

Reconstructing Shakti:
Investigating narrative representations of
Hindu women within the context of intimate
partner violence

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DECLARATION

By submitting this research dissertation, I declare that the entirety of the work contained herein is my own original work, that I am the owner of the copyright thereof (unless explicitly otherwise stated), and that I have not previously submitted it, in its entirety or in part, for obtaining any other qualification.

Signature..... Date: 6 February 2017

As the Supervisor, I acknowledge that this research dissertation is ready for examination.

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DEDICATION

This Master's degree is dedicated to the women in my family – especially my Amma, who inspired me to believe that it was never too late to live your dreams, and my Ava, who taught me to connect with the wisdom of the earth, and to play a wily game of scrabble. They both led rich and textured lives. The life experiences, of so many; experiences of pain, tenacity, joy, love and power may never be recovered but I believe that to some extent they guide the daughters who follow. Our daughters will carve out their lives in unique ways, navigating their own challenges; yet somewhere deep down, they will know that those who walked before them, did so with courage.

ABSTRACT AND KEY TERMS

The survival and constitution of Hindu religious practices in South Africa are quite unique. Having survived indenture, racial discrimination, relocation, and the prejudices of Hindu reform movements, the *Amman* tradition, which has its roots in South India still seems to be very popular in South Africa. The literature around these practices as performed locally has been fairly limited. Even less prevalent on the local, literary landscape, are the stories of Hindu women. This study explores two narratives of a female *Amman* worshipper at the intersections of gender, religion and intimate partner violence. Employing intersectional and poststructural, feminist theoretical frameworks, the study interrogates and problematises how Hindu women survivors of intimate partner violence are textually represented. In this study, I interrogate the representations of Pat's faith and her experiences of intimate partner violence, while employing feminist poststructural discourse analysis. In deconstructing the narratives, my analysis shows that the lived experiences of Hindu survivors of intimate partner violence are intersectional. Furthermore, portraying Hindu women as either victims or goddesses tends to exoticise and essentialise them. Drawing on empirical and textual data, my analysis reveals that faith practices are fluid and reconstitutive. Thus, they are able to be performed differently. More attention needs to be paid to the complexity of women's experiences in order to understand that patriarchy is only one of the oppressions facing women of colour in South Africa. Transformation would require us to really listen to the voices from the edges.

Key terms and themes: *Goddess worship, Intimate partner violence, Narrative, Spirituality, Ways of knowing, Intersectionality, Feminism and Representation*

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background, Location and Context of Study

*'Shakti: Stories of Indian Women in South Africa'*¹ (Diesel 2007) is a compilation of narratives about and by Indian women compiled by Alleyn Diesel. Alleyn Diesel is a prolific white South African scholar of Hindu practices in South Africa and has produced several publications on the subject. In a short dissertation which is located within a programme on gender, religion and sexual and reproductive health, I interrogate two narratives within this publication which focus on a devout Hindu practitioner, Pat Pillay (also referred to as Padmani Naidoo). I examine the author's representation of Pat's experiences of intimate partner violence (IPV), her ways of dealing with her domestic circumstances and her religious fervour and activism.

Upon reading the narratives of Pat Pillay, I had three responses. Firstly, I was struck by how familiar she seemed to me. The first narrative, *Breaking the Silence*, revolves around her experiences of intimate partner violence. Pat Pillay was from my old neighbourhood, Northdale in Pietermaritzburg where I went to school with children who came from homes in which IPV, alcoholism and job insecurity was rife. My second reaction to *Breaking the Silence* was one of awe at the courage it must have taken for Pat to share her experiences of heinous psychological and physical abuse. As Catherine Reismann says "telling stories about difficult times in our lives creates order allowing a search for meaning and enabling connection with others" (2008:10).

In the second of the narratives, *Walking on Fire*, which is written by Diesel, we hear about Pat's religious devotion, her invocation of the Hindu goddess Kali and primarily about her 'feminist' activism around the overturning of a rule barring women from fire-walking at the Pietermaritzburg temple. Hence, my third response to the narratives was to muse on how Pat was represented within the narratives. Pat Pillay, as a Hindu woman, a survivor of intimate partner violence and an activist, is portrayed from Diesel's viewpoint as researcher which has been informed by her own location and ontology. As Stanley says ... "the

¹ I will refer to the primary text *Shakti: Stories of Indian Women in South Africa* as '*Shakti*' for the rest of the thesis, and Pat's narratives as the '*Shakti*' narratives. This is not to be confused with the word *shakti* which means power. The text '*Shakti*' will have a capital S and be within inverted commas, while the other remains in lowercase.

biographer' is a socially- located person, one who is sexed, raced, classed, aged [hence] any biographer's view is a socially located and necessarily partial one" (1992:7).

