

# **KITE / காத்நாடி**

**LEENA MANIMEKALAI RAGHUPATHY**

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE  
FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

GRADUATE PROGRAM IN FILM  
YORK UNIVERSITY  
TORONTO, ONTARIO

December 2022

© Leena Manimekalai, 2022

## **ABSTRACT**

My MFA (Film) Thesis work *Kite/காத்தாடி* is a hybrid film in which I turn the lens on myself, become the text, and decode my search for radical love that can unchain me from the bondage of the past. I improvise to hear the sound of my own voice clearer, to get out of the binary logic of phallocentrism, to wage a solitary struggle against the silencing of my desires, to explore my sexuality and to decolonize my existence. The film weaves episodes from my life where I turn to poetry, dance, movement theatre, painting and documentary, battling various emotions from rage to violent delights in order to attempt a poetic approach to gendered trauma, bringing with me both my excitement and trepidation.

## DEDICATION

I dedicate my thesis work *Kite/காத்தாடி* to the memory of my dearest grandmother Rajeswari. She loved me unconditionally and gave her all to comfort my being with her warmth. She burns as a lantern in my thoughts and her spirit glows as my aura. I am trying every day to be as kind as her, to be worthy of her affection. I am foremost her granddaughter and my art is her blessing. She stopped breathing on August 11, 2022 and I could not return to India to kiss her goodbye because of the death threats and the prosecution by the Indian State on the grounds that one of my film posters hurt Hindu sentiments. On those days all the geese were swimming towards me.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I sincerely thank all my teachers for taking me to worlds I have never been to and also for standing with my truth through the hard times. Manfred Becker, Howard Wiseman, Phil Hoffman, John Greyson, Mary Bunch, Ali Kazimi, Ingrid Veninger, Taien Ng-Chan, Marie Rickard, Don McKellar, Brenda Longfellow, Tony Vieira and Michael Zryd, each one of them have touched my life in the last two years like the branches of an old banyan tree of my ancient village in the remote south of India. My Graduate Program Director Manfred Becker's endurance with my exigencies, patience and support held my hands through this graduate program. Dean Sarah Bay-Cheng kept her office always open for me and her empathy and understanding moved me deeply every time.

Without my Supervisor Brenda and Reader John, this thesis would have been a dried up river. They showed me exactly where to look and I saw the spring. I surrendered to their compassion and that took me to the end of the tunnel.

My film *Kite/காத்தாடி* would not be flying without my film crew. My audiographer and composer Phil Strong; Cinematographer Shanti Bhushan Roy; Choreographer and Co-Actor Fawas Ameer; Colourist Rajarajan; Production Designer Ramalingam T; Co-Actor Arpita Banerjee; and child actors Athira and Nithila who happen to be my baby nieces; Associate Art Director Charles Carys; Flutist Colleen Allan; Associate and Assistant Editors



Abhishikta and Dhanush S; Assistant Cameraman and Drone Operator Mohan A and Aravind Mak; Assistant Script Writer Atul Kisku; Script Consultant Ravi Shankaren; Translator Ashik Kumar and Subtitlist Leeny Elango; Assistant Directors Vijay Adithiyan and Bharanitharan; Makeup artists Samyukta and Lakshmi; Artists Dileep Kumar for playing the role of painter in the film; and Christina Joseph for her design work in this thesis paper; Photographers Arun, Gokul and Mani; Set Assistants Guru and Yogesh and friends like Sadanand Menon who generously helped me with locations like Dancer Chandralekha's studio. Each and every soul of my mini film crew helped me realize this fever dream of mine with their love of labor. I cannot thank them enough.

The moral support of my cohort and their astounding peer feedback helped me grow in new creative directions. Special thanks to the warmth of Shabnam Sukhdev, Rojin Shafiei and Lokchi Lam.

My friends in India - Bala, Raja, Sangeetha, Tangella Madhavi, Asadha, Shravan, Poly Varghese, Nagaraj, Dhivya Marunthiah, Sabaritha who helped me with this impossible production in the midst of a pandemic and my friends in Canada and the US - Thoman TomJoseph, Jelena Dordevic, Emma Wadsworth, Apoorva Bakshi, Monisha Thiagarajan, Dharshi Vara, Gladys Angel, Nedra Rodrigo, Aparna Sundar, Sunita Viswanath, Roja Singh, Vagisha Agarwal, Yasir Hameed, Sabika Zaidi, Ravi Subramanian, Mark Balmforth, Chris

Gehman, Indu Vashist, Ajay Rao, Jim Turk who grounded me throughout my emergencies. Singer Chinmayi Sripada, News Editor Dhanya Rajendran ("The News Minute"), Dhivya Marunthaiah (Youth Congress) are also facing Civil Defamation Case because of their support to me in the **#metoo** movement and I am grateful to their sisterhood. Covid waves, legal battles, loss of loved ones, mental health issues, medical needs, financial difficulties, immigration issues... my plate is always full of crises. I am alive because of my friends.

I thank PEN USA, PEN Canada, Artistic Freedom Initiative, Freedom House, Dignity For All, Humanists International, Poetic Justice Foundation, Frontline Defenders, Protecting Defenders, India Civil Watch International, Hindus for Human Rights, All India Progressive Women's Association, All India Progressive Writers-Artists Association, Women in Cinema Collective. Network of Women in Media - India, Dalit Solidarity Forum, James Town Community Centre, YUGSA, CUPE, The Centre for Sexual Violence Response, Support & Education, Centre for Free Expression - TMU, Equity Committee - Faculty Union TMU, South Asian Visual Arts Centre(SAVAC), Centre for South Asian Critical Humanities - University of Toronto Mississauga, Jackman Humanities Institute and all the journalists and media houses for their consistent support, solidarity and commitment to Artistic Freedom.

It is an honour to receive the N. Sivalingam Award for my thesis research and I thank the committee and York Centre for Asian Research for the facilitation.

I thank my Graduate Program Assistant Kuowei Lee for his resilience with my never ending idiosyncrasies and Post-Production Coordinator Jon Hedley for his readiness to help.

My lawyer V.S Senthilkumar in Chennai fought a four tier legal battle in India with me to quash the unfair impounding of my passport on the basis of **#metoo** defamation case. In my absence, he continues to defend the main criminal defamation case and miscellaneous other cases filed as an extension of predatory practices of the film industry in my country.

My lawyer Indira Unni Nayar in Delhi who had legally cleared the state ban and refusal of censor certification for my earlier films *Sengadal/The Dead Sea* and *Maadathy, An Unfairytale*, is defending me in the Supreme Court of India against the state persecution and police warrants with respect to the “Kaali” film poster. CLASP, the legal clinic at Osgoode law School apart from helping me with notarising legal documents arriving from India then and now, also is representing me judicially to vacate the unfair exit notice and refusal of study permit extension by Canadian Immigration. Lawyer Subodh Bharati at CLASP never lets me get into anxiety. Lawyers Mayoore Malankov and Samantha Yan at the York

International help me sail through the rough waves every time. I owe my hope in Justice to each one of them.

My late father Dr. Raghupathy, my mother Rama, my brother Elango, my sister-n-law Leeny, my baby nieces Athira, Nithila, Mithila and my family are my nest and the fact that they are rooting for me makes me believe that there is a tomorrow.

## LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

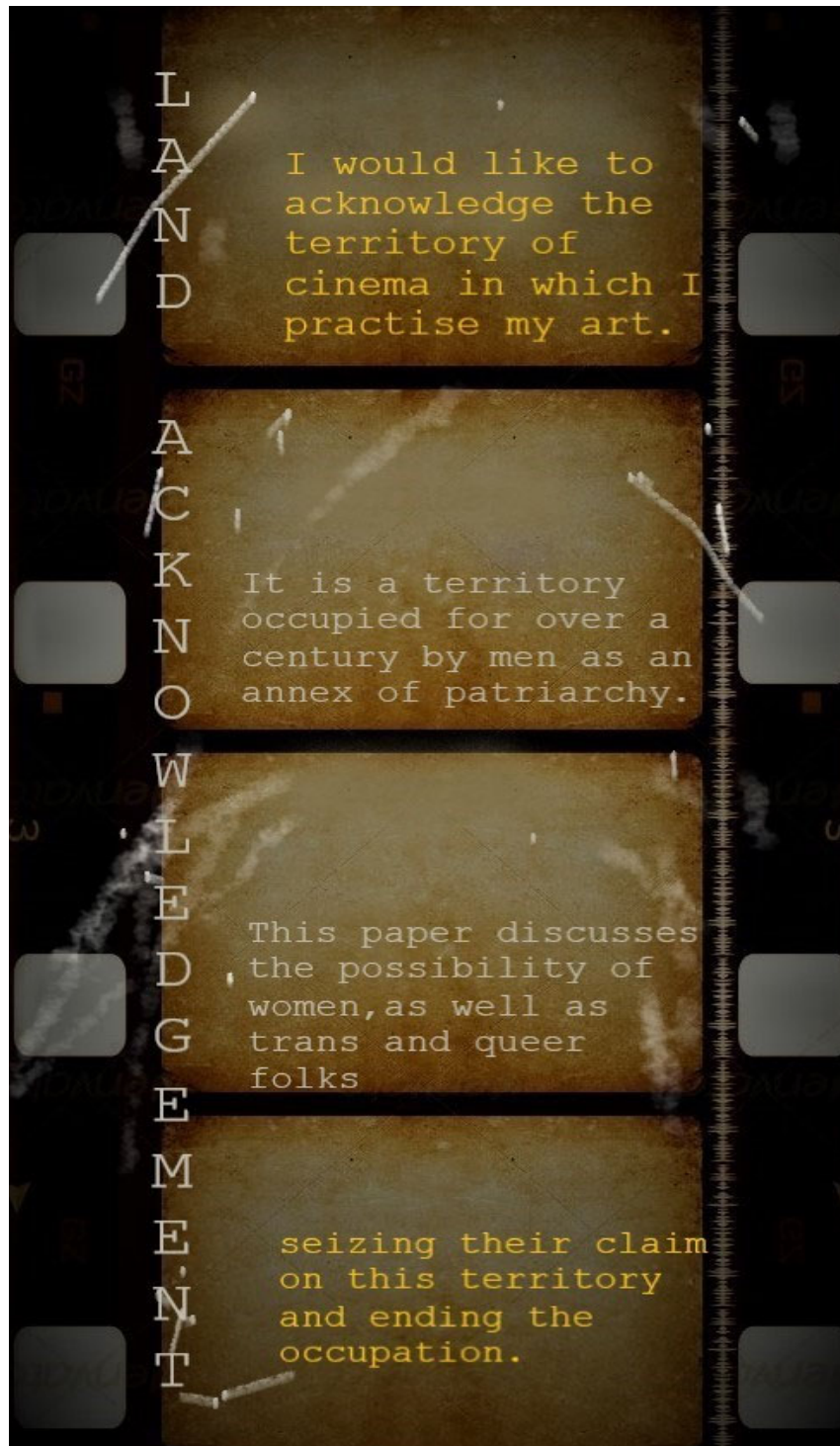


Image 1: Land Acknowledgement illustrated as celluloid strip

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	ii
DEDICATION .....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	iv
LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT .....	ix
TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	x
LIST OF IMAGES .....	xii
PRELUDE .....	1
MANIFESTO.....	3
IMAGE: REMOVING THE BLINDFOLD .....	4
SOUND: CRACKING THE MIRRORS.....	10
SPACE: MARKED OR UNMARKED .....	14
MOVEMENT: FILM IS A VERB, NOT A NOUN.....	19
POETRY IN FILM OR POEM FILM.....	27
HYBRIDISING IS QUEERING .....	29
CENSORSHIP: TRIAL BY FIRE.....	34
MUSINGS .....	37
TAKE DEVIATION: PRODUCTION ROADBLOCKS.....	40
AFTERWORD .....	41

BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	45
FILMOGRAPHY.....	48
APPENDICES .....	49
Appendix A: 25 Frames P(h)er Second.....	49
Appendix B: Poems written originally by Leena Manimekalai, Translated by Ashik Kumar.....	50

