

*My ornament:  
writing women's moving, erotic bodies  
across time and space*  
**A novel and exegesis**

**Volume 2: The Exegesis**

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A Research Thesis in two volumes submitted in total fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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**April 2008**

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## Introduction

The title of my novel, *My ornament*, has a strong metaphoric function, both in the fiction and in the exegetical reflections. It encompasses the emotional resonances of the writing and encapsulates a number of discursive issues that arise in the text. It is a motif deployed to choreograph the shifts in subjectivity and agency for the women characters—for Rachel and for Muddupalani—across time and space, on the sensuous surfaces of Indian texts, in particular Muddupalani’s *Radhika santwanam*.<sup>1</sup>

The experiential base of the novel is drawn from a number of trips to India, as well as two periods of living in a provincial city South of Mumbai, in the state of Maharashtra, for several months at a time. I lived in a sexual relationship with a North-Indian man (B.G.), wearing *salwar kameez*<sup>2</sup>—the baggy pants, tunic and large scarf—at his suggestion. I mixed only with Indian people, mainly the middle class speakers of English, intellectuals, feminist activists, writers. I communicated in my inadequate Marathi,<sup>3</sup> the vocal attempts often accompanied by extravagant gestures and body language, as I interacted with the local shop-keepers, the cleaning lady, the dhobi who ironed my dresses, while pondering on the complex layering of Indian daily life.

B.G. and I lived as an autonomous couple in a miniscule gap, surrounded by the tight local web of family duties that friends and acquaintances were engaged in: we dwelt outside of the ‘familial-conjugal enterprise of domestication’ as Hélène Cixous would say, in her ground-breaking essay, ‘The laugh of the Medusa’ (p.290). For me, social life was limited and there were few public places in the early 1990s where a foreign woman could acceptably go alone without a clear purpose. To make sense of the extraordinarily different life experience, to increase my imaginative space and, as a writer, to connect it with artists in my host culture, I undertook some preliminary research on women artists of Maharashtra. This gave me a framework in which to meet dancers, musicians, writers, film-makers—mainly feminist—and a bona fide reason to use the local university library. It also enabled me to ask the question that has always interested me: how does a woman nurture her creativity, in particular, her writing? What are the factors that foster or inhibit it? How might the

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<sup>1</sup> I consider the motif, *ornament*, in Chapter one.

<sup>2</sup> Salwar kameez are termed ‘churidars’ in Tamil Nadu, the setting of the novel.

<sup>3</sup> The language of Maharashtra.

experiences of these Indian women artists differ from my own? I did not know at the time that these reflections would be the basis of a novel.

I travelled around the state, in this space that I had made for myself, in an otherwise potentially intense and claustrophobic situation. While there was an atmosphere of love and care in my life at the time, there was not much leeway for the individuality of a mature, single Australian woman in the Indian setting. Personal boundaries tended to melt or become rigid structures, with confused readings of cultural/gender sensitivities and reactions, generating tensions that can come with the patriarchal construction as well as 'regulation of bodies and space in this contested area' (Ahmed in Eagleton 2003, p. 248). These experiences and reflections were mixed with my sensitivity to the fact that I was a guest in a cultural space, with a constantly shifting awareness of my own colonial and post-colonial failings. Ahmed, a feminist theorist interested in transcultural issues, recognises the 'complex locations of Western women as they rewrite and participate in colonial discourses' (p. 248). At the time, given the overwhelming totality of the world in which I lived as a stranger, I did not give much thought to *my* effect on the space and place that I inhabited in India. And I was not at all sure who *I* was. During these months, the woman in the salwar kameez was different from the one who wore a sari for gala occasions, or the wearer of long, loose dresses in the house during the heat of the afternoon. (These women were different again from the one who wore jeans or skirts in Australia.) Then there was the reading and writing woman, the one who became involved in a Mumbai feminist organisation<sup>4</sup> who, as a devotee of performance, sat transfixed in theatres for all the classical dance and music programs available in a provincial city. There was also the Australian woman with the Indian lover in the small, uncharted space of the erotic/exotic in the heat, dust and noise of the material world.

Accordingly, I developed an understanding of the different 'I's who existed and who manifested at different times and places. The public 'I' was demure, following social cues, taking up little space in the street, painfully aware, especially in

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<sup>4</sup> I spent many hours on the train to Mumbai and travelling with members of Stree Mukti Sanghatana (Women's Liberation Organisation), watching their play *Mulgi Zali Ho (A Girl is Born)* performed in slums, villages and universities. I interviewed the playwright Jyoti Mhapsekar. Later, I organised (accommodation and food among friends, as well as contacts) for twelve of the members to perform the play at the International Women Playwright's Conference in Adelaide 1994. I was made an honorary life member for services to the organisation.

the first few months, of the constant presence of the gaze.<sup>5</sup> Then, there was the transitional ‘I’ who changed out of the churidar and into jeans and a tee shirt in the women’s toilets at the halfway mark, the inbetween space of Singapore or Bangkok airport, on the flights back to Melbourne.

As I strode around the Antipodes, I speculated on the different ‘I’s of the Indian women I met. The ones who entered my sphere, the wives who stayed at home, the working/family women, a continuum across class and caste. I encountered almost no single women. What was the nature of their becoming? How did it intersect with my developing subjectivity (a single woman, with her lover, her own money, away from her family, not engaged in a clearly defined career, easily apprehended by the interested Indian observer)? This raised myriad questions for me about the role of agency,<sup>6</sup> of the self and the other, in particular relating to my experience of the erotic *writing woman*. In India/Australia/India, she kept a diary of her project of becoming, recording the vivid moments, as well as fictionalising them—short stories based on Indian life.<sup>7</sup> She drew on a fund of reading—having a window on the present world (*The Times of India* delivered); taking an auto-rickshaw to the university library to devour Indian history, social science, poetry, fiction, aesthetics, the arts.

I decided that I wanted to write an Australian erotic novel set in India, with an Australian protagonist, a literary work that was not an *Oz Kama Sutra*. A friend recommended reading for me, beginning with the women mystic saints. I began with *The Songs of Mirabai*, by the late 15th-century North Indian Hindu saint who not only wrote ecstatic poetry about her god but left her Rajasthani royal husband and home to follow Krishna, showing herself in public—dancing ecstatically in temples in her devotion to him. I was struck by the sensuous verse, the summoning of images of the god as a lover, divine, but earthly as well. I speculated on the connection between the erotic and the spiritual, the way it was expressed by women from different cultures. My Irish Catholic experience of the divine was hardly erotic, and the feminist activists I met in India, rather than indulging in time-consuming Krishna-inspired raptures, were focused on their professions, voluntary political work for social change, plodding up the stairs at 10pm to reach home and cook chapattis for their mother-in-

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<sup>5</sup> Mulvey (1974) first used the term for the act of looking at other (particularly women’s) bodies as erotic objects.

<sup>6</sup> Anzaldúa advocates new notions of ‘agency’ that move from ‘victimhood’ to a higher level, that question what we’re doing to each other, to those in different countries, and to the earth’s environment, that acknowledge relationship and motivate us to act collaboratively (Anzaldúa & Keating 2002, p. 2).

<sup>7</sup> Gillespie (1995, 1996, 1998).

law. This text led to further reading and the recognition of Krishna as a potent male mythic presence. Back in Australia, I read *Syncope: the philosophy of rapture* in which Catherine Clément connects East and West in the space of syncopation. Holding the breath before the beat in music, suspended after orgasm, the subject attempts to escape, from time, but also ‘from a part of itself that denies access to intimacy’, stuck in its ‘unbearable collection of *belongings to*’ in time and space (Clément 1994, p. 251). The notion of this liminal zone resonated strongly with my experiences, reflections and fictions.

I began to write, assuming that I would immediately conjure up the main protagonist, Rachel, a contemporary erotic writing woman.<sup>8</sup> But the first image that drifted in and out of my consciousness was a woman alone and having a nervous breakdown in a bleak palace on a great river. It was not Rachel, but Muddupalani (1730–1790), whom I had met for the first time in the pages of *Women Writing in India: 1600 BC to the present* (Lalita & Tharu, 1991). The Prologue to volume one contains an account of this 18th-century historical figure, poet, courtesan and dancer—who wrote the erotic epic, *Radhika santwanam*. Lalita and Tharu present Muddupalani as a feminist icon of Indian womanhood. Not only is there a strong sense of agency in her story, but she is transgressive in her textual portrayal of the erotic woman, Radha (Krishna’s lover), from the woman’s point of view.

As I continued to write, Muddupalani developed her own strong voice. I became anxious and wondered if Rachel would be audible. After all, she was to be the lynchpin framing the narrative, as well as being a vehicle for exploring many of the author’s issues and questions about the lives of both an Australian and an Indian woman. Muddupalani did take over for a while, but Rachel’s voice gained in timbre and volume as I wove it together with that of her 18th-century ‘counterpart’. Concurrently, Radha became a textual presence, as the main protagonist in *Radhika santwanam* but also as an element in the inter-subjectivity of the women. Their voices blurred at times, particularly in the transitions from one world to the next, as I matched similar motifs in their lives. In writing the three women, losing and finding themselves through their erotic bodies and their art, I realised that Rachel, by the end

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<sup>8</sup> I was Asialink Writer in Residence in Malaysia in 2000. I stayed at Rimbun Dahan to write the first draft of *My ornament*.

of the narrative, was more like a *ganika*<sup>9</sup> while Muddupalani was more like a modern writing woman.

## **Positionality and methodology**

As a feminist I advocate and work, in bursts, for women and feminist issues.<sup>10</sup> As a writer, I have a further commitment to creating women characters and placing them at the centre of literary-critical discourses, as part of a wider political process. As a researcher, I acknowledge the difficulties of ‘maintaining the links between knowledge and action’ (Ahmed in Eagleton 2003, p. 237). I also recognise the ontological centrality of the embodied, social existence of gender as a basis for a feminist epistemology, as well as the belief that grounded research and creative production can contribute to the increasing emancipation of women globally. Theorists such as Grewal and Caplan (1994) advocate transcultural feminist reading and writing practices from around the world, avoiding essentialising the term ‘woman’, in:

feminist work that attends to issues of class, caste, and sexuality (that) interrupts... binarism, working against the hegemonic formations that occur within both sides. (Grewal 1996, p. 13)

As a Celtic-Australian woman born into a settler society, I am conscious of the complex intersections of identity and locations from which I speak and write, as well as their contradictions. I am also conscious of the temptations of many white Western feminists to universalise women’s experience<sup>11</sup>, despite disparities in the material existence and agency of women. And while there are rich discourses of identity politics and assertions of difference, I am interested in pursuing commonalities and areas of resistance across cultures, in this time of globalised capitalism and a dominant patriarchal discourse of US hegemony and transnational and national

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<sup>9</sup> Ganika: a dancer/courtesan in 18th-century India. At that time, her role and life was similar to that of a *devadasi*, but the ganika was not married to the god nor dedicated to the temple.

<sup>10</sup> I have worked in women’s health and education, including Women’s Health Victoria, BreastScreen and the Cancer Council. In 1999 I was the writing facilitator for the multi-media Warrior Women project, that resulted in an exhibition that toured Victoria. I facilitated the writing projects *Inspirational Women* and *Heartsongs in the Key of C*, also for women with breast cancer. See Gillespie, Moloney & Fry (2006).

<sup>11</sup> ‘Feminist work has collided with work on ‘race’/ethnicity and racism, a collision that is now fairly well documented (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981; Amos and Parmar 1984; duCille 1994; Mirza 1997; Bhavnani 2001)...It was only when women of colour challenged...hierarchies of power within feminism (and) its universal claims...that the...complacency in the women’s liberation movement was disturbed’ (Bhavnani, K and Coulson, M, in Eagleton 2003, pp 73 – 74.)

religious fundamentalist movements. I consider that it is crucial for women to make spaces of connection. My mode of exploration of such commonalities is fiction.

To explore connection and to begin my research, I needed in particular to find out about Muddupalani, a woman very different from me; to study her, not just as a historical figure but also as a textual and cultural presence. I knew from Lalita and Tharu that Muddupalani was a controversial figure when her epic poem, *Radhika santwanam*, was considered obscene and banned by patriarchal/colonial forces in the 20th century. She was rehabilitated by a member of her community, Bangalore Nagaratnamma, who 'wrote back' against the empire, editing a new version of *Radhika santwanam*, with an Introduction that was a powerful statement of advocacy for the artistic and moral reputation of the dancer and her community (Nagaratnamma, 1910). This action, standing up to famous male critics of the time, was a key factor in developing a discourse of South Indian woman as writer/dancer/agent, built upon by later work, for example, Lalita and Tharu's *Women writing in India* (1991).

Such writing women challenge the severe limitations of numerous cultural/textual constructions of South Asian woman. Many contemporary feminists deplore 'Brahminic cultural fictions' that posited a perfect (Aryan) Hindu woman who was above all chaste, faithful, passive and self-abnegating so that an

asexual glorification of women limited them to socially-confined roles whose boundaries were fixed and well-defined, eliminating the possibilities of transgression or cultural errance. (Mehta 2004, p. 544)<sup>12</sup>

Mehta goes further, homing in on the Indian class and caste system as they affect South Indian women, specifically:

Discriminatory practices based on skin colouring and the... cultural inferiority of non-Aryan social systems depicted [Tamil and Telugu people] as cultural anomalies who were less Indian and therefore, less Hindu than the fair-skinned northerners. (p. 542)

Accordingly, Muddupalani as a textual figure introduces a bold challenge to static and repressive notions of Indian 'woman'. She was a Telugu-speaker living in Tamil country, born into the 'low' *sudra* caste. As an artist and courtesan, she was also a stellar figure in the kingdom of Tanjavur, inhabiting complex and contradictory sites

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<sup>12</sup> Mehta discusses the situation of Indo-Caribbean women in British Guiana (Tamil and Telugu); it is clear from the paper that her remarks are relevant to women on the sub-continent.

of performance. How, I wondered, could this dancing/writing woman demonstrate her subjectivity and agency in an Australian novel?<sup>13</sup>

In 2000, when I undertook my first field trip to India to learn about Muddupalani, I met K. Lalita, editor of *Women writing in India*, who provided me with invaluable contacts for my project. I located and interviewed feminists, intellectuals, dancers, historians, Telugu academics and two elderly devadasi ladies. I sourced material dealing with aesthetics and the history of Tamil country, specifically literary/cultural analyses of 18th-century Tanjavur; texts about Indian dance, music and drama; and historical and contemporary studies related to devadasis.<sup>14</sup>

The only extant work by Muddupalani is *Radhika santwanam*. Telugu and English speakers could not point me to other primary sources directly relating to her, so I had to piece her life together. I arranged for translation of the text into English and waited expectantly in Chennai for each instalment to see what I could learn and to wonder: what is there in Muddupalani's writing to excite the controversy and later rehabilitation of Muddupalani as an erotic writing woman?<sup>15</sup> Despite (or because of) the paucity of material available, I had no intention of making Muddupalani only an intertext for Rachel's film. I had the need and the latitude to imagine her as a full-blown character.