This led me to speculate on the concept of representation. I contend that, in South Africa, many stories are woven about the 'other' from the viewpoint of those who have the power to tell them (Mohanty, 2003). The strongest voice has come from those who have been the self-nominated gatekeepers of epistemology, those who have also been able to produce representations of ethnic and religious groups from an outside perspective. Initial analysis revealed that aspects of goddess worship from a phenomenological perspective underpin Pat Pillay's religious experience, practice and activism, but a closer reading reveals how closely her narrative is intertwined with Diesel's scholarly perspective.

My research sought to interrogate these texts at the intersections of religion, gender and intimate partner violence, within a poststructural feminist analytical framework which looks at how story is constructed, about whom, for whom and by whom. How is the Hindu woman, survivor of IPV and religious practitioner written about, and how is she read? Most importantly, I ask, how these representations may be deconstructed and reconstructed in a re-telling and re-reading of the narratives (Nadar, 2006:78). In so doing, I will examine my own reflexivity, as an Indian woman and its bearing on the narratives.

1.2 Positionality of the Researcher

I locate myself in the ambiguous position of being insider and outsider (McCutcheon, 1999) to the Tamil² religious practices as performed in the narratives. As aforementioned, my religious upbringing is Hinduism with a strong focus on Tamil traditional practices. I grew up frequenting the Mariamman temple in Pietermaritzburg, attending many of the religious functions including the fire-walking ceremony. I have not performed the fire-walking ceremony myself, although I have had friends who have done so in the past. My mother regularly carried Kavady³, taking vows for the continued health and well-being of our family.

² Tamil people are of South Indian Dravidian origin and in South Africa make up a little less than half of the Indian diaspora. While not all Tamil people are Hindu, the traditional practices of those who are, vary quite considerably to the North Indian Sanskritic practices.

³ The Kavady festival is held in honour of Lord Muruga and is a propitiatory ritual in which devotees carry various 'Kavadies', either brass pots with milk or poles balanced over the shoulder. Devotees perform the ritual for continued well-being or to show gratitude for prayers answered. For more information see Pillay, P. 1996. The Kavady ritual as a paradigm of Hindu religio-cultural expression. *Southern African Journal for Folklore Studies*, 7, 13-25.

As I moved out of the township⁴ and neighbourhoods which had helped to preserve many of the traditions, the focus on the rituals became of less value to me and there was a greater need for me to access spirituality wherever I was geographically situated. My spirituality is now performed differently to how it was in my childhood, and while I am still a Hindu, I also recognise that identity is fluid and not bound to ancient tradition. I am also aware of the difficulties which certain cultures have had to face, in trying to survive in South Africa, yet survive, they have. I, therefore, come to this study as a researcher and a Tamil woman with questions. These are not only questions about the religious practices I grew up with and how they may intersect with intimate partner violence, but also questions about how they have been written about by scholars and ethnographers. As an academic and as one who is interested in the voices from the periphery – who is also located on the periphery – I acknowledge my scepticism of the ‘grand narrative’. While the narratives within ‘*Shakti*’ are constituted of what might be viewed as ‘local’ narratives hence giving voice to the voiceless; my view is, that subtly woven within the compilation of these peripheral ‘voices’ is still a ‘master narrative’, or layers of other ‘master narratives’. Embedded in this is not only the power of the biographer to represent these marginalised voices (Mohanty, 2003), but also the dominant narratives of the higher Brahmanical forms of Hinduism which I will discuss in Chapter Four⁵. Although, I am aware that my own subjectivity impacts on the ways in which I have deconstructed and interpreted the texts, I have attempted to be rigorous in my methodological and analytical processes.

1.3 The Phenomenon

At the onset of this study, I had been intrigued by Pat Pillay’s activism and the courage – in other words the agency – with which she was able to fight the systemic restrictions of the temple while surviving the violence of her marriage. Embedded in both narratives is her faith in the goddess and her unwavering commitment to her religious practice. Originally, I had planned to interview Pat in order to gain closer insight into the relationship between her religiosity and her experiences of intimate partner violence. After making contact with the author of ‘*Shakti*’ Alleyn Diesel, I discovered that Pat had died of cancer in 2009. It was during this meeting that my focus changed. I realised that the phenomenon that now interested me was the representation of Pat Pillay’s narrative within the

⁴ Townships are a legacy handed down by apartheid South Africa, when strong legislative measures were taken to geographically segregate the four different race groups. Indians, Coloureds and Blacks were relocated to separate townships, usually on the outskirts of cities.

⁵ See also the key term Hinduism later in this chapter

religious and domestic paradigm; in other words – my research would be based on Diesel’s research of Pat Pillay. Hence, the phenomenon interrogated in this study is how and why Pat Pillay is constructed in the way that she is.

Determined and fiery... powerful. You know, that was one of my first impressions of her when I first met her. She was commanding. You noticed her. And very devout. Absolutely committed to her religion. She actually really woke up every morning and lived for her religion. Mother Kali.

(Interview with Alleyn Diesel, description of Pat Pillay: 29 September 2016)

1.4 Research Questions

How are Hindu women characterised at the intersection of religion and intimate partner violence in Alleyn Diesel’s narrative representation of Pat Pillay?

1.5 Research Sub-Questions

1. What are the narrative representations of the Hindu women’s spiritual practices in *‘Shakti: Stories of Indian Women in South Africa’* ?
2. How is Pat Pillay portrayed in the context of Hindu spiritual practice and intimate partner violence in each of the two narratives? (Comparison of both narratives with empirical data)
3. Why are the narratives representing Hindu survivors of intimate partner violence, constructed in the way that they are?

1.6 Key terms

1.6.1 Hinduism

Although I use the broad term Hindu in my research question, the focus of this work is based on Tamil traditional practices with a focus on goddess worship or *Amman* (mother) worship in South Africa. Kamala Ganesh identifies four ‘Hinduisms’ as practiced by diasporic Indians namely, “brahmanical /sanskritic, regionally rooted devotional, local/folk and popular Hinduisms” (Ganesh, 2010:29). The Brahmanical traditions follow the classical scriptures like the ‘Mahabharata’ and the ancient Vedas and although the various forms of Hindu practice have, to an extent, merged and become hybridised in diasporic practices, some of the south Indian ritual practices are said to be influenced primarily by folk rituals. The rituals of fire-walking, the invocation of the *Amman* goddesses, animal sacrifices, and piercings are still practised in South Africa, mainly amongst the south Indian Hindus. Diesel

asserts that these spiritual practices bear a distinct resemblance to how they are practiced in certain parts of India (Diesel, 2002:6). In Chapter Four, I analyse the Hindu goddess drawing on hermeneutics offered by various scholars, focusing primarily on Kali and Draupadi. Both goddesses are pertinent to the fire-walking ritual practised in this context. Both goddesses can also be found in the Brahmanical texts and have developed *Amman* qualities in Tamil tradition. Quite interestingly, these festivals have gained popularity even amongst north Indians in South Africa (Kumar, 2013b:81).

While there are myriad Tamil traditions, such as Kavady, Mariamman or porridge prayers, purtassi and many more, which are still practiced in South Africa, they are not explored in this short dissertation. Hence, the term ‘Hindu spiritual practice’ refers, in this study, specifically to the worship of the *Amman* Goddess and the fire-walking ritual.

1.6.2 Intersectionality

I draw on the concept of intersectionality, as Kimberle Crenshaw frames it, as a coming together of oppressions (Crenshaw, 1991). Crenshaw says that gender issues and race issues are discussed and tackled separately yet in reality they intersect (Crenshaw, 1991:1244). The question of intersectionality within my case study of Pat Pillay through Alleyn Diesel’s lens is further complicated by class and caste. Acknowledging South Africa’s systemically divisive past and its contribution to a unique set of oppressions for various genres of people in this country, is the first step towards social justice. As Crenshaw succinctly states,

[T]he violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class. Moreover, ignoring difference within groups contributes to tension among groups (Crenshaw, 1991:1242).

Intersectionality also forms the basis of the Gender, Religion and Health programme, of which this study forms a part. The programme recognises that gender issues and, sexual and reproductive health rights when overlapped with religion creates an opportunity for religious or theological transformation. This concept will be discussed in the final chapter.

1.7 Brief synopsis the narratives of Pat Pillay⁶

1.7.1 Narrative One: Breaking the Silence

⁶ Full versions of the narratives are attached in Appendix E

According to Alleyn Diesel, Pat Pillay approached Diesel with this narrative just before '*Shakti*' went to press. Diesel recorded this story, edited it and read the edited version to Pat for her approval. The story entitled *Breaking the Silence* is Pat's confessional about her years of abuse at the hands of her husband, Reuben, during their thirty years of marriage. The family lived in Northdale, an Indian township, at the time of these incidents. During the course of their marriage (1973-2003), Reuben throws her out of a moving car, burns her hair, breaks her bones, stabs her, continually rapes her and burns her with a lit cigarette. Reuben freely admits to having affairs which include him impregnating two of her younger sisters. She describes how one of her sisters and Reuben attempt to poison her. She manages to keep all of these events a close secret from her family for many years "trying to make out that all was okay and that my marriage was fine" (Diesel, 2007:160). Pat remains with Reuben until the children are adults whereupon she leaves him. There are attempts at reconciliation but Reuben's violence becomes worse. He rapes and stabs her again but she doesn't lay charges. Pat and Reuben eventually divorce but Pat leaves her children, Sharon, Mergen and Rogani with Reuben. Both Reuben and Pat are employed in menial work intermittently and Pat mentions not receiving money from Reuben for school fees or food, at times being unable to pay for electricity. Her relationship with her children is initially strained after her departure but at the time of telling this story, all of her children frequently visit her. She moves in with Joey, a friend and a fellow fire walker, and they are eventually married by Hindu rites. In the interview Diesel reiterates that she had been unaware of this trajectory prior to 2005.

1.7.2 Narrative Two: *Walking across Fire*

The second of the narratives about Pat Pillay, forms part of a compilation of the experiences of five different Hindu women, focusing on their worship of the *Amman* Goddesses. These stories are related by Diesel and from her observations, interviews and relationships with the women. Here, Diesel describes Pat the devotee, giving some background to her childhood of poverty, health conditions and ability to experience trance⁷.

There is mention of a blood sacrifice in which Pat drinks the blood of animals which have been sacrificed for Kali. Pat's claim is that she had stopped menstruating and "she no longer wanted to have sexual relations" (Diesel, 2007: 196) with her husband. She begins a little temple at the back of her garden where several people come to her for counselling and

⁷ Trance is experienced by many devotees of Kali, Mariamman, Draupadi and other gods and goddesses. The spirit of these god/goddesses are embodied by the devotee where he or she 'becomes' the deity who is able to bestow blessings to others.

healing while she is in a trance. Many of the problems experienced by her 'clients' are domestic issues.

Diesel describes many of the possession trances and the factors leading up to the trance each time. The crux of this trajectory, however, revolves around a banning of women from fire-walking at the Mariamman temple in Pietermaritzburg. The temple committee at the time were all male. Furthermore, the Mariamman temple was the only fire-walking temple in KwaZulu-Natal issuing such a ban. Pat and other women, who regard the fire-walking as a cleansing ritual – “Walking through the fire is proving your ...purity to people” (Diesel, 2007:201) – must travel to Durban temples in order to perform their rituals. Pat begins to question the reasons given by the temple leaders for the ban. The committee contends that women are more likely to suffer burns because they wear long saris. Menstruating women were also seen as unclean for ritual. In 1996, Pat is put in touch with journalists and her concerns are published in two separate newspaper articles. The response to these articles from the public is in favour of Pat's plea. There is later a petition which Pat initiates, calling on the committee to lift the ban. The committee, however, are dismissive of the petition.

A year later, Pat and her cousin, rebelliously walk on the fire in Pietermaritzburg without being granted permission. They are lifted off the coals by temple officials but the act is welcomed by others who supported her petition. The incident, the petition and the newspaper articles puts pressure on the committee to rethink the ban. Eventually in 1997, women are once again allowed to participate in the ritual and continue to do so.

1.8 Conclusion

In this chapter I offered a broad overview of the background, location and context of the study, in which some of the key words and concepts applicable to this body of work are expanded on. The main research problem, critical questions and research objective are explored, where after, I iterated the phenomenon being addressed as well as the significance of the study. This being a qualitative study, I have stated my own positionality as the researcher from a contextual and theoretical perspective. The chapter also included a brief synopsis of the two narratives.⁸

The second chapter explores the literature and theories around the themes which have emerged during this study. Chapter Three is a combination of the theoretical frameworks which were applied to the data and, the methodology, methods and analytic tools with which

⁸ Full versions of the narratives are attached in Appendix E

the textual and empirical data were interrogated. This chapter also investigates what steps were taken to ensure a reliable methodological process. In Chapter Four, I elaborate on the tools of analysis and the method used. My analysis involves deconstructing the text and, by implication, the representations of Pat. The section entitled *The deification of Pat* focusses on the similarities of Pat's textual representation with the *Amman* goddess, and the role of the biographer in producing Pat in this way. Chapter Five, contains the second part of the analysis in which I critically compare the two narratives – one of which provides insight into Pat's experiences of intimate partner violence and the other, which focusses on Pat in her religious practices. This chapter is made up of three sections, the first of which shows the parallels and contradictions between the two narratives, and how they meet at the site of Pat's body. The second section looks at the relationship between the biographer and the subject, looking also at the nuanced power relations between them. The textual and empirical data are brought into conversation within this chapter. Chapter Five constitutes the conclusion and findings of the study.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I offer a thematic literature review which will focus on the key themes: embodiment, intersectionality, intimate partner violence and spirituality, the Hindu goddess and feminism, narrative, and representation.

The first theme of embodiment and the various historical and theoretical underpinnings concerning the body, centres on the embodied experiences of a woman; her experiences of physical abuse, her experiences of the divine through embodied ritual and, finally, her resistance as actualised through her body. Therefore many of the overarching theories around the body are significant to this study.

2.1 *Embodiment*

Scholars have noted that western discourse dating back to Plato privileged soul/mind over body (Grosz, 1994, Spelman, 1982), leading to a clear binary which aligned men to the mind and women to the body. Spelman iterates that in the denigration of the body, women, by association, were deemed to be less than men. Furthermore, says Spelman, early feminists inherited this fear of the body or what she refers to as ‘somatophobia’, wanting to transcend their bodily encumbrances in search of more intellectual pursuits. As such, early feminists did little to bridge the mind/body binary thus perpetuating the already scathing view of the body and its association with all things profane and inferior (Spelman, 1982:119). This is critiqued by Moira Gatens (Gatens, 1996), who argues for a more deconstructive approach to feminism. According to Gatens most feminists have either attempted to reshape existing socio-political theories to fit into a suitable feminist discourse, or, on the other hand, completely dismissed the historical/theoretical – and patriarchal – underpinnings of the body. Based on the Foucauldian principle (Foucault, 1980) that power is ubiquitous and insidiously ingrained in everyday life, Gatens asserts that an interrogatory and deconstructive approach is necessary in order to subvert power relations. The body, in this case, becomes the vehicle which is not only subjected to various historical power inscriptions but also a possible site of resistance and destabilisation (Gatens, 1996:120-121).

Questions of how one experiences pain, trauma, power and healing through the body are embedded within the focus of this research. Hence, Merleau-Ponty (1962) , Grosz (1994), and Butler (1988) provide helpful arguments for the experiences of the body with a move

away from Cartesian philosophies of dualism. While Merleau-Ponty's theory on phenomenology (1962) expounds the importance of the body and of lived experiences, feminists like Grosz (1994) critique Merleau-Ponty (1962) for his focus, primarily, on the male experience and the male body. Merleau-Ponty asserts that consciousness is embodied and that we experience the world and make sense of the world through the body. The sensory and intellectual are not binary opposites, nor is the mind superior to the body, but they are both necessary for how the world is perceived. Therefore, according to Merleau-Ponty, the body is at once subject and object, and its relationship with its surroundings is what determines the perception (Grosz, 1994). The concept of the body as the centre of focus rather than being peripheral or subordinate to the intellect is one of Merleau-Ponty's main arguments. Grosz contends, however, that Merleau-Ponty had not taken into account sexual difference. She also argues that even though many of the male theorists had engaged with theories of the body, they had not interrogated the overarching associations of what embodiment might mean to the feminist project and the specificities of the female body. Butler (Appelrouth and Edles, 2010) observes that sexuality is actually fluid and that like Grosz's 'Volatile Body' (1994), the sexed body is a construct produced through performativity and is therefore fluid, thus challenging normative perceptions. Meanwhile Grosz (1994) argues against the containment and generalisation of, specifically, the sexed body, and its experiences and its reification; some of her argument can be appropriated for the project of the marginalised body. Reclaiming the full and ambiguous experience of the person in my narratives can be understood using the theories of Grosz and Butler. Although neither feminist approach takes into account the specificities of the experiences encountered by a Hindu survivor of intimate partner violence, both Grosz and Butler assert that new ways of seeing the body is possible. Therefore, using the frameworks of Butler's performativity (1998) and Grosz's 'Volatile Body' (1994) one can begin to deconstruct some of the implicit inscriptions made upon the gendered and sexed body by prevailing and dominant discourse.

2.2 *Intersectionality*

In the case of my research, the body in question is not only deemed sexually inferior but also inferior in terms of race, caste and class in the South African context, hence it is significant to take into consideration the pervasive western discourse and its implications for how the body is viewed. In South Africa, the indentured labourers from India – specifically the South Indian Tamil contingent – brought with them several customs and folkloric practices which survived largely from oral tradition (Desai and Vahed, 2007, Diesel and

Maxwell, 1993). The embodied rituals such as fire walking and Kavady practices of the South Indian community, met with disapproval, not only by the ruling whites but also by Hindu reformists, who viewed the practices as barbaric, and made strides towards embracing philosophies which privileged scripture over ritual (Diesel and Maxwell, 1993). I, therefore, believe that an intersectional approach, as theorised by Crenshaw (1991), is useful for interrogating and understanding, what Hill-Collins refers to as, the ‘matrix of domination’ (Appelrouth and Edles, 2010:338) which contributes to the disparaging views of this particular body.

Patricia Hill-Collins (2000), bell hooks (1984) and Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) investigate and explore the need for an intersectional approach to feminist perspectives concerning black and other racially marginalised women. While Hill-Collins points out that black women in the US face oppressions based on race, class, gender, and sexuality and that these oppressions overlap and intersect, Crenshaw acknowledges these oppressions as unique and specific to Black women, thereby bringing a sense of community and solidarity based on these oppressions.

Many feminists who speak outside of the western discourse agree that the experiences of women on the margins, are imbued with complexity and therefore relative to their specific situations (Spivak, 1988, Mohanty, 2003). Crenshaw states that issues of race or that of gender based violence is often addressed in isolation, but that these issues need to be viewed in their totality. The intersectional approach when dealing with feminist issues becomes crucial in addressing the specifics of experience. As Hankivsky observes,

Intersectionality challenges practices that privilege any specific axis of inequality, such as race, class, or gender and emphasizes the potential of varied and fluid configurations of social locations and interacting social processes in the production of inequities (Hankivsky, 2012:1712).

The intersectional approach, therefore, takes cognisance of difference and the various aspects which contribute towards those differences. Hill-Collins and Crenshaw observe that the intersectional approach to feminism reclaims and voices the particular standpoint of the black woman in the US (Appelrouth and Edles, 2010). In so doing, resistance and opposition to the various oppressions would also have to intersect thus providing a platform for social and community transformation which could benefit communities which are affected by similar issues. While intersectionality as it pertains to Black feminism is useful to my study, it is important to understand that the circumstances affecting Black women in the US are quite different to those which inform the women of the Indian diaspora in South Africa.

Feminist issues in South Africa are complex, given the divisive effects of apartheid and, more so, the privileging of the white minority in avenues of education and knowledge production. The ordinary lived experiences of the South Indian community in South Africa are also influenced by other factors such as migration, class, indenture (Desai & Vahed, 2007), and faith which contribute to experiences of the Hindu survivor of intimate partner violence. The theories around intersectionality and identity politics (Crenshaw, 1991) not only offer a different perspective to understanding a particular standpoint, but assert that hidden feminisms and resistances reveal themselves within the lived experiences of women.

Hankivsky (2012) and Crenshaw (1991) look at the necessity of ‘examining how social locations and structural forces interact to shape and influence human experiences’ (2012:1713). In South Africa, the effects of the Group Areas Act persist, at once keeping various racial identities separate whilst perpetuating the exclusion of peripheral voices (Govinden, 2008). Govinden investigates the marginalisation of Indian women writers who have been engaged in the literary field. Her investigation draws attention to the question of who tells the story of the South African Indian woman. This question bears significance to my study because it iterates my interrogation of the ‘*Shakti*’ texts which have been compiled by a South African white woman about South African Indian women.

2.3 *Intimate Partner Violence, Spirituality and Agency*

While intersectionality requires the scholar to take cognisance of factors such as race and class, when it comes to victims of rape and intimate partner violence, Gqola warns against profiling perpetrators according to race, class, ethnicity or religion (2015:11). Gqola points out that it is a fallacy to assume that poverty breeds more rapists (2015:12), an untruth which she believes takes the focus away from the issue of rape being a ‘crime of power’ (Gqola, 2015:11). The main argument to come from Gqola is to refocus on the rapist or perpetrator of IPV, thereby demanding accountability from the perpetrator.

Messina-Dysert (2012), on the other hand, takes her attention to the victim or survivor of abuse, exploring how rape could lead to a spiritual death in the victims of these abuses. Defining spirituality as ‘the mystical experience of the individual’ (Messina-Dysert, 2012:122), she locates this spirituality at the centre of a woman’s selfhood and identity, which contribute to her selfhood, agency and self-determination. Furthermore, she asserts, that the invasive nature of rape has the power to infiltrate that spiritual centre and create a disconnection in the victim thereby stripping her of her spirituality. She examines the

victimhood of women who have been subjected to rape and asserts that these victims could ‘resurrect’ their spirituality and thus their sense of self (Messina-Dysert, 2012:129). This healing and returning towards spirituality is a process according to Messina-Dysert (2012). Gillum, on the other hand, sees spirituality as a ‘coping strateg[y]’ (Gillum et al., 2006:240). Not only does the organisational aspect of religious or faith groups offer support, they also felt ‘unconditional love and acceptance from their supreme being’ (2006:240). Like Messina-Dysert, Gillum finds a strong correlation between spirituality and identity, and makes stronger associations between spirituality and community support.

2.4 *The Hindu Goddess and Feminism*

Pat Pillay, the woman central to this narrative analysis, is a devotee of Hindu goddesses. Many western scholars have investigated Hindu goddesses and the possible significance of goddess worship to feminism. David Kinsley (1988) traces the scriptural and ritual origins of the many female deities. Analysing the Rg-veda, the earliest known documentation of Hindu philosophy and mythology, Kinsley shows the mythological histories and incarnations of goddesses who remain popular in the Hindu tradition, such as *Laxmi*, *Kali*, *Parvati* and *Durga*. Kinsley offers insight into, what has come to be referred to as, the ‘benign goddesses’ and the ‘fierce goddesses’ (Diesel and Maxwell, 1993, Kinsley, 1988) in the Vedic tradition; with the benign goddesses usually associated with devotion (bhakti) and dharma (right path) and the fierce goddesses, with death, destruction and rage while also representational of and synonymous with the liberation from karmic cycles (moksha) and power (shakti) (Narayan, 1999). Foulston (2002), like Kinsley highlights the binary representations of the fierce and benign goddesses, although Kinsley’s analysis does show a richer and more textured interpretation of these goddesses. The benign goddesses are almost always consorts to their more powerful male partners while the fierce goddesses are independent and seldom married (Foulston, 2002). Although Kinsley also investigates the folkloric deities of the South Indian traditions, he does not discuss the goddess Draupadi who is central to the fire walking ceremony. Foulston does focus on the fire walking ceremony as performed in India, comparing two major cities in Tamil Nadu and Orissa.

Several Hindu goddesses have become synonymous with having endured hardships and being devoted wives (Hiltebeitel, 1988). Draupadi, the heroine of the Mahabharata, was one of these goddesses. Hiltebeitel, Foulston and Diesel (2002) offer an interpretation of Draupadi, as she is portrayed in the Mahabharata, as a woman who has endured physical and moral humiliation and abuse and survives to witness the destruction of her enemies. Many of

the fire walking traditions have South Indian connections to *Amman* (mother) worship and have bearing on studying aspects of the divine feminine (Foulston, 2002). In the Brahmanical account of the Mahabharata, Draupadi is not seen as a goddess but in the South Indian versions she is transformed into a phoenix-like goddess (Hiltebeitel, 1988) who is able to cleanse herself from her past abuses by walking on fire. Through a South Indian interpretation, Draupadi 'had attained the status of the fierce South Indian goddess of fire, who requires propitiation, but can also bestow great blessings on her devotees (Diesel and Maxwell, 1993:51).

Foulston compares *Amman* worship in two temples in different South Indian cities in India. She observes that 'the fire walk is seen as an honour and a privilege rather than a punishment' (2002:139).

The history of the diaspora and the ways in which many of the traditions and religious practices have come to survive in South Africa is discussed in several publications. South Indian folk deities such as Draupadi and Marriamman have come to play a central role in the Tamil rituals within South Africa (Diesel 1993). As mentioned before, however, these South Indian traditions – brought across from India by, mainly indentured labourers (Desai & Vahed, 2007) and passed down orally from generation to generation – were under derogatory attack from Neo-Hindu movements (Kumar, 2013b). The Hindu reformist movement, for example, made attempts to 'rationalise' the face of Hinduism by claiming that ancient texts, such as the Vedas, were the ultimate word on Hinduism. Rituals and rites as performed by many of the South Indian Hindu communities were deemed archaic, and organisations such as the Arya Samaj and the Hare Krishna movements attempted to distance itself from traditions such as Kavady and fire walking (Kumar, 2013, Diesel, 1993:63). The Hindu reformist movement also attempted to intellectualise Hindu religious practice and made assertions of monotheistic belief systems (Kumar, 2013). Kumar notes that the Hindu reformists were afraid that Hindu practitioners would convert to Christianity and that ritual practices would not survive in South Africa. Interestingly, much of the Neo-Hindu reform movement is immersed in the Brahmanical tradition, which is itself, according to Uma Chakravarti, steeped in patriarchy and caste politics (Chakravarti, 1993). "Caste hierarchy and gender hierarchy" she says, "are the organising principles of the Brahmanical social order and are closely interconnected" (1993: 579). Although caste is not a legal issue in South Africa, underlying ideologies based on the caste system in India have been inherited; and what is deemed religiously superior and inferior in South Africa has been informed by prior caste distinctions.

Kumar (2013) and Diesel (1993) note that the so-called “inferior” and “archaic” practices, particularly *Amman* worship has survived the strong opposition. Although scholars and proponents of *Amman* worship, such as Diesel, rally for women to understand the feminist underpinnings of *Amman* worship (Diesel, 2002), rituals such as fire walking and Kavady have survived and remain strong from an oral and ritual understanding. Popular literature by Tamil preservationists have made attempts to document some of the reasons and history surrounding *Amman* worship and those seeking reasons for their practice are usually informed by these documents. Diesel observes that there is a ‘discrepancy between the respect paid to these divine images [forms of *Amman*] and the daily realities of Hindu women’ (2002: 5).

2.5 *Agency*

The next theme which frames my analysis is agency. Chandra Mohanty (1988) and Patricia Hill-Collins (2000) assert that resistance is always present even within marginalised communities and one is never completely a victim (Said, 1979). bell hooks explores power, emphasising that women can exercise a “basic personal power” by refusing to accept an oppressive shaping of their realities thus even the uneducated and unsophisticated resist in this way. Lois McNay in *Gender and Agency*, argues that, theoretically, ‘practices of subjection’ (McNay, 2013:2) are highlighted in identity formulation in dominant discourse, thereby implying that victimhood is a static condition for some women, and more recently, women from the periphery, Black, Indian, Muslim, Third World. McNay asserts that identity is always in a state of flux and when located in the body “is the threshold through which the subject’s lived experience of the world is neither pure object nor pure subject” (2013:33). McNay links embodiment, gender and agency and further examines the significance of narrative in the quest for identity and agency.

2.6 *Narrative*

Stories are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world; they also become the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history. (Said, 1993:xiii)

In a postcolonial and poststructural feminist framework, the power of narrative has come to be widely recognised. As Said (1994) reflects in the statement above, much of the narrative prior to the postcolonial era has been one sided. The marginalised have been written about but via western eyes (Mohanty: 1988). Yet Said (1994) also suggests that story can be used to reclaim ones place in history, and is, therefore, an act of resistance and agency by the

previously marginalised. Riessman posits that narratives not only create the space for individuals to remember and re-imagine their lives, but that narratives can also mobilise social action (Riessman, 2008:8).

2.7 Conclusion

I have identified several key themes which are pertinent to my investigation. I have read a wide range of literature written about Hinduism and Hindu goddesses by western scholars both from South Africa and abroad. Several publications of what is referred to as popular literature have been produced for the Tamil diaspora by preservationists of Tamil cultural and religious heritage in this country. The folk traditions and rituals have mainly been passed down orally from generation to generation as a part of a cultural inheritance. The dearth of religious and ritual documentation marking the natural dynamism in how rituals are performed has led many a Hindu scholar to research the roots of their own religiosity in ethnographic and anthropological texts. In perusing the many texts of Indian scholars, I have also found that the voice of the South African Tamil woman to be somewhat tenuous. The production of a book like '*Shakti*' was possible because of this gap and lack of voice. I interrogate ways of knowing and epistemological privilege in this context and ask why these silences exist.

There are also silences around the subject of intimate partner violence. Although Pat's experience occurred more than fifteen years ago, rape and intimate partner violence is still rife in South Africa and the world (Gqola, 2015). Gqola coins the term "unrapable" or women who are deemed impossible to rape (Gqola, 2015:31). Among these are sex workers, wives and, slaves, whose experiences of any violence, Gqola argues, are met with incredulity. While religion and intimate partner violence are 'voiced' separately in Pat's narratives, another narrative emerges at the intersection of faith and IPV. Within this intersection, I investigate issues of Pat's agency and the violations of her agency imposed on her body – whether it is physically attacked or whether it is banned from performing rituals. Finally, from the theories around these concepts, I interrogate how the biographical and autobiographical elements of the narratives have been storied, how they have been allowed to be storied and why.

The lack of written word about experiences which may resonate for me, as a woman of Indian descent, whatever that may mean in a confusing country, is the biggest tragedy. Communities are rich with anecdote, memory and movement – circumstances change, experiences are dynamic – yet this textured trajectory has not been sufficiently documented

by the people who experience them. Without enough documentation, the ordinary and intricate complexities of a changing daily life, is in danger of being reduced or even misrepresented, and this in no way suggests that the work done by ‘outside’ scholars, ethnographers or anthropologists is not valuable. In many ways qualitative research becomes an excavatory exercise for the researcher and this has certainly been my experience in this study. In delving into Pat’s stories, I also get to understand a portion of my own story while unearthing the complexity of the construct of ethnic identity (Gunaratnam, 2003). In the next chapter, I discuss the theoretical frameworks and methodology used in order to do so.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH DESIGN: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS AND METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In Chapter Two, I offered a thematic review of literature that explored some of the pertinent themes which have emerged from the data and explore how these themes have been conceptualised theoretically and methodologically. Furthermore, I identified certain gaps and silences within the literature with regards to my research. In this chapter I discuss the research design. Here, I introduce the **theoretical frameworks** adopted in the research design and motivate as to why these align with the rest of the design. The **research methodology** which includes the sampling, methods and tools utilised for data production and data analysis follows the theoretical framework. This chapter also explores my own reflexivity as the researcher.

3.1 Theoretical Frameworks

3.1.1 Poststructural Feminism

I have used a postcolonial and poststructural feminist theoretical framework to explore the issues of gender, religion and sexual and reproductive health rights inherent in the textual and empirical data. The feminist lens, particularly from a Black feminist epistemic perspective (Hill-Collins 1991) has facilitated a critical examination of this data as possible ‘master narratives’.

A given epistemological framework specifies not only what ‘knowledge’ is and how to recognize it, but who are the ‘knowers’ and by what means someone becomes one, and also the means by which competing knowledge-claims are adjudicated and some rejected in favour of another/others. (Stanley and Wise, 1993:188)

In exploring the texts and empirical data critically, a poststructural approach was necessary to challenge the ways in which knowledge has been produced about the ‘other’. Weedon asserts that poststructuralism is relevant to feminism as it, too, deals with subjectivity, knowledge production, power and the possibility of change (Weedon, 1997). She says that,

Feminist poