, she joins him. Their duet is the third act of the scene.

Act I: The Wife

The dancer enters from stage left. She is wearing an old sari, *tied high as if for housework: the bottom reaches only to just below her knees, exposing her calves, while the usually flowing end piece is wrapped up tightly and tucked in at her waist. Her blouse is faded and stained. She is a woman dressed for menial labour, not a woman dressed to go out. Indeed, one would not normally see a housewife dressed like this outside at all unless she had run out of the house momentarily and in a hurry.*[2]

2. Outside one sees such dress only on women working alongside men on construction sites, i.e. building new inside spaces, where they haul bricks and other heavy material on their heads.

Dressed like this, the only bit of the outdoors a woman would regularly enter does not actually count as "outside" at all but is rather the backyard [*kollai*]. In the backyard, women regularly wash clothes, hang them to dry, grind spices, sift rice and sort vegetables, burn garbage — and frequently chat with other women doing the same things out behind adjacent houses. In effect, the Dancer's costume immediately locates the scene, and the woman, in the nitty-gritty of female domestic life.

Standing at the microphone nearest the musicians and addressing herself to them, the dancer begins her act with a song that clinches this visual effect by adopting the voice of a married woman whose world is defined by the coordinates of home and husband.

> *Wife* (*sings*): The man I live with is good like a god, a knowledgeable man
> I've never had to go to the backyard [*kollai*] in frustration and anger
> Nor to the temple to cry over his cruelty.
> He won't gossip, he won't boast
> He won't drink, he won't brawl
> He won't suspect me, or spoil my pleasure
> He won't stop his work and lie lazy on the porch.

In the conversational dialogue that now begins between the dancer and the harmonist, who leads the musical ensemble in accompanying a special drama throughout the night and plays the role of interlocutor and moral arbiter here as we shall see, the wife continues to praise her excellent husband in the following terms:

> That's how he is, my husband! I can go and stand where I like, and he won't suspect me. He'll just think, "This woman goes out and earns good money and brings the cash home to us, she does". If I stand there talking, he will not ask suspiciously "What are you talking to this guy about?" He's not that kind. There are men who will get all worked up if their wife even stands in the entranceway [*vasal*] for a moment; they'll start asking, "Who is that you are standing there hoping to see, woman?" and all. My husband won't ask all that. My husband has the kind of character you could inscribe on a golden plate! There's no man like him! He won't stand around all day drinking and fighting; he never hits me, he never beats me.

> Well, you might ask, "fine, your husband is not doing all this. Are you happy?" Up to now he's never left me even to sleep on the porch. If I'm not next to him, he can't sleep. He's never even thought to leave his wife for one instant, going here for ten days, there for ten days.

The two domestic spaces invoked in this description — the doorway (*vasal*) and the backyard (*kollai*) — have distinctly gendered resonances. The *vasal* is a more public space than the *kollai*. It is at the front of the house, and is more frequently occupied by men, who interact there with outside visitors. Any interactions at the *vasal* are also visible from the street, and it is an overtly social space of greeting and interaction. The *kollai*, by contrast, is a domestic space for domestic chores and duties, a space primarily of women's work. The men of the house do enter, as this is often also where bathing occurs, but male visitors do not. The *kollai* is a space where women gather to work and talk amongst themselves. In the line of the song above where *kollai* is invoked, the knowledge of *kollai* as women's space is assumed: "I've never had to go to the backyard in frustration and anger" refers to the practice of women sharing their troubles with each other in the *kollai*. A deprecatory characterization of *kollai* as a female gossip space is central to the ensuing plot.

The wife's opening song thus paints a picture of her golden man and establishes her world as one of domestic peace. And then suddenly, crash down to earth: she admits that this is all purely her own dream and desire.

> I have so much desire for my husband to be like this, I saw it in a dream: my husband should not cast suspicion on me; he should be happy with me; he shouldn't leave me even for a day. I dream of this! [*Ippadi ellam en purusan irukka veendum enru enakku romba aasai. Kanavil naan partteen*!]

The harmonist interjects, "Oh, this is all just your dream is it?" She continues: "Yes! If it was this way, how would our family be? Would there be any fights or quarrelling? This is how a husband and wife should be, I think!"

We now see that in truth, this wife is really quite dissatisfied with her husband, who is not at all like her fantasy. He goes out all the time and doesn't tell her where he's been or when he'll return —

which is, note, the local, if rude, norm for husbandly behaviour. She stays with him, she insists, only because she's tied to him — because he's the one who tied the *tali* around her neck, after all — but she finds him cruel because he doesn't buy her things, or take her out to movies or festivals, or tell her where he goes when he leaves home. She delivers this list of complaints intermingled with curses, and doing so suddenly makes her seem shrewish indeed.

The wife's curses provide the opportunity for a comic bit with the harmonist: every time she reports having cursed her husband, the harmonist gets defensive as though she were cursing him. "'You dastardly sinner, do you deserve a wife?' I said" she cries, and pretending to misrecognize the deictics, the harmonist responds as though there were no quotation marks in her address and as though she were cursing him rather than her husband.

> Wife: You diseased leper...!
>
> Harmonist: Hey! Watch it!

In a moment's work this defensive slippage, and the gendered alignment it both presupposes and confirms, forms of the men onstage an interchangeable group defined by gender role.

This interplay begins a theme that develops throughout the sketch as both the husband and the harmonist prove themselves unreliable characters. The husband is unworthy of the praise initially showered on him; likewise the harmonist is introduced as a village leader whose motives then prove questionable. Though initiated as a comic subtext, this unreliability of the male character is quickly made explicit. Witness the following dialogue:

> *Wife*: He won't come home regularly, he leaves the house at dawn, and where he goes and what he does I can't understand. If I ask, he'll tell me to shut up. So, what can I do?
>
> *Harmonist (H♫)*: You should have come to me! [*male laughter in audience*]
>
> *W*: That's exactly what I'm doing. Now I've come to you, haven't I? And for what have I come to you? I've come to tell you all the details, and hold a *panchayat* so that there may be happiness in our family.

H♫: Speak, woman.

W: That's why I've come sir. You seem to be a decent type. They say you are the one who conducts all the *panchayat*s for this place. They say many families have been spoiled by you . . ./

H♫: /Hey!/

W: /Oops! I mean, they say many families have prospered through you. They say that if I come to tell everything to you, everything will work out all right. That's why I now come directly to you . . .

H♫: Yes! You've come directly to me.

W: [*pointing to mridangist*] They say he's the same way.

Mridangist: Hey! You are a younger sister to me, so don't talk all that!

W: Brother! Brother! I've come to you with the desire to openly tell you everything!

The overall theme of the *Atipiti* scene first becomes apparent in this exchange: airing one's domestic troubles publicly is a double-edged sword. The harmonist plays here the role of *nattaamai*, or village headman and *panchayat* leader.[3] As the recognized moral arbiter of local disputes, the *nattaamai* is meant to serve as a weathervane of social conscience, though as we see, his role here quickly becomes that of a very human character open to parody in his own right. Casting the harmonist as public mediator of disputes deepens the role that musicians (who are invariably male these days, though in the 1930s and 1940s there were a few female harmonists) already play in Special Drama: comparable to a Greek chorus, the musicians model a first audience response. In the *Atipiti* scene the gendered nature of this chorus is suddenly marked as its neutrality is called into question: can this bank of men ever be trusted to take a woman's side? The question arises immediately when in introducing the harmonist's role, the wife slips in a Freudian slip:

> Sir, you seem to be a decent type. They say you are the one who conducts all the panchayats for this place. They say many families have been spoiled by you . . ./Oops! I mean they say that many families have prospered through you. (*Unkalal ketta kutumbam niraiya kutumbamaam! Chee! Ungalaal vaalnta kudumbam atikamaana kudumbaam*!).

3. A *panchayat* is a meeting of the inhabitants of a village for the public airing of grievances, at which the nattamai presides as arbiter and judge whose responsibility it is to mete out a course of reparation.

Such play with slippery ambiguities continues in the common sexual double meaning of "come to me", phrased without a qualifying verb; the bald phrase "I've come to you" and the harmonist's retort "you've come to me" is sexually suggestive (as in, "you've come to sleep with me"). The dancer does finally insert a qualifying verb in teasing the mridangist, but the damage is done: the suggestiveness of "coming to him" with "the desire to openly tell everything", and so on, can hardly be mitigated by the late inclusion of the verb "to tell" (*Ungukkitta taan naan ellaam tirantu solla veendum enru aasaiyaaka vanteen*!). In addition, his having to remind her of their *murai*, their proper kin relations, by saying, "You are [in the relation of] a younger sister to me, so don't talk like that!" (*ni enakku tangachi murai veendum, appati ellam peesaatey*!) projects onto the actress commonly held ideas about actresses as the locus of a key stigma on the acting community: that theatre artists lack proper *murai* (see Seizer 2005: 1-42) and engage in incestuously confused relations.

In her opening bit, then, the wife has brought into the open her dissatisfaction with her marital relations. Both the story she tells and the way she tells it touch on issues that arise for many women, not only actresses, in negotiating gender roles with their husbands. But she has gone public with her desires for her husband's behaviour, and brought these issues before the entire *Uur* (village) by asking the headman to conduct a *panchayat*. In the narrating frame too this transgressive reality plays out: all this is simultaneously being presented publicly on a village commons by an actress, notoriously a "public" woman. At both levels then, narrated tale and narrating frame, this woman transgresses the norm of treating the husband-wife relation as private and sacrosanct. And for this, as we shall see, she gets her come-uppance.