In writing a novel about a Telugu-speaking Indian woman of the 18th century, this Celtic-Australian found that the post-colonial problematics did not just go away. Such an attempt certainly requires imagination. I find Gayatri Spivak's comments on reading and understanding world literatures useful in this context. The process, says Spivak, does not involve the activity of 'learning about cultures.'

Rather, you need to be imagining yourself, really letting yourself be imagined (experience that impossibility) without guarantees, by and in another culture, perhaps. (Spivak 2003, p. 52)

This imagining and being imagined is a key process in *My ornament*, with the contemporary character, Rachel, not only imagining Muddupalani, but also imagining herself in an Indian location. Radha is a vivid presence in Muddupalani's imagination, her role model, shaping her identity as an erotic writing woman. In addition,

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<sup>13</sup> While there is often a blanket of religious correctness surrounding cultural productions in India (for example, the banning of Deepa Mehta's 2003 film, *Water*), there is robust debate about women and agency. An example is Gairola, 2001.

<sup>14</sup> See footnote 46 for details of field work. Some valuable texts related to devadasis/ganikas include: Marglin (1980); Meduri (1996); Kersenboom-Story (1987); Ramanujan and Shulman (1994); Srinivasan (1985 & 1988); Soneji (2004). See Works Cited for further references.

<sup>15</sup> Mrs Sarojini Premchand, a Chennai poet who writes in Telugu and English, translated fragments of *Radhika santwanam*, in consultation with Emeritus Professor Chekuree Rama Rao, Hyderabad.

Muddupalani breaks out from an Australian imagination at the Summer Palace as she imagines Rachel. In this liminal fictive space, the characters are letting themselves ‘be imagined’, seeking a space in South Indian feminist writing discourse. And the author of *My ornament* knows, like Spivak, that there are absolutely no guarantees.

### **This exegesis**

In the exegesis I attempt to engage in an ‘erotics of thinking’—within the framework of creative writing discourse from a feminist perspective—to make multiple connections among the discursive, political and aesthetic issues raised by the thesis novel. In the process I draw on discourses of transnational feminism, cultural nomadism, *écriture féminine*, and of the heterosexual erotic, as well as dance and planetarity.

‘Erotics of thinking’ are ‘affective connections’ in one’s engagement with texts, according to Rosi Braidotti, in her *Metamorphoses: towards a materialist theory of becoming* (2002). Such thinking may achieve ‘the unity of the aesthetic with the cognitive and their joint contribution to an ethics of empowerment’ (Braidotti 2002, p. 95). In outlining this ‘erotic imaginary’, she points to:

a nomadic, fluid notion of thinking that bridged the constitutive gap between mind and body, reason and imagination, being and becoming. (2002, p. 106)

In this fluid space there is room to move in the thesis for a fictive and exegetical consideration of the nomadic subject in process which bridges the gap in regard to political will as well as desire that is not necessarily conscious. This is a zone inhabited by Braidotti’s ‘becoming woman’ (2002, p. 97), a notion congruent with *écriture féminine*.

As a reading and a writing woman, I have been variously influenced in my research and fiction by Francophone women’s literature, and my project is in the spirit of Hélène Cixous’s oeuvre as she explores ‘the relations between women, femininity, feminism and the production of texts’ (Moi 1985, p. 102). In my discussion of the subject in process, I shall refer frequently to ‘The laugh of the Medusa’, which advocates:

writing that inscribes femininity as woman, embodied, speaks out. She must ‘write her self’, creating an ‘insurgent’ writing that takes a woman back to her body. In the process, as she speaks, she bursts into history. (1983, pp. 282–4)

As the textual figure, Muddupalani bursts into my imagination. She locates herself in my Western consciousness, making a further leap from South Indian to transnational contemporary discourses. In writing her and launching three women on an intercultural trajectory through time and space, this project requires a firm grounding in transnational feminism. Like Inderpal Grewal, I want to avoid essentialised binaries between Western women and women in ‘Third World’ countries. And I concur with Grewal’s advocacy of an increase in the ‘focus on the multiplicity of discursive practices utilized by women’ (Grewal 1996, p. 12), in a recognition that information flow, reading and writing practices in transnational cultural production and reception are produced in diverse locations and are not all one way: Muddupalani and Radha have much to teach Rachel and the author. Accordingly, *My ornament* is an attempt, in the words of Gayatri Spivak, ‘to write the self at its othermost’ (2003, p. 91).

### **Summary of chapters**

The five chapters of the exegesis are a synthesis of the key issues that arise from (or that have informed) the writing of the novel *My ornament*. Chapter one considers the motif *ornament* as it illuminates issues of women’s dancing sexual bodies in the novel. Chapter two outlines ways in which *My ornament* writes the body, particularly in relation to *écriture féminine*. Chapter three problematises the heterosexual erotic and women’s agency in *My ornament*. Chapter four writes the moving body, finding feminist and queer spaces inhabited by a cast of writers and dancers, in which fictive women can choreograph, perform and improvise their subjectivities. Chapter five charts the time/space trajectory of the Australian feminist writer mapping women’s desire across and inbetween centuries and hemispheres and depicting an 18th-century Indian woman dancer who is an historical figure.

A key link—or a gem—in the chain is the notion of *ornament*, both South Indian and Western, which is taken up in Chapter one.

## Chapter one. *Ornament as motif*

In the novel, the motif of ‘ornament’ illuminates notions of women’s dancing sexual bodies, translating across time and space. As Rachel and Muddupalani’s relationships with each other—and with their lovers—develop, new meanings of the term emerge and shift from Western to the richer South Indian connotations in the shared resonances of the intersubjectivities-in-process.

*The Macquarie Dictionary* (1997) defines ‘ornament’ as ‘an accessory, or detail, used to beautify the appearance or general effect. A person who is an “ornament” adds lustre as to surroundings, society etc.’ She is a decoration, an item that celebrates excess. She may be a plaster statue. Her likeness may rest on a shelf, a decorative detail in the scheme of some larger design. As an ornament, she may be one of a mass-produced run of women who are all the same, with no meaning beyond herself who, over time, might at best develop sentimental value for the owner. As ornament, she does not have the power of an idol to be adored or of a sculpture, an object of art that has cultural and market value.

These impressions of ‘ornament’, in relation to women<sup>16</sup>, exist on the first level of recognition in a Western cultural reading of the title of the novel, *My ornament*. They problematise the shifting balance of equality and inequality in relationships; raise issues of subjectivity and agency; the gaze; and the translation of an ‘other’ into an object whose value can be easily assessed and dismissed. All of these reverberations resonate in the material lives of the women characters. While Rachel and Muddupalani are sometimes ‘ornaments’ in the Western sense, they are often transformed by this motif in the multiple meanings of Indian poetics. In writing *Radhika santwanam*, Muddupalani follows the same traditional structure as the *Gitagovinda*, an earlier and more influential Radha/Krishna erotic poem in which the poet Jayadeva begins the narrative with the recognition of desire, moves through stages of separation and yearning and then to the final consummation. (To some

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<sup>16</sup> It could be argued that both Surinder, and indeed Krishna, are ornaments in the same way. However, in this chapter, I have concentrated on the issue of women as ornament, in an attempt to unfix the traditional patriarchal ‘individual (bourgeois white male) subject of Western humanism whose centrality had elided questions of class, gender and racial differences.’ Sunder Rajan, p. 10. See p. 36 of the exegesis for a discussion of the issue of the objectified Asian man, in relation to the character of Surinder.

degree, the thesis novel follows these stages as well.) ‘Ornament’ is a key motif in these texts. When Jayadeva’s Krishna has strayed from Radha and wants to return to her, he acknowledges her preciousness as he begs:

You are my ornament, my life,  
My jewel in the sea of existence.  
Be yielding to me forever,  
My heart fervently pleads! (p. 112)

In Radha/Krishna poems, the characters are always covered in gold and precious stones. The lovers, both the man and woman, ornament themselves and each other, with garlands and jewellery, in sensuous, poetic images of mouths, shining bees, glowing faces, fragrant flowers, curved flesh, so that the woman is cherished, desired, divine, powerful, an ornament. In the process, Radha achieves the status of the divine by the very nature of the erotic rapture that exists in the embodied sexual connection that she enjoys with her lover, a relationship that is mutually dependent and giving.<sup>17</sup> In *My ornament*, too, the women are precious gems, as the adornments of the male characters, but there are further complexities. Seven-year-old Muddupalani is being prepared by Ammama, the grandmother, for her first appearance before the King at the Big Temple. Ammama tells her:

‘The King must see you unadorned. The sweetness of your young body needs nothing.’  
Ammama bent lower to attach the strand of white jasmine to the girl’s coiled plait and the scents of her oiled smooth breasts oozed into the air.  
‘In time, kings and princes will bedeck you with rich ornaments. These will cover you, even when you are otherwise naked.’ She laughed as she held the girl’s chin in her hand and her heavy gold bangles clunked together down her fore arm. (p. 36)

Jewellery will be the mark of this girl’s success. From the time of her professional debut, six years after this scene, Muddupalani uses ornaments as a tool and a means of assessing and displaying her public and private power. When she adorns herself in spectacular silver jewellery (and little else) she is donning armour, assembling her weapons against a threat, the new talent—the moonbeam girl—whom she fears will be her successor. When the King is dead, the great tangled ball of ornaments is the token of the right to mourn at his side. The new girl’s mother has claimed both. When Muddupalani arrives:

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<sup>17</sup> Radha is often regarded the female side of Krishna. Shakti (the wife of Shiva) is the supreme creative power of the Absolute Being, a dynamic part of the Hindu cosmology. Shakti is a philosophy and practice of women’s power, particularly in South India.

The girl climbs off the couch, walks across the chamber and hands me the tangle of gold as big as a melon. ‘These are yours. He would have given them to you, his Radha,’ she says. I drop the clump on the floor beside the bed and brooches, earrings and anklets clank and jangle on the stone. And I leave the room, a hand on my breast to still my burning heart. (p. 36)

It is Muddupalani who is represented by the great gold chunk of gems, chains, pendants and loops—the riches of the King, his ‘life in the sea of existence’—as she takes the first step to go away, leaving the matted clump behind, and fall apart at her home in the dancers’ street, and then more completely at the Summer Palace, where she will be stripped of her ornaments. Similarly, Rachel’s relationship with ornaments parallels the shifts in agency in her relationship with Surinder, but her trajectory is different. She succumbs to his urging her to be pierced to wear his silver jewellery, then goes further in piercing other parts of her body (under her own volition). This raises complex issues of feminism in relation to body politics and ornamentation, which would suggest to some theorists masochistic submission to a patriarchal norm of beautification and a giving in to a lover’s wishes, against her own feelings.

Almost at the end of the novel, Surinder’s gift raises power issues. Sending the gold bangle with the lavish one thousand rupees for a taxi is an overt act in his modelling of her into his 20th-century courtesan—transforming her into a ganika, a dancer for the gods. She is a figure who must be garlanded, adorned, adored. She is his Radha, his Muddupalani, who dreams of bees and honey and is worshipped by him. In the realm of the trope, ‘ornament’, she has the capacity to turn him into a god. But finally she rejects the transaction, takes off her ornaments, changes into her jeans and leaves for the airport.

Muddupalani provides three further dimensions to the term ‘ornament’ in *Radhika santwanam*, which are firmly located in the richly erotic tradition of Sanskrit and Telugu courtesan poetry. The first refers to embodiment and character traits as ornaments. Following tradition, in her opening stanzas the poet enumerates her outstanding qualities—a face that glows like the moon, conversational skills, compassionate eyes, generosity:

These are the ornaments  
that adorn Palani,  
when she is praised by kings. (Lalita & Tharu 1991, p. 117)

So here, and in other Indian lyrical court poetry, character traits are surface, bodily phenomena, in the same list of ornaments as a beautiful face, worn by the individual

like ornate clothing or jewellery. Accordingly, character development is then an increase in one's 'ornaments'.

More broadly, embodied woman as ornament in Sanskrit and archaic Telugu poetry is a means of defining and explaining traditional Indian poetics, as well as being a trope within the texts themselves. Hijjas, in *Ornamented bodies*, uses the Sanskrit term *alamkara* in her discussion of women's Sanskrit court poetry (1999, p. 87). 'Alamkara' means both jewellery worn by people and figures worn by poems. This theory was originally proposed by the 9th-century CE Sanskrit literary critic Anandavardhana. He writes about both literal and implied meaning (*dhvani*), suggesting that the body parts of the woman are like the surface meanings of the poem—the individual characteristics, or gems—while the sum of the parts is the indefinable quality, intuited by the reader, the charm (of a woman), the metaphor for *dhvani*, that makes up the whole. This latter element of poetry is not paraphrasable (Anandavardhana, Abhinavagupta & Ingalls 1990). Alamkara is a range of poetic devices and rhetorical figures from alliteration to metaphor. So what makes the text beautiful is 'woman' and the definable textual specifics of the poem, her ornaments.

The third element is the poetic convention of using a woman's body as a symbol for the beauties of nature, descriptions of landscape and vegetation, a combination of woman/ornament/poetry/natural world. The discussion of 'ornament' in Sanskrit and Telugu literatures suggests that these meanings are complex, not just for the callow Westerner but also for Indian readers. Hijjas notes that Sanskrit poetry assumes the reader will do a lot of work. The same could be said for Telugu, particularly in translation. These literary conventions—the nexus between ornament/woman's body/poetry/beauty—are confidently followed by courtesans such as Muddupalani in their poetry, as well as by male poets in South Indian court life.<sup>18</sup>

Muddupalani and Rachel, as women artists, subvert and extend the resonance of alamkara/ornament. They are not just the subject of nor the *form* of a poem; rather, they are creating their own work, extending their agency, claiming the qualities that are their ornaments—their sensibilities, their sensuality, in their dance and their making of erotic text. In so doing, the women inhabit the textual space. They are not merely fleshed out in a poem, but by creating their own embodied filmic or poetic expression they develop a voice and celebrate woman's erotic bodies from the

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<sup>18</sup> Rao, Shulman and Subrahmanyam (1992) mention examples: 'women such as Rangajamma and Ramabhadramba' (p. 53).

desiring woman's point of view. As Cixous says, in her (woman's) speech and writing, the profound and moving element is 'the song; first music from the first voice of woman which is alive in every woman' (1983, p. 285). Muddupalani is a writer, a scholar, a singer, a dancer, aware of woman's song, woman's voice. When she begins writing *Radhika santwanam*, with the King in attendance, he encourages her, with royal largesse:

‘Well,’ says My Lord. ‘Your work will be widely read when it is completed.’

I turn to him. ‘No,’ I say. ‘I do not wish to be merely read; rather my verse must become ornaments for the throats of the learned. (p 87)

Muddupalani has a larger vision for the text that she is beginning to create. It has a physicality. It will be like jewels lodged in the body, precious text that can spill, overflow, from the mouths of those who read and speak it. Women at the end of the second millennium write the body, in the same spirit:

proclaiming it so that other women can relate to the experiences and say: I, too, overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard of songs. (Cixous 1983, p. 280)

The term ‘ornament’ echoes the French feminist notion of *jouissance in écriture feminine*, but it is even more multi-faceted—closely associated, I would suggest, with the Indian aesthetic of *rasa*. According to Barbara Stoler Miller, the translator of Jayadeva's *Gitagovinda*, ‘*rasa* is at the heart of all Indian artistic expression. *Rasa* is literally the taste or flavor of something’ (Miller 1977, p. 14). It is the sap or juice of a plant, but in traditional Indian aesthetics it is the feeling, the relish, the heightened aesthetic rapture that flows between the musician or dancer and the *rasika*, the viewer, the listener. Its power was realised and expressed by Sanskrit poets and critics, so that not only is *rasa* available as a rapturous feeling, but it was also an organising principle, in the same way as *dhvani* (implied meaning) and *alamkara* (ornament) in Indian poetics. There are multiple connections within this aesthetic framework. Poems such as Jayadeva's and Muddupalani's would have been sung and danced according to the Carnatic system of classical music, in these explorations of the ‘aesthetic potential of sexual passion’ (p. xi). Erotic sentiment (*sringara*) is the ultimate *rasa*, the expression that a dancer such as Muddupalani must learn:

We were progressing with our lessons in *abhinaya* in our dance classes, learning to change the expressions on our faces like beautiful masks. So we were becoming better at pretending to be fascinated when our teachers droned on. (p 165)

*Sringara* was the emotion that overwhelmed Radha and the gopis of Hindu mythology, as they felt and acted upon the urge to leave their husbands' beds, their

domestic and other work to go to Krishna, dance rapturously and couple with him simultaneously, each one thinking that she was the only one. Sringara is uncontained, beyond the law, where passion is paramount. In rewriting desire, the erotic body and connection in *My ornament*, rasa opens a space for transcultural aesthetic correspondence, offering a notion of the intersubjectivity of dancing bodies that resonates with the French feminist notion of jouissance in *écriture féminine*—rasa, the sap that runs in the *jouissant* inbetween.<sup>19</sup>

‘Ornament’ expands traditional Western frames and opens the gap for an exploration of new economies of desire. For the woman maker of text, her ornaments are her strong character traits, her embodied beauty, enshrined in text of her own making. Significantly, both Rachel and Muddupalani leave their jewellery, their precious stones, behind, replacing them with fluctuations and tensions in their agency, as they make more creative space for themselves, each choreographing and performing her newly ornamented character in a metaphoric staging of *woman*, across space and time.

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<sup>19</sup> Note: this point will be developed further in Chapter four.

## Chapter two. How does *My ornament* write the body?

In the previous chapter I discussed woman as ornament in my novel, attempting to expand Western notions of this trope by locating it in an Indian aesthetic context. Chapter two concentrates on my creative process and the feminist poetics of writing woman's body, with particular reference to *écriture féminine*.

During the early stages of drafting the novel, I was drawn to the lush theorising of Hélène Cixous, for example in 'The laugh of the Medusa', and her extravagant assertions of the embodied writing woman resonated with me as I discovered the characters of Rachel, Muddupalani and Radha. The first fragment I wrote for the novel—the scene in which Muddupalani 'falls apart' at the Summer Palace—shows a 'mad' woman, immobile, exhausted, dishevelled, unmasked, dissolving. In retrospect, it was not an optimistic beginning for a work that deals with women's agency. In the scene, at first Muddupalani is passive:

I lie on the bed and shiver, even though the rains have barely begun. My skin is brittle like the brown shell of an egg. If I move even one muscle, the shell will break and the inside will splatter to the ground, the rotten yolk breaking in the white and spreading fetid yellow brown across the slime. (p 122)

In the first draft of this scene, I had Kannan, Muddupalani's companion and servant, taking a strong part in her mistress's recovery, drawing on her experience of women's 'falling apart' and pulling themselves together, encouraging Muddupalani into a trance, in which she laughs, dances around, physically abandoned. This idea came not from a Western feminist study of Freudian hysteria but from an Indian source, an ethnographic study of Mukkuvar women who lived in a mainly Catholic South Indian fishing village (Ram 1991). I was fascinated by a 'syndrome' described in the study, in which women were 'possessed'. They participated in a healing ritual, in a safe space. Here, a woman faith healer helped them to drive out a demon, calling on the Virgin to save them as they screamed and threw their bodies around, until they had reached some resolution. As an Australian woman, I found it interesting that in such South Indian communities there was a socially recognised way for women to deal with mental/emotional crisis.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> There were strong connections in these rituals with some traditional practices of non-Brahminic, South Indian Hindu women. I am unaware of Western ways of dealing with mental illness in such a way, with women supporting each other so strongly in a community setting.

In later drafts of Muddupalani falling apart, I kept Kannan's confident handling of the situation of passivity and the breakthrough to action, but instead of the Catholic servant orchestrating her traditional ritual, I had Muddupalani devise her own. When she sees herself in the mirror and realises that she is bleeding, she paints her body with menstrual blood:

A drip falls on the skimpy dance sari. I catch the next drop on my finger and inscribe a circle around my left breast. I dip again and decorate the other breast. I draw a line from the circle to the nipple, paint it cherry red with my thumb and forefinger. It becomes hard like a seed pod. I pinch colour onto the other one and shiver. I rise up to vertical, and continue my painting, my stylus keeping pace with the supply of pigment between my legs. (p125)

It was not until much later that I could see that the scene I had written resonated with a feminist trope—the abject body—characteristic of *écriture féminine*. According to Kristeva in *Powers of Horror*, the abject refers to the human reaction (shit, vomit, body seepage) a place where:

identities (subject/object, etc.) do not exist or only barely so—double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject. (Kristeva 1982, p. 207)

While Muddupalani is a relatively emancipated female subject, elevated in Tanjavur society, her life has been a constant interactive *relating*, as she struggles to hold up the King, the incarnation of Krishna, trying to stave off his disintegration and the fall of the state:

I will hold the dark forces at bay, at least for a little longer, for I am Muddupalani and the King had asked for his Radha. (p 117)

In her exhaustion, there is no time and energy for being an independent writing woman. As a 'becoming woman', she must eventually 'attempt to disconnect her sense of being from the patriarchal logos' (Cavareros in Braidotti 2002, p. 164), but there is power inherent in this matrix of abjection. Kristeva asserts that the socially perceived danger of the 'polluting' menstrual fluid has its origins in the perception of blood as an 'uncontrollable' power of the feminine that threatens male phallic power (1982, p. 71). She associates this euphoria of the abject with *jouissance*:

One does not know it, one does not desire it, one joys in it [*on en jouit*]. Violently and painfully. A passion. (1983, p. 9)

In this space Muddupalani is deconstructing her socialised self, experiencing the euphoria and suffering as layers of subjectivity dissolve, losing her identity in her 'desire to live self from within, a desire for the swollen body, for language, for blood'

(1983, p. 295). As she makes marks on her body, she displays similarities to Cixous' Prométhea, becoming one of Cixous' 'admirable hysterics':

Write on what is alive? But up to now I thought of myself as writing on paper. Sometimes the paper was thick enough, in fact, for me not to feel the **blood** flowing under the skin, under the paper... I warn her: 'I am writing on you, Prométhea, run away, escape. I am afraid to write you, I am going to hurt you!' (1991, p. 15) [my bold].

For now, abjection has enabled Muddupalani to refashion her ornaments as she wishes. She will revisit her own experience again later, risking hurting herself (like Prométhea), to wipe her flesh clean of the inscriptions of patriarchy, dancing, speaking and overwriting the skin with blood, but legibly, on paper. She will reconfigure her own life through her creation of the Radha/Krishna story, in the gradual 'becoming' of the writing woman and her own text, *Radhika santwanam*.

Muddupalani's abjection and the imprinting on the body are mirrored by Rachel when she farewells Surinder the day after the seduction on 'Muddupalani's couch':

she lies down on the bed, feeling the glossy pictures sticking into her arm and her hip, the edges sharp, the slick finish sticky. The silver snake is around her wrist. She has asked the matron to hook it on for her. She pulls the white sheet up over her and curls up like a foetus. She shivers in her sweat and listens. With a glorious blast, a locomotive thunders into the station, the brakes grinding and wheezing to a halt below her bedroom. She must move, she tells herself. Her face is cooling in the wind of the fan. Sharp points of pictures lacerate her skin. She sits up and peels the colour snaps from her back and thighs, wondering if the images will be dissolved in the sweat and heat of her flesh. (p33)

Rachel's sweat is potentially more powerful than the images on the photographic paper, able to overwrite frozen visual text with the fluid of the embodied moment, an abjection that is, according to Kristeva, 'what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules' (1982, p. 4). Braidotti refers to such abjection as akin to a radical sexual ecstasy: 'this experience is one of utter dissolution of boundaries of self, species and society' (2002, p. 162). It is another side to jouissance, the oceanic sexual pleasure, the realm where the three women come together—Rachel, Muddupalani and Radha.

I continued with my exploration of *écriture féminine* and Francophone writers, feeling that this was an empathetic space for my thinking and imagining, this time, revisiting or locating French fiction. I read the work of Annie Ernaux, whose novels and short fiction—writing style, themes and images—resonated with my text. In *Fragments around Philippe V*, Ernaux writes:

We made love on a Sunday in October, I was lying on a piece of drawing paper spread out on the bed. He wanted to know what kind of picture the mixture of his sperm and my menstrual blood would make. Afterwards we looked at the paper, the damp picture. We saw a woman whose face was being devoured by her thick mouth, whose body seemed to fade and flow, formless... Writing and making love. I feel there is an essential link between the two. I can't explain it, I can only record those moments when this appears most clearly to me. (1999, p. 50)

Ernaux's character, like Rachel, is inscribing marks 'on what is alive' and colouring the drawing paper with her desire, 'writing on paper' but with ink that is sperm and menstrual blood. The narrator of the *Fragments* and Rachel have comparable understandings of sensation moving through the permeable membrane between abjection and jouissance, 'the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite' (Kristeva 1982, p. 4). Like Annie Ernaux, I wanted my characters to cut themselves free and face the consequences. According to Clément:

Human *jouissance* requires that one lose one's head; that is the foundation. That is the only way to obtain the simulacrum, the moment when nature's harbour is reached, when the mooring ropes that hold fast the subject—consciousness, its *cogito*, its history, and through that everyone's history—are cast off at last. (1994, p. 15)

Rachel's research in India encompasses a study of ecstasy, making her own story a casting off of mooring ropes, grounded in the connections Clément establishes between the abject and the ecstatic. In *Syncope*, she looks to Christian or Eastern mystics to explain this abjection/jouissance in which:

they all describe the same ocean. A flood; a torrent of waves; a delicious immersion; a feeling of drowning; arriving in a liquid that rolls, shakes, exhausts... and 'oceanic feeling'. (p. 201)

Radha, Muddupalani and Rachel's jouissance is the 'pleasure which radically exceeds cultural laws and limits' (Silverman 1984, p. 321). From Clément, I returned to Cixous who says of her fiction:

the novelistic dimension is displaced for me. . . the adventure is not situated on the exterior; it does not manifest itself with linked scenes . . . It is in the in-between scenes where what are the essential things for us...always take place. (Cixous & Calle-Gruber 1997, p. 68)

I could not relate my own prose to this degree of 'interiority'. My novel definitely has a 'story' as well as 'linked scenes', but the links and transitions are equally important—textual interstices for intersubjectivity. I turned to other fiction to make comparisons, to *Mauve desert*, by the Canadian Francophone writer, Nicole Brossard (1998) who considers herself a practitioner of *écriture féminine*. I studied Brossard's style, the vividness of her writing of women, who were nevertheless at times just

sketches against the light that shimmers and shifts in the timelessness of her desert. I decided to model some paragraphs from *Mauve desert*, following Brossard's text closely, the cadences of the sentences, the rich, evocative style. This material became the prologue to the novel, a passage in which the three characters of *My ornament* are indistinguishable. I liked the poetic prose, the intersubjectivity, but after some agonising I deleted my poetic, oceanic prologue, deciding that it was inconsistent with the tone of the rest of the novel and did not sit comfortably with the characters. However, I saw parallels between Brossard's and my writing. In Brossard's novel, the desert is a trope in which the women, several of them, are sometimes indistinguishable, embodied but inbetween. Melanie, the fifteen-year-old, driving her mother's car, is immersed in the dry country:

In the desert one gives in without ulterior motive with the pliancy of a being surrendered to space. The horizon is a mirage that orients the thirsting body. (1998, p. 28)

In a similar way, the river is the connecting medium for the women of *My ornament* to experience their triumphs, escapes, sinking and recoveries from disaster—in the water, at the Summer Palace, on the steps or in the cottage at Brindavan. The sacred Kaveri flows in mythic, contemporary and historical time, a warm amniotic fluid in which Rachel can stretch her limbs, wearing her swimsuit, and make a space for her Australian body to be in tune with her South Indian existence, in a place outside India/Australia:

Muddupalani is there, laughing. She walks out onto the steps as Rachel ducks her head again for the Australian crawl, the sun striking the silver lycra of her Speedos. And what would Muddupalani see? A fish woman with scales that are pewter in the brown of the sacred river, her legs kicking, feet churning the surface, up and down, saplings of white, the body long. (p. 17)

Time warps as Rachel experiences herself from the imagined point of view of Muddupalani. This scene is mirrored later in the novel when Muddupalani walks onto the unstable fluid stage when the performance of her self is faltering. Muddupalani sees Rachel:

And I walk towards her, calling, my arms stretched out to her because she is swimming across the stage as if it is water. There is another scream. The door slams shut on the picture and I shiver, up to my waist in the river, my sari dark and heavy, unravelling across the top of the water. (p. 127)

At the river, the women meet in the Cixousian 'in-between' liminal space. Their lives are texts, but interleaved, from one character to the other, from first to third

person, with an ambiguity at the beginning of the transition to each linked scene, aiming for a subtle crossover, so that the reader may not be sure which world she is in. However, while I created these inbetween, trans-historical spaces, the style of my novel is relatively 'realist' and comparable to the writing of Annie Ernaux. The commitment to telling a story differs from the *écriture féminine* of writers such as Hélène Cixous, for whom narrative is not a primary focus and 'the adventure is not situated on the exterior' (1997, p.67). My characters are not adventuring in a vast interiority of textual space.

Later in my writing project, I read (and identified with) A.S. Byatt's account of writing her novel *Possession* in the 1980s. She says:

...my interest in both character and narration had undergone a change—I felt a need to *feel and analyse* less, to tell more flatly, which is sometimes more mysteriously... I found myself crossing out psychological descriptions, or invitations to the reader to enter the characters' thought process. (Byatt 2000, p. 131)

In a similar manner, my process eschews psychological accounts and analyses. Instead, I am telling story in a filmic way, so that the reader observes the characters in action as the alternating scenes intertwine. Rachel, the film-maker, observes and imagines, just as the author of *My ornament*, constructs a largely exterior narrative of women spanning the 18th and late 20th centuries. This process aligns with Kearney's insight that 'storytelling may be said to humanise time by transforming it from an impersonal passing of fragmented moments into a pattern, a plot, a mythos' (2002, p. 4). Nevertheless, I wondered: is experimental prose necessary for a feminist writer? Trinh says that:

Experimentation with form is an absolute necessity for a woman writer. For what has been done and how that was done neither says what she has to say nor provides the way of saying it. (1991, p. 6)

It is possible to experiment, to find one's voice but not produce 'experimental' prose, and surely there is room for stylistic variation within a feminist political framework. In 'Feminist art and political imagination', Mullin warns against generalisation by feminist art theorists that certain styles (for example, realism) are either suited to or inappropriate for feminist art production. Mullin states:

My claim that specific works are feminist reflects their impact on me and my assessment that they have the potential to have a similar impact on others. I call artworks feminist if, in my judgment, they focus on sex and gender and work toward politically progressive change. (2003, p. 190)

The necessity for a distinctive literary form is not mandatory in contemporary feminist fiction. The writer must find her own way. In fact, radical stylistic rupture—for example, Cixousian experimental language—and lack of narrative drive in fiction could be considered esoteric and off-putting for the majority of readers. Ultimately, I want my writing to be accessible and to have the potential for communication with a broad community of women. According to Mullin:

The contemporary (feminist) writer who... accepts the call to disrupt fictional conventions . . . must recognise the possibility that her text may bear little relationship to the way women experience their lives, and she may find that her audience is limited to an elite of feminists familiar with theoretical concerns... [and] may contribute little to political exchange. (2000, p. 134)

Despite the fact that *My ornament* is not radically experimental in style, it focuses on sex and gender from the viewpoint of the women who are strong presences, making gaps for them to meet in an interstitial textual space as their stories cross between the ‘I’ and the ‘she’ of the poet/dancer and the film-maker, echoing each other, in these jouissant<sup>21</sup> narrative cavities. The women, at times ‘admirable hysterics’, experience ‘voluptuous moments’, enacting textual performances and fleshing out ideas of becoming with a ‘carnal and passionate body’ (Cixous 1983, p. 290) as the subject matter of the fiction.

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<sup>21</sup> Clément 1994: Translation: the French infinitive *jouir*—‘to enjoy, be in ecstasy, to have an orgasm’; *jouissance*—‘ecstasy, orgasm, enjoyment’ (p. 291).

### **Chapter three. The feminist heterosexual erotic**

*My Ornament* explores aspects of women's sexual desire across time and space, by writing about three fictional characters - the 20<sup>th</sup> century film maker, Rachel, the 18<sup>th</sup> century dancer, Muddupalani and the mythic Radha. The characters may dwell in a liminal zone of abjection, syncope and jouissance, but they inhabit a social/political world and this raises questions for me—as a feminist writer—about the politics of the erotic, and where the novel sits most comfortably in feminist writing discourse.

The political issue of agency is raised, for example, in Part Three of the novel, when Rachel stares at a poster on the wall of the beauty shop. A tall blonde woman on a white horse rides through clouds. She studies the caption, 'The happiest women like the happiest nations have no history' (p. 192). Like the figure in the poster, Rachel is buffed smooth, depilated, stripped back to some poster-version of woman, rootless, country-less, with no past, to the point where it may appear that her relationship with Surinder is the key factor that defines her.

This scene from *My ornament* reminds me of my first experience as a reader of erotic writing. When I was a naive twenty-year-old, a friend lent me a copy of *The story of O*. According to one of the blurbs in the front of my current paperback copy, the novel is 'a maze of perverse relationships... where the primary bond is mutual complicity to the pleasures of sadism and masochism' (Réage 1975). The work was favourably reviewed by (male) critics such as Grahame Greene, Harold Pinter and J.G. Ballard, and in 1960s Australia it was considered to be a decidedly 'underground' publication, shocking, even sensationally controversial in its explicit sex. In the novel, a young Parisian woman agrees to become a sex-slave to her lover. She is taken to a chateau in the country and subjected to sexual practices that are increasingly painful and objectifying, which she embraces as sources of ecstatic sensation, until she reaches total self-annihilation as a subject.

During my first reading of the text I experienced complex reactions. I was thrilled and disturbed at the same time, wondering that a woman could choose to place herself in such a position to experience extremes of bodily ecstasy. I found myself identifying with O, recognising the darker areas of the psyche and being uneasily aware that O, in the end, was portrayed as totally powerless, nil, nothing zero, O. Well into the seventies, we debated *O* enthusiastically. Was it porn? Was it erotica? We referred to Susan Sontag's article, 'The Pornographic Imagination'

(1969), as we strained against the puritanical remnants—including the issue of censorship—of 1950s Australia.

Then, and now in 2007, I find Sontag's a fascinating text about erotica, literature and *The story of O*, which raises questions about and influences the writing of my current novel. (I return to Sontag and *O* below).

As a second-wave feminist, my attitudes to the erotic in art/fiction are mixed. As a reader, I felt optimistic and excited in the late Sixties and the Seventies about 'liberation' for desiring women. However, in the Eighties the term was heard less and less as, I believe, the early goal of the women's movement to free woman's body was left behind—as was the right to pursue multiple sources of pleasure—in the discursive spaces of American and English feminisms. Vance's *Pleasure and danger: toward a politics of sexuality* (1992) describes and contextualises the gradual marginalising of the heterosexual erotic for women as a result of the anti-porn debate, with its almost total emphasis on the visual and a privileging of the male gaze, in which male sexuality was deemed dangerous for women and men were the enemy (Vance 1992). Braidotti contrasts a 'generalised backlash' in critical thought—including issues of women and the erotic—in the US during the 1980s, with the European experience. She states that:

on the Continent feminism was experimenting with writing, eroticism, and the exploration of ways and means of making difference as effective tools for social policy and legislation. (Braidotti 2002, p. 29)

With the 'sex-wars', American and Australian feminist discussion took a negative turn. Heterosexual desire was downgraded in the hierarchies of sexual pleasures and there was no flowering of an Anglophone erotic literature for women exploring multiple sources of pleasure for women.

The issues of masochism and of domination are elements of female sexuality/practices that were problematic for theorists such as Jessica Benjamin and Michelle Massé. Their arguments raise issues of agency for the women in *My ornament*. In *The bonds of love: psychoanalysis, feminism, and the problem of domination* (1988), Benjamin discusses Freudian theories of domination and the evolution of a duality that leaves women out of the equation. In her discussion of *The story of O*, Benjamin writes:

Erotic domination, for both sides, draws its appeal in part from its offer to break the encasement of the isolated self, to explode the numbness that comes with false

differentiations. It is a reaction to the predicament of solitary confinement—being unable to get through to the other, or be gotten through to—which is our particular modern form of bondage. (1988, p. 83)

For Benjamin, this is not a viable way of connection between individuals, but merely an instance of women accepting the status of object as an inevitable aspect of the feminine. She maintains that:

[to] halt the cycle of domination... the other must make a difference. This means that women must claim their subjectivity and so be able to survive destruction. (p. 221)

Rachel, Muddupalani and Radha relinquish power in various incidents in the novel, in their relations with men, but they usually recognise what they are doing and they are not destroyed. The scene in the Goan tattoo studio, as Rachel goes to have her ears pierced,<sup>22</sup> certainly has masochistic overtones:

‘Relax. Relax,’ Surinder whispers, turning my head and stroking my hair and neck, kissing me on the forehead. I look at the poster on the wall, a skull with snakes crawling out, intertwined like the intricate patterns of Celtic design. Elwood turns and pours another whiskey...

There is a hum in the room as I am pierced again, three times rapidly, in the other ear and desire rides on the wave of revulsion that sweeps me. Elwood swabs the piercings and puts little gold sleepers in each hole. ‘The ones that hate it get to love it,’ he says with feeling, clearing his tray away and standing above us . . .

(Surinder) pampers my body for some time; telling me that I must wear more of his ornaments... and I am delirious and swamped with a torrent of euphoria and horror, at his touch, and for what I have done. (p 65)

While Rachel does not experience extremes of pain or humiliation in this scene and there is no complete stripping of subjectivity as in the abjection of O, she is not bravely facing her fear of needles and piercing but submitting herself to a symbolic domination. She is pleasing Surinder and, as a trade-off, experiencing the ‘torrent of euphoria’. But Rachel is self-aware, and her recognition of enjoyment in playing out a masochistic situation is a textual gesture towards the ambivalence of Julia Kristeva’s subject/object/object as discussed in Chapter two. It is also a case of Rachel, despite her apparent objectification, choreographing and playing out her desire.

In her work, *In the name of love: women, masochism, and the Gothic*,

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<sup>22</sup> The issues of piercing and body modification are hotly contested in feminist theorising. See: Jeffreys (2000) and Riley (2002). For me, even ear piercing is a revolutionary act—my father thought that only tarts had pierced ears. My writing of piercing scenes may well be a late rebellion against him, located, ironically, in a part of the world where pierced ears are almost universal and nose piercings for women no cause for amazement.

Massé argues that women have been taught to crave love and that its intertwining with pain is natural, originating in the self, with fiction being one of the primary sources for women to ‘learn’ this. Massé emphasises that masochism's causes are external and real, not a ‘natural’ part of being a woman but that, as Freud says, they are a problem of ‘the interaction between the psyche and social life’ (Massé 1992, p. 5). Both Muddupalani and Rachel are temporarily ‘assigning subjectivity to another’ in the novel as per Massé. Rachel does so in her piercing experience to reach the state of an intense delirium. Similarly, Muddupalani submits to the King’s sexual needs and derives pleasure from these interactions but, as time goes on, she becomes more exhausted, soothing the King’s developing madness. However, in this time of intense strain, she is aware that in many ways she is the one with power—within a larger context. She is playing out the Radha/Krishna dyad of holding up the universe against the forces of darkness as a result of their love.

‘In *My ornament* the characters are clearly struggling in patriarchal societies (and mythologies). The novel maps the shifts, rises and falls in their power and their insights into these shifts. For example, Rachel and Surinder discuss the fate of the courtesan, Madhevi: Kovalam's wife is the heroine, not the courtesan.. Rachel, in particular, is self-reflective regarding issues of agency, throughout the novel. She challenges Tata on his judgment of her when he, himself, has negotiated for a lifestyle outside the conjugal, domesticated norm. She watches the levels of her power swing and change, in her interaction with Surinder, from masochistic tendencies to a clearer sense of her own strength. See, for example, my discussion of ‘the gaze’ in chapter four. But there is no assumption in the text that submission is an inevitable part of the heterosexual relationship. On the contrary, I assume that there are power issues in every relationship. While Surinder may be dominant in the piercing scene, he is also subject to the patriarchal confines of his society in the life options and choices that he perceives as available to him. And, in the end, Rachel packs up and leaves him to pursue her creative goals while Muddupalani ceases to carry the weight of the world—being part of the dual lynchpin supporting the cosmos—and walks away from her stardom to be an unadorned woman writing her body.

Concurrent with the cautionary readings of female desire by theorists such as Benjamin and Massé, there has been the robust development of lesbian and queer

discourses on the erotic and the continued tradition of Francophone literature.<sup>23</sup> Up until quite recently, Anglophone heterosexual women, by comparison, have been left high and dry, unless they can identify with liberatory impulses in queer or Francophone literature.

From the 1990s, in the more recent discourse of women's erotic body, contemporary expressions of desire are more wide-ranging. Anglophone contemporary erotic fiction, from the Nineties and into the millennium, ranges from the mass-market 'post-feminist' heterosexual porn specifically for women<sup>24</sup> to the fiction and theorising of 'sex radicals' such as Pat Califia, who sees masochism as just part of the range of erotic pleasures available to persons of all persuasions.<sup>25</sup> Her 'subversive' pornography includes varied sexual identities, practices, performance and fantasies, which are viewed as a continuum rather than as sets of polar opposites. Masochism is definitely not at one end of the scale and feminist agency at the other.<sup>26</sup> Califia described herself as an s/m dyke in her book, *Public Sex*, which advocates embracing lust and condemns conservative feminist inclinations to 'punishing or eradicating dissenting sexualities' (1994, p. 65). Califia does not pussyfoot around. She/he<sup>27</sup> writes with a wide experience of sexual issues, demonstrating a belief in radical choices that claim agency, break down stereotypes and oppression and are thus inherently political:

It is one more brick in the Great Wall of Feminist Propriety that separates the ladylike lesbians from the female sex perverts. This new category of sexual deviant, created by real feminists, individuals, women who do S/m, women who crossdress, butches and femmes, women who are promiscuous, women who use pornography, transsexual women, women who work in the sex industry, women who have fetishes, girl-lovers, bisexual women, and just about anybody who has a clearly defined sexual preference and spends time trying to fulfil it. (p. 63)

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<sup>23</sup> As Rita Felski points out, 'the works of writers such as Jeanette Winterson, Gloria Anzaldua, and Nicole Brossard, as well as key predecessors such as Monique Wittig and Gertrude Stein, have inspired much reflection on the links between sexuality and writing, between lesbian themes and fragmented, playful, textual forms' (2000, p. 8). An Australian writer who has explored similar themes and forms is Fallon (1989).

<sup>24</sup> This mass-market pornography for women raises interesting issues of consumerism and 'post-feminist' writing. See Sonnet (1999). These issues are not central to this discussion.

<sup>25</sup> Califia also wrote in the '80s on lesbian S/M themes. See Samois Collective (1982).

<sup>26</sup> Jessica Benjamin considers that the main protagonist in Pat Califia's *Jessie*, 'a thoroughly independent woman', is not so different from Réage's character, O. (Benjamin notes the title of the anthology of lesbian sadomasochism, *Coming to Power* and its alternative subtitle, *S/M: A Form of Eroticism Based on a Consensual Exchange of Power*.)

<sup>27</sup> Born female in 1951, Pat Califia came out a lesbian in 1971. In the 1990s Califia made the decision to transition to a male gender role and is now known as Patrick Califia. He has written a range of fiction and non-fiction on sexual freedom, in particular BDSM.