## LIST OF IMAGES

Image 1: Land Acknowledgement illustrated as celluloid strip.....	ix
Image 2: Prelude illustrated as a feminist pamphle .....	1
Image 3: Screenshot from <i>Kite/காத்தாடி</i> , Leena Manimekalai .....	2
Image 4: Manifesto illustrated as one of the pages of an old book.....	3
Image 5: Screenshot from the film <i>Kite/காத்தாடி</i> , Leena Manimekalai, Arpita Banerjee .....	7
Image 6: Screenshot from the film <i>Kite/காத்தாடி</i> , Nithila, Leena Manimekalai .....	9
Image 7: Location still from <i>Kite/காத்தாடி</i> , Chennai, 2022, Leena Manimekalai.....	15
Image 8: Location still from the film <i>Kite/காத்தாடி</i> , Chennai, 2022, Artist Jayakumar, Aathira.....	17
Image 9: Location still from the film <i>Kite/காத்தாடி</i> , Wayanad, 2022, Leena Manimekalai.....	17
Image 10: Location still, <i>Kite/காத்தாடி</i> , Chennai, 2022, Choreographer Fawas Ameer, Leena Manimekalai .....	20
Image 11: Location still, <i>Kite/காத்தாடி</i> , Chennai, 2022, Choreographer Fawas Ameer .....	20
Image 12: Still, <i>Kite/காத்தாடி</i> , Chennai, 2022, Leena Manimekalai.....	21
Image 13: <i>Sengadal/The Dead Sea</i> Film Poster, 2011.....	23
Image 14: Location still, <i>Kite/காத்தாடி</i> , Chennai, 2022, Leena Manimekalai and Crew .....	25



Image 15: Maya Deren’s speech designed as a typewriter transcript.....	27
Image 16: Poetry and the film designed as a letter to my Supervisor Prof. Brenda Longfellow .....	28
Image 17: Location still, <i>Kite/காத்தாடி</i> , Chennai, 2022, Choreographer Fawas Ameer, Leena Manimekalai .....	30
Image 18: Location still, <i>Kite/காத்தாடி</i> , Chennai, 2022 Arpita Banerjee, Leena Manimekalai .....	31
Image 19: Location still, <i>Kite/காத்தாடி</i> , Chennai, 2022 Leena Manimekalai with crew.....	31
Image 20: Screenshot from the film <i>Kite/காத்தாடி</i> , Aathira .....	32
Image 21: Hybrid Filmmaking illustrated as a Recipe Note .....	33
Image 22: Chapter on Censorship illustrated as a Newspaper Interview between Prof. John Greyson and Leena Manimekalai.....	34
Image 23: Chapter on Censorship illustrated as a Newspaper Interview between Prof. John Greyson and Leena Manimekalai.....	35
Image 24: Chapter on Censorship illustrated as a Newspaper Interview between Prof. John Greyson and Leena Manimekalai.....	36
Image 25: Illustration of Production Roadblocks .....	40
Image 26: Afterword illustrated as Diary Entries .....	41
Image 27: Afterword illustrated as Diary Entries.....	42
Image 28: Afterword illustrated as Diary Entries .....	43
Image 29: Afterword illustrated as Diary Entries .....	44
Image 30: Location still, <i>Kite/காத்தாடி</i> , Chennai, 2022, Cinematographer Shanti Bhushan Roy, Leena Manimekalai and crew.....	49

Image 31: Screenshot from the film <i>Kite/காத்தாடி</i> , Leena Manimekalai .....	49
Image 32: Poem 1 illustrated as a page in its original Tamil language in a bilingual poetry anthology.....	50
Image 33: Poem 1 illustrated as a page in translated English in a bilingual poetry anthology.....	51
Image 34: Poem 2 illustrated as a page in a bilingual poetry anthology.....	52
Image 35: Poem 3 illustrated as a page in a bilingual poetry anthology .....	53
Image 36: Poem 4 illustrated as a page in a bilingual poetry anthology.....	54
Image 37: Poem 5 illustrated as a page in a bilingual poetry anthology .....	55
Image 38: Poem 6 illustrated as a page in a bilingual poetry anthology.....	56

## PRELUDE

### 1. PRELUDE

*"If women have a role to play, it is only in assuming a negative function: reject everything finite, definite, structured, loaded with meaning in the existing state of society. Such an attitude places women on the side of the explosion of social codes: with revolutionary moments." – Kristeva Julia*



What If I attempt to make a film with my body as a creative source. It means returning to my womb. To my mother's placenta. To my grandmother's umbilical cord. "Kaathadi(Kite)" is born out of this process. Interestingly it made my body a site of "dislocation", a land full of burrows and burrows of longing for "fluidity", a haunted house of "violations", a museum of "unmapped desires".

What and where and who is my home? I could travel a few milestones of my voyage to be "longing", translating my body into space, time, image and sound. Identities that I am forced to own such as gender - caste - class - color - race do not let me exist in the unconscious. So, I rebel. I refuse the stasis and constantly struggle to flow. I queer. I am always here and there, then and now. There is no narrative. There is only poetry. And it is as

*"We must kill the false woman who is preventing the live one from breathing" –Laugh of the Medusa, Helen Cixious.*

My existential crisis in life drove me to make the film that I did not have the courage or strength to make. The film that hurts me like a butcher's knife and makes me bleed.

"Kaathadi(Kite)" for once leaves behind "thinking," feeds off my placenta and offers the taste of it. It invites whoever is "ready" for a communion to taste their own placenta too.

*"What else could that feeling be of restrained force, ready to explode into violence, that urge to use it with her eyes shut, all of it, with the unbridled confidence of a wild beast? Was it in evil alone that one could breathe without fear, accepting the atmosphere and one's lunges... No, no - she repeated herself - one mustn't be afraid of being creative" – Near to the Wild Heart, Clarice Lispector.*

I wished to make a film and still be able to say nobody holds me back anymore in my mission to claim my unrobbed body and pump life in its veins.

Image 2: Prelude illustrated as a feminist pamphle



Image 3: Screenshot from *Kite/காத்தாடி*, Leena Manimekalai



# MANIFESTO

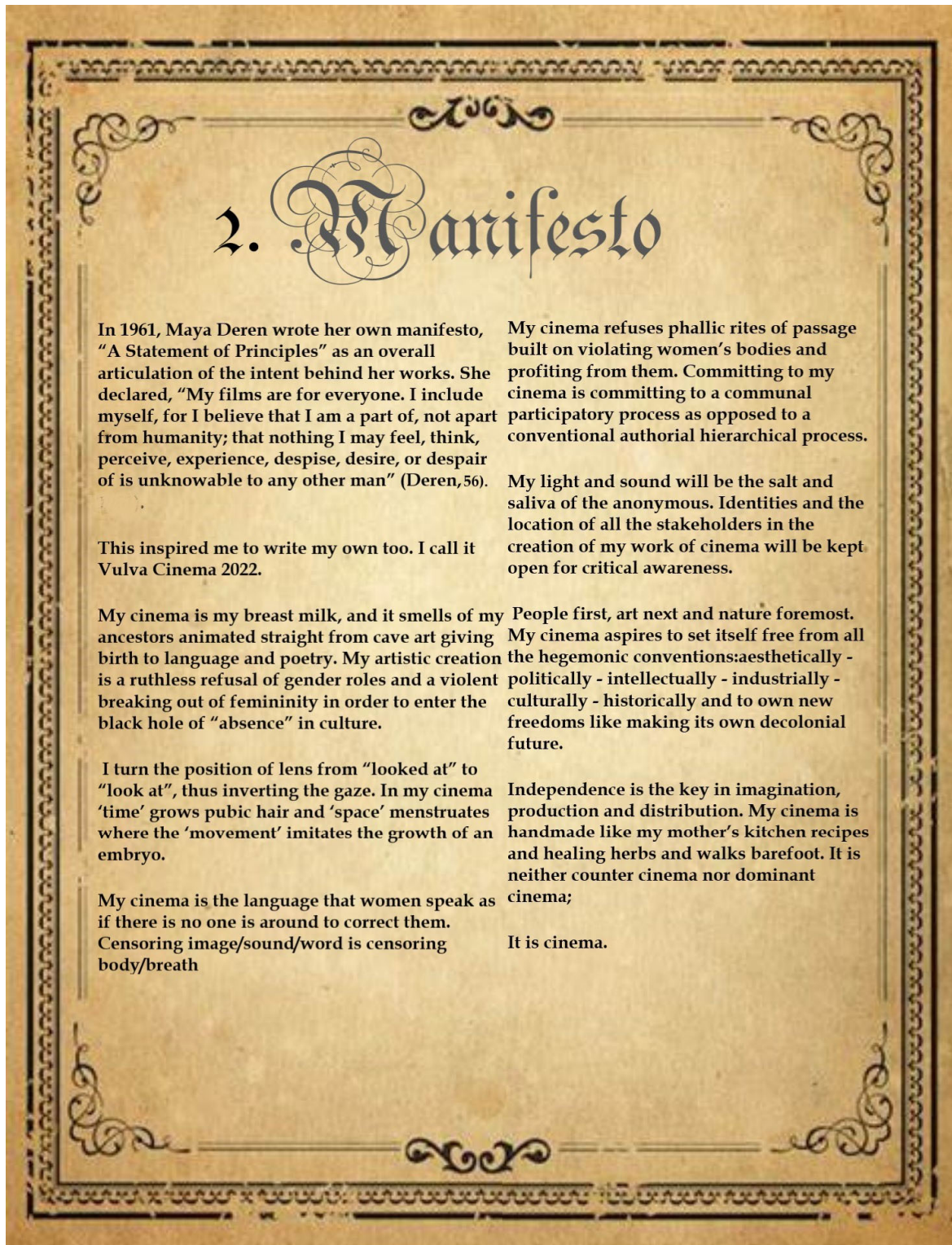


Image 4: Manifesto illustrated as one of the pages of an old book

## IMAGE: REMOVING THE BLINDFOLD

In her famous essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', written in 1973 and published in Screen in 1975, Laura Mulvey argued the controlling gaze in cinema is male.

*In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said that to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. Women displayed as sexual object is the leit-motiff of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip-tease, from Zeigfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire. Mainstream film neatly combined spectacle and narrative*

- Mulvey, 814-815

In 2016 Joey Soloway (named Jill at the time) gave a keynote address at the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) about the female gaze.

*I think the Female Gaze is a way of 'feeling seeing'. It could be thought of as a subjective camera that attempts to get inside the protagonist, especially when the protagonist is not a cis male. It uses the frame to share and evoke a feeling of being in feeling, rather than seeing – the characters. I take the camera and I say, hey, audience, I'm not just showing you this thing, I want you to really feel with me.*

- Joey Soloway on The Female Gaze | MASTER CLASS | TIFF 2016,  
<https://youtu.be/pnBvppooD9I>

In *Kite/காத்தாடி*, I am reclaiming my body, making it my protagonist and using it with the intention to communicate 'Feeling Seeing'.

As a woman of colour from the backward caste group located in Tamil Nādu, the remote south of India, and the first in my family to attend graduate school, my body is a battleground of containing and fighting various emotions and regressive patriarchal practices in society. In my attempt to unfold those accounts of my life as a memoir that explores the forces of gender identity, sex, and power without flattening their differences, the exercise of image making is both personal and political. While I was writing myself into images, the blindfolds were only multiplying as I removed them. When the culture has been writing what a woman is, for about five thousand years, how do I 'un-culture' myself as a female artist in my self-expression? Maybe my film is about this. It is about exploding the madness of being a "woman" but still hungry for dignity, self-esteem, freedom, sexuality, desire, choice and agency.

It is about finding a film language to align the mind-body-emotions of a female body, reflecting pleasure as well as pain with all the ambiguities and complexities that both imply.

When my cinematographer, Shanti Bushan Roy, when he is holding the camera, his body is not just capturing images with the digital recording equipment he is participating in my feeling, pulsating in sync with me as my heart beats and he burns along with me. We

had prioritized our bodies and feelings over technology and constantly tried to work in multi-layered metaphysical symbols as we wanted to simultaneously name and abstract the emotions.

The conscious decision to include imperfections within frame, the un-composition, the un-light, the un-form, the un-texture guided our image making. The frequent use of a wide angle view on the faces, landscapes, interiors of houses, nature, and trees along with the movement of camera on the hand crane created the perspective and little distortions were maintained to showcase the complexity of our sensitive, analytical, trapped, wounded self to create textured, tilled and bruised human presence. The exposures and depth of field were mostly controlled and improvised through the visualization process.

Rajarajan, my digital imagist and my cinematographer Shanti graded the images to stay bright, high contrast and colour corrected the saturation levels with balanced blacks, definitive highlights and a bit of crushed mid tone. The spirit of Rembrandt oil paintings is our anchor in fixing the palette. Rembrandt is never about impressing but is always about making one feel and live in a moment. Instead of choosing Greek Venus as his muse he painted a washer woman or an ordinary old woman with a lot of wrinkles or flabby breasts or wrenched hands or a lot of cellulite. He made the story internal and even his gods are people in the end.





Image 5: Screenshot from the film *Kite/காத்தாடி*, Leena Manimekalai, Arpita Banerjee

What one sees in an image is a manifestation of how one sees it. In research and exploration, as well as in political dissidence, the question is not merely to gain vision and visibility, nor is it to vainly oppose the ear to the eye, or the other senses to sight, for example. On the contrary, invisibility is built into each instance of visibility, and the very forms of invisibility generated within the visible are often what is at stake in a struggle. The two are inseparable, for each is the condition for the advent of the other (Minh-ha 2016)

*Kite/காத்தாடி* is my self-journey of discovering the invisibilized anguish looped around inside my body, embracing its shape as the film's language, making it visible and

unleashing the power of it. It is about empathizing with myself and the millions of my fellow women who have had similar journeys over the generations.



Image 6: Screenshot from the film *Kite/காத்தாடி*, Nithila, Leena Manimekalai

## SOUND: CRACKING THE MIRRORS

In *The Acoustic Mirror/The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, Kaja Silverman argued that the soundtrack is also constructed along gendered lines;

*It is curious... that the feminist critique of classic cinema has focussed primarily upon the image track and the construction of woman as object of the male gaze.... It has somehow escaped theoretical attention that sexual difference is the effect of dominant cinema's sound regime as well as its visual regime, and the female voice, is as relentlessly held to normative representations and functions as the female body - (viii).*

Michel Chion also looked into different components of sound as a place of feminine agency within and beyond the film text. He noted,

*The realms of sound and rhythms promised a potential 'territory of freedom' for feminists, a fluid and musical domain rich in meanings and pleasures - (8-10).*

I am drawn to Guy Rosolata's argument for the acoustic origin of the subject's emergence into selfhood, beginning before birth with the sounds perceived in the "sonorous envelope" - (Silverman 85) of the mother's womb. The experience of being immersed and submerged is a central idea in the soundscape I have created along with my composer, sound designer Phil Strong. The soundscape in *Kite/காத்தாடி* is completely studio created except for the documentary portion because the perspective of the lyrical part is about pondering the interiority of the character. Here I equate interiority to femininity.

In one of her interviews, filmmaker Lucrecia Martel whose works are known to unsettle and subvert traditional - perceptual - cinematic hierarchies, asks us to " imagine ourselves as a being at the bottom of an ocean of air" - (*Martel on LA CIÉNAGA/ VIDEO / FALL 2014* <https://www.criterionchannel.com/videos/lucrecia-martel>). I agree with Martel that Cinema remains magical when the image captured in real life becomes a two-dimensional optical illusion while the sound created in the studio becomes a three-dimensional tactile reality.

Sound in *Kite/காத்தாடி* uses time as pressed leaves in the notebook of life. Memories, irreconcilable traumas, voices oozing from the past, present and future, sounds and silences encrypted in the genes, deep sighs of the repressed body and existence are quilted into the soundtrack in the aspiration of making it a more body-centered experience.

While live recording the music, flutist Colleen had remarked, woodwind instruments are very intimate to woman musicians as they can all at once be tender, go nuts, yell, sulk, howl and summon the primal. There are theories that assert man invented language to end matriarchy. Music came before language, the primary patriarchal agent. Hélène Cixous asserts, music and the voice operate outside patriarchal constraints.

*You can't talk about a female sexuality, uniform, homogenous, classifiable into codes.... Women's imaginary is inexhaustible, like music, painting, writing, their streams of phantoms is incredible - (Cixous 246)*

While for Cixous, music's abstract qualities allow a flexibility of meaning and signification, for Julia Kristeva, music facilitates subject positioning as well.

Intonation and rhythm which play only a subordinate role in everyday communication but in music, constitute the essential element of enunciation and lead us directly to the otherwise silent place of the subject (Kristeva 167)

Phil Strong, the sound designer and I agreed to compose an evocative musical score with an under layer of subdued impressionistic ambient sound for the alter ego - the MONOLOGUES and to design a diegetic, hyper-real, hyper articulated sound for the ego, the ACTS - since the script is fundamentally written in seven acts and seven monologues feeding into the traditional optical spectrum of VIBGYOR (Violet-Indigo-Blue-Green-Yellow-Orange-Red). What if one could hear a colour or what if the colours gush to embrace everyone ready to get in touch with the world of *Kite/காத்தாடி* with its sound wings? I must have asked this question to Phil quite a few times. Hope there are answers in the film.

'You are a beautiful woman; audiences think you have a voice to match', explains a publicist to silent screen star Lina Lamont in *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) when she wonders why she is not allowed to answer the questions directed to her by fans and reporters.

*I'm born in a beam of light; I move continuously yet I am still. I am larger than life yet do not breathe. Only in darkness am I visible. You can see me but never touch me. I can speak to you but never hear you. You know me intimately, but I know you not at all. We are strangers and yet you take me inside of you. What am I?*

- Voiceover of Julie Christie's character in Sally Potter's Film, *The Gold Diggers* (1983)

My voiceover in *Kite/காத்தாடி* is my embodiment, enunciation, confession and invocation of ancestral spirit. I think, write and speak in my mother tongue Tamil primarily. My voice over is a searchlight to my thoughts as the central character, giving access to the ostensibly repressively inaudible, transforming the private to the political. The poems I have used in the film are from my published poetry anthologies that had extensive discourse as "literary texts" amongst Tamil readerships. The migration of voice from literary land to cinematic land cracks many mirrors that were taking too long to reflect.

I also allowed myself to experiment using voices as sound montage, wandering text, emanation speech, transphonia, ghosts from the past and the future, 'lip-sync', dub of the present and 'live' recorded truths.

Cinema gestated in sight and was born into sound says Walter Murch. My cinema gestates in my body and was born into my mother's bath of sounds. My umbilical cord is never cut but growing like a banyan tree.

## SPACE: MARKED OR UNMARKED

The way I understand space comes from Tamil classical poetics, where the subject of art is taxonomized by landscape—*tinai* in Tamil. The most ancient Tamil poems are divided into *agam* and *puram*—interior and exterior modes. The former are usually love poems, the latter concern war and politics. There are five landscapes in which poems take place: *kurinci* (hills), *mullai* (forest), *marudham* (cultivated land), *neytal* (coastal land) and *paalai* (desert). The landscapes are not just setting. Each invokes a set of moods, themes and images that are particular to it, so that *kurinci* poems invoke secret love affairs while *paalai* poems invoke separation or danger. *Tinai* are not really landscapes, but a systematized repertoire of tropes and images poets use to give concrete form to emotions. In classical Tamil poetics, there is no stark separation between emotions and things. Space and objects are embodied emotions.





Image 7: Location still from *Kite/காத்தாடி*, Chennai, 2022, Leena Manimekalai

I started the film Kite/காத்தாடி with a pre-civilisation landscape where *tinai* is intact with emotions. When the film displaces the character to the post - post-modern era, there is loss/dislocation/fracture of *tinai* and hence disorientation. There is constant anxiety of being thrown away from one's familiar land/*tinai* to an unfamiliar place. That radiates throughout the existence of my being as a queer woman and I reflect that in the episodic acts bleeding into memoir chapters. The 'loss of place' and the emotional wreckage propels the protagonist towards self-actualisation. For a queer woman, being is made possible only by becoming free from belonging/conditioning.

This is what I arrive at as my final act. Evocation of desire and a profound sense of homelessness - like the two edges of the spectrum tears apart the existence. I am crossing over the space that is spacelessness through my film like a fragile kite.

I closely worked with my Production Designer Ramalingam and created props/recurring motifs like a broken chair, strings and ropes that are metaphoric to the expulsion/removal of the body while being present in the space. The body is clinging onto colours, to artifacts, to other bodies, to one's own body and we created relationships between them with contact improvisation to vibrate the memories, emotions and feelings, long story short, a poetic landscape.



Image 8: Location still from the film *Kite/காத்தாடி*, Chennai, 2022, Artist Jayakumar, Aathira



Image 9: Location still from the film *Kite/காத்தாடி*, Wayanad, 2022, Leena Manimekalai

In *Space, Place, and Gender*, Doreen Massey proposes rethinking of space as itself imbued with temporality. In place of the gendered opposition of movement/stasis, time/space, journey/landscape, culture/nature, she proposes a space that is not only in movement but is itself a 'dynamic simultaneity' (46), Landscape then ceases to be something we traverse but becomes an intersection of different stories, different temporalities.

In constant expulsions, my lived body and its expressions urgently need re-envisioning of the gendered 'space-time' framework for it to be narrated with a new vocabulary.

*Woman's cinema is not 'at home' in any of the host cinematic or national discourses and it inhabits because it is always an inflected mode, incorporating, reworking and contesting the conventions of established traditions.*

- Judith Butler (2019, 22)

## MOVEMENT: FILM IS A VERB, NOT A NOUN

*Soon it will be spring again.*

*Grass sprouting.*

*Then comes summer,*

*tall grass,*

*sun.*

*Then comes autumn,*

*leaves falling.*

*And the....*

*winter,*

*spring,*

*summer,*

*autumn,*

*winter!*

*There are situations of course*

*that leave you utterly speechless*

*All you can do is hit at things*

*Words, too, can't do more*

*than just evoke things*

*That's where dance comes in again."*

- Pina Bausch (*Pina*, Wim Wenders, 2011)



Image 10: Location still, *Kite/காத்தாடி*, Chennai, 2022,  
Choreographer Fawas Ameer, Leena Manimekalai



Image 11: Location still, *Kite/காத்தாடி*, Chennai, 2022,  
Choreographer Fawas Ameer



Image 12: Still, *Kite/காத்தாடி*, Chennai, 2022, Leena Manimekalai

Fawas Ameer, my choreographer considers himself a disciple of Pina Bausch and his practice of dance form *Movement Improvisation* is rooted in bodily agency. In one of his earlier workshops, he gave me and my co-actors an exercise of hugging each other for continuous 30 minutes. We'd burst into tears notwithstanding the naked intimacy, such a long embrace had created between us. We got introduced to situation-response choreography, which works against the notions of pre-established forms/methods and relies on the relationship between the actors and the act - for the choreography to evolve on its own. Contact improvisation, one form of Movement improvisation completely focussed on the body's ability to be both aggressive and graceful at the same time and develop a new language in motion, interacting with other bodies, time and space. Though I am a formally trained dancer in classical Bharatanatyam, Movement Improvisation

opened me to deeper connections to the self. In my state of being as a 'flow', I could actively lose my awareness of control and demands. I discovered I still had parts of my body that were never 'touched' even by myself and the whole process gave me heightened regard for myself.

I consciously practice participatory cinema and my whole filmography is my aspiration for collective agency for all the stakeholders. The Third Cinema Movement and Brecht influenced me a lot and helped me evolve into a process-oriented artist. My first feature *Sengadal, the Dead Sea* was a cinema vérité and the film was made with the participation of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees and Indian Tamil fishermen at the Indo-Sri Lankan border shore village in India. Eventually, reading Bill Nichols (Introduction to Documentary, 2010) made me realize what I practice is 'Improvisation'.



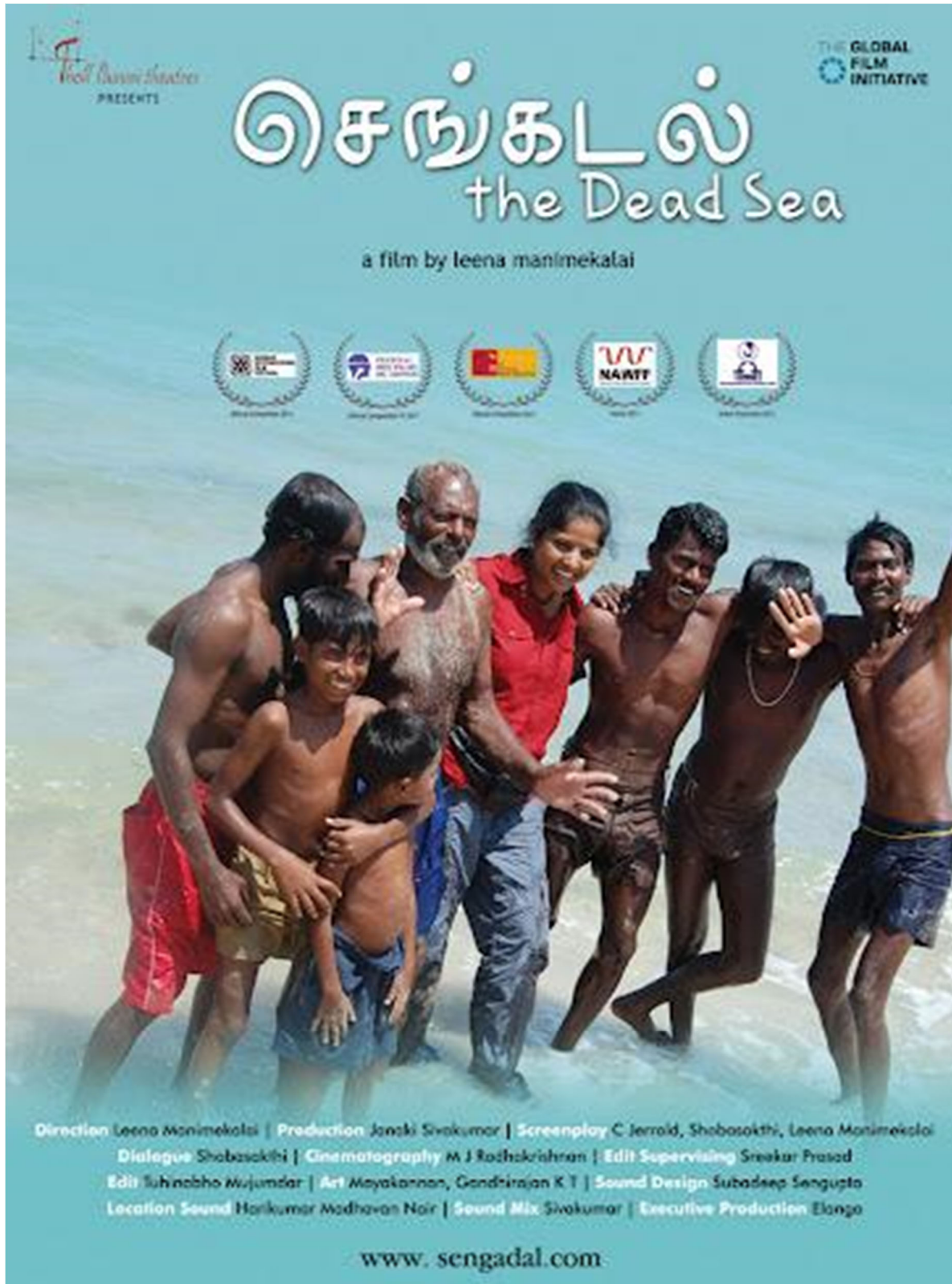


Image 13: Sengadal/The Dead Sea Film Poster, 2011

My collaboration with movement theatre/dance choreographer Fawas is nurturing because of our common interests in opposing hierarchies in commercial theatre/film by democratic practices of collective decision making and responsibilities in creation.

Iconic Dancer Chandralekha's studio "Spaces" in Chennai which is a cultural eco system that I grew up learning martial art dance form 'Kalari', Dalit resistance art (drumming/dance) form 'Parai' and participating in several folk theatres as a performer, was a site for workshopping and filming *Kite/காத்தாடி* too. I chose performance and not enactment because I did not envision *Kite/காத்தாடி* as a dramatized testimony. I am more interested in emotions than accuracy and conformity to facts. I am not trying to recreate my memory but embody it.



Image 14: Location still, *Kite/காத்தாடி*, Chennai, 2022, Leena Manimekalai and Crew

Movement theatre/dance empowered me by allowing me to embrace my vulnerabilities and trust my feelings. It helped me address my low self-esteem that comes with my culture and conditioning and work on the dilemma between the fear of rejection and performance of self. I had screen tested close to 25 artists who are queer or queer allies to play my character in the film and workshopped three of the shortlisted artists for several weeks. Only one survived through the process and even she demanded not to use the footage after shooting for three days. Finally, I used my friendship and goodwill to bring Arpita Banerjee, an established female actor from Mumbai, use my choreographer Fawas as male-actor and my nieces Athira and Nithila as child actors.

Though the relentless Covid waves played a major role in defeating us over and again, I could see taboos also feeding into the hassles. The real reason I discovered was, women who do not find themselves in a position to speak freely could not claim the voice as their own.

Audre Lorde writes, "*We can locate revolutionary change in identifying that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us*" (2007, 116). I realized the deep need to discover a new language that would encourage women artists to try corporeal experience of self and expressions.

# POETRY IN FILM OR POEM FILM

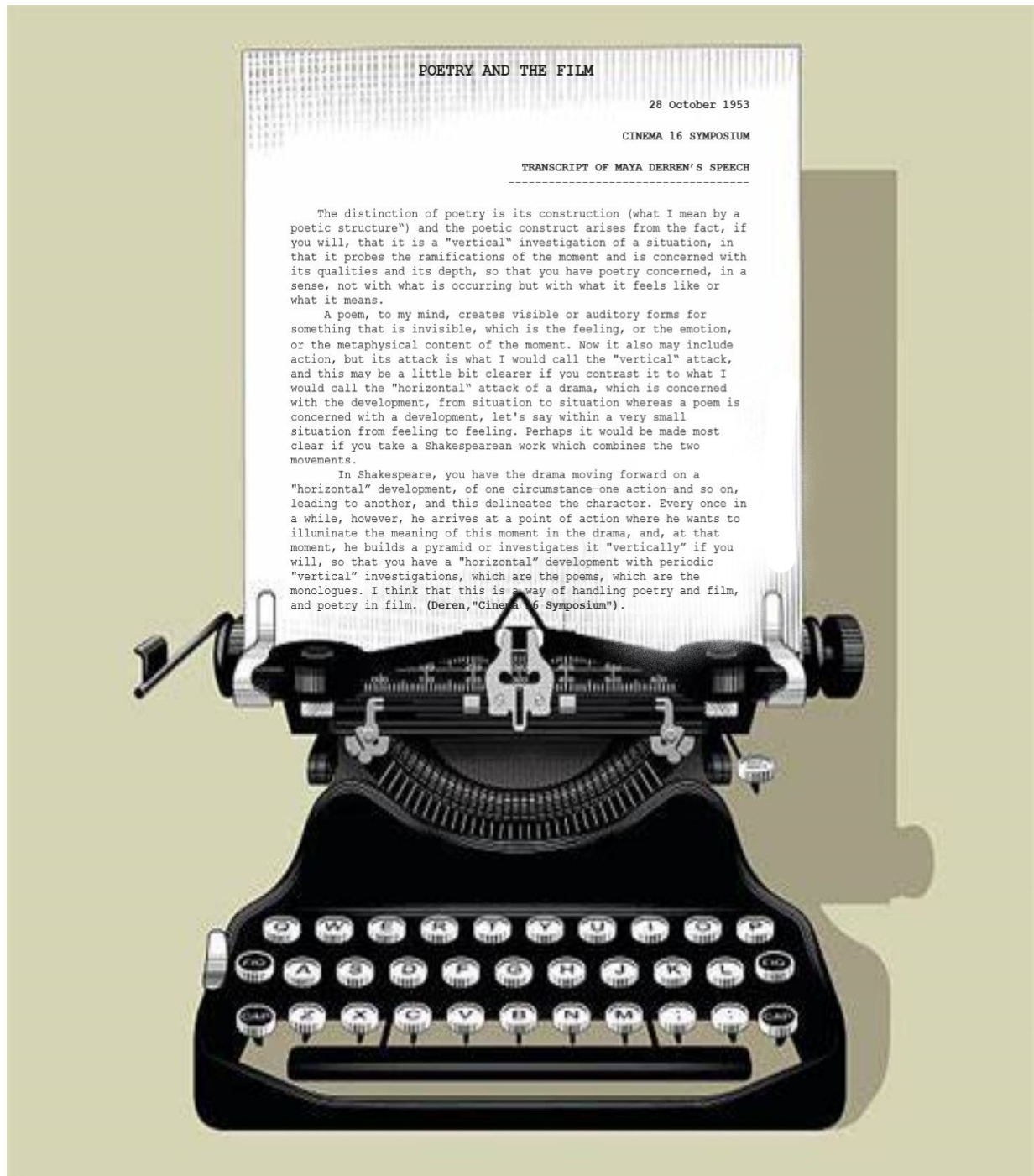


Image 15: Maya Deren's speech designed as a typewriter transcript





Image 16: Poetry and the film designed as a letter to my Supervisor Prof. Brenda Longfellow

## HYBRIDISING IS QUEERING

*If ethnographic texts are a means by which Europeans represent themselves their(usually subjugated) others, autoethnographic texts are those the others construct in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan representations.*

– Mary Louise Pratt (Russell 1999, 277)

The oxymoronic word “autoethnography” fascinated me when I got an opportunity to watch certain films under the genre. Witnessing how one’s body and one’s historical moment become the joint site of experience and identity gave me a new awakening. The ways in which the filmmaker inscribes the ‘self’ with a first-person voice over, being at the origin of the gaze and as body-image, generate the multiple possible permutations of three voices – the speaker, seer and the seen. Especially in the queer culture, this genre has emerged so richly and diversely to unfold personal histories where queers write their identities in temporal structures.

Family histories take the centre stage in storytelling and embody the difficult processes of remembering. Queer ethnographies unleashed new forms of embodied knowledge and politics of location as documentary truths freely mixed with performances. I took to auto ethnography as I had recurring images in my dreams echoing across the distances of time and space in my life. It gave me a fertile land to experiment with a queer gaze, queering

the language, queering the lensing, queering the time, queering the space and thus disengaging with the dominant.

It has been said that women suffer cultural scripts in their bodies and women artists are like mythical woman warriors who went into battle scarred by the thin blades which their parents literally used to write fine lines of script on their bodies. I imagined myself as that warrior with the weapons of poetry, dance, movement theatre, music, painting, architecture and documentary. I hybridized my expressions in my effort to challenge the imposed structures and formulas. That gave me the state of flux that I deeply desired.



Image 17: Location still, *Kite/காத்தாடி*, Chennai, 2022,  
Choreographer Fawas Ameer, Leena Manimekalai





Image 18: Location still, *Kite/காத்தாடி*, Chennai, 2022  
Arpita Banerjee, Leena Manimekalai



Image 19: Location still, *Kite/காத்தாடி*, Chennai, 2022  
Leena Manimekalai with crew

*Kite/காத்தாடி* is my story: a complex negotiation of my embodied memory and an ongoing emotional process bounded by a timeframe of beginning and end, but where trauma and subjugation has neither. Throughout this visceral reckoning of emotion and colours not bound by narrative time I try to break free from the shackles of the society and the medium. It is imperative for me that I assert myself in the present and be totally at a remove from the constraints of gender construction both in my existence and expression. I, at times, tremble thinking that my anima magic will wear off and I will be left alone with those doubting voices and the scarred image in front of the mirror, but I have started to accept and remind myself that this continuous period of change within me, in fact, has always been flowing. It is unsaid, closer to me than ever before, that I am already full. And, so, as always, I turn to time and space and ask: "Are we there yet?"



Image 20: Screenshot from the film *Kite/காத்தாடி*, Aathira



Cooking with Leena Manimekalai.  
*Filming*

*Eat your vegetables.*  
*Heighten senses*

INTENSE & DELIGHTFUL



## Recipe

### KAATHADI / KITE

★★★★★

⌚ 60 min - 7 servings

#### Ingredients:

- Poems - Voice Over - 6
- Dance sequences - 2
- Paintings - 7
- Memoir bits -
- Movement Theatre Performances - 5
- Documentary - 1
- Fictional Episodes - 6

Music Interlude throughout



#### Mis-En-Scene

- ★ Mix all art forms in about 25 progressive frames, 16:9 Aspect Ratio.

- ★ Bring a palette of colour with enough light and a set of camera lenses.

- ★ Frame the actors and stage their actions until you get your shots.

[Use gimbal and drone if necessary]

*W.H.E.N W.A.I.T...*

\* Use generous portions of landscapes like dilapidated houses, forests, rivers, cityscapes, dance studio, living room, terrace, garden.

\* Edit the footage shot, in rhythm with emotions and feelings

! ALWAYS WEAVE THE FRAMES WITH LOVE, EMPATHY & PATIENCE

! BUILD SOUNDSCAPE IN SYNC WITH THE INTERIORITY OF THE CHARACTER

1<sup>st</sup> - RAGE - 7 min  
2<sup>nd</sup> - LONGING - 7 min  
3<sup>rd</sup> - CONFLICT - 7 min

4<sup>th</sup> - DILEMMA - 7 min  
5<sup>th</sup> - ECSTASY - 7 min  
6<sup>th</sup> - DEPRESSION - 7 min  
7<sup>th</sup> - ARRIVAL - 7 min

★ Edit - re-edit - Fine tune  
- Sound mix

★ Play - Linger - Replay - Trim

ALMOST DONE!

ENJOY!

- ★ Add pre-civilization forest sequence for 3 min.

- ★ Add painting - VIBHAYOR strokes - as transition

- ★ Add voice-over, inter-titles, subtitles, end titles, logos

- ★ Add Medical Image Heart & Kite CG, Chair burning visual effects - 45 sec.

Image 21: Hybrid Filmmaking illustrated as a Recipe Note

# CENSORSHIP: TRIAL BY FIRE

WEATHER

Tuesday: Partly cloudy, 15°C  
 Wednesday: Partly cloudy, 15°C  
 Thursday: Partly cloudy, 15°C  
 Friday: Partly cloudy, 15°C  
 Saturday: Partly cloudy, 15°C  
 Sunday: Partly cloudy, 15°C

9. Censorship - Trial By Fire

WEATHER

Tuesday: Partly cloudy, 15°C  
 Wednesday: Partly cloudy, 15°C  
 Thursday: Partly cloudy, 15°C  
 Friday: Partly cloudy, 15°C  
 Saturday: Partly cloudy, 15°C  
 Sunday: Partly cloudy, 15°C

JOHN GREYSON

**Q.**  
*Within histories of censorship globally, queer expression rivals use so-called blasphemy as a primary weapon and these are often conjoined, as you've experienced with 'Kaali'. Isn't it?*

**A.**  
 Thank you John and I take this moment to thank my Professors, Artists and Activists who stood by me and my film *Kaali*, during the violent attack of the hindu fundamentalist mob and persecution by the fascist Indian State. They call me a "western whore" for portraying goddess Kali smoking a cigarette and carrying the pride flag. The moment reflected in the poster is about shared love. Kali travels in the tram, listens to jazz, drinks cocktails, shares a cigarette and spends an evening with Torontonians from across cultures.

If I had shown Kali in the kitchen, cooking, cleaning and washing, it wouldn't have been labelled provocative. Kali with a Pride flag and a cigarette in her mouth proclaims her power, her choice and empowerment. If art can't be offensive, can we really have art? The *raison d'être* of the artist's life is to offend, to disturb the status quo. But art's intention to offend is to reshape the thoughts, rebuild the ideas, and regrow imaginations. My *Kaali* will be offensive to misogynists, to queer-phobics, to the absolutists who want to establish a monolithic patriarchal Brahmanical Hinduism.

*What is the future of political filmmaking in India?*

Filmmakers in India, both independent and mainstream, have been struggling with the regressive censorship laws. Aamir Khan to Kamal Haasan, Rakesh Sharma to Anand Patwardhan, any filmmaker who dares to do a film even with the slightest political flavour goes through the trial by fire. We always had constitutional laws and institutions to fight for our free expression.

But the current regime's abolition of the Film Certification of Appellate Tribunal (FCAT) and revision of the Cinematograph Act (1952) even without carrying out a single dialogue with the filmmakers of the country is a death knell to freedom of expression.

Without the FCAT, both my earlier feature films wouldn't have managed to see the light. New amendments to the Cinematograph Act 1952 gives the heckler's veto to the state to suppress films. We won't have a future if we give up the fight today. But I am hopeful.

With every episode of censorship, I have found allies and camaraderie. I am fighting and I am not alone. I have the All India Progressive Women's Association, Progressive Writers & Artists Association, Hindus for Human Rights, Dalit Solidarity Forum, Poetic Justice Foundation, India Civil Watch International, Humanists International and Frontline Defenders to protest along with me.

**Solidarity with Leena Manimekalai**

Screenshot of the petition created on Change.org in support of Leena Manimekalai and her recent work *Kaali*.

The Equity Committee of the Faculty Union of Toronto Metropolitan University organised the protest screening of the censored film *Kaali* in the campus itself to show their dissent against the institutional failures to protect the art and the artist.

Art is always more powerful than fascism in uniting humanity!

*"If art can't be offensive, can we really have art? The raison d'être of the artist's life is to offend, to disturb the status quo."*  
 - Leena Manimekalai,  
 Poet & Filmmaker

Image 22: Chapter on Censorship illustrated as a Newspaper Interview between Prof. John Greyson and Leena Manimekalai



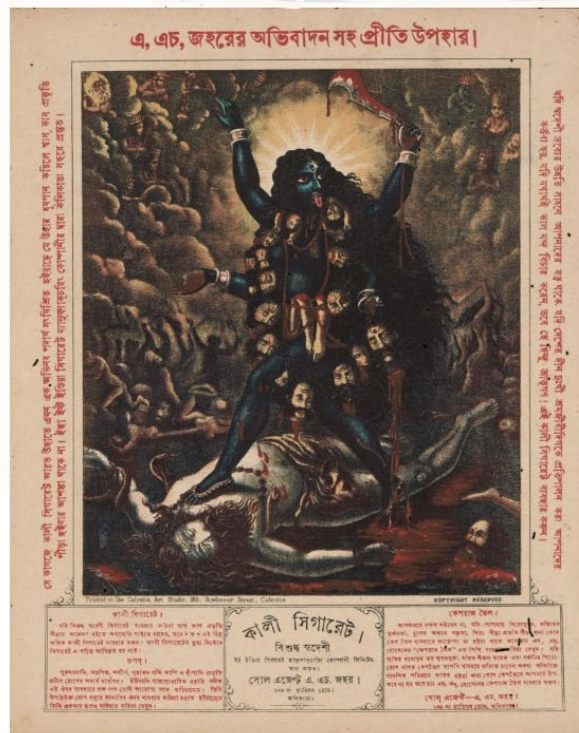
## A CONVERSATION ON ARTISTIC FREEDOM (contd.)

**Do you think the "hurt sentiment" laws are used as a ploy to prosecute "others" ?**

India has become a republic of hurt sentiments. The country feels threatened by a range of things ranging from tweets to WhatsApp messages and Facebook posts, from emails to articles, to books, songs, plays and films. According to the Hindu rightwing, anything can destabilise this country other than their own bigotry. Hurt sentiment law is just an insidious tool of control and censorship and the Hindu Right of India uses it to harass artists, activists, filmmakers, Muslims, Dalits and other minorities.

Shuddhabrata Sengupta from Raqs Media Collective wrote a timely article in *The Wire* (<https://thewire.in/culture/kaali-poster-smoking-history>, July 8, 2022) on the absurdity of this whole "hurt sentiments". He had brought up the image colour lithograph, a print advertisement, of Kali Cigarettes that were especially popular in Calcutta and Bengal, back in the late nineteenth century (1885-90). Infact, the print was published by the Calcutta Art Studio, of 185 Bowbazar Street, Calcutta and a copy of the print is still in the collection of the British Museum, London.

So the Hindu rightwing sells and smokes Kali cigarettes but feels offended by a film poster with an actor dressed up as Kali, smoking. It is just a classic case of hypocritical moral vigilantism.



Advertisement for 'Kali Cigarettes', Calcutta, India, c. 1885-90, Lithograph, British Museum 2016.

**"Hurt sentiment law is just an insidious tool of control and dictatorship..."**

**— Leena Manimekalai, Poet & Filmmaker**

Image 23: Chapter on Censorship illustrated as a Newspaper Interview between Prof. John Greyson and Leena Manimekalai

## A CONVERSATION ON ARTISTIC FREEDOM

### *How is the case of Kaali similar to these historic precedents and distinct?*

In the past we have seen hatemongers threaten writers like Perumal Murugan, Taslima Nasreen and Salman Rushdie, as well as artists like MF Husain in the name of religion. In the recent barbaric attack at New York, Salman lost his one eye and almost his life. I remember intensely reading his 'Midnight's Children' again and again like a prayer when he was admitted in intensive care unit.

I have self-censored and it is a concern when you're writing semi-political stuff in a place like Sri Lanka - who are you going to offend and is it really going to cost you more than you anticipated? I think that this is something that hangs over all of us if we're writing in South Asia, especially writing about politics or religion and things like that, says the recent Booker winning Sri Lankan author Shehan Karunatilaka in his interview to The Independent.(Bedigan).

*What is been your journey? What lessons can be learned?*

I come from a society self fashioned by censorship. While growing up, my existence as a female child is always censored. Don't laugh, don't talk loud, don't wear this dress, don't let loose your hair, don't talk to boys(they still think girls won't fall in love and elope with their girl lovers), don't put makeup, don't mix with other caste or religion, don't choose to be an artist, don't cross your legs, don't stare in the mirror for long and the 'don't list' is endless.

When I became a thinking adult and an artist, my expressions started facing multi level censorship by family, civil society, caste-religion-gender institutions, agents of power and state. My filmography and bibliography have gone through all the dark alleys of censorship and attacks.

My MFA thesis dissertation got delayed not only because of my academic project Kaali and the massive witchhunting followed over the 2022 Summer. Earlier my Passport was impounded on Sep 9, 2021 on the basis of defamation case filed against my #metoo testimonial in 2019. I am a leading voice in the India #metoo movement and one of the two survivors battling the legal warfront. I had to fight a four tier legal battle at the Magistrate, District, High and Supreme courts of India to get my passport back.

Apart from the main defamation case, I have also been slapped with a gag order and a civil suit with a demand of 10.1 million INR (along with my supporters Singer Chinmayi, 'The News Minute' Editor Dhanya Rajendran, Youth Congress Activist Dhivya, Facebook, Twitter and Google) and Contempt of Court Case(based on Indian Express Kochi Edition Article on #metoo cases and safety of women in film industry in India).

The Indian Justice system and its colonial libel laws protect the predators and punish the survivors with the long protracted processes. No wonder India leads the world in rape cases and dreaded as the 'Rape Nation'.

My debut feature 'Sengadal' (The Dead Sea) about the lives and struggles of Sri Lankan Tamil Refugees and Indian Tamil Fishermen at the Indo-Srilankan border shore was banned by the Indian Censor Board in the year 2010. I fought it legally at the 'Film Certification Appellate Tribunal' (FCAT) under the Supreme Court of India and won the censor battle in 2011. The film was released without a single cut. It was selected at the prestigious Indian Panorama Awards in the same year and won many awards subsequently.

In the year 2019, my second film 'Maadathy, An Unfair Tale' about the 'unseable' caste group in southern Tamilnadu also was refused certification by Regional Censor Board. I had to fight again at the Tribunal to get the film released without cuts. The film got its world Premiere at the Busan International Film Festival in 2019 and after a successful festival run, now streaming in Mubi.



John Greyson started this petition

As Canadian artists, scholars and activists, we stand in unequivocal solidarity with filmmaker Leena Manimekalai and her documentary Kaali. We are horrified by the extreme harassment, death threats, abuse, censorship and legal charges that Leena has faced in recent weeks concerning the poster of her new short film, which depicts Goddess Kaali smoking a cigarette and holding a pride flag. We stand with Leena, supporting her fundamental rights of freedom of expression as she critically explores issues of identity, community and diversity.

As a distinguished artist, invited to study and work in Canada at York University, Leena Manimekalai has been active creating original feminist, queer and anti-racist works which explore diverse themes. In early July, she was asked with 17 other artists to create an original work for the Under the Tent exhibition, a "creative exploration of diversity and race" organized by the Toronto Metropolitan University, and exhibited at the Aga Khan Museum. Her short film Kaali is a personal, critical and poetic meditation on the theme of the program, "belonging or not belonging under the tent of Canadian multiculturalism."

Sign this petition

Message of solidarity from York University, as part of the campaign through Change.org.

My short documentaries, 'Is it too much to ask' (2017) about the transgender rights, 'Mathamma'(2003) about the practice of sacrificing female children from the oppressed caste to the deity and 'Parai'(2004) about 'Caste and sexual violence' also had faced similar censorship struggles. My feature documentary, 'White Van Stories'(2015) about the enforced disappearances in Sri Lanka that was broadcast in Channel4, is banned in Sri Lanka till date.

*'Kaathadi/Kite' also had roadblocks from my earlier supervisors at the York University who wanted to protect themselves from speculative threats and hypothetical libel suits.*

Whoever wants to censor an artist has something to hide and the act of censorship is all about pimping the oppressors, predators and fascists. But I believe, art has always been a vehicle of truth and truth somehow gets allyship to win its way. That is the lesson, I have learnt through my encounters. I have only one 'don't' in my life. I don't allow self-censorship to block my way. I create, I own and take all the bruises in the process. That's been my path. If not me, who will stand by my truth?

Image 24: Chapter on Censorship illustrated as a Newspaper Interview between Prof. John Greyson and Leena Manimekalai

## MUSINGS

Experimental Filmmaker Kyoka Tsukamoto came as a guest for one of my screenwriting classes with Prof. Howard Wiseman. She screened her film. *My dearest sister* (2016). Kyoka's interior monologues and her piano compositions taking the shape of intimate memories, the profound simplicity of her complex exploratory process, the breaking down of familial emotional barriers, childhood abuse taboos and the shame that rocks us for lifetime stayed with me.

*Watermelon Woman* (1996) by Cheryl Dunye taught me what you can do when you are invisible. How she used the camera as a tool to depict her world, tell her audience a false history and make us believe it and challenge the social norms—showed me the limitless possibilities of the medium.

*I am the first and the last  
I am the honored one and the scorned  
I am the whore and the holy one  
I am the wife and the virgin  
I am the barren one, and many are my daughters  
I am the silence that you cannot understand  
I am the utterance of my name.*

The impossible voice in the beginning sequence of Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), as it speaks the silence with the authority of a name we do not hear, spoke for all the mothers and daughters. Prof John Greyson made me study the film closer in

his Hybrid Fiction classes. *Kite/காத்தாடி* is the final assignment I had failed to submit in his course.

Chantal Akerman's *Je Tu Il Elle* (1975) is my workshop film for all the actors and crew members who showed interest in being part of . *Kite/காத்தாடி*. I liked the pleasure of seeing everyone stunned exactly like me or more after watching the film. From her films, I learnt how to lose the mind without becoming mad. *Kite/காத்தாடி* is my fangirl letter to Chantal Akerman.

I repeatedly watched the entire filmography of Maya Deren to make an assignment on Archival Cinema for Prof. Phil Hoffman's Analog Cinema Class. Deren made a profound effect on me with her films, writings, poems and voice. I had edited images from her films to play her unpublished poems and I imagined myself as Maya while giving a voice over for that ghost film I made for her. She kept me in a state of trance for a substantial time period. Her life and work feels like a legend and I am so smitten by her magic.

I regard Agnès Varda as my foremother in cinema and I want to hold on to her legacy. I had an opportunity to sit not very far from her at the Cannes Premiere of *Faces, Places* (2017). I witnessed her humility in front of all the respect and celebration. As someone from the third world I never had access to all her films. I felt attacked when Prof. Ingrid Veninger questioned me in the MFA Admissions Interview about my non mention of any woman in the list of my favourite filmmakers. It drove me close to going crazy collecting,



watching and writing about her films for the next few months, close to one hundred pages about each of her works in Tamil. Her *Vagabond* (1985) is my benchmark for a cult feminist film.

My choreographer Fawas Ameer and I used to watch Pina's performances in a loop. She was a morphine we never injected into our veins. Her expansive creative vision made me see the meaning of movement even in mundane activities like speaking, sign language, laughing, crying, screaming and running.

Tarkovsky is my shaman. His films are *Mirador*. I hold on to his writing as fairies whenever I feel lost. I did not choose to go to film school for a long time just because he said it is not necessary in one of his interviews. Then a disastrous love breakup pushed me to pick the MFA offer. I told myself, all is fair in love and war. Tarkovsky nodded his head in his photograph I have kept laminated in my study desk. I am like a goat under a spell in his poetic land.

## TAKE DEVIATION: PRODUCTION ROADBLOCKS



Image 25: Illustration of Production Roadblocks



## AFTERWORD

### AFTERWORD

Feb 6, 2022  
Chennai.

*I abandoned writing diaries after my father broke into my scribble book and questioned my dating of several boys at the same time in my adolescence. He had cut my hormones with an ax. It terrified me. But I do write entries when I get to have monumental days.*

*My relationship with my mother is always love and hate. In split seconds I will either die for her or kill her. It is so tense that I can break the granite floor into two with the velocity and strength of that tension and bury myself.*

*I am more calm around my grandmother. I have conflicts with her too but I forget the moment I am embraced by her innocent smile and creases that smile would make in her face. She is my father's sister. I hate this incestuous system of marrying off a woman to her maternal uncle to maintain ethnic purity and the territories of land. Both my mother and grandmother are victims to that. They were child brides married to their uncles older to them at least by a decade. I raged and cried blood whenever my mother used to say with an eerie tone that I was born to her when she wasn't even aware from which part of her body the baby would pop out.*

*Am I born out of marital rape? I wanted to end my life several times because of this burning question. My parents were never happy in their marriage and I remember returning to school with so much anxiety about how violent the evening*

*I was dumbstruck when my mother started insisting me to marry her brother even before I turned eighteen. I had to run away from home to escape marriage. I was in my first year Engineering college but I had decided to drop my studies and start working as a journalist to get rid of my familial pressures.*

*It was my grandmother who understood my urge to break the chains and set myself free from age old customs. She took me back to our village home to finish my engineering degree and assured me to back my decisions after my graduation.*

*The justice system of my mothers always unnerved me. They were able to come to terms with even pedophiles to protect the interests of family. Family honor was every woman's honor. We girls were taught to swallow everything and flaunt the badge of family honor. My mothers gifted me the lowest self esteem and an absolute lack of pride about oneself. I feel never enough as a person and that is the perennial source for all my bad decisions till date.*

*My mothers were school dropouts but not illiterates. But they pretend as if they are not aware of my poetry. I came out as a queer in the preface I had written for my second poetry collection. It was just seen as my another act of defiance like how I got married to a Dalit that ended in divorce. After a point they just outcast me from the family and community so that whatever I did as an artist and as a woman could never affect them. My family would change tv channels whenever my face appeared in some or other news or change the page when something got reported about me in the newspapers.*

Image 26: Afterword illustrated as Diary Entries



*So, I have been a branded outlier since my age of 19. But why? Why do I have to be disowned for my want of agency? I wanted to ask my mothers. Will they agree? Do I have the emotional distance to film them? How will I manage myself asking them the most difficult questions with all the equipment and crew around? I felt so powerless before my endless feelings!*

*Mothers agreed. Maybe because they thought it is important for my graduation as they knew this is for my thesis work. They didn't care when I said I can't give them questions beforehand as I wanted their candid answers. When I told them no retakes, it didn't mean anything to them. Finally I shot them at my mother's sister's place in Chennai. Mother's sisters are not aunts in our culture. I call her my mother too.*

*They fed the entire crew with a delicious meal. When I was sweating out of nervousness before the shoot, my mothers cooled me down with tender coconut water. It was me who felt that the exercise was like sitting over an erupting volcano. My mothers ached it!*

*My grandmother was breaking jaw dropping news about how my grandfather was sleeping around while my mother and my mother's sister were waking up to it with raised eyebrows for the first time in their life. I had extreme difficulties in empathizing with how they spent their entire life performing their gender roles and never had an independent existence.*

*It was dizzying to realize how my family history is written over their sacrifices and erasure of self. I felt sad and could not breathe. The fact that they did not despise me and my choices in life as much as I had imagined kind of comforted me.*

*I wondered if they said it because of the camera or people around. But I had a strong feeling that they just forgot about the camera or crew after initial interactions and triggered by the impetus of the moment. They were maybe meeting themselves and their truths.*

*The interview was a catharsis of three generations of women. A true first person plural experience. We are from the same womb but different bodies with different spiritualities.*

*Will I have the courage to process and edit this footage?*



*AMMA had scolded me for something that I don't remember. Unamma is comforting me with maruthani. Vijayamma and thambi Elango are busy watching TV.*

Image 27: Afterword illustrated as Diary Entries



August 8, 2022  
Toronto.

How can my grandma leave me once for all? How is it possible for the same person to whisper love you in a video call and stop breathing after an hour? Did she forget her promise to fly down for my graduation ceremony? She definitely knew that it is not safe for me to return to India with all the police warrants and look out circulars? She did say I didn't do anything wrong with my Kaali film poster and all these cases will not stand the test of time, but why won't she wait for me? Didn't she want me to kiss her goodbye? Did it slip her mind that I was her eldest granddaughter?

Who will mouth feed me a hot meal for dinner? Who will oil my hair? Who will send me mango pickles every summer? Why would she make me an orphan now? Why should grandmothers die before their children? Who decided that? How can I stop howling seeing her tilting her head with so much grace in the video? Can I cry and cry and cry and become a rain she loves? What do I do with her ash? Can I dissolve her ash in my womb?



With Avva. Clicked a day before I left for Canada.  
Must be Feb 4, 2022.

Image 28: Afterword illustrated as Diary Entries

24.10. 2022  
Toronto.

*My mother used to say I was brought up by my three grandmothers since she herself was a child when I was born. My grandma, great grandma and my grandmother's sister who became a widow in young age all of them were feeding me sugar water as a baby. They quilted me with their sarees to sleep, as their smell would stop me from crying. Now, I only have their ashes.*

*I knew my grandma's sound before her image. I use her voice as a spirit and image as a closure in my thesis film. She lived and died as my grandmother. I want her to be remembered as Rajeswari in my film. I shout her name aloud. Until it becomes my primal sound.*



*Avva holding me, Amma standing by. How to crawl back to Avva's hip?*

Image 29: Afterword illustrated as Diary Entries



## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Arning, Bill, and Chantal Akerman. Chantal Akerman : moving through time and space. Edited by Terrie Sultan, Blaffer Gallery, the Art Museum of the University of Houston, 2008.

Bainbridge, Caroline. A Feminine Cinematics: Luce Irigaray, Women and Film. Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

Bolton, Lucy. Film and Female Consciousness: Irigaray, Cinema and Thinking Women. Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

Butler, Alison. Women's Cinema: the contested screen. Wallflower, 2002.

Chaudhuri, Shohini. Feminist Film Theorists: Laura Mulvey, Kaja Silverman, Teresa de Lauretis, Barbara Creed. Taylor & Francis, 2006.

Cheu, Hoi Fung. Cinematic howling : women's films, women's film theories. UBC Press, 2007.

Chion, Michel. Audio-vision : sound on screen. Edited by Claudia Gorbman, translated by Claudia Gorbman, Columbia University Press, 1994.

Chion, Michel. La voix au cinéma. Editions de l'Etoile, 1982.

Cixous, Helen. "The Laugh of the Medusa." Edited by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. Signs, vol. Vol. 1, no. No. 4, 1976, pp. 875-893.

Cook, Pam, and Philip Dodd, editors. Women and Film: A Sight and Sound Reader. Scarlet Press, 1993.

Deren, Maya. Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures: A Critical Anthology. Edited by Scott MacKenzie, University of California Press, 2014.

Hoolboom, Michael, and Karyn Sandlos, editors. Landscape with Shipwreck: First Person Cinema and the Films of Philip Hoffman. Images Festival of Independent Film & Video: Insomniac Press, 2001.

"Joey Soloway on The Female Gaze | MASTER CLASS | TIFF 2016." YouTube, 11 September 2016, <https://youtu.be/pnBvppooD9I>. Accessed 11 November 2022.

Kristeva, Julia. Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art. Edited by Leon Samuel Roudiez, translated by Thomas Gora, et al., Columbia University Press, 1980.

Kristeva, Julia. Julia Kristeva, interviews. Edited by Professor Ross Mitchell Guberman, et al., Columbia University Press, 1996.

Kristeva, Julia. New French Feminisms. Edited by Elaine Marks, Isabelle De Courtivron. University of Massachusetts Press, 1980.

Kristeva, Julia. Revolution in Poetic Language. Translated by Margaret Waller, Columbia University Press, 1984.

Lispector, Clarice. Água Viva. Edited by Benjamin Moser, translated by Stefan Tobler, New Directions, 2012.

Lispector, Clarice. Near to the wild heart. New York: New Directions Books, 1942.

Lorde, Audre. Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches. Penguin Publishing Group, 2020.

Lovaas, Karen. LGBT Studies and Queer Theory: New Conflicts, Collaborations, and Contested Terrain. Edited by Gust A. Yep, et al., Harrington Park Press, 2006.

லீனா மணிமேகலை. *பரத்தையருள் ராணி; சிச்சிலி; அந்தரக்கன்னி*  
- *கவிதைகள்*. கனவுப்பட்டறை பதிப்பகம், 2010; 2017, 2013

Massey, Doreen B. Space, Place, and Gender. University of Minnesota Press, 1994.



Mayer, Sophie, and Corinn Columpar, editors. *There She Goes: Feminist Filmmaking and Beyond*. Wayne State University Press, 2009.

Minh-ha, Trin T. "The Image and the Void." *Journal of Visual Culture*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412915619458>.

Minh-ha, Trin T. *Cinema Interval*. Routledge, 1999.

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen*, 1975

Nichols, Bill. *Introduction to Documentary*, Third Edition. Indiana University Press, 2017.

Parmar, Pratibha, et al., editors. *Queer Looks: Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Film and Video*. Between The Lines, 1993.

Rizzo, Teresa. *Deleuze and Film: A Feminist Introduction*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2012.

Russell, Catherine. *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video*. Duke University Press, 1999

Silverman, Kaja. *The Acoustic Mirror: The female voice in psychoanalysis and cinema*. Indiana University Press, 1988.

Thornham, Sue. *Spaces of Women's Cinema: Space, Place and Genre in Contemporary Women's Filmmaking*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2019.

## FILMOGRAPHY

Akerman, Chantal. Dir. *Je Tu // Elle*, Feature Fiction. Belgium-France. 1974.

Buñuel, Luis. Dir. *That Obscure Object of Desire*. Feature. France, Spain. 1974.

Dash, Julie. Dir. *Daughters of the Dust*, Feature, USA, 1991.

Deren, Maya. Dir. Films: *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), *At Land* (1944), *A Study for Choreography for Camera* (1945), *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1945–1946), *Meditation on Violence* (1948), USA

Donen Stanley, Kelly Gene. Dir. *Singin' in the Rain*, Comedy, USA, 1952

Dunye, Cheryl. Dir. *Watermelon Woman*, Autofiction, USA, 1996.

Lucrecia Martel, Dir. *La Ciénaga*, The Criterion Channel, Argentina, 2014.

Manimekalai, Leena, Dir. *Sengadal/The Dead Sea, Pennadi/My Mirror is the Door*, India, 2013.

Potter Sally. Dir. *The Gold Diggers*, Drama, United Kingdom, 1983

Tsukamoto, Kyoko. Dir. *My Dearest Sister*, Documentary, Canada, 2018

Varda Agnès. Dir. *Vagabond*, Drama/Romance, France, 1985.

Wenders Wim, Dir. *Pina*, 3D Documentary, Germany, 2011.

## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: 25 FRAMES P(H)ER SECOND



Image 30: Location still, *Kite/காத்தாடி*, Chennai, 2022,  
Cinematographer Shanti Bhushan Roy, Leena Manimekalai and crew



Image 31: Screenshot from the film *Kite/காத்தாடி*, Leena Manimekalai

## Appenix B:

Poems written originally by Leena Manimekalai, Translated by Ashik Kumar

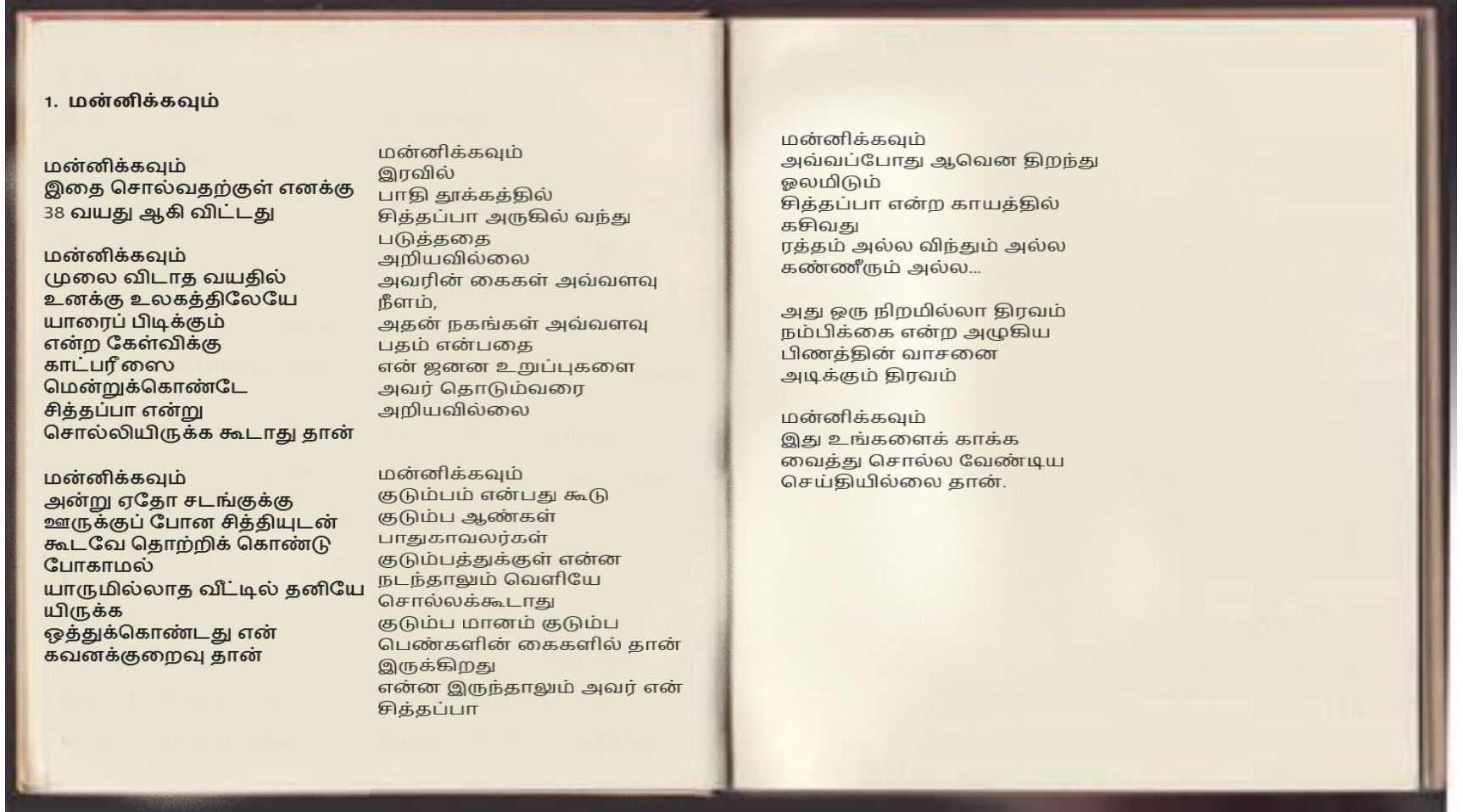


Image 32: Poem 1 illustrated as a page in its original Tamil language in a bilingual poetry anthology

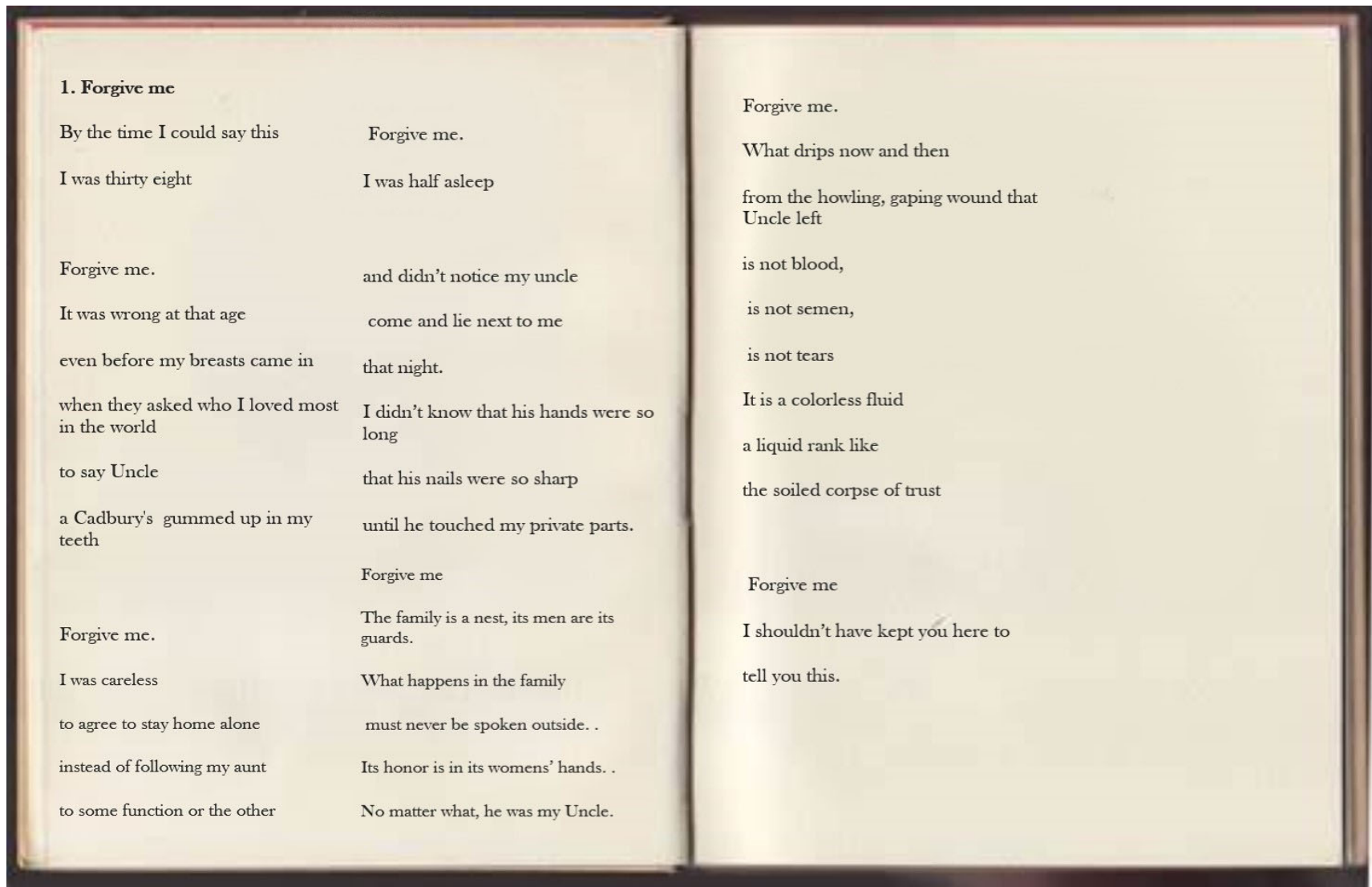


Image 33: Poem 1 illustrated as a page in translated English in a bilingual poetry anthology

## 2. மிதக்கும் பாடல்

எங்கு மறைந்தாய்?  
கண்ணாடி நிலத்திலா?  
கண்களின் வானத்திலா?  
வரிகளின் பெய்யும் மழையிலா?

சொல்லில் மிதக்கும் நீலப்படகிலா?  
கனவின் புழுதியிலா?  
மீனவின் கழுவினிலா?  
நாளங்களின் கள்ளிலா?

விதைகளின் உறக்கத்திலா?  
காமத்தின் வண்டுகளிலா?  
இழந்த அன்பின் ரேகையிலா?  
இருத்தலின் உடலிலா?  
வீழ்தலின் நிழலிலா?  
அழிதலின் எலும்பிலா?

வாஞ்சையின் கூந்தலிலா?  
பாயலின் சிதையிலா?  
நோய்மையின் நிறத்திலா?  
எங்கு மறைந்தாயோ  
அங்கு என்  
பிரதிமையின் நடனம்  
பிரசன்னத்தின் பாடல்.

## 2. Floating Song

Where have you vanished?  
Into the mirror of the land?  
Into the sky of the eyes?  
Into the rain of these lines?

Into the blue boat floating over these  
words?  
Into the dust of dreams?  
Into the wash of reawakening?  
Into the veins' nectar?

Into the sleep of seeds?  
Into the beetles of lust?  
Into the fingerprints of lost love?  
Into the body of being?  
Into the shadow of falling?  
In the bones of destruction?  
Into the braids of affection?  
Into the bed of a pyre ?  
Into the color of sickness?

Wherever you have gone  
Is the dance of my similitude,  
The song of my presence.

Image 34: Poem 2 illustrated as a page in a bilingual poetry anthology



### 3. தேவிடியா

தேவிடியா என்ற  
வார்த்தையை  
நான் முதன்முதலில் கேட்ட  
போது  
எனக்கு வயது பத்திருக்கும்  
அப்போது எனக்கு முலைகள்  
வாய்த்திருக்கவில்லை  
வயதுக்கு வந்திராத  
யோனியை  
சவரக்கத்தியால் கீறித்  
திறந்தால்  
குபு குபுவென கொட்டும்  
ரத்தத்தைப்போல  
சூடாக தளும்பியது அந்த  
வார்த்தை.

காரணம்  
உள்ளாடை போடாமல் வாசல்  
படி இறங்கியதென்பதாக  
இருந்தது  
பள்ளிகூடத்திலிருந்து அந்தி  
சாய  
தாமதமாக வீடு  
திரும்பியபோது  
சோற்று பாத்திரத்தை தீயில்  
வைத்து விட்டு  
விளையாட்டில் மறந்து போன  
போது

கண்களுக்கு அளவுக்கு  
அதிகமாக  
மை தீட்டியபோது  
சில காதல்களை  
அங்கீகரித்த போது,  
சில காதல்களை  
நிராகரித்தபோது  
  
தன்னிச்சையாக முடிவுகள்  
எடுத்தபோதென  
வயது கூட கூட  
தேவிடியா  
என்றழைக்கப்படுவதற்கா  
ன காரணங்களின்  
வகை மாதிரிகளும்  
கூடியபடி இருந்தன

இப்போது கவிதை  
எழுதுவதே  
அதிகபட்ச காரணமாக  
கருதப்படுகிறது.

### 3. Whore

the first time i heard the word whore

because;

i must have been ten

I put on too much kaajal

i didn't have breasts yet

because;

the word burned me

I gave in to romantic advances

like the hot blood gushing out

or I did not

when a razor blade slits open

because;

a vagina

I made my own decisions

that has not yet come of age

Why did they call me a whore?

As I got older

because;

there were more and more reasons

i stepped out of the front door

for being called a whore

without panties

because;

these days

i came home late from school

writing poetry is the most frequent.

in the evening

because;

I was playing and forgot

the pot of rice on the stove

Image 35: Poem 3 illustrated as a page in a bilingual poetry anthology

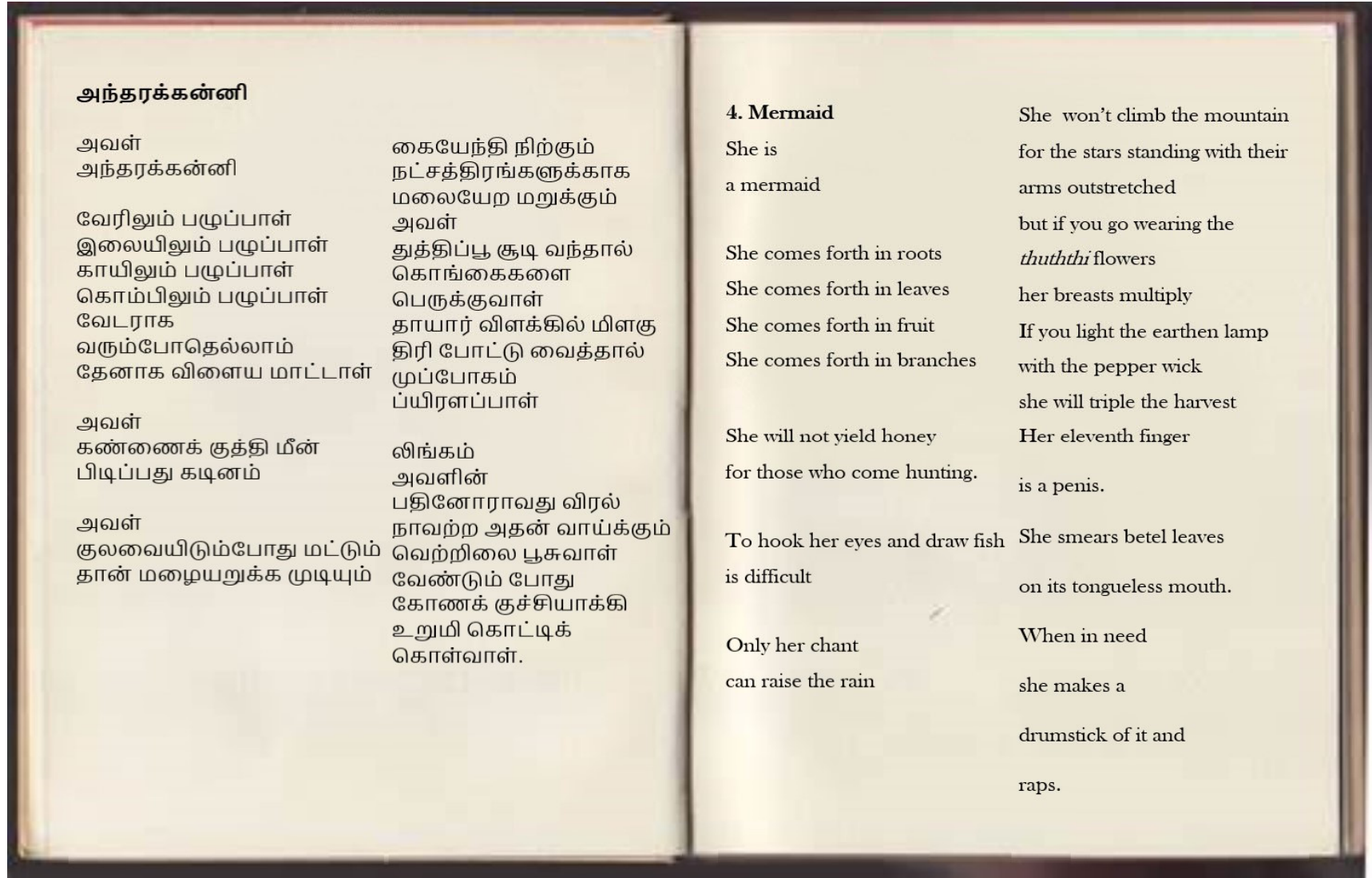


Image 36: Poem 4 illustrated as a page in a bilingual poetry anthology



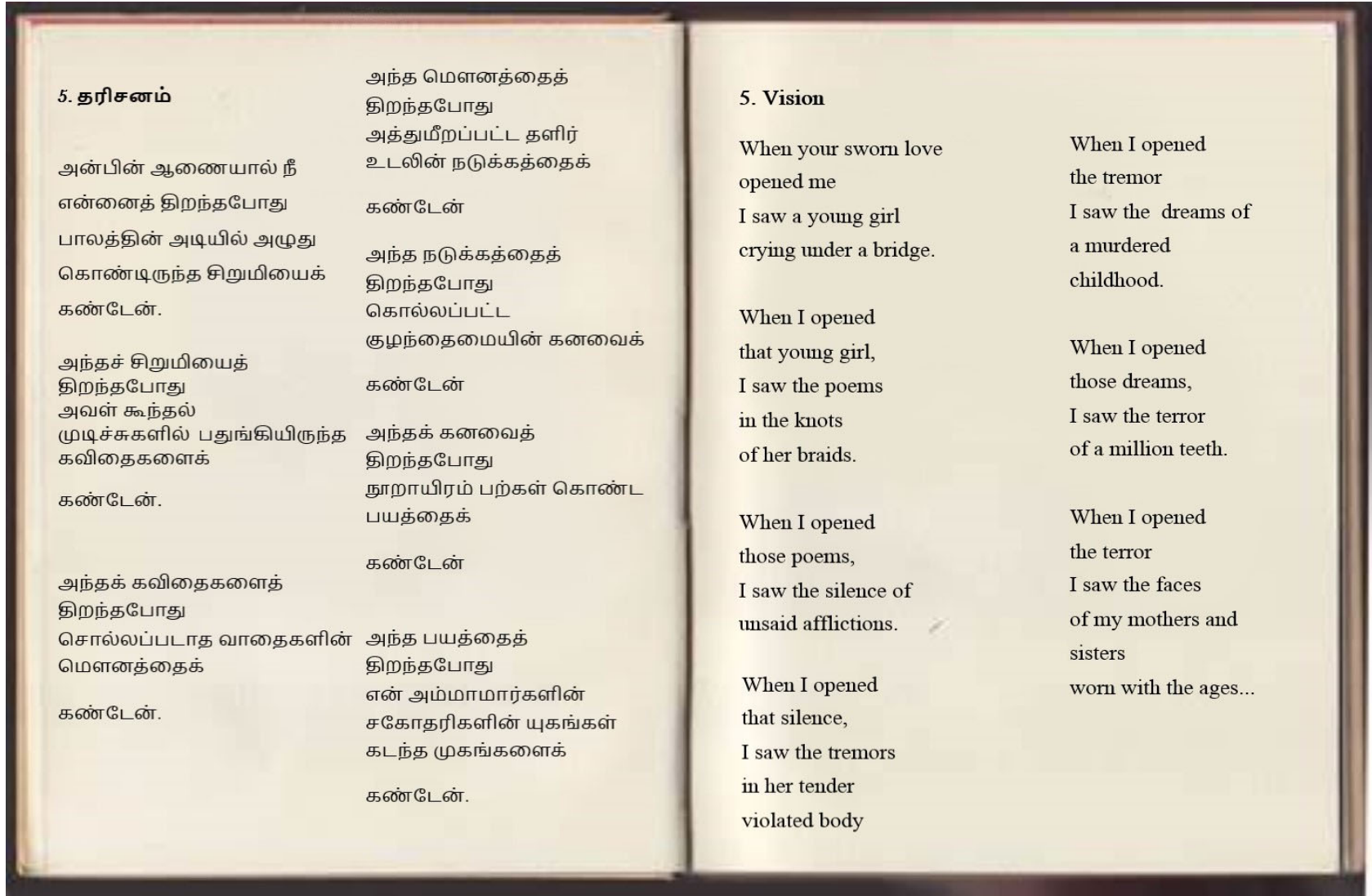


Image 37: Poem 5 illustrated as a page in a bilingual poetry anthology

## 6. என்னைப் போன்ற பெண்கள்

நான் சதா வெளியேறுகிறேன்  
ஒரு தன்னந்தனிப் பெண்ணென  
இருள் விலகிக் கொடுக்கும்  
பாதைகளில் ஏகாந்தமாய்  
நடக்கிறேன்  
வீடுகளை  
மனிதர்களைதாவரங்களை  
விலங்குகளைகைகள்  
கொள்ளாமல் அணைக்கிறேன்  
நல்லது தீயதெனப் பிரிவதில்லை  
என் கனவுகள்  
என்னைப் போன்ற பெண்கள்  
முழுமையாக  
காதலிக்கப்பட முடியாதவர்கள்

எனக்கு காடுகளின்  
வெதுவெதுப்பில்தான் உறக்கம்  
வைக்கும்  
புழுக்களுக்கு எஞ்சிய  
மண்ணில்தானியம் அறுப்பேன்  
நான் தரும் விருந்துகளுக்கு  
சாத்தான்களுக்கும்  
அழைப்புண்டு  
சீரற்ற மொழி  
வேரற்ற இருப்பு  
கூரற்ற பாடல்  
ஆற்றில் மடியில் கிடக்க  
தோல்தான் என் உடை  
என்னைப் போன்ற பெண்கள்  
முழுமையாக  
புரிந்து கொள்ளப்பட  
முடியாதவர்கள்

என் விலா என் சக்கரங்கள்  
என் ஒளி என் சிறகுகள்  
என் வேட்கைக்கு  
பால்பேதம் தெரியாது  
என் கருணைக்கு நிறம்  
பகுக்க இயலாது  
என்  
விரிந்ததோள்களுக்குள்  
எண்ணாயிரம் மேகங்கள்  
அத்தனையும் கூடுகள்  
என்னை வானத்தில்தான்  
புதைக்க முடியும்  
என்னைப் போன்ற  
பெண்கள் முழுமையாக  
மரணிக்க முடியாதவர்கள்.

## 6. Women like me

I am always leaving  
the darkness makes way  
for a woman all on her own  
I walk alone over paths  
I embrace houses humans plants  
animals with too small arms  
My dreams don't separate good from bad  
Women like me can't  
be loved fully

Only the forest's humidity  
puts me to sleep

I harvest grain from soil  
left to locusts

Even devils are invited to my feasts

Language with no grammar

Existence without roots

Songs without melody

I take the skins lying beside the river  
for my clothing

Women like me can't be understood fully

My ribs, my wheel  
My light, my wings  
My desires know no gender  
My mercy can't be graded by color  
My broad shoulders hold eight  
thousand clouds,  
each one a nest;  
I can only be buried  
in the sky  
Women like me can't die fully.

Image 38: Poem 6 illustrated as a page in a bilingual poetry anthology