The dancer exits stage left, leaving the arena ready for the husband's entrance. The audience cannot yet know exactly what to expect: has she done the right thing in seeking public mediation? How

will her husband react to this? Will he defend himself? How will he answer her charges, and her dream invocation of a fantastically modern domestic sphere wherein she has power and respect? And finally, how will he react to her rather audacious flirtations with the other men right here onstage?

Act II: The Husband

The Buffoon promptly enters from stage left, singing. He too moves directly to the mike closest to the musicians. He is shirtless and wears a homey, plaid *lungi*. His shoulder towel is wrapped around his head like a menial labourer. Tamil men often carry a small towel with them, and where and how they wear this towel is as much a sign of their class status as is the tying of her *sari* for a woman. On entering, the Husband unwraps the towel from his head, but doesn't wear it over his shoulder as prestigious men do; instead, he holds it in his hands, in limbo, as it were, while the status of his character is still in question.

The husband's entrance song is about women, just as the wife's was about men. But if hers was a dream of impossible goodness in a husband, his is a cynical portrayal of the harsh realities of a type of dream women: he sings about mistresses. Though these are the kind of women of whom men dream, the husband is here to advise them otherwise. Note here that, in a further blurring of the boundaries between reality and representation and between narrated and narrating texts, this is precisely the kind of public woman a dancer is thought to be. So instead of his own fantasy we hear why a married man ought not to want a woman other than his wife. The husband's song refutes the possibility of pleasure through women such as actresses, and erects a moralizing frame to shore up his own reputation before the audience.

> Husband [sings]: Don't keep a mistress! [*vaipaddi vaikkaatingu*!] Even if you are a king who follows the righteous path, don't keep a mistress! Even if you [are an ascetic who] transcended earth by eating only to a quarter of your stomach's size, don't be a miserable sinner to your own wife, don't betray her. Don't keep a mistress! She'll ask for a goat, she'll ask for a cow, she'll ask for a nice fluffy mattress. If he says no, she'll tell him "Scram, Dog!" I tell you in all truth, don't betray the wife you married, don't keep a mistress! Don't keep a mistress! Please — don't keep a mistress!

Here is a husband preaching to other husbands, before an audience of both men and women, not to betray one's wife. He seems to sing from experience; has he himself been burned by a mistress, like the mythic, repentant Kovalan?[4] Or might he actually be the golden husband his wife desired, faithful and kind? His song readies the audience to hear about this man's relations with women, and he obliges both in character and out: the actor inserts short anecdotes about his own hard luck in life into the husband's song, recounting how he lost money and ended up in the drama field where he now finds himself "lugging around a suitcase with the rest of these sinners". From subsequent conversations with the actor himself I know these interspersed anecdotes do indeed refer to his own offstage life. Is this something an audience could pick up? Onstage, Kalaiarasan moves seamlessly from song to story this way:

> *Buffoon*: Get this! Is there any connection between all this and myself, man? Had I used the Rs. 46,000 to set up a grocery store in Pudukkottai, I'd be sitting there now, and would I have any need for this work of lugging around suitcases, man? My father told me right off, "Don't get mixed up with these people . . ."
>
> *Harmonist*: Which people, man?
>
> *Mridangist*: [*defensively*] Hey! Hey!
>
> *B*: He told me, my Dad told me, "Don't get mixed up with these loafers, you'll end up a waste! Keep quiet and stick with our business." Did I listen? Like most guys these days, I didn't heed my old man's advice. Only now do I realize the results of my actions! I joined with this type instead and lost the Rs. 46,000. Now I go from town to town lifting my suitcase with all you sinners! [*sings*] "She'll ask for a fluffy mattress. . . ."

Here the actor tells a real-life story critical of the drama world embedded in a song in critical of the world of extra-marital relations. The conceit is utterly believable; this is already how most Tamilians think of the drama world anyway. The audience is invited to see the buffoon as a normal guy gone astray, just as in character he plays a

4. Kovalan is the husband of Kannaki in the famous Sangam-era Tamil epic *Cilappatikaram*. He is seduced by a Dancer, and keeping her as his mistress reduces him to ruin.

married man beaten down by the treacheries and temptations of women.

His song over, the husband begins to tell of how he ended up with his wife. His real wife, or the woman who plays his wife? How are we to disentangle the two? The actor makes no distinction between the one story as "true" and the other as "fictional"; his story begins in a rhetorical manner that signals the beginning of a long yarn on the topic of marriage.

Buffoon: People marry, don't they, man? You are all married men?

H♫: Why?

B: When I married . . .

And so it begins. The husband complains about how little dowry he received from his wife's family. To add insult to injury, he claims she turned out to be a shrew:

B: When she sees me, she says "Hey you! Get lost! [Dey! Po 'Daa!]" That's how she speaks to me man! "Hey! Get lost! Are you a man or what? [*ni ellam oru manishan*?]"

H♫: Hey!

B: To me, that's the way she speaks to me! Who else has made such a sacrifice?

H♫: You're a man, man!

B: I married her with no dowry. I made a sacrifice, right? Hey, look here, today something's gonna happen, I'm telling you — I'm gonna hit her [*atippeen*] and grab her [*pitippeen*], and anyone who tries to interfere won't make it home whole!

H♫: Oh, there's something important I forgot to tell you.

B: What?

H♫: Just now, man, looking for you, your wife came to me! [*audience laughter*]

So now it's clear: here is the husband of the wife we've just met. He claims she speaks to him in an insulting way, and he is fed up! He

announces his intentions to thrash her something fierce today, to *ati* (hit) and *piti* (grab) her, and is egged on by the harmonist's questioning of his manliness. This stings, as the next exchange proves:

B: She came to you, did she? Dear Lord! [. . .]Even directly in front of me, you would say that she came to you! What do you think of me, that I haven't any manly pride [*rosham*]? What do you think, that I rent out my wife?

The husband's fears are clear: he wants to make sure he is not being cuckolded, accused of lacking manly pride, or of pimping his own wife. The term the buffoon introduces here to indicate these incursions on his manlihood is *rosham*, and it proves the nerve centre driving the actions that follow.

H♫: Man, she only came here to ask whether her husband had come.

B: Then you should have said so right away! All you said was "she came to me". Anyway, she probably came to call for a *panchayat*. [*Turns to audience*] Oh, under the guise of the *panchayat* you can lure all those women to you. . . .

H♫: Yeah, right, scores of them. . . .

B: [*turning to call backstage*] Yo! Woman! Woman inside the house!

Dancer: [*answering from offstage*] Whaddya want, you? [*een daa appu?*]

H♫: What is this? Is that your own wife addressing you like that?

This testy exchange between the harmonist and the buffoon regarding the husband's manliness leads directly into his calling out for his wife, and to the third and final act of the scene.

To appreciate the insult of the wife's language here, know that Tamil terms of direct address fall into two distinct categories — singular or plural — which read as informal and formal respectively. The second person singular "you" is conventionally used with persons of lower or commensurate status, or younger age, as well as with intimates. The common examples in use here are *po* (go) and *va* (come). The second person plural should properly be employed with persons of higher status or elders, or any others to whom one owes respect; this plural "you" is voiced as *pongu* (go) and *vaangu* (come).

At issue here are the marital conventions of gendered language use. The husband is normally accorded the linguistic status of a superior *vis-à-vis* his wife. Conventionally, wives address their husbands in the respectful plural, while husbands address wives in the more familiar singular. Children may speak to their mothers in the singular, but not to their fathers. In keeping with a general avoidance of public intimacy on the part of husbands and wives, these conventions of ranked address are maintained even in the privacy of the home. As if this were not confirmation enough that language is the long arm of the public, we shall see here that the public can act non-verbally too to enforce domestic convention.

At home then the majority of Tamil women add the respectful suffix *unku* to everything they say to their husbands. Many will not even address their husbands by name, as direct use of a personal name implies that the addressee is of lower, or commensurate, status. Instead, wives use creative coinages like *hey-unku* to get their husbands' attention. Such usage is also a class-inflected practice: middle-class educated Tamil women might now speak their husband's name, while women of the urban poor still do not.

Attributed as often to superstition as to religious doctrine, the majority of Hindu women are careful never to utter their husbands' names at all. It is thought to earn them sacred merit (*puniyam*, "favourable effect or blessings accruing through virtuous deeds" [Cre-A 1990] to pay their husbands this respect.

In discussing these linguistic conventions directly prior to his being joined by the wife, the buffoon takes on a new, less conventionally masculine persona: he both criticizes the conventional practice and notes with cynicism that it is not likely to change anytime soon. The husband's ability to voice such conflicting sentiments makes him an almost sympathetic character, caught in a bind that exceeds him. The harmonist, on the other hand, never wavers in his adherence to a doctrine of male superiority. Witness the shift in the husband's persona, and the rigidity of the harmonist's stance in this final dialogue of the second act. It is in the eyes of this man above all, it seems, that the husband wants to affirm his masculinity.

H♫: Is it your wife who talks to you like that?

Buffoon: Like what?

H♫: If it'd been me in your place I'd have died on the spot!

B: Die then, who's asking you not to?

H♫: But she's saying "whaddya want" [*da 'paa*] to you, like that . . .

B: So what if she addresses me *een daa*? Man, *vaa daa* is exactly how a wife should call her husband!

H♫: Whoa!

B: That's respect [*mariyaatai*] man! Don't you know man? Even Shiva himself gave half to Shakti.

H♫: Half of what?

B: Sir, he gave half of his body! When Shiva himself gives half, then between a husband and a wife there should be such closeness [*kajakajappu*]. So she should call him by saying, "Come here husband! Go there husband! [*Vaa 'daa purushaal! Po 'daa purushaal!*]." [***turning to address audience***] You all too should speak to your husbands this way, saying "Come here! Go there! [*Vaa 'daa! Po 'daa!*]" [***Turns back to the Harmonist and says as an aside***:] So what if they get beaten for it! [***again turning to audience***:] Who will say anything? When love is great . . . for example, how do we call our daughters? We say *vaa 'daa kannu! Po 'daa kannu!* [Come here dearest! Go there dearest!]'That's how we address them, right? In the same way, if a wife has great love for her husband she may call him saying *ee 'daa raajaa!* [whaddya want, king!]." I'm for equal rights [*nan cama urimai kotukkiratu*]!

H♫: Bravo! Bravo! [*Paley! Paley!*].

B: Only the woman who calls her husband by name will die with merit [*puniyam*], man. And it's the husband who calls his wife by her name who will die in misery. [*laughing*] I've switched it all around, haven't I?

H♫: Excellent!

B: [*turns again to call backstage*] Yo! What woman is in this house?! Yo woman! [*e! evalati aval veeddil? adi yey!*]

D: [*calling from inside*] Whaddya want? I'm busy! Go away!

B: Today you'll see! With the beating I'm going to give her today, she'll want to flee this town, you'll see! That's how I feel today, yes! [*turning to face the upstage curtain*] Yo! What woman is in this house?! Yo woman!

H♫: What will you do?

The husband calls backstage to his wife here much less respectfully than he has just advocated, revealing that his advocacy of "equal rights" was indeed in jest. He laughingly admits to having "switched it all around" while philosophizing, glibly suggesting a reversal of linguistic protocol for domestic relations between husband and wife, while his actual address to his wife is a rude version of the standard. For a husband to jokingly suggest reversing standard norms for gendered behaviour in the home is one thing, whereas a wife who actually follows such a doctrine is another matter entirely, as we shall see.

In the ensuing action husband and wife play out the options raised. We meet both versions of the husband, the woman's dream husband who respects her and the real guy who does not. The buffoon recognizes in himself both these personae, one who uncommonly and obsequiously respects his wife (and is thus seen by the harmonist as a humiliation to all men), and another who vows to do so no longer. As the scene progresses, the wife too enacts what are effectively female alter-incarnations: one uncontrolled and dangerous, like a fierce Amman goddess, the other controlled and benevolent, like the goddess as a paragon of wifeliness. It is through the meeting of these extreme aspects of husband(s) and wife(s) that the *Atipiti* scene manages to spark both the carnivalesque laughter of reversal and the malicious laughter of the social corrective

Act III: Their Meeting

The following is a direct transcription of the remainder of the *Atipiti* scene. I have indicated gesture and action throughout. See *fig.* 7.1 for a storyboard of still images marking the progression of this scene; the images were captured from videotape of Kalaiarasan and Sridevi in performance.

Wife enters from upstage left, moves behind him and bumps into husband, slapping him hard on the back with both hands. They spring apart and she immediately starts commanding him about the stage.

Wife: Come here! Here! Come here! [*va 'ta*!; *she points to the floor, as though gesturing to a dog*]

Harmonist♫: What is this?

W: The nerve of you to call me like that, saying [*slapping him on the upper arm*] "What woman is inside?" [*slap*] "What woman?" [*slap*] "What woman?"

H♫: Whoa! Poor fellow!

W: Whom [*slap*] were you calling like that? Whom? [*slap*] Is this the proper way to speak to your wedded wife? [*slaps him on the cheek*]

H♫: Ai yai yo!

W: Who put you up to this? Who gave you the nerve? [*slaps his cheek again*]

H♫: Ai yai yo!

W: Come here you! [*pointing to floor*] Yo! Come back here! I'm getting mad now! [*slaps his cheek*] Do you know the proper way to address a wife with respect?

H♫: Ai yai yo! He is shaming the entire male race!

W: Come here! Get back here! [*pointing to floor*]

Mridangist ♫: Look here! He's just carrying his towel around! [*ito! tuntu etuttu kontu varukiran.*]

W: You don't know how to address the wife you've married with respect. Do you deserve a wife? Come here, I say! Come here! You know what I'm like when I get angry, don't you? [*slaps him on the mouth*]

H♫: His mouth is bleeding, ai yo!

W: Do you know or don't you? Do you know or don't you? No respect for the wife. . . . You have always spoken to me respectfully; who taught you to speak to me like this today? Today you said to me, "Get over here, woman!" didn't you?

Husband: [*pointing at the musicians and speaking to them*] See, you sinners! That's what I said.

H♫: What did you say?

W: Don't open your mouth! [*hits him in the mouth; audience laughter*]

H♫: Hey!

W: Don't go speak to someone else while I'm talking to you!

H: They said they all call their wives like that, *va 'ti, po 'ti*! [Come here! Go there!]

W: And if that man calls that way you have to call that way too?

H: Yes!

W: Hey! [*hits him on the mouth; audience laughter*]. Don't open your mouth. Don't you know what you'll get if you speak while I'm speaking to you? [*hits him on the mouth; audience laughter*] Don't be gabbing uselessly, shut up! Are you talking? Be respectful! You must know to always be respectful to your wife. Why are you looking at your hand?

H♫: His teeth have fallen out!

W: What? You're bleeding? Bleed! [*Slaps his hand away*] Come here! [*Points to floor*]. What? Come over here before me! [*Hits him quite hard on the mouth; the audience goes wild with laughter, some audience members call out]* Come here! You have no respect for your wife? [*Hits him in the mouth; audience continually laughing*]

H♫: He's shaming the whole male race, wretched fellow!

W: Will you speak respectfully? Will you give respect?

H♫: Yo! Are you a man? [*Buffoon and Dancer both spin to face the Harmonist*]

H: Forget it, man, you're too much!

W: You should shut up!

H: Only if you go look in each and every man's house will you know who's taking the beatings! [*They turn back to each other*]

W: Hey! Shut your mouth! How many times have I told you, just stay in the house and do the housework!

H: Yes.

W: I am the one who goes out.

H: You mean I am not allowed to go out even to pee?

W: I go out to work, right? I put it [food] out for you three

times a day, don't I? And you can't simply eat and do the housework? And you dare . . .?

H: She puts it to me three times, while I only put it to her one time, man!

W: You put it? Have you ever even one time put it correctly? Do you put out the food? [*hits his mouth*]

H: I put it at night!

W: You put it? [*Hits his mouth*] You better behave! If I get any angrier, I'll tear you to pieces!

H: Right.

W: You know, right, that if I tear you up I'll tear you to shreds! Come here! I have told you to stay home and do the housework, don't go anywhere or talk to anyone. [*A man in the audience calls "hey babe!" (e kutti!)*] From listening to others, if you dare to speak to me that way, I'll beat you senseless! Come here! Thinking he's so great he got married. . . .

H: [*looking out past her, behind her, and bowing with his hands in greeting*] Brother! Welcome, Brother! [*She spins around to look and he grabs her by the hair (grabs her bun). Pulling her head back, he kicks her repeatedly in the butt. She runs but he is right behind her, kicking her. They run like this around the whole stage. She stops, she bends forward in pain, waving her hands, he kicks her a few more times. At each kick the mridangist hits his drum. The harmonist and the mridangist are smiling broadly.*]

H♫: Go for it!

H: She's saying *Va 'ta, po 'ta*! to me? What is the meaning of this, sir?

H♫: Only now are you a man! Shake my hand! [*he stands up behind his harmonium and extends his hand, the buffoon leans towards him and they shake hands. Other musicians extend their hands and the buffoon shakes them.*]

H: [*again to Dancer*:] I'll roll you and beat you!

W: Ai yo! He's beating me! [*He kicks her again*]

H♫: Beat her, kick her; look how [bold] she is for a scrawny woman!

M♫: She's the size of a grasshopper.

[*The buffoon swings his towel up over his neck, and proudly pulls it back and forth for a moment, then tugs at the two ends smugly.*]

W: You wretched sinner! Not even one day. . . . [*The buffoon pulls his towel off with his right hand and swats her across the back with it*] Ai yo! [*He swats her again with the towel, chasing her around and around the stage as she runs from him*] Appa! Do you think I am a washerman's stone, that you should beat me so? That you can beat me like he beats clothes against a stone? Go to hell!

H: [*Slinging his towel up over his right shoulder and wearing it there*] Look you all, still she opens her mouth!

W: Hey! While you are sleeping, I'll come drop a stone on your head and kill you man! If you keep on beating me, your hands will become leprous!

H: Oh will they?

W: Go to hell!

H: Sir, she is still saying *va 'ta* to me! [*Kicks her*]

W: Ai yo! It hurts!

H♫: Change the place you hit her man! What is this? Why do you keep on hitting her in the same place?

W: My parents brought me up so well and all! Oh you sinner! [*They are now in the downstage right corner nearest the musicians. He kicks her yet again and she cries, looking all around for help to the musicians. Flinging her arms out, she falls to the ground and stays there.*]

H♫: What man! Kick her both frontside and backside man!

H: Hey, I'll kill you!

H♫: Wretched fellow! She's fallen and weak, man!

M♫: She's as small as a flea.

W: You'll become leprous!

H: Hey! Don't speak! [*He kicks her in the ribs*] Don't speak! [*He kicks her again in the ribs, and then stomps on her foot.*]

W: Don't stomp on my foot! [*she spits*]

H: She's speaking again! [*kicks her in the ribs*] Get up! First get up!

W: Go away! I can't get up! [*He drags her up by her hands, only to swat her again across the arms and back with his towel.*] Ai yai yo! [*She falls back to the floor, now centre stage, sobbing.*]

H♫: [*raucous laughter*].

M♫: Is she laughing or crying?

W: [*to Musicians*:] *Po 'ta*! Dog!

Musicians♫: [*laughter*].

H: Will you still talk? [*Again wields his towel in his right hand and swats her with it.*]

W: *Po 'ta*! No! No! Ai yo! I can't take it! I can't take it! You've never been like this before!

H: Yes, yes.

W: Up to now you've been such a nice quiet man, so I expected the same today. [*He kicks her*] Ai yo! But today you've started!

H: Right!

W: This is enough for me for a whole year man!

H: Get up! [*Kicks her*] First of all, get up!

H: [*turning to address the harmonist*] You sinner man! Aren't you supposed to be a headman? I'm beating her up like this, shouldn't you be coming and putting a stop to it?

H♫: Sure man. Anyway, now that you've beaten her up like this, what are you going to do at night?

H: What will I do at night? I'll come to your wife. . . .

H♫: I'll slipper you, rascal! [*Audience bursts into laughter*]

H: [*singing in Oppari/lamentation style*] On that side of the river, a goya tree in Ayodha. . . .

[*With this song, the husband and wife move swiftly towards reconciliation. He helps her up from the ground. She sobs in repentance as he sings to her, until finally she clasps him in an embrace and cries into his bare chest. Their dialogue continues with her contrition.*]

H: There there, don't cry, don't cry.

W: My man!

H: Yes . . .

W: I never wanted to oppose you, until all the neighbour women said you had no manly pride [*rosham*] . . .

B: [*he slaps her on the mouth*] What, woman? How would the women next-door have any idea whether I have manly pride or not?!

W: They said, "your husband is not going out properly to work". They told me that if I give you a good harsh cursing, from the very next day forward you would go properly out to work. . . .

H: And in so doing, in cursing me harshly, you have received a beating, haven't you? So don't listen to the talk of the women next-door if you don't want to be ruined!

W: Hereafter, I won't listen; this beating is enough for me man! This is enough for me for two years, man!

H: Hereafter how will you address me?

W: *Attan*! [kin term for both cross-cousin and husband] [*she touches his chest lightly*]

They engage in some light banter, ending with a romantic love song, "Night-time"*:*

H & W: [*Singing*] Time, night-time, this is it, night-time! The coloured moon belongs to us! O apple of my eye, your arms are my cradle! Come, come, ours is a bed of flowers! You are like a mother, I like a child; I'll jump to embrace you, and sing joyfully! O apple of my eye, your arms are my cradle! Time, night-time, O night-time! [*They exit together, running off upstage left.*]

* * *

Of all the echoing signs of gender trouble that ricochet through this scene, the husband's use of his towel is perhaps the most condensed symbol of the stages through which it progresses. As noted, a man's towel is a status marker, and how he wears it significant. The buffoon entered with his towel wrapped around his head like a menial labourer, then unwrapped it and held it in one hand in suspended

animation as he spoke with the harmonist. When the wife begins beating him, he holds it with both hands and attempts to use it as a shield, clutching it to his chest as she assaults him frontally. He continues clutching it like a baby's blanket for comfort as she orders him around, pointing to the floor. At one point the mridangist explicitly comments on the ineffectiveness of this poor excuse of a man by commenting on his relations with his towel: "He's just carrying his towel around!" (line 19)

Then as soon as it is he and not her delivering the blows, he swings his towel up around his neck, pulling it proudly back and forth, tugging at the two ends hanging over his puffed-up chest: now he is in control. He takes his towel in his right hand and begins to use it as a weapon, swatting the wife across the back and arms as she runs from him. She responds: "Am I a washerman's stone, to beat like this?" (lines 97-100). If a washerman is low on the social ladder (and he is, very) the inanimate stone he whacks is even lower. The husband has moved up. He slings his towel up over his shoulder, and wears it there smugly. This is how politicians, and prestigious men of town or village, wear their towels. The husband now wears his towel in this slung-over-the-shoulder manner until the end of the scence, like when finally he uses it to wipe his wife's tears off his chest.

Special Drama comedy scenes, like so many other types of farcical comedic performance around the world, frequently play upon and elaborate quotidian fears of gendered interaction. In these acts, the orderly gender world comes unhinged, proper relations mess up, social reprobation looms large and, as in most nightmares, the worst things imaginable happen. Dreams and nightmares are the manifest content of the *Atipiti* scene. The dancer offers her dream vision, "I have so much desire for my husband to be this way, I saw it in a dream!" which to the harmonist is a nightmare: that the "manly pride" of the "entire male race" will be shamed if a wife speaks to her husband without conventional respect markers (lines 17, 50). The exaggeration is ludicrous and yet it rings true for some: this is, one audience member told me, "the way it really is with us".

The stage is filled here with characters who epitomize extremes. The harmonist struggles to instill rigour in the buffoon, whose fantasy demoness has come to life in the dancer's embodiment of the worst-

possible wife, that is, she who goes out to work and expects her husband to stay at home.

Hers is the real acting job in this act. It is no mean feat for a woman to do all the things she was told never to do. Of course, stage actresses in Tamil Nadu are by definition always already doing precisely that, so for a Special Drama dancer, this trick is a matter of degree, not of kind. Nevertheless, I am impressed by the actress Sridevi's ability to both give and take abuse so publicly, and by the fullness with which she bodily inhabits the commanding language and cocksure manner of the Tamil husband at home.

Her technique in acting the worst possible wife is simple. She takes gender-role reversal altogether literally and does everything a man does. Her language and her bodily gestures and postures quote verbatim the stereotypical Tamil husband at home. The only twist in the tale lies in its gender inversion; were it not for the fact that they are enacted by the wife, all these domestic behaviours would be standard. When the husband-at-home is actually a woman, she instantly becomes the worst-possible-wife.

Were such a simple reversal of roles advocated as a strategy for social change it would, as feminists have long noted, be a lousy and unsophisticated strategy indeed (Sandoval 1991; Scott 1988). What is its effect when used parodically?

Note first that the object of parody here is not what one might assume. Whereas in contemporary U.S. theatrical culture a parodic gender-reversed portrayal of a husband's aggressive behaviour at home would most likely be used to expose problems in the original gender role (i.e. how ridiculous the husband at home is, as a type, with his smug masculinity, etc.), here the set-up is used instead to show the ridiculousness of anything *other than* the original gender role. As it plays out here, role reversal only confirms how wrong it is of a wife to attempt to be a husband-at-home. There is no ostensible critique of that role *per se*; there is only a critique of the woman who tries to inhabit it.

Indeed the dancer here enacts woman-on-top as a simple, mirror inverse of man-on-top. Her worst-possible-wife uses the same phrases, the same postures, and the same gestures that husbands at home use to control their wives. She commands him not to speak but to stay

home and do the housework (line 60), refusing to allow him to go out or to speak to anyone outside. He is not to stand in the vaasal, he is not to talk back. One would think this parodic parroting would raise not only laughter but a concomitant culture critique from the audience. Yet while the buffoon may himself be a fool, it nevertheless remains his prerogative, not hers, to cast aspersions on masculinity; what she does in the male role raises questions only about her, not him, in the context of the *Atipiti* scene. As the scene continues and its inversions revert to their rightful order, it is clear that those who break with convention are the objects of this parody: only the re-establishment of the conventional order offers closure and "peace".

What begins as a reversal of domestic power in a home dominated by a raging and uncontrolled demoness ends in the righting of this obvious imbalance through the taming of the shrew.[5] This fictive enactment provides a platform for (married) men to imagine a backlash against a changing reality of increasingly emboldened wives and the threats to masculinity they pose. Toward this end, the buffoon is eagerly joined by the musicians, who help him establish a manly (read violent) virility. Putting the wife in her proper place is modelled by the chorus of musicians as the collective responsibility of all the men on stage: they praise the husband for finally acting like a man, shake his hand, and egg him on verbally and musically while teasing and laughing at her (lines 87-89).

The key transition out of inversion and into right order — i.e.

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5. Holly Baker Reynolds notes that, in what at first seems paradoxical but in the end proves to be in keeping with dominant Tamil cultural values, women aspire to the wifely-goddess role that keeps them subordinate out of a general preference for an ordered social world.

> [W]omen themselves are the staunchest supporters of a system that normatively renders them subservient and subordinate to men. [. . .] Why do women opt for goddesses such as Laksmi who are paragons of wifeliness, purity, and benevolence, instead of *ammans* who are independent, passionate, and capricious? [. . .T]he benevolent goddesses express an ordered, regulated, and properly classified world. To opt for the married goddess, then, is to opt for a world of order on cosmic, social, and existential levels.
>
> — Reynolds 1980: 43-4

In her assumption that opting for the "world of order" would be the obvious Tamil choice, Reynolds thinks like most Tamilians I met, for whom the dis-order represented by the acting community was anathema.

into male virility and female subservience — is effected here through a fake greeting ploy (lines 78-79). The buffoon suddenly feigns a greeting to an imaginary "big brother". This sparks a shift that swings all the men on stage into action: the buffoon kicks and puffs up his chest, the musicians cheer, hit their drums and applaud. The audience hoots. The insipid husband has finally found respect for himself as a man — he finds his *rosham* — and reinstalls himself as the correct bearer of the role of husband at home. As noted, this role itself remains remarkably unsullied by the dancer's parodic inhabitance of it, and it is the wife alone who suffers for her aborted attempt to usurp him.

What is so interesting to me is that performers and audiences alike nevertheless saw wife and husband as equally victorious in this scene: both are said to attain their proper powers in the end. They argue — to me, as the conversations I present hereafter make clear — that the proper form of women's power is found in the confirmation of men's power. They point out that after all, this end is achieved through a plan hatched by women: talking together in the *kollai*, women plot to gain proper status, self-respect and *rosham* for the husband (lines 155-56, 159-61). The wife is a vehicle for the husband's coming to power.

The two women with whom I spoke at greatest length about this scene, one an actress and the other an audience member, tried to convince me that married women (a category in which each includes herself, though neither lives a married life anything like the model she upheld in our talks) desire their subservience to men as the proper state of domestic affairs. Wifely agency, they suggest, inheres in the ability to incite men to the responsibilities of the husband, and the wife's come-uppance raises her husband's (and thus her own) status in the all-important public eye.

This return to an idealized normalcy that ends the *Atipiti* scene cannot, however, but be precarious. This act scratches the otherwise glassy surface of the "normal" and reveals lurking terrors. It offers both an initially terrifying reversal and a frighteningly powerful pooling of collective wills (present in both the narrated and the event texts) to rectify that reversal. When the scene ends, comic break-time ends, and the subsequent, final dramatic scene of the night is the culminating marriage of hero and heroine. Can their marriage ever again seem the promised bed of flowers after this eye-opening interlude?

A Discussion with the Artists

In discussing the popularity of this piece with its two main performers, I learned of their overt intention to deliver a moral message. They saw themselves as staging a glimpse of "the wrong way" in order to teach people what not to do. The artists seemed to take particular pleasure in this chance to be the ones to deliver such a moral lesson, as it represents a major reversal of social roles for them. Stigmatized as public performers, Special Drama artists in general rarely get a chance to be heard as purveyors of any kind of morality. In this particular case, Kalaiarasan and Sridevi, as Muslims in a predominately Hindu field, are also minority performers who particularly relished the chance to use their popular repertory hit to prove their ability to assert a sanctioned morality.

At the core of our discussion of the *Atipiti* scene was the artists' notion of proper, separate spheres: the family is properly a domestic matter, to be dealt with inside the home, and any move to involve the public in what are meant to be kept as internal disputes will end in tears. This is also the real life context of their engagement in the art of public performance. Our discussion began with this recognition of the difficult position of Muslim actresses in particular. Sridevi is the actress's stage name, not her real, Muslim name. She says,

> If we use our own Muslim name, advertise it and go to act in some other place, people will speak of us as though we are very cheap, saying "Look at that! A Muslim girl has come to act! What a big shame it is for Islam." They will talk thus amongst themselves, considering it a big shame for the entire village.

Kalaiarasan adds "A humiliation and a shame — they might take action through the *jamaat* [a Muslim *panchayat*]." This is indeed what happened to Sridevi; the *jamaat* in her village excommunicated her, cutting her off from all relations with her community. Fortunately two years later a more liberal leadership took power in the *jamaat*. They allowed her again to be part of her community and allowed her children to study Arabic at the mosque. For men, the prohibitions are not as strict. Kalaiarasan in fact often introduces himself on stage using both his

names: Kalaiarasan, his Hindu stage name, and Mustaffa, his Muslim given name. There are a greater number of Muslim men acting in Special Drama than women; indeed, Sridevi's family — her mother, her elder sister, herself, and now one of her daughters — were the only Muslim women currently acting in the field as far as I could gather.

Thus public opinion is a powerful force shaping these artists' lives, and it varies greatly by gender. As in the *Atipiti* scene itself, it is deemed highly important that a man's masculinity be recognized by other men, yet women's talk and the decisions they take amongst themselves are met with disdain. Sridevi stressed that the unacceptably bold aspect of the wife's character lay in the fact that she dared talk to outsiders (both the neighbour women and the *panchayat* headman) about problems internal to her marriage. This is why her husband has to hit and discipline her; the main moral of the story, both artists agreed, is that "One shouldn't go and tell what happens in the house to others". They adamantly asserted that all problems should be kept quiet in a marriage; opening up marital relations to the gossip of outsiders should be avoided at all costs. "Peace" in married life means *not* talking about problems in the marriage. In Sridevi's words:

> We should solve all our problems amongst ourselves. Women should generally work within the house and not go around gossiping; otherwise, the family will suffer. When a husband and wife fight, they should forget it immediately. Only then will one's family life be peaceful. Otherwise, if we think "my husband has bashed me up and therefore I won't give him any food", the family will be ruined. Man and woman should be united; and when we have kids, we should make sure that we give them a stable family life.

It is a general premise of feminist work against domestic violence worldwide that a couple has first to recognize violence against a spouse as a problem before they can begin to address changing it. To do so, one must talk about it and admit that a problem exists. The opposite paradigm is in play here. Domestic violence, far from being seen primarily as a social problem, is treated instead as an acceptable social resolution. Violence is naturalized as an unmarked male action, a given of a husband's behaviour. The wife's "complaint" to her neighbours and to the *nattamai* leads directly to blows; this eventually "reforms" him, in the sense that it encourages him to establish "normal" husband-

wife relations with her by beating her. As Sridevi explained the action of the scene:

> My main aim is to reform him. That's why I hit him; that's why I talked like that: so that he will get *rosham*. Once he gets *rosham*, then I promise him that I won't talk like that. I say, "We should be like everyone else, like husband and wife". And he also agrees: "Yes. It's my mistake also. Henceforth, I'll go out and earn. Let's live like all other husbands and wives. Let's live peacefully."

What the wife seeks to reform in her husband is his lack of sufficient masculinity, his lack of *rosham*. Again, male "violence" is not the problem here, but rather the solution, as well as the desired norm: a man's *rosham* is his proper pride and self-respect, which as we have seen, he attains through his domination of his wife in their home. The original problem in their marriage is the topsy-turvy relation of their household, where the wife was working outside the home. As Sridevi put it:

> His wife earns and feels, "Why the hell should I respect this man? I am the one who earns." So she never respects him, but rather calls him "*vaa 'da, po 'da*. [you come, you go]'.

Thus the wife claims that she engaged in public talk purely as an instrumental move to get her husband to engage publicly with other men and thus find or develop his masculinity. As Sridevi put it, the wife feels that "All these days I behaved in an arrogant manner so that you would get *rosham*. At last, you have gotten it." Public exposure here works to ensure that men will continue to hit their wives, and that as long as they do, their wives will stay quiet about it.

What about the publicness of their own performance, I asked? Their performance, the artists felt, works to reinscribe the message that public exposure of marital problems should be avoided. This is clearly understood, they emphasized, as everyone laughs at them. Even children can learn here the values of maintaining an orderly, self-contained Tamil household:

> *Sridevi*: In some families, what we show is a fact. The audience will realize [on seeing our act], "Oho! If we talk like this [with outsiders], I suppose this is what will happen." Women should not listen to other women or talk in such a manner to men.

Kalaiarasan: When they see our comedy, families will reform; both some men and some women will reform. After seeing us, they will try to be more united even if they are fighting with their husbands.

The reform urged on families here would not rid them of domestic abuse (seemingly not a salient category of distinction) but rather only of the overly bold speech of a woman, whether to her husband or to outsiders.

The most ironic thing about Sridevi's emphasis on publicness as wrong for women is that she is using publicness itself to make her point (shades of Anita Bryant). She is in the lowest, most public of professions, for which she is held in disdain by her own Muslim community, yet she stands on ceremony here with normative Tamil ideas about women's non-public persona as the only right role for women. That she herself doesn't find this ironic underscores her very real need to be concerned with what people think. Special Drama actors frequently inhabit such a paradoxical position: their being on public display stigmatizes them, so they attempt to distance themselves publicly from this stigma by enacting a morality critical of public display. The *Atipiti* scene is one of the most pointed, and poignant, representations of the painful repercussions of such a strategy.

Given its conveyance of all these moralistic messages, why, I still wondered, is any of this *Atipiti* funny? For one thing, of course, the scene comes in the almost irresistible packaging of slapstick physical comedy, some version of which is found across many cultures. Tamil audiences appreciate it in *terukkuttu* clowns, for example, as well as in celluloid incarnations (the goofy cinema comedy duo Senthil Gowndamani is a case in point).[6] The tried and true antics of physical comedy produce an almost knee-jerk laugh response in audiences of all ages. In classic Victorian Punch & Judy puppet shows, Punch trips, and the cymbal clangs! Hands fly up, the body falls down! His arm swings, and ding! connects, causing Judy to reel wider than in real life. The stage performers play the scene for laughs. They attune their

6. *Senthil Gowndamani* is an act of two male comedians who figure as comic relief in innumerable Tamil films of the last decade. In all these popular entertainment genres, whether play or film, the comic action is entirely separate from the dramatic action, and skits or sketches, such as the *Atipiti* scene, stand (or fall, repeatedly!) on their own merits.

gestures through the use of pauses, repetitions, and exaggerations — nevertheless in many respects frightfully realistic, especially the sobbing and doubling-over-in-pain of the wife — to an accompanying whir-slam-bang sound track that provides an overall tenor of cartoon slapstick rather than humanist tragedy.

In Punch & Judy, however, what makes the despicable Punch nevertheless easy for Western audiences to cheer is that he always, if inadvertantly, challenges the super-ego of authority in its many guises, from the cop one should obey (Punch kills him) to the helpless infant one should protect (Punch abandons it). In his way, Punch is pure subversive id, the kind of character that Western audiences love to love. I don't know how he would go over in Tamil Nadu. He is utterly different from the husband in the Tamil scene: in *Atipiti* the husband beats his wife so that all will appreciate his manliness and cheer the reinscription of accepted roles of authority. The anthropological question thus remains: how do Tamil audiences watch *Atipiti*, and why do they find it funny?

Four Theories of Spectatorship

It should be unsurprising that the spectatorial relations pertaining between Special Drama and its audiences are other than those generally held to pertain in "Western theater".[7] Firstly, the Tamil genre of *Isai Naadakam* (Music Drama) developed at the intersection of multiple theatrical traditions, including the realism of mid- to late-nineteenth-century Parsi and British travelling troupes; indigenous theatrical traditions of Tamil *terukkuttu* (street theatre); Hindu devotional song genres; folk song ballads; and poetic verse stories. Current stagings of Special Drama continue to blend Western and Indian influences, and seem equally to draw on multiple traditions of

7. This phrase is a convention of the literature in which "Western theatre" all too often designates a tradition held to be continuous from Ancient Greece to contemporary SoHo. I don't want to get side-tracked into a discussion of the potential pitfalls of such usage, so here I use this rather problematic term as mere shorthand without necessarily abiding by all it implies. The point really is to be able to discuss here how audiences whose primary expectations of theatre-going are shaped by their experiences with performance traditions in India might approach theatre-going differently than audiences whose primary experiences of the theater are based on Western theatrical traditions.

spectatorship. Three influential classical theories of spectatorship provide possible models for understanding the spectatorial relations at play in Special Drama, and together they inform a fourth model that, I will suggest, best captures the particular ways local Tamil audiences view Special Drama in general, and the *Atipiti* scene in particular.

The first model of spectatorship I consider it useful to revisit is the Platonic model, characterized by its emphasis on *imitation*. Plato distrusted the potentially powerful effects of theatre on spectators, to the extent that theatre scholars now characterize his attitude as a "loathing of the theatre" (Diamond 1992: 391). In the *Republic*, Plato represents the problem as one of unthinking imitation.

> Instead of being repulsed by the sight of the kind of person we'd regret and deplore being ourselves, we enjoy the spectacle and sanction it. [. . .] And the same goes for sex, anger, and all the desires and feelings of pleasure and distress which, we're saying, accompany everything we do: poetic representation has the same effect in all these cases too. **It irrigates and tends to these things when they should be left to wither,** and it makes them our rulers when they should be our subjects, because otherwise we won't live better and happier lives, but quite the opposite. [. . .] If you admit the entertaining muse of lyric and epic poetry, then instead of law and the shared acceptance of reason as the best guide, the kings of your community will be pleasure and pain. — *Republic* 605e-607a, emphasis mine

Given such ideas, in his plan for the ideal republic Plato recommends banishing actors from the city entirely (after anointing their heads with myrrh, to be sure 398b). In the Platonic/imitative model of spectatorship, the audience members want to be the person they see, and theatre leads people into unthinking imitation.

A second classical Western model of spectatorship is found in Aristotle's brilliant answer to Plato's fears in the *Poetics*. I think of this as the *inoculation* model. Aristotle effectively rescued theatre from Platonic condemnation by proposing "catharsis" as a kind of homoeopathic cure: through a small dose of pity or fear, a momentary identification leading to enjoyment or repulsion, the spectator purges himself of the same, and thereby attains moral betterment. Here the idea is that the viewer will not copy the bad actions of the actor but rather learn from them what to avoid. By partaking in the bitterness of the tragedy or the foolishness of the comedy staged before them,

spectators will be cleansed of any desire to go through the same experiences in their real lives: spectators partake here, so that they need not do so elsewhere. Theatre in this model is an instructive purgatory that offers a useful, inoculating dose of poison; catharsis strengthens the polity rather than leading it astray.

A third theory of spectatorship harks not from ancient Greece but from ancient India. It is a theory concerned less with the identifications made by individuals than with a collective appreciation of theatre. The aesthetic theory of *rasa* derives from the classic Sanskrit theatrical tradition, as codified in the early text known as the *Natyashastra*, attributed to the sage Bharatamuni around the third century BCE. In this tradition of theatrical aesthetics, *rasa* is understood as the taste or mood of the performance. It is generated by the performer's skill and dependent on the ability of the audience to taste its flavour.

> *Rasa* therefore has essentially a double character: it is "taste" and it is "tasted." It is not possible to separate the two aspects. [. . .] "Objectively seen *rasa* is the juice, from the subjective point of view it is the relish of the juice. . . . The word *rasa* in fact hangs between the subjective and the objective." — Heckel 1989: 37

In this model, "the play performed must offer the possibility of tasting", while "a capacity for tasting is likewise required of the audience" (37). The audience relates not to a particular character, or even his or her traits or actions, but rather to the mood of the performance as a whole.

The goal of the audience in this model of spectatorship is to appreciate the artistry of the theatrical representation of human emotion. The idea is that audiences will enjoy the spectacle from a certain distance, exclaiming "So this is how it is!" and appreciating the truths it expresses about the human condition. The *Natyashastra* builds theatre from a palette of eight primary *bhava*s, or human emotions: love, humour, anger, compassion, heroism, wonder, disgust, and fear. These eight are then further broken down into four pairs, comprising a source emotion and a derivative emotion. The first paired set of emotions is love (*shringara*) and humor (*hasya*). Of this pair, the text notes that "Humour results when love is parodied or imitated." The semiotic system that stimulates parodic laughter here relies on

exaggeration and disfigurement, distortion and deformity, to read as queer deviations. Simply put, "The comic *rasa* is experienced when something tastes funny" (Siegel 1987: 8).

The *rasa* of humour is then itself divisible into six varieties, according to whether it is used by high-, middle-, or low-status characters. Each character type is associated with two varieties of laughter. The two used most frequently in the *Atipiti* scene are, not surprisingly, those associated with low characters, who employ loud laughter and silly laughter (as opposed to the gentle laughs of the high, or the broad smiles and satirical laughter of the middle types). The silly laughter both used and provoked by low characters is described in the *Natyashastra* as "laughing in the wrong context with tears in the eyes and head and shoulders shaking", while loud laughter is described as "tears flowing from the eyes, voice loud and screeching and sides firmly clasped".

This third model of spectatorship thus recognizes the shared nature of the event that takes place between audience and performer. It suggests not that this experience of give-and-take leads directly to specific actions in everyday life, but rather that it leads to commentary on such actions. The *rasa* theory appreciates theatre as something the audience judges from a critical distance.

In this sense the Sanskritic theory of *rasa* provokes performances similar to those that inspired Bertolt Brecht as he developed his theatrical model for activist art. Brecht's early-twentieth-century comparisons of European theatre with Asian theatre (based on his viewing of traditional Chinese acting as performed by Mei Lan-Fang and Co. in 1935), led to his celebration of a technique he called "the alienation effect". His comparisons describe well the interactive quality that pertains between spectators and actors in Special Drama:

> Above all, the Chinese artist never acts as if there were a fourth wall besides the three surrounding him. He expresses his awareness of being watched. This immediately removes one of the European stage's characteristic illusions. The audience can no longer have the illusion of being the unseen spectator at an event which is really taking place. . . . He acts in such a way that nearly every sentence could be followed by a verdict of the audience and practically every gesture is submitted for the public's approval.
>
> — Brecht 1964: 91-2, 95

This notion that audiences *judge* a performance within a shared context of known styles and common standards of behaviour reappeared in my conversations with artists and audience members alike regarding their appreciation of the *Atipiti* scene.

In fact, all three of these theoretical models of spectatorship — the imitative Platonic model, the Aristotelian inoculation model, and the appreciative aesthetic model of Sanskritic *rasa*s and *bhava*s — reappeared in discussions with those at the scene. Performers spoke of their intention to deliver a moral message, while audience members spoke of how the scene teases their own sense of right and wrong. These conversations strongly suggest yet a fourth model of spectatorial relations, one that engages the audience in an active role of moral patrol.

Why Does the Audience Laugh?

Laughter on its own is a difficult way into the analysis of any performance event. There are too many types of laughter: cynical, tentative, broad, merry, and so on. At the same time, no laughter is any one of these things: a broad laugh may be cynical or a cynical laugh tentative, a merry laugh gentle or bitter, or even fake. To make sense of any particular instance of laughter, one must consider it in context: which, when, by whom, at what, and with what effect(s)?[8]

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8. Most literature on humour recognizes that not all laughter is humorous laughter. There is indeed a larger methodological question here: should one assume that laughter is even a set whose various members are at all related? Is malicious laughter in any way related to joyous laughter, hysterical laughter to conspiratorial laughter? Perhaps the best approach to theorizing about laughter is to regard each type of laughter as requiring its own theory. Certainly in reading the literature on humour theory, one has the strong sense that each theory derives from and primarily addresses only those specific instances from which it builds. Though this may be a truism for all theory, it is particularly glaring in this field. As John Morreall writes:

   > The major difficulty in constructing a comprehensive theory [of laughter] is that we laugh in situations which are so diverse that they seem to have nothing in common but our laughter. [. . .] In the face of this diversity, many have suggested that there could not be a single formula which covered all laughter situations. The correct approach, they say, is not to look for an essence of laughter, but to treat laughter situations in the way Wittgenstein treated games, as a set whose members show only family resemblances.
   >
   > — Morreall 1987: 128

→

The most notable features of the laughter greeting the *Atipiti* scene were its conventionality and ubiquity. First, the audience's laughter was quite regularly timed to the stage action. It came in response to punch lines, and thus often in this case to punches. The transcript of the scene presented earlier confirms this tightly interactive, attuned-to-the-action character of the laughter: every time she hits his mouth, *laugh*; every time he kicks her in the ribs, *laugh*. The audience laughter here is a regular, reliable feature of the event text.

A primary means of achieving such regularity of response lies in the percussive accompaniment provided by the musicians. The score of beats and bangs, hits and clangs offered by the two drummers signal punches and punch lines that recall the way vaudeville routines or early animated films used sound. The soundtrack helps keep the audience on track with the action: *pow* laugh, *clang* laugh, *whoosh* laugh slam laugh. This non-verbal audio score engages the two sets of observers present at any Special Drama event, the musicians and the audience, who co-create the mutual, participatory score and in the process, their own relation to it.

The other feature marking this laughter as conventional was its ubiquity. Everyone (apart from me) laughed. While it seemed at times uncontrollable and uncontrolled, coming in big breaking guffaws, it was nevertheless contextually normal and regular: laughing out loud was the proper response. From where I sat, as usual amongst the women in the audience, I was surprised to see that rather than the usual shy giggles, women too laughed openly at the *Atipiti* scene. One such laugher was a woman I knew.

→ Morreall himself nevertheless attempts a universal theory, summed up in the adage "Laughter results from a pleasant psychological shift". I hesitate at any such move, as laughter may result from widely diverse sources. Laughter in use is my primary interest; I am less interested in generalizations that risk mitigating the particularity of any given instance of use.

Another problem never directly addressed in humour literature is that of the means used for assessing another's laughter. How can we tell, from the outside, precisely what kind of laughter we witness in another? I aim here to understand a responsive laughter that is not my own, making this a particularly ethnographic quest; I hope my method and approach prove useful in other situations as well.

An Audience Account

The neighbourhood in which this performance took place is a section of Madurai called Krishnapuram Colony, very near where I lived at the time. The American Institute of Indian Studies School for Tamil language study was located there, and several other American scholars also lived nearby. Neelam is a woman from the neighbourhood who provided domestic services to several residences, including my own.

Neelam fits a common profile of the kind of woman who attends Special Drama performances in urban settings such as this. Working class and lower caste, she is one of the urban poor. She was raising her teenage son alone after her husband left her, "for drink" as she put it, three years earlier. She offered her services as a cook or maid in as many homes as possible to piece together a living.

When Neelam and I spoke on the day after the performance, I didn't quite realize the extent to which her comments answered my questions about audience relations to Special Drama. I was a bit incredulous at the time. Fortunately, my tape recorder was running, and I have been able to listen carefully to our conversation many times since so as to present Neelam's comments here verbatim.

Our conversation went like this: I asked Neelam why she found the *Atipiti* scene so funny, and in reply she recounted the performance to me as she saw it. Her account differs in telling ways from the transcript I made of the video. Most significantly, in her account Neelam substitutes audience laughter for all the critical responses, promptings, and verbal and musical interjections made by the musicians.

In Neelam's account, the voice of the harmonist as *nattamai* disappears entirely and is replaced by a collective, critically interactive public. This substitution suggests that it is a particular subject position, rather than a specific character, with whom Neelam identifies. That is, she does not see herself in either husband or wife, but rather finds and defines herself through her experience as an audience member.

As the following excerpts from our conversation reveal, here audience enjoyment had more to do with the assertion of a collective moral sensibility, and a self-defined through collective action, than with any Western psychological notions of individual identification.[9]

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9. In discussing the audience's enjoyment, Neelam invokes a collective →

Neelam's account of the event began as follows:

> At the beginning, the husband is like a small child, with a mild-mannered nature. He's sort of crazy. His wife, boldly, makes him do all the housework. "You must wash my *saris*. You must cook. You must not speak with anyone next door. I'll go out and I'll earn like a man for you. You just eat and listen to me. Whatever I say, you listen. What man, what do you say? What I say goes. Come here! Wash my *sari*! Put out the food 'daa!" — this is how she talks to her husband. And like a little child, he fears her, and does anything she says: "O.K. 'maa, whatever you say I'll do it, 'maa."[10] So for about ten minutes, he listens to everything she says.

Note immediately how the event text (what occurs in the real time of the performance event) and the narrated text (what occurs in the staged time of the fictional story) merge in Neelam's account. She quotes dialogue from the narrated text but frames it in the real time of the event-text, saying "So for about ten minutes he listens to everything she says" (rather than something like, "So for years he had been doing everything she said", which would have kept her own account in the single plane of the story). In meshing these two time frames, Neelam's account reveals the realness of her experience as an audience member who feels she has a real effect on the onstage action.

Neelam continues by saying that after about ten minutes of listening to everything his wife says — a point on which, by the way, her recollection is uncannily accurate, as testified to by my video time clock! — it is finally too much for him and "he suddenly takes courage". How exactly does this come about, I wondered?

→ sensibility — what she refers to as "the tastes of all Tamil people" — that seems to function differently than the psychological processes of individual identification, introjection, incorporation and transformation historically active in the bourgeois spectatorship of Western dramatic realism (Diamond 1992). The model is based on psychoanalytic theory, in which identification is understood as that "psychological process whereby the subject assimilates an aspect, property or attribute of the other and is transformed, wholly or partially, after the model the other provides" (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973: 205).

10. The word *ma* is short for *amma* (woman; lady; mother).

> *Neelam*: People will laugh, saying, "*Ai Yo*! See how he does everything his wife tells him to, he irons her *saris*, he cooks for her, he's so afraid of her!" People will laugh. Then/
>
> *Susan*: /What's funny in that?
>
> *N*: See, he is submitting to his wife. He is ironing her *saris*, cooking for her. He has no other go, and because he is living off her income, he is afraid of her and submits to her. If you show this to Tamil people, they'll laugh happily. Then what does he do, immediately he turns around and realizes, "Hey, shit! Everyone is looking at me and laughing!"

It is once the audience's laughter begins that the slippage between the narrated and the event text really comes into its own in Neelam's account, and the event starts to fully "hang between the subjective and the objective" (as a *rasa* theorist might put it), with no separation between the juice and its tasting: the people laugh, and the performer becomes cognizant that he is laughable.

> He suddenly takes courage: "*Whoa*! Looking at me, they see that my *veshti* is tied like a *sari*, while hers is tied like a *veshti*! Everyone is looking at me and laughing!" and this gets him going.

Even though the artists never actually do so in this performance, Neelam has here retroactively clothed the gender reversals of this sketch in the ever-humorous stuff of cross-dressing. Cloth provides Neelam (as it did me in my earlier discussion of the husband's towel) a tidy symbol with which to condense the many issues at stake here into a single image, and she captures the flavour of the gender reversal through this idiomatic exclamation of the shame of psychic cross-dressing: "my *veshti* is tied like a *sari*, while hers is tied like a *veshti*!" is effectively a Tamil parallel to the English idiom that characterizes a topsy-turvy gender situation in a heterosexual household as that of a woman wearing the pants. Her account continues:

> *Neelam*: So right away he says to her, "Hey you, you think I'm the kind of guy who will do everything for you? Cook for you and wash your clothes? I will not cook. I will not wash. I will not heed your words" — and with that he raises his *veshti* [in a fighting gesture] and beats her with blows and kicks. Then she says, "Everyday I talk to you like this, so why have you suddenly taken exception today?

> Suddenly you are angry? You have been like the wife to me, I've been like the husband to you. Today what, someone taught you that you should beat me like this, kick and beat me like this! You'll come to no good! Your hand will turn leprous!" and she scolds him. And that will be pleasurable for Tamil people. First he was afraid of his wife, but now, finally now, happily, he hits her. . . .
>
> *Susan*: And how did this happiness come about?
>
> *Neelam*: Right! **He realized that everyone was laughing at him**. "They must be laughing because they think I'm crazy. So, what if I should get the right character, if I should get heroism? Then I show my manliness, and she submits to me." The wife submits. And today the husband moves a step up.

I suspect that by "today" Neelam again refers to a day that simultaneously occupies both story time and telling time, and that the husband moved up a step on both that day and this. Indeed, in her words: "Only now has he become a man. *A man*. And she a wife. And now she surrenders to her husband."

There was an almost wistfully romantic tone to this ending in Neelam's account, a sigh of relief, a contentedness like the happily-ever-after of fairy tales. This is the way it should be. Now he's a man, and she's a surrendering wife; now everything will be O.K. When I asked, "But doesn't anyone feel sorry for her?" Neelam answered "No one will feel for her, because she spoke insolently to him. She didn't treat him with respect. So we'll think, 'Beat her good! Hit her again! Hit her man! Kick her man!'"

The effective role claimed for public laughter in this audience account strongly recalls the turn-of-the-century French humour theorist Henri Bergson's treatment of humour as a mechanism of social control and an instrument of moral reform. The use of public laughter as a shaming corrective is as central to Bergson's theory as it is Neelam's account. Bergson writes:

> Laughter is, above all, a corrective. Being intended to humiliate, it must make a painful impression on the person against whom it is directed. By laughter, society avenges itself for the liberties taken with it. It would fail in its object if it bore the stamp of sympathy or kindness. — Bergson 1956[1900]: 187

Neelam's retelling of the *Atipiti* scene casts the audience's corrective laughter in a key role, erasing any separation between musician as every man and audience as everyone. Whereas one might generally talk of a chorus "standing in" for the audience, in Neelam's portrayal the two are absolutely undifferentiated subject positions. Audience and chorus are not merely contiguous; they are coterminous. As a result, the harmonist completely disappears from her account, and his contemptuous verbal comments are subsumed into the audience's laughter, which acts to effect the scene's progression.

Neelam's account presents a theory of causality in which shame effects are key. It is the Bergsonian laughter of the audience, "intended to humiliate", that prompts the husband's self-realizations. Likewise it is his shame in the face of the audience that causes him to desire change and thereby to find his manly pride (*rosham*). The shared assumption in both Bergson's and Neelam's logic is that shame is highly efficacious in enforcing social norms; as soon as a man realizes that everyone is laughing at him, shame will prompt him to reform and conform.[11] It's as though these 10 staged minutes are not a representation of ongoing relations (that might have existed for 10 months or 10 years) but rather are the very relations themselves. What is happening right here onstage, in the midst of this particular public, is what has to be corrected, and the people right here, as a powerful instantiation of the Tamil public, are the ones doing the correcting.

In this sense, Neelam's account concretizes an abstract public into the current, present public. Working-class women like Neelam and

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11. Silvan Tompkins' psychological affect theories would be a good place to begin thinking further about shame and contempt in this performative context. Comparing Tompkins' ideas on shame to the kinds of affective continuities held to pertain between audience and performer in classical *rasa* theory could prove particularly productive; "Shame is the most reflexive of affects in that the phenomenological distinction between the subject and object of shame is lost" (Sedgwick and Frank 1995: 136).

    On the power of public opinion to shame, Bowen suggests that among the Tiv, "public complaining" works to cement familial relationships, as the fear of public shaming keeps the family together in anticipatory avoidance of outsiders' comments (Bowen 1954: 73-4). Shame as a public catalyst for domestic transformation is clearly at the crux of the *Atipiti* scene.

her friends, who attended this performance together, are quite familiar with child rearing and, in Neelam's case, the particular struggles of singly raising boy children into men. When she characterizes the psychological state of the husband as that of a young boy toward his mother — "And like a little child, he fears her, and does anything she says" — she simultaneously remarks the shift in authority that would characterize adulthood. The figure for whom the man must properly perform is that of the larger public, not simply this one woman, whether wife or mother. The man's awareness of the broader audience and of himself breaks into consciousness simultaneously. This sudden self-awareness breaks his orientation to the parental figure, and he abruptly stops orienting his actions to his wife/mother inside the home and reorients himself instead toward the audience, outside in public.

"Going public" is thus both a male life-stage marker and an important step in the proper socialization of male citizens. Going public is right for the man, but wrong for the woman, as going public invites the public in. But for everyone the case is made that only by internalizing the public voice in the first place do we avoid shame and laughter;[12] such are the moral lessons one learns at Special Dramas.

Further, Special Drama seems to draw on every possible model of spectatorship in conveying such socializing messages. The audience partakes of a key aspect of the classic role of the audience in Sanskritic *rasa* theory, tasting the flavour of the performer's emotional evocation of the human condition. Simultaneously, audience members inoculate themselves, in good Aristotelian fashion, from any need to suffer the same plight as these characters, having learned the consequences of such acts through the performance event itself. And in identifying with the musicians' position rather than that of the actors, they enjoy this spectacle freed from the Platonic curse of having to be "the kind of person we'd regret and deplore being ourselves".

Through a combination of spectatorial orientations, then, audiences for Special Drama can enjoy scenes like *Atipiti* — its upside-

12. Cf. Erving Goffman: "whether we interact with strangers or intimates, we will find that the fingertips of society have reached bluntly into the contact, even here putting us in our place" (Goffman 1963: 53).

down-ness as well as its uprightness — without disrupting the conventions of morality that order their own lives, for better or worse.

Public voices and public advice, and public commentary on every staged move, are what move the whole event along, through shaming taunts and corrective laughter. The ultimate message seems to be that to avoid confrontation with any actual public, one must internalize the accepted attitudes about public behaviour so thoroughly that one never trips up, or has to consult an outsider. Actors — and especially actresses — are cast permanently in the role of persons who haven't yet learned such basic lessons of Tamil life, stuck as they are in the shameful, stigmatizing position of being on a public stage getting laughed at by an audience that thoroughly enjoys its own ability to claim the moral high ground. Hit (*ati*), and hold (*piti*): a public celebrates what it knows about public humiliation by re-enacting it on actors.

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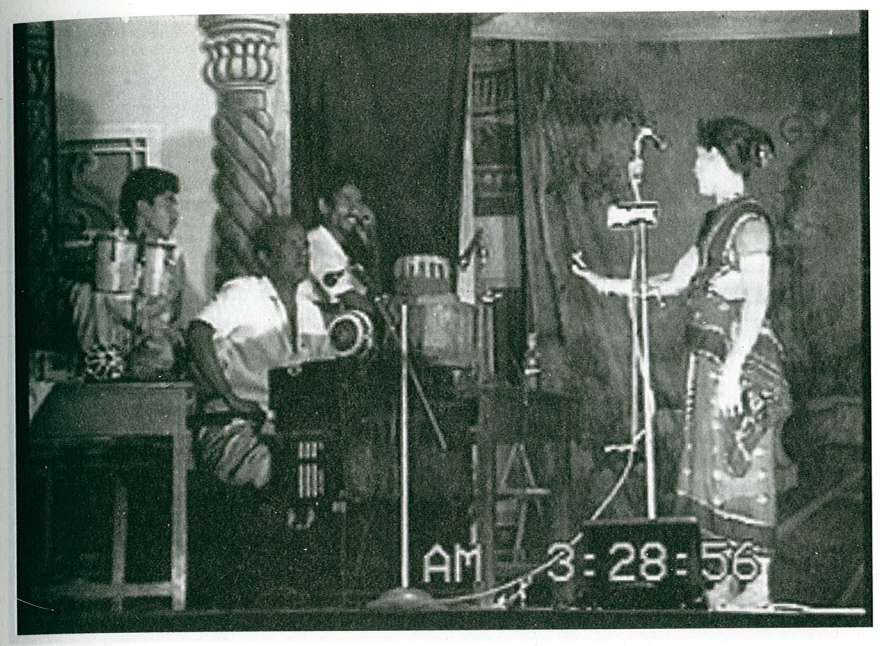

fig. 7.1: Wife alone talking with musicians

fig. 7.2: Husband alone talking with musicians

fig. 7.3: Wife pointing husband to floor

fig. 7.4: She hits him in the mouth

fig. 7.5: "What? You're bleeding? Bleed!"
[*She slaps his hand from his mouth*]

fig. 7.6: Husband bowing with his hands in trick greeting

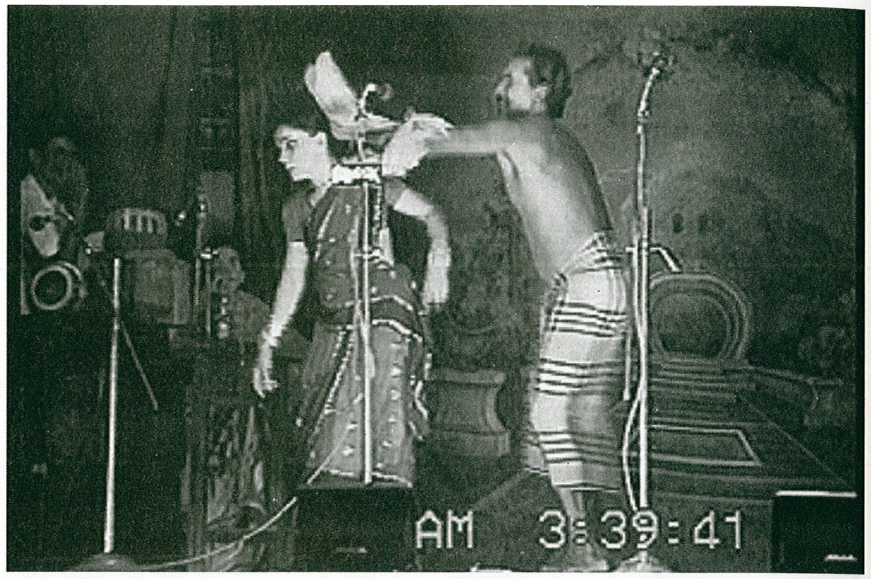

fig. 7.7: He grabs her by the bun

fig. 7.8: He kicks her in the butt while she runs

fig. 7.9: He shakes hands with the harmonist

fig. 7.10: He swats her with his towel

fig. 7.11: She falls to the ground and stays there

fig. 7.12: He stomps on her foot while she is down

fig. 7.13: She falls back to the floor, sobbing

fig. 7.14: She sobs in repentence as he sings to her

fig. 7.15: They sing a love song together to end the scene
Photo credit: Susan Seizer

8

Witnessing Movement
The Women Artists of the Indian People's Theatre Association's Central Squad

Sharmistha Saha

In talking about the Indian People's Theatre Association or the popularly known theatre movement IPTA, and its success especially during the freedom struggle in the 1940s, what we often tend to overlook is how this movement was one such cultural platform where for the first time the participation of women as the "public" figure, as a stage performer became socially accepted. Talking about women within the nationalist project, certain social scientists, like Partha Chatterjee, propose, that women's roles during the colonial period had been clearly demarcated especially as subsidiaries of the inner *versus* the outer domain discourse.[1] This seem to get questioned by such role transit. The problem of understanding gender within such a discourse of binaries like the inner *versus* the outer domain becomes even more manifold when one tries to locate gender not only within a further study of the idea of *stri-svadhinata* or freedom of women as had become popular within the nationalist project, but also when one tries to look at gender roles as articulated by events and moments as inexplicable as the Bengal famine. Using the testimonies of the IPTA Central Squad women performers, this paper would attempt in understanding the politics of gender within not only the Marxist Cultural Movement in India of which IPTA is claimed to be a part but also within a larger paradigm of the freedom struggle of India.

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1. Partha Chatterjee, "Nation and its Fragments", *The Partha Chatterjee Omnibus*, Oxford University Press, 1997.