As a ‘ladylike’ heterosexual (and possibly ‘female sex pervert’), I celebrate Califia’s advocacy of breadth of sexual preference and feel relief that there are possible jouissant locations for *My ornament*, so that I have not been cast out into the wilderness by any remaining remnants that may lurk in an arid, grim, puritanical feminist box. Nevertheless, there are still questions that the feminist writer might consider regarding the heterosexual woman in erotic fiction—Rachel, Muddupalani and Radha—and ways in which they retain agency.

In ‘The Pornographic Imagination’, Susan Sontag considers this problem indirectly in relation to the character of O, as part of her reading of *The story of O*, arguing that Réage’s novel is a significant work of literature, rather than merely pornography. She considers that:

Its protagonist has complex feelings, emotions and motivations (the transcendence of personality... which O seeks and eventually attains. (p. 55)

According to Sontag, there is a plot; language is taken seriously; the novel has ‘originality, thoroughness, authenticity and power’ and, novels such as *L’ Histoire d’O* exist in dialogue with each other [my emphasis]’ (p. 41). Here, I believe, Sontag’s model for literature could also be a means of considering agency. Like O, neither Rachel nor Muddupalani are in any way ‘stereotype sex-object figures... whose consciousness remains unaltered by her experiences’, in contrast to the totally objectified and one-dimensional Sadeian character, Justine (1969, p. 55). Also, significantly, Réage’s novel exists in dialogue with others.

Some feminist theorists would say that we have not progressed in our attitude and depiction of (particularly heterosexual) women and desire. Braidotti still has a dim view of the general state of feminist discussion on women and the erotic:

I would say that ‘the body’ in USA feminism cannot be positively associated with sexuality in either the critical or the public discourse. (Braidotti 2002, p. 31)

In Australia, at least since the mid-1990s, there has been a revival of interest in women’s heterosexual ‘literature about lust’ (Sontag, p. 46), and an opening up of the discursive space for writing and critiquing erotic fiction, providing possible locations for *My ornament* in this space. At this time, three Australian novels were published: Justine Ettler’s *The river Ophelia* (1995), Linda Jaivin’s *Eat me* (1995)<sup>28</sup> and Tobsha

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<sup>28</sup> Linda Jaivin did write about her novel in her paper, ‘Why sex makes me laugh’, *Hecate* vol. 20 no.1, May 1994.

Learner's *Quiver* (1996).<sup>29</sup> Later, Nicki Gemell's *The bride stripped bare*<sup>30</sup> and Cameron Redfern's *Landscape with animals* (2006) appeared. Of these, I will focus on Ettler's novel, because it has been taken up and critiqued in Australian feminist discourse on women's desire and I will consider the possibility of *My ornament* being located in some similar space.

At the time of publication, critics had reservations about *The river Ophelia*. Don Anderson found it 'deeply shocking' (ABR, July '95: 50). Rosemary Sorenson's newspaper review in the same month described it as 'cheap and unknowing': 'All the rubbing and juicing that goes on between the sheets... is offered up here with relentless lack of skill' (1995).

In October, the journal *Hecate* joined the debate with four critical articles about Ettler's novel. The critiques differ markedly. One of the pieces, Costigan's 'Queering "The River Ophelia"' points out the narrowly heterosexual nature of the work. It also challenges 'the text's representation of S & M as a practice implicitly grounded in abuse, as well as lacking "fluidity"' (1995, p. 70). In contrast, Henderson's 'Sex, writing, and "The River Ophelia"' is more positive, locating the work in Gen X grunge writing, suggesting that we need more narratives and representations of Sadeian women<sup>31</sup> (Henderson 1995, p. 69).

Ferres in 'Justine Ettler: "The River Ophelia"' (1995) describes *TRO* as an erotic female fantasy in which the characters Justine and Ophelia are:

not produced out of real life, but out of a textuality which this novel makes visible, that crosses the lines between canonical and popular culture. (p. 7)

Ferres credits Ettler with a novel of some note. While I do not especially admire *The river Ophelia*, I acknowledge that both Ferres and Ettler herself make a space for it in feminist discourse. In the last of the four articles in *Hecate*, Ettler sees her novel as 'an intervention into Brat Pack texts'<sup>32</sup> from a feminist point of view. Another

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<sup>29</sup> According to writer Nick Earls, Learner's book of short stories is a 'non-literary huge seller' that sold approximately 70,000 copies. See Nile, Richard (ed.) (1999).

<sup>30</sup> Sarah Dunnant's review in *The Times* suggests that Gemell's hiding behind anonymity in her erotic novel 'feels almost discourteous to feminism'. She considers that the novel 'doesn't make it', that it 'reads more like a slightly undercooked novel about marriage and about the temptations of infidelity than any dark exploration of the female sexual psyche' (2.7.03).

<sup>31</sup> The term was first used by Angela Carter in *The Sadeian woman: an exercise in cultural history* (1979). According to Carter, "'The Sadeian Woman" is neither a critical nor a historical analysis of Sade; it is, rather, a late-twentieth-century interpretation of some of the problems he raises about the culturally determined nature of women...' (p. 1). For Carter, Sade was 'unusual in his period for claiming rights of free sexuality for women...' (pp. 36-37). Carter saw liberation, including erotic freedom, as a continuous struggle for women.

<sup>32</sup> An example is the 'grunge' writing of Bret Easton Ellis and Jay McInerney.

‘intervention’ claimed by Ettler is her location in ‘a kind of lineage of texts that have argued that sex and violence, desire and power, are at the heart of our culture.’ She also compares her work to that of Kathy Acker who ‘performs feminist rewritings of the male literary canon’ (p. 63). So, Ettler is attempting to engage in a dialogue with Sade, Bataille and Justine. She is interrogating pain and violence, creating a version of Angela Carter’s Sadeian woman. In her article, she does not mention *The story of O*, but she is engaging in a *dialogue* that includes conversations among Réage, Carter, Sontag and the present author.

While I acknowledge the range of exploration of the heterosexual erotic in the works of my countrywomen, I feel that more congenial locations for my Australian fiction lie within South Indian erotic discourse and the Francophone tradition.

Hughes and Ince, in *French Erotic writing: women’s desiring fiction* (1999) refer to a review of erotic novels by British and American women that appeared in 1994, which reached the conclusion that:

although those writings have female narrators and focus on women’s erotic experience, they employ too much of the language and the techniques of ‘male’ pornography to indicate any real shift in the prevailing ideology of erotic relations between the sexes.<sup>33</sup> (Hughes & Ince 1999, p. 17)

While Hughes and Ince are clearly not as ‘radical’ in their thinking as writers such as Califia, they view women’s desiring writing as an:

evolving discursification of women’s erotic experience occupying an alternative space to the discourse of male (and some Anglophone women’s) desiring writing. (p. 17)

The literary works of the women writers discussed in their text may retain some of the motifs of commercial pornography and its tendency to being a formulaic model, but many women Francophone writers go beyond such limits in what Hughes and Ince term a ‘transgression of the pornographic by the erotic’ (p. 3). In this discursive space there is ample room for *My ornament*. For example, when Rachel leads Surinder to the Summer Palace as part of her seduction strategy, she choreographs a sexual scene that involves only stimulation of her breasts and the erotic trope and theatrical prop of tropical fruit. On the banks of the river, she is rehearsing a scene that she plays out later when they come down from Terekhol Fort and stop at a village. Surinder has been coldly cruel to her. He makes a phone call to his dreaded family. She re-designs

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<sup>33</sup> Rebecca Adams, ‘The pain for pleasure principle’, *The Guardian*, 19 July 1994. According to Hughes and Ince, Adams reviewed four novels, all published in that year.

the ‘breast’ scene, but involves two strangers, fishermen who take on Surinder’s role, in a situation of erotic revenge:

SURINDER *calling out from the road*. Rachel!

Rachel *looks at the walkway along by the chai stall*. She is panting.

The boy *licks the last of the juice from her breast*.

RACHEL *cries out and shudders, buttoning her dress*. Coming!

The script has many possibilities. Some of the themes have been rehearsed in the Breast Scene at the Summer Palace with Surinder. She laughs. (p 62)

In this, she mirrors the boldness of the mythic Radha in *Radhika santwanam*,<sup>34</sup> as well as that of its writer, Muddupalani. Here, the breast for Rachel is a key source of her sexual power and pleasure. Similarly, in the erotics of *fin-de-siècle* novelist Rachilde, according to Hughes and Ince, it is female desire that drives the narrative, with a certain perversity that differs from the unwavering, linear goal-centredness of male-authored fiction. In Rachilde’s novels the male can be an object of desire, with the female more interested in ‘autonomous pleasure and lack of interest in penetrative sex’ (p. 5). This is not to suggest that there is no bliss to be experienced with penetrative sex, but rather that Rachel is prepared to take her pleasure in stages, to embrace a diffuse female sexuality where sexual intercourse is mandatory, in an economy of desire where the needs of women are rarely seen as of paramount importance.

In *My ornament*, the scene in which Muddupalani arrives home from her first night with the King raises further issues of desiring women in its complicated erotics. She is a ‘girl-lover’, only just pubescent, whom the King has violated with his deviant behaviour, bruising her young skin but not ‘taking her virginity’ with penetrative sex. Another ‘girl’ desiring subject appears in Marguerite Duras’s *The lover* (1984), the story of an affair between a poor, white adolescent French girl with a rich Chinese man in colonial Saigon in the 1920s, a ‘tale of a white girl’s assertion of herself as an autonomous female subject’ who can explore and enjoy her desire (Ruddy 2006, p. 76). Similarly, the ‘girl-lover’ Muddupalani achieves her own satisfaction, a surprising bonus to the oddities of her lover, the young King. Muddupalani’s experience is not a rebellious act against the mores of her society, as in the case of the ‘white girl’, but the pleasure she experiences outweighs the threat to her career, the

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<sup>34</sup> *Radhika santwanam*, Poem no. 66, translated from the Telugu by Sarojini Premchand, in consultation with Professor Chekuree Rama Rao and Christine Gillespie.

fact that she cannot reveal to the matriarchs in her house that the King has not ‘taken’ her. In both cases, there is a complexity in the politics of the erotic.

In *The lover* and in *My ornament*, both the girls may be achieving erotic satisfaction in transgressive situations. Similarly, in the work of French women writers of the erotic, it is not love and relationships that are the primary focus, but ‘the unconscious, fantasy and an infinite libidinal territory’ (Brécourt-Villars in Hughes and Ince, p. 17). Writers of the erotic such as Wittig, Cixous and Duras have all been, eventually, embraced by Anglo-American critical theory, both because of their distinct contributions to theoretical discourse and because of the theoretical questions their fictional writings raise (Hughes and Ince, p. 18). In *My ornament*, the three women protagonists move in a similar territory.

The Francophone writer Annie Ernaux could be considered a more mainstream writer in terms of her style and popularity in France. As suggested earlier, there are parallels between her work and *My ornament*. Ernaux describes her approach to one of her novels:

In *Passion simple*, I described—calmly and precisely—the passion of a mature woman, lived in adolescent, ‘romantic’ mode, but also very physically—without the emotional framework, the moral judgment, without precisely the romantic conventions which are expected from a woman writer. (Ernaux in Day & Thomas 2003, p. 100)

According to Ernaux, she was vilified for just such writing; a woman claiming pleasure as the primary goal is unacceptable in the mainstream, transgressive in its foregrounding and descriptions of passion, and disturbing to male and to some feminist critics (Day & Thomas 2003, p. 100). In an acknowledgment of the primacy of a particular lover in her life, Ernaux says:

I was sure that nothing had ever been more important to me, neither having children, nor success in exams, nor travel to distant lands, than being in bed with this man in the middle of the afternoon. (Ernaux in Day and Thomas, p. 101)<sup>35</sup>

This is the erotic woman, perhaps considered by some as a shocking tart, in the patriarchal filing system where only romantic love is acceptable,<sup>36</sup> and which has only

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<sup>35</sup> The ending to *My ornament* could have been more ambiguous, so as to suggest that Rachel might come back for the passion of the relationship.

<sup>36</sup> From a feminist POV, one could say that the romantic is more likely to be patriarchally corrupted than the erotic. It promises something in the future, whereas *jouissance* is fulfilment in the present. Also, romantic fiction usually concentrates more on the male body than providing an account of female arousal.

three folders – virgin, mother and whore. According to the Australian writer Kate Grenville:

Writing is a permitted way of exploring taboo subjects, or taking seriously subjects that are usually trivialised: and writing is a way of making visible the invisible bias of our culture.

These taboos or attitudes can't easily be tackled head-on, but they can be embedded in the rich and seductive texture of the novel. (1994, p. 143)

Having begun this chapter with a consideration of *The story of O*, I now return to it in conclusion. Silverman, *The story of O: the construction of a female subject* considers the significance of the novel:

*Histoire d'O* is more than O's story. It is the history of the female subject—of the territorialisation and inscription of a body whose involuntary internalization of a corresponding set of desires facilitates its complex exploitation. That history will never read otherwise unless the female subject alters her relation to discourse—until she succeeds not only in exercising discursive power, but in exercising it differently. (1984, p. 346)

There are, indeed, multiple readings of *O*, of women's desiring texts and as many subject positions available to the contemporary woman reader of erotic writing. The same goes for the writer. *My ornament*, in a similar way, brings a less conventional view of women and desire into mainstream reading, contributing to the process of cultural change as women's erotic writing is a developing genre, a 'desiring discourse' that modifies generic and cultural models (Hughes and Ince 1999, p. 11).

In *My ornament*, woman, always the primary subject, negotiates the space and pushes the boundaries available to her in the libidinal disequilibrium of a patriarchal society, 'exercising discursive power' as Silverman points out above. Positions are set in the male/female dyads, only to be subverted and destabilised. Despite the clear tensions, ultimately the women assert their subjectivity. I consider that my novel is an example of 'innovations of textuality' and *écriture* while contributing to the 'erosion of boundaries between mainstream and more formally complex writing' characteristic of contemporary French erotic fiction by women (Hughes and Ince 1999, p.18).

Exploring women's desire in fiction, engaging in discursive dialogue, increases the capacity for enlarging this space.

## Chapter four. Choreographing a fiction

In *My ornament*, five of the characters are dancers: Muddupalani, Rachel, Radha, Krishna and Tata are choreographing, performing and improvising their subjectivities through erotic torsos, limbs, looks and touch as they move through time and space in Indian places. They engage in different forms of corporeal intelligence, physical movement in varying erotic/creative connotations and contexts. Desmond, editor of *Dancing desires: choreographing sexualities on and off the stage*, discusses some of these connotations. She suggests in her Introduction that 'much of the current work on sexuality is rooted in literature and thus words, not motion.' The essays in *Dancing desires* emphasise 'bodily enactment... process in time and space... an articulation and materialization of meaning and relationships' (2001, p. 13). While agreeing with Desmond's notion of expressing desire, I believe that there is another process in action, through dance, of the subject rehearsing for Rosi Braidotti's 'becoming I', deploying imaginative leaps in time and space to invent and reinvent identities, so that the 'I', rather than having any essential unity, assembles fragments of 'fictional choreography on many levels into one socially-operational self' (2002, p. 76). I also suggest that the novel, *My ornament*, with its sexual/textual/cultural/fictive becomings, through the intertextuality of dance and writing, continues this process.

Rachel is defined not so much by her dance performance as by her movement practice and skills, her physicality and consciousness of moving bodies, her own and those around her. She is a choreographer, a director who performs only a couple of times in the novel, for example, when Surinder orders her to dance for him at the Mayapuri Hotel:

'Dance,' you say. 'You will dance for me.'

I assume a Bharat Natyam attitude, contained, my expression one of cute, chaste seductiveness. I lunge. My anklets tinkle as my feet slap on the stone floor. You lie on the bed and watch and I wonder if I should pause and peel you a grape. I retain the upright torso, my feet flashing, arms out, fingers like birds, face coyly flirtatious. (p 91)

Rachel performs. Surinder watches. This, again, raises feminist issues of the 'male gaze'. Is Rachel a passive victim? To what extent does dance provide a space for agency as a 'becoming I' (as per Braidotti) in the full beam of the male gaze?

In her work, Mulvey focuses on how subject positions are constructed by visual media texts. She argues that in patriarchal society, men do the looking; women

are there to be *looked at* (1984, p. 26). Critics such as Teresa de Lauretis have argued that positionalities of desire are more complex, asking, for example: ‘What happens when woman serves as the looking glass held up to women?’ (1984, p. 7). In the writing of *My ornament*, I am constructing a fictional, textual looking glass, rather than a display of women as objects, depicting discrete individuals with vastly different intersecting embodied experiences. In regard to the gaze, the feminist reader can also read against the grain. Accordingly, the situation for Rachel is not at all simple. In the last segment quoted from *My ornament*, she is performing as a sex object for Surinder, but *self-consciously* so. She reflects, ironically, as he lounges on the bed to watch: ‘I wonder if I should pause and peel you a grape’—conjuring up this indolent, self-indulgent stereotype of Roman decadence—before launching her body into the a different realm, the physically unfamiliar gestures of Indian dance, her misperformance playing with both ‘passive and active subject positions’ (De Lauretis, p. 143). Even though Surinder has commanded Rachel to dance for him, she has already set up the scene for her own active desire and pleasure before his arrival, as soon as she reached the Mayapuri to meet him:

The balcony of the Mayapuri is dark. If it was a film set, the lighting man has not arrived yet to bring up the silvers and the black and grey shadows with tree tops roiling and coiling under a flat moon. (p. 76)

As she waits for her lover, her gaze is self-consciously filmic:

I look at myself in the mirror, at the satiny, cream silk, the softest that I could find, cut on the cross so that it clings and flares slightly at the hem. Like the evening dresses in the French film *Last Year at Marienbad*, with its mirrors, corridors, ambiguities, amnesia, muddled memories, illusions of debonair smooth-haired men and slinky women. (p. 76)

In writing this scene, the *Marienbad* film<sup>37</sup> (1961) came to mind, as it did for Rachel as well. Later, I realised that Rachel was director, script-writer and actor/dancer at the Mayapuri, which, like the Marienbad hotel is a place of dreams, confusion, acting, in a world of melting logos and practicality. In the Alain Resnais film the man keeps meeting a woman at an elegant palace/hotel, insisting that they have met before. The film is an essay on the constructions of desire, time, reality, memory, fantasy of its characters in the sterile setting of the hotel, in which the other characters in their immaculate evening clothes are mere background to the man, the woman and her

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<sup>37</sup> Robbe-Grillet, A. 1962, *Last Year at Marienbad*, Grove Press Inc, New York. The script had been made into a film directed by Alain Resnais in 1961.

husband/lover. The camera, too, is like a character. Script writer Alain Robbe-Grillet specifies in his screenplay:

The camera having circled, as for the preceding groups (but quite rapidly), the frozen characters, returns quite naturally to the gallery seen at the beginning of the film and starts following it. (Robbe-Grillet 1962, p. 60)

Rather than being a victim of the gaze, Rachel the film-maker is like a camera, recording her sensual, bodily experience at the Mayapuri, the meticulous director, setting the stage, taking the dual role of active woman and the character in her fantasy film script. Rachel plans the scenario:

I will use my body, dance, stroke, suck, receive his cock into me, deliver myself up to him to be pierced and loved. I will wallow and be suspended, but I will choreograph. (p 77)

She is Cixous's Medusa, who can dance and laugh, who can direct and perform a role:

I retain the facial expression, work on its variations and slowly loosen the perpendicular stance, gradually, curving the spine, working from the abdomen and the pelvis, taking up space at different levels, swaying close to the floor, sweeping, not moving far. Dancing in the space, between India and the South. (p. 77)

Rachel dances for Surinder and for herself. In fact, throughout the novel there is a complex tension in the gaze between Rachel and Surinder, in a shifting dynamics in which the white Western woman represents a locus of power by the physical fact of her blonde hair and her pale skin. Therefore, gender is not the only issue. There are parallels here with Duras's *The lover*. Ruddy notes that:

rather than celebrate *The lover* as a tale of a young French girl's resistance to colonial sexual mores and regulations, (her) paper seeks to excavate how that resistance both affirms and challenges the radicalizing and racist dynamics of colonial society. (p. 76)

Also, despite the limited erotic options of the girl in this patriarchal colonial society, it is clear that:

by appropriating the conventionally male role of the desiring subject, the girl lover makes the Chinese man the object of her desire, feminizing him as other men have feminized her. In so doing, she forces her lover to mime the feminised image of Asian masculinity in the white colonial imagination, an image that constructs Asian men as weak, submissive, subordinate, and at times asexual. (2006, p. 91)

Ruddy goes further in her critique of the girl/narrator:

Furthermore, one of the pleasures of loving the Chinese man is to write him down, and through this to make his aestheticised and eroticized body the object of the reader's gaze as well. (p. 91)

Are the Australian writer and her character, Rachel, constructing Surinder as passive and asexual? In the post-colonial space of *My ornament* the issue is more complex.

Surinder does not relinquish power in his relationship with Rachel, although there are shifts in the balance. Rather, he is in a position in patriarchal society, offering her an exotic corner of domestication as his lover in the flat owned by his in-laws, demonstrating a status and ability to operate successfully in a world where she is a stranger. Of course, the Western reader might consider that he is trapped: he must adhere to the model of family duty, while she can change into her jeans and fly away. So, in the novel, there are tensions and shifts in power across patriarchal and colonial issues, and neither Rachel nor Surinder is simply a victim of the gaze.

Another space with room to move for the becoming 'I' exists in dance and queer theory. Desmond, in *Dancing Desires: choreographing sexualities on and off the stage*, explores performances that disrupt patriarchal representations of the feminine and present woman as both desiring subject and object of desire. Desmond's goal in her collection of essays is a consideration of dance:

in a more *jouissant* and less patriarchally disciplined way, emphasising that dance lets us look at bodies for pleasure... in a public staging of desire. (2001, p. 5)

In this zone, where the emphasis is on the agency of the performer, the gaze is not oppressive. Rachel's dance for Surinder is a combination of her own untutored version of Indian dance<sup>38</sup>—her body miming some imagined version of Muddupalani's style—combined with Western movements that take up the space between South India and Australia:

My expression changes. It is probably beyond any of the rasas, more raw. I move. I am a siren who dances. Surinder leans forward at the boldness of my body. I offer myself to him. His face is that of the rasika who experiences the sap rising, the artistry, the juiciness of the dance. (p. 91)

Rachel is self-conscious, not only of her movements but also of their potential for misperformances and possible meanings in an Indian cultural context. Desmond cites Judith Butler's notion of reiteration in performativity as useful in dance studies:

She defines it as the practice through which social identities are communicated in relation to extant meaning systems, and that allows for change through *misperformances*. (p. 12) [my italics]

Rachel is performing the Indian woman, Muddupalani, just as the author of *My ornament* is not writing India but an Australian woman's experience of the place. By not reiterating the original completely, if that were indeed possible, by misperforming,

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<sup>38</sup> Bharat Natyam, a modern version of the dance of the devadasis and ganikas.

there is a space made for change, for becoming 'I', in this fictive exploration of some aspects of dance theory.

Currently there is a rich, developing dance literature that covers a vast range of dance styles and their transposition into other art forms. In 'The politics and poetics of dance', Susan Reed gives a useful overview of the state of play in this field:

Since the mid-1980s, there has been an explosion of dance... situating studies of dance and movement within broader frameworks of embodiment and the politics of culture. (1998, p. 503)

A recent analysis of woman and dance is Fischer's critique of Sally Potter's film, *The Tango Lesson*, which is a treatise on the female author:

portraying both the perils and glories of writing. At the same time, the film questions rigid binaries that have haunted feminist thinking—sexual pleasure versus oppression and male versus female roles. (p. 56)

Potter uses the trope of the tango lesson, with a male teacher and a woman student (Fischer 2004). Another paper, 'Belly dance: orientalism—exoticism—self-exoticism' addresses the globalisation of solo Middle Eastern belly dancing, 'a rapidly expanding genre of performance labelled as "intercultural performance"' (Shay and Sellers-Young 2003, p. 13).<sup>39</sup>

Such dance studies include critiques of patriarchal norms and the regulation of femininity in dance traditions such as ballet, the traditional and dominant Western dance mode, that represents some facet of men's ideal of women, thin, ethereal, disembodied, floating in air. It is a tradition that disciplines women's bodies, valorising jetées, arabesques, en pointe, as high art, rather than situating it as just another (Russian) ethnic dance form that involves pain and strategies such as anorexia, deleting the mature, active sexual body, in favour of a 'non-sexualised corporeality' (Desmond 2001, p. 149). The documentary film *Ballet Russes* (2005) is a clear depiction of gender roles in traditional Western dance, where the artistic director/impresario infantilises his dancers, who begin their careers as young teenagers, 'baby ballerinas', living highly disciplined, sheltered lives in the asexual world of ballet as art form, appearing, in their eighties, as delightful but aged sylphides.

While Muddupalani could not be termed 'asexual' in the novel, there is a sense in which the self-expression of her dance is severely proscribed as she plays out

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<sup>39</sup> Additional dance references: Browning (1995), Buonaventura (2003) and Ram (2000).

her Radha role to the King's Krishna. It is not until she loses her ganika mask, at the Summer Palace and at the farm, that she becomes stripped back to a more authentic self, without the pressure to perform and excel, to the point where she tentatively discovers her creativity in writing *Radhika santwanam* and allows herself the potential for a relationship that is free from artifice and dissimulation, with Govinda. At the same time, the movement of her body is more subversive in its spontaneity.

In an attempt at making discursive space for subversive choreographies of desire, dance theorist Albright in *Mining the dancefield: feminist theory and contemporary dance* develops a kinaesthetic dialogue that includes Cixous and Derrida as she explores 'the interplay between multiple languages of the female body, knowing that, however incalculable, these are never inconsequential choreographies' (1991, p. 133). According to Albright, Derrida 'identifies dancing as a "feminine" subversion par excellence' (p. 105). Albright considers this an opportunity for the dancer to move *through* instead of locating her(him)self *in* narrative positions, thus being able to step out of meaning before it becomes stabilised, in a zone that is 'one of choreography and movement that slips right through sexual difference' (p. 106). In this space, it may be possible to devise kinaesthetic possibilities of becoming. For example, in the novel Muddupalani has moved *through* the narrative position of dancer/courtesan, no longer trapped in the character of Radha, Krishna's ornament. By the end of the novel this writing/dancing woman can move freely, dance on the banks of the Kaveri, as the scribe's daughter reads her text; and if she is indeed performing, it is for the goat, for herself and perhaps for the sacred river, in her becoming 'I'.

A further space is made for Muddupalani, as well as Rachel, in dance theory. Albright, having introduced Derrida, brings two more protagonists into the dialogue—Cixous with her notion of the physicality of the writing body, in its hysteria and transgression (p. 164), and Vaslav Nijinsky, whose scandalous sexualised Russian ballet dancing caused a sensation in 1912. He had a capacity for performance that transcends 'the feminisation of spectacle' and is both 'homoerotic and heteroerotic':

His peculiar and spectacular stage antics unsettled and undermined the heavily policed cultural boundaries separating male from female, masculinity from femininity, homosexuality from heterosexuality, and human from nonhuman. (p. 61)

This 'ambisexual Hindu god' in the classical ballet *Le Dieu bleu*, performed in 1912,<sup>40</sup> was a jouissant rendering of desire in the persona of Krishna. Here, in the discursive space of queer theory, we have Krishna, 'The Blue God', Hindu imagery and movement and Nijinsky, to add to the dialogue on dancing desire, making more room for desiring bodies across sexual and cultural boundaries.<sup>41</sup> Albright contends that, taken together, the writing of Derrida and Cixous and performance by Nijinsky cross: over boundaries of 'self' and 'other' so frequently that the very categories begin to lose their meaning. What is left then, is the dance created by the movement between those places. (p. 177)

Albright has posited this dialogue as creating a jouissant space in dance that includes ballet. I would like to extend her trio to choreograph for a larger caste, extra dancers—Muddupalani, Rachel and Tata<sup>42</sup>—to add to the conversation with Derrida and Cixous and Nijinsky.

Such conversation opens up a significantly jouissant discursive space for translations of bodily multilingualism that explore varieties of sexuality and desire.<sup>43</sup> In this expanding space, women can also improvise and 'misperform' subjectivities and join a wide-ranging kinaesthetic embodied conversation. Derrida, Cixous, Nijinsky, Tata and Krishna together provide the discursive space. Here, Rachel and Muddupalani choreograph women's selves, challenging existing mainstream dance expectations regarding body type, performance, the gaze, discipline, control, expressivity and eroticism. Gr

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<sup>40</sup> Franklin in Desmond (p. 61). Even more famous for its shock value was *L'après-midi d'une faune* also performed in 1912.

<sup>41</sup> The question of jouissant, transgressive explorations in contemporary Indian dance cannot be dealt with in detail here. Mitra (2006) cites dancers such as Mallika Sarabhai, the late Ranjabati Sircar and Chandralekha, who all attempt to reconfigure the language of Bharat Natyam 'by reaching back to its corporeal roots' (p. 11). She also describes a cross-cultural dance production she devised in Kolkata that combined her classical training there as a child with her experience in contact improvisation in London: 'The Kinaetma project 'attempted to "rewrite" most inscriptions upon their [the Kolkata dancers'] bodies to be replaced by expressions of subjectivity, agency and sexuality' (p. 12). According to Mitra, the project was also attempting 'to reclaim the Indian woman's body and sexuality from the bounds of patriarchal nationalist propriety' (p. 15).

<sup>42</sup> Tata, the seventy-three-year-old dancer in *My ornament*, has little room to move for choreographing his sexuality in the material world of Indian patriarchal society. However, he can make space in Indian discourse of the moving body, performing his desire, dancing ecstatically, annually, on his birthday, expressing his dedication to Krishna, the god who embodies a multiplicity of desiring subjects. Krishna's ambisexuality provides Tata with this locus of expression.

<sup>43</sup> Michael Warner and others 'challenge us to question the heteronormativity of the world and to reveal its operation in symbolic practices. *Queer* in this context stands for all that is not heteronormative and is a practice of symbolic production of interpretation that anyone, whether self-identified as "gay" or "straight", can initiate about anything, whether the subject is associated with gay culture or not' (Desmond, 1998, p.11).

adually, through the moving body and the creation of their texts, the women, these 'body artists' (Albright , p. 109) dance, write and voice woman's desires as they become other. And this process is rehearsed, constantly, across time and space.

## Chapter five. Writing across space and time

Nancy Paxton quotes a 19th-century Indian colonial romance in her *Writing under the Raj: gender, race, and rape in the British colonial imagination*:

[Menachee] took wing to other scenes, where the drumming of the tomtoms and the orgy of the heathen pooja filled her wild heart with a gladness that made her life complete. (1999, p. 108)

Menachee is the Indian dancer in Fanny Farr Penny's novel, *Romance of the Nautch Girl* (1898).<sup>44</sup> Menachee opts for these primitive, heathen pleasures, and in the end Felix rejects her to marry Beryl. According to Paxton:

Penny's conclusion asserts, at the same time, the incorrigible passions that, though racialised and abjected, remained uncontained, passions allowed freest expression in the figure of the secularized dancing girl. (p. 108)

The brief quotation from Penny's novel is a cautionary warning to the Australian feminist who is writing women across time and space and who might inadvertently exoticise her 18th-century dancer character, abandoning her to a textual or material abjection similar to that experienced by Penny's Menachee. Or, at the very least, there is the danger that Muddupalani may be hijacked into Western discursive space in the novel. I was aware of the significant risks in such a project. I could give up, or progress in good faith with the likelihood of making mistakes, referring frequently back to Spivak's notion of the imagining required by literature, this means of engaging with the other which has 'no guarantees' (2003, p. 50). One strategy I employed to deal with this problem was extensive research, that included working closely with people able to advise me on Telugu and Tamil cultures.<sup>45</sup>

A starting point for an Australian feminist writer imagining Muddupalani is to consider different representations (and translations) of the Indian dancer—the ganika and the devadasi—in South Indian, as well as in Western discourses, focusing on

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<sup>44</sup> 'Nautch' is an Anglicised Indian word for dance. 'Nautch girl' was a term used to describe devadasis, but it indicates a secular aspect of the dance, performed for human rather than divine pleasure.

<sup>45</sup> My field work was intensive and I travelled extensively in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. In all, I made three field trips of six weeks each, usually accompanied by a Tamil-speaking researcher, K.T. Gandhirajan, who located temples, Maratha palaces, English and Tamil texts with me. During this time, I visited the sites inhabited and visited by Muddupalani and the court. For one of the field trips I worked in the University of Madras, Chennai, attached to Professor Arasu in the Tamil Department; this was an Exchange scheme with Victoria University. I consulted with K. Lalita in Hyderabad and the Anveshi Centre for Women. Following up Lalita's contacts, I worked closely with V.A.K. Ranga Rao, a Telugu speaker and musicologist, on South Indian dance and music, who provided invaluable information. He read a late draft of the novel and approved the cultural information, making some suggestions for greater precision.

notions of women's moving erotic body in Telugu-speaking settings and in Tamil country. This process is an attempt at feminist post-colonial readings of my characters that do not draw me into some colonial quagmire. Rather, in this chapter, I aim to make further connections between women writers and readers—textual, embodied and 'planetary'—in the writing of *My ornament*.

In the novel, the King sits in the durbar hall, bored with supplicants, including the foreigners whom he sees as 'just English messengers from some distant, cold island, far away from the riches of Tanjavur' (p. 23). In this dreary state of *ennui*, he decides to withdraw and enjoy quality time with his *ganika*:

She leads, her hips swaying, her tiny waist and curved torso gliding. Yes, she is like a temple sculpture. She turns and smiles at the King. He takes a breath, catches her and steers her in to the small room he has recently had prepared, a retiring room for these moments, because, as everyone knows: *Only the man who has touched the courtesan's breasts can become the commander of a fort; only one who has stared in her face can be a king.* (p. 24)

Muddupalani is seen from Rachel's point of view as she notes that, yes, the dancer she is studying has physical curves that follow the lines of an idealised woman in a temple sculpture. There is some irony in this aside, an acknowledgment that both the author and Rachel are at risk of exoticising the Indian dancer, representing her as a petrified oriental object. But then Muddupalani takes on her full power, with her confident perception of what 'everyone knows', that it is she who provides the King's status. 'Only the man who has touched the courtesan's breasts...' These lines are taken from *Symbols of substance: court and state in Nayaka period Tamilnadu* [sic] (Rao, Shulman & Subrahmanyam 1992), a key reference in my research that gives a vivid picture of the embodied Indian woman of the 18th century.<sup>46</sup> The bold affirmation of the powers of the dancer's breasts, translated from the Telugu by Rao et al, were written by Muddupalani, the historical figure. They are part of the *Radhika santwanam* text.

Like Lalita and Tharu, cultural studies theorists Rao, Shulman and Subrahmanyam choose the dancer/courtesan as their 'model' of Indian womanhood in *Symbols of substance: court and state in Nayaka period Tamilnadu*. The work analyses a period of significant cultural change in South India, utilising literary texts of the time to consider subjectivity and 'emerging notions of human identity' in Tamil country (p. 56). While Rao et al focus on the Nayaka dynasty of the early 16th century

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<sup>46</sup> The spelling of Telugu and Tamil names varies when transposed into English and Roman script, e.g. Tamil Nadu.

to the 1730s, there is an overlap with Muddupalani's life and times, as they highlight the striking artistic creations of courtesans such as Muddupalani<sup>47</sup> who appear in these historical works as women with agency and a 'brazen self-confidence' (p. 316), providing symbolic recognition of the status of these, generally self-made, kings (p. 54). In the literature, the poets fashion images of sensuality and excitement in which the artist/courtesan and their lovers indulge with abandon. This excess is located in feminised court ritual, where the King assumes a ritual devotional role, personifying the god Krishna in all his erotic glory, thus proclaiming the body to be 'the primary instrument of transcendence' (p. 61). Rao et al make the point that the heroes and heroines of the literature of the time include Radha and Krishna, and all of them are 'protagonists in dramas of sensual excess and violation' (p.124). I have drawn on these perceptions of power in my portrayal of Muddupalani and her lover and liege, Pratapasimha. Such representations of a god are far from my Christian tradition which sadly lacks the erotic divine. Bhakti, devotion to the god, comes in different forms. One manifestation is sringara, 'in which the worshipper sees Krishna as a lover, as did Radha and the gopis' (Isacco and Dallapiccola 1982, p. 22). In this erotic/spiritual ambience celebrating Radha/Krishna, there is:

a groping towards the individual—the single, feminine human being endowed with a body—is part of a wider process of self-transforming awareness. As already hinted, much of it involves an expanding imagination, which seeks to explore the women's subjectivity in the context of love and bodily experience, always in relation to the male figures surrounding her. (Rao et al, p. 123)

In *My ornament* it is not only Muddupalani who undergoes this 'transforming self-awareness'. Rachel also becomes gradually absorbed into the space of sensuality – and its resonance of the erotic divine—in South India, in her own temporal location and in the imagined cultural space of 18th-century Tanjavur. Towards the end of the novel she is even more convinced that the erotic is the preferred path, in keeping with her developed understanding of and identification with Muddupalani. When she believes that she has lost Surinder to the familial, conjugal enterprise, she dramatises, with some irony, her present life and her vision of future bliss in heaven:

These people will live their lives as they should, but will not know Paradise. I run my hand over my breast and torso. After all, as Tata says, *heaven is full of actors, playboys and*

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<sup>47</sup> Muddupalani (1730–1760) lived in Tanjavur which was ruled by a Maratha king, Pratapasimha (1739–1763), but the court continued many of the linguistic and cultural practices of the previous Telugu-speaking Nayaka dynasty.

*courtesans; it's no place for a married woman.* And I will be there in the celestial heights, among the seraphim and cherubim, fingering stiff paper covered with verse, reading words in many tongues, enthralled by the thrum of the tanpura, guitars; dancing with ganikas; watching video clips of rock stars strumming riffs, among heartbreaking men with golden eyes, in all, all of my silver ornaments. The Lord Krishna will be there, but not Surinder. *For it is a grave sin to sleep with anyone else but the person you love, even your wife.* And this is an Indian saying, not one brought here by a rank outsider. (p. 186)

Rachel's celestial vision is syncretic and hybrid, encompassing the Christian and Hindu, replete with 'world' (and other-worldly) music. It is sensual, with fingers touching words on paper as glances meet golden eyes. The *actors, playboys and courtesans*—and the writers—are there too, but not Surinder, who has not qualified, having chosen to be a family man, eschewing devotion to the senses and spontaneous sexual love, sleeping with a woman who is his wife, not his lover, thus committing a serious offence against the natural order. *For it is a grave sin...* In the world of the court writers and *My ornament*, Rachel has the entitlement of the lover. This is one performance of the Hindu erotic divine, in courtly 18th-century Tanjavur, reflected in the fictive representation of embodiment in *My ornament*, where the flesh is indeed heavenly, with 'the body' as 'a primary *sadhana*, instrument of transcendence' (Rao et al. 1992, p. 114). Muddupalani was a major player, and Rachel a fictive character imagining herself in a world of changing notions of embodiment, in a spectacular South Indian Nayaka cultural transformation which was 'linked to emerging notions of human identity and to altered paradigms of knowledge, both of the world and the self' (Rao et al., p.58).

Rachel's positioning is achieved through a 'mixture of signs, citations, and echoes' (Cohan & Shires, 1988, p. 50). I suggest that this multifaceted intertextuality links not only an Indian and an Australian dancing/writing woman, but also South Indian notions of the self with *écriture féminine*. In 'Word, dialogue and the novel', Julia Kristeva writes that 'any text is the absorption and transformation of another... and poetic language is read as at least *double*' (Kristeva in Moi 1986, p. 37). In *My ornament* the intertextuality is multiple in its connections, transferring across the text a range of possible readings. The two quotations, in italics, in the fragment from *My ornament* above, are both purloined from Nayaka literature surveyed in Rao et al and given to my characters.<sup>48</sup> *Heaven is full of actors...* Rachel's words, above, cite

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<sup>48</sup> *Heaven is full of actors...* in Rao et al, p.152.

Muddupalani who has already mused on the subject of heaven and its inhabitants, in a very different setting, earlier, at the queens' sati where she is grieving the death of Pratapasimha and watching the beginnings of his cremation (p. 120). In the above scene, Rachel is also directly and consciously citing Tata who earlier stated that: *Heaven is full of actors...* The second quote from Rao et al in the fragment above is given to Rachel. She says melodramatically, *It is a sin to sleep...*<sup>49</sup> So there is a cross-over of shared citations in the text, not only between the characters of Muddupalani and Rachel, but with the narrator as well. The same words, from South Indian traditional texts, enable the fictive and fictionalised characters in the novel to inhabit this inbetween space across time.

In the novel a further multiplicity of 'signs, citations and echoes' is woven in an 'intersemiotic translation', a term proposed by Canadian feminist Pamela Banting. In *The Body as Pictogram: Rethinking Hélène Cixous' écriture féminine*, Banting proposes this notion of 'translation' as an alternative model to 'representation'. She suggests that Cixous's corporeal and gendered grammatology begins to make it possible to translate between bodies and texts (1992, p. 240). *My ornament* is a fictive exploration of this translation:

Arches hold up a high timber ceiling and the space is broken up with slim wooden pillars. Dancers had performed here. It would be difficult for a large group of women to move easily. Constricting... Rachel tries, she really does, to transport herself into another skin, to translate herself into Tamil or Telugu when her mouth does not speak the language. Can her body speak? She throws the dupata across her right shoulder. It is an annoying pink, a colour that she would never wear in Melbourne. But Surinder had pressed her to buy some Indian dresses. (p. 21)

In the hall where Muddupalani danced for the King, Rachel makes her first attempts at translating her body into this new space, wearing the new Indian clothes that she had bought under Surinder's supervision. Eventually she transposes herself into Muddupalani.

In her article, Banting re-examines Cixous' deployment of the hysterical body as a glyph or pictogram in 'The laugh of the Medusa', and expands the notion of women's writing. Banting's reading of *écriture féminine* compares 'intersemiotic translation' with the transposition from verbal art into music, dance, cinema or painting. The poetic body, the body as pictogram, according to Banting, allows

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<sup>49</sup> *It is a sin to sleep...* from a South Indian traditional story, critiqued in Rao et al, p. 155.

Cixous to hypothesise women's writing as in part translation between language and corporeality (p. 231). Banting asserts that:

translation among different signifying systems, both verbal and non-verbal—speech, writing, image, song, gesture, caress, and flesh—is not only possible but provides a way out of the problematics of representation. (p. 237)

It is at this point that dance can leap into this space in a displacement of cultural meanings. In *Mining the dancefield* (1991), Albright suggests that movement and the gaps between allow for:

an intricate layering of visual, kinaesthetic, and cultural meanings in which bodies, sexualities and identities can begin to restage the terms of their alliance. For if sexual difference can be conceived as physical motion rather than a set of stable ideological positions, the resultant narratives of desire might then be choreographed with more imagination. (p. 160)

Hence, Albright expands further the notion of dance narratives of desire by positioning it, with Banting, in the multiple possibilities of 'intersemiotic translation'. This cross-over space provides an opportunity for women's agency. Then, on a more literal level, Albright refers to Nancy Stark Smith's movement hieroglyphs that translate dance and bodies into marks on the page. According to Albright, an informed 'effort/shape analysis would reveal, for instance, the dynamics and spatial pathways of the movement' to which lay people could easily have a 'movement response'. These 'little insignias of a moving body' (p. 14) have the potential to leap across time and space. The flourishes, curves and dashes remind me of Muddupalani's 'squiggles on the paper' that she would study as an illiterate girl before she was 'chosen' for Tanjavur life. 'What secrets did they hold?' she asks. She remembers back to her lessons, her first study of Marathi and the Devnagari script with Guruji:

The script was so different from the Telugu which burbles over the paper, curly and round, with jaunty scrolls and squiggles, sometimes little darting animals, or apples and oranges with curly stalks, all rolling and hopping across the page. (p. 165)

Muddupalani, a young girl experiencing intensive training in movement, is conducting her own naïve effort/space analysis of the marks on the page. In the absence of the organising skill that she does not yet fully possess—that of reading—she looks for the movement or stasis of the glyphs:

I turned the page around on the table in front of me. The Marathi is more sensible than the cheerful Telugu. There was the line across the top of the marks which hung like sleeping bats from the ceiling beam. (p. 166)

The viewer who lacks literal understanding must learn to find sense in the marks on the paper, or, if that is not possible, to imagine it. Like Muddupalani, the 'illiterate'

Australian writer must stare at *Radhika santwanam*, at the shapes on paper, ‘rolling and hopping across the page’, and speculate as to their meaning, until she can have fragments of the text translated into English. Then she must imagine what falls in between—the verses that she cannot read, the partly illegible person of their author, Muddupalani. In so doing, she attempts an ‘intersemiotic translation’ between women’s bodies and texts.

Such notions are not apparent in contemporary Indian feminist literary discourse. Lalita and Tharu’s *Women writing in India* (1993) is a huge translation project,<sup>50</sup> but while their icon of Indian woman is Muddupalani, there is limited theoretical consideration of women’s bodies and texts. Lalita and Tharu do not theorise the ‘mixture of signs, citations, and echoes’ across cultures in terms of women’s bodies and ‘intersemiotic translation’. They acknowledge very briefly that they do not have a great expertise in French feminist thought. In fact, their only reference to Cixous and Kristeva is to say that:

(s)trictly speaking, of course neither Cixous’ concept of *écriture féminine* (feminine writing) nor Kristeva’s notion of femininity as marginality is concerned with *women’s* writing. (p. 13)

Since *Indian women writing*, Susie Tharu has turned to Francophone women thinkers and writers in a transcultural project that includes two volumes, one of French (already published) and the other of Indian feminisms (still to come). *French feminism: an Indian anthology* is translated into English, for Indian readers (Haase-Dubosc et al., 2003).

The 447-page first volume of *French feminism* covers everything from Women and Creativity to Trafficking in Women to Monique Wittig and Olympe de Gouges. It is an attempt to redress the situation where

French feminist thought never reached India directly, but was mediated by translations undertaken in England or the United States by English or American feminists who chose those French texts best suited to further their own needs in their own locations. [The Indian project aimed to create] ‘other internationalisms’. (p. 15)

In the resulting broad survey there are a few brief references to Cixous and Kristeva and no entry in the index for *écriture féminine*. This ‘French feminism for Indian women’ has little to say about women’s desire and sexuality. This is a gap in keeping with many contemporary Anglophone feminist publications.

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<sup>50</sup> The collection includes works in eleven languages and spans 2,600 years. The target language is English.

This thesis attempts to make links between Western feminist thought (viz *écriture féminine*) and Indian feminist notions in the discursive space of women's physical/writing/textual body. While Muddupalani and her writing are clearly located within the milieu of South Indian, Telugu-language and Tamil-country discourse, a crucial link to initiate 'other internationalisms' is *écriture féminine*. The courtesans are celebrating the body in expressions of their sexuality in their poetry and in their dance and music. They create a *jouissance*, a *rasa* as they connect with the *rasika*, the viewer in the ecstasy of artistic, *jouissant* performance, in a society with:

an expanding imagination, which seeks to explore the women's subjectivity in the context of love and bodily experience. (Rao et al , p. 123)

The character of Rachel, and her intersubjectivity with the other women in *My ornament*, translates this *rasa* across time and space to the end of the second millennium, and in so doing raises the question of connection through the capacity to *read* the other: the extent to which Rachel reads Muddupalani; their capacity to read each other; the challenge for the author of *My ornament* in reading (misreading) and writing Muddupalani. But then, this also creates opportunities for connection through writing practice. Surely, one goal shared by writers of fiction is further understanding of the human condition:

One of the novel's major social functions, it could be argued, is to demonstrate and reinforce, perhaps to generate, the assumption that the other is another person like me. (Miller 2001, p. 66)

At the same time, there is the possibility of inaccuracy in *reading* the other, for the characters in a novel. Miller's example is from *Middlemarch* where:

Casaubon is for Dorothea a text to be read, or rather misread, since, like a book, he has a fatal susceptibility to multiple interpretations. (p. 71)

Dorothea and her husband are of the same background, in the same temporal space. Their differences are of sensibility and interpretation, rather than large swathes of time and geographical space in between Rachel and Muddupalani. For example, Rachel is swimming:

Muddupalani laughs and rubs her eyes. The sun strikes the fish woman's buttocks, part silver and part pinkish flesh. The fish has a green head, not unlike a human's. If it is a human, her head is flat with no hair, just a green skull, like a cap made of a great lotus leaf, shrunk and moulded to the size of a woman's head. The face is in the water. After two strokes, left and right, left and right, a face swivels out to the side and the fish opens its mouth and seems to breathe in. It has great bulging eyes with a black line from the sides around the back of the head, as if they are held together by a ribbon. The mouth closes and the fish face points down

into the water. And what would the fish woman see if she strained her neck, broke her stroke and looked back? But she stays in rhythm, scooping through the water with her hands like paddles, looking through the lenses of her goggles into the deep, knowing that any shape she sees will be merely a knotted tree stump or some perfectly natural and real phenomenon. (p. 17)

In this scene the woman on the steps by the Summer Palace, in her heightened emotional state with the preconceptions of her time and location, and her vivid imagination, responds to the phenomena at hand—the woman in bathing cap, goggles and a swimsuit, doing the Australian crawl. Muddupalani reads Rachel, inaccurately, as fish not woman, in the ambiguous inbetween space at the river, a parallel to incomprehension on the part of Rachel as she makes incomplete readings of Muddupalani. With Radha as a further textual connection, in *Radhika santwanam*, the characters read and cite each other, literally and metaphorically, in a triangulation of fictive relationships in *My ornament*. And this reading generates invention: Muddupalani, Rachel and the author are inventing each other. These inventions require a new space in which the writer:

creates a world that must be read with the assumption of (some) shared codes (social, cultural, linguistic) to make meaning. (Hutcheon 1991, p. 29)

According to Hutcheon, this can be achieved by placing the reader ‘temporally and spatially oriented in the fictional world’ (p. 51). Gail Jones’s short story, ‘Eleanor reads Emma’ (1997) creates this zone for her characters, within the imaginary. This space overlaps the ‘planetary’ in Jones’s exploration of reading and writing and translation across time and space. (See discussion later in this section regarding planetarity).

Jones begins her story with the question, ‘What is it to read?’ (p. 44). She answers by placing two women together in a relationship—Flaubert’s Emma Bovary and a fictionalised historical figure, Eleanor Marx, who in fact made the first translation of *Madam Bovary* into English. Jones establishes a subtle and complex intertextuality, a translation and, further, an intersubjectivity between the two women in the story. Like Emma, Eleanor dreams of passion as she fashions French into English sentences:

...when she read *Madame Bovary* it seemed ineluctably her self. I am Emma Bovary, she might have whispered to the night, her voice soft and serious and dreamy as Flaubert. (p. 45)

Of course, Flaubert's heroine has constructed a dream-life from reading romantic novels and has tried to realise it in her own provincial existence, with disastrous consequences.

'No doubt you know Emma Bovary's story,' Jones checks with her reader, before outlining, in both fictive fine detail and broad biographical strokes, her reading of the life of Emma, including Emma's suicide with arsenic. Eleanor immerses herself in translating Flaubert's novel and finds that, gradually, everything inevitably *refers*. Her own life becomes cross-referenced to Emma Bovary until Eleanor, the translator, will also eventually suicide with arsenic. During this process of referral, Jones creates the fictive space. When her brainless lover falls asleep, drunk beside her,

Eleanor's book has fallen to the floor and closed its French pleasures. She extinguishes the lantern and lies quietly, listening to the wind. A detonation of pigeon wings momentarily startles her; then it is the black wind again blowing all around the planet, blowing across the English channel, furrowing the dark cold water, heading eastward, and billowing, and rising to a gale. (p. 53)

Here the expansion is both spatial and temporal, out from Eleanor's claustrophobic domestic scene, borne on the dark wind across the water to France, Emma Bovary's territory, as the fictive narrative ranges across time and space, encompassing readers, writers and characters.

There are comparisons to be made with *My ornament*: Gail Jones shows Eleanor reading Emma, just as Rachel reads *Radhika santwanam*; both Muddupalani and Eleanor are historical figures, refashioned into fictive personae. Jones's Eleanor finds that everything 'refers' to Emma Bovary. Rachel goes further, translating her self into the fiction of a devadasi/ganika, Muddupalani.

Such reading, writing and translation across time and space are theorised in 'Literature for the planet' by Wai Chi Dimock (2001). In her article, Dimock makes a strong connection between Mandelstam and Dante as the early 20th-century Russian dissident reads his treasured copy of *The divine comedy* in gaol. According to Dimock, in such planetary writing, texts bind readers to each other, defying chronology, nationality and geographical borders. Dante is:

a reader, a writer and a translator [for] if writing must end up being a form of translation... from the here and now, it is reading that initiates that process. (p. 178)

Thus Muddupalani's work, like Flaubert's and Dante's, is one of countless texts that come alive, over and over, in diverse locations and times. Such readings turn literature into the collective life of the planet and:

this life derives its morphology... from the motion of words: motion effected when borders are crossed, when a new frame of reference is mixed with an old, when foreign languages turn a native tongue into a hybrid. (p. 178)

Accordingly, we have the opportunity to stop pigeon-holing literatures within national borders, saying predictable things in that context, and to embrace the new meanings available from global readings. For Dimock this has a vital function as:

the human species articulates itself across space and time (allowing) human beings to have a *collective life*, not identical to the life span of a perishable individual or of a perishable nation. (p. 182) [my emphasis]

My vision is that my project is a part of Dimock's 'collective life', a position also taken by Gayatri Spivak's recent theorising on planetary writing, within the discourse of comparative literature. While Spivak's earlier work emphasised women, identity politics and agency, within post-colonial discourses (1988), eighteen years later, she now writes that planetarity is a crucial project in this millennium, proposing, in the final essay of *Death of a Discipline* (2003), for 'the planet to overwrite the globe' (2003, p.72)<sup>51</sup>. There are echoes here of Braidotti, who sees this collective life as a form of nomadism, a non-linear break from 'monolingualism':

Moving between languages, speaking several and mastering none, living in constant simultaneous translation, is a possible location for the nomadic sensibility which best expresses itself in creative writing... there are no mother tongues, only linguistic sites from which one takes one's departure. (pp. 94–95)

My reading and writing Muddupalani is an attempt to re-locate and translate *Radhika santwanam* and to place *My ornament* in a transnational feminist space of embodied women, rather than an 'Australian' work trying to appropriate the space of an 'Indian' novel. The process involves the challenge of trying to know the other, to translate her semiotically through the body, to imagine her as one might imagine oneself in another culture.

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<sup>51</sup> Susan Bassnet provides a succinct summary of Spivak's planetarity: 'A new comparative literature will need to "undermine and undo" the tendency of dominant cultures to appropriate emergent ones (Spivak, 2003, p. 100). In other words it will need to move beyond the parameters of Western literatures and societies and reposition itself within a planetary context. The original enterprise of comparative literature, which sought to read literature trans-nationally in terms of themes, movements, genres, periods, zeitgeist, history of ideas is out-dated and needs to be rethought...There is therefore a politicised dimension to comparative literature; Spivak proposes the idea of planetarity in opposition to globalisation, which she argues involves the imposition of the same values and system of exchange everywhere.' (2006, p.3).

## Conclusion

This thesis, through the practice of creative fiction, explores woman's desiring, dancing, writing body across time and space. It makes a new discursive space by connecting elements of *écriture féminine*, cultural nomadism, women's fiction, transnational feminism, the heterosexual erotic, dance theory, as well as notions of planetarity. These are the main issues that arise for me, as a contemporary feminist, in the writing of the novel.

The metaphor of 'ornament' in my novel provides multiple meanings and a transcultural textual space for women's writing, drawing on South Indian notions of woman, desire and art with their potential to expand traditional Western frames. The trope provides a gap in which to explore new economies of desire that suggest the shifting dimensions of agency and subjectivity.

*My ornament* writes the body in the discursive space of *écriture féminine*, and the exegetical reflections chart the characters' shifting dissolution and reconstitution of identity as the women relate to their lovers, writing on and with the body. In addition, the exegesis compares and contrasts the narrative concerns and style of the novel to elements of Australian and Francophone women's writing.

In *My ornament* Muddupalani, Rachel and Radha, always the primary subjects, negotiate the space and push the boundaries available to them in the libidinal disequilibrium of a patriarchal society. Positions are set and then undermined in the tensions of male/female relationships, so that ultimately the women assert their subjectivity in settings where there is usually just a cramped corner for them to inhabit. This exploration of women's desire in fiction, while engaging in transnational feminist dialogue, increases the capacity for enlarging this space.

In considering the erotic dancing woman, the thesis makes queer and feminist readings of desire, opening up a significantly jouissant discursive space for translations of bodily multilingualism. Here, women can also improvise and 'misperform' subjectivities, so that Muddupalani and Rachel join the kinaesthetic embodied conversation with an enlarged caste—Derrida, Cixous, Nijinsky, Tata and

Krishna, all body artists, challenging existing mainstream expectations of dance, text and desire.

In its time/space exploration, the thesis makes a bold jouissant intersubjective translation between woman's writing body in *écriture féminine* and the erotic sensibilities of South India, specifically the sites inhabited by Muddupalani, the 18th-century Tanjavur court and its environs, positioning Rachel firmly in this zone, translating the characters back and forth in the fluidity of the erotic writing space.

The process of this project relates to Braidotti's notion of 'in transit', making links 'where things were previously dis-connected (1997, p. 76). *My ornament* attempts such a transit/translation, between India and Australia, the 18th and the late 20th centuries, with new ways of relating across physical, temporal and discursive space.

I believe that, as writers and readers, it is critical at this time that we participate in the creation of such narratives which provide 'new ways of relating' (Braidotti, 1997, p. 76). Seyla Benhabib (1999) suggests that the subject is constituted through developing a 'synthetic' narrative, rather than merely accepting the story into which we are born, changing these stories constantly as we connect with other life narratives. This notion suggests the construction of texts that create 'footbridges between notions' (Braidotti, 1997, p. 76), requiring a leap of the imagination. It is a Deleuzian 'pushing the subject' to his or her limit, in a constant encounter with external, different others (Braidotti 2002, p. 118).

The synthesising of narrative in *My ornament* is a risk-taking 'erotics of thinking' where bodily sensation provides a truth. It is pursued through the characters of three women, precious ornaments, enfolded, erotic, their writing tattooed on dancing sexual bodies, claiming agency in their heterosexual relationships across time and space, as they construct fictional choreographies of the self.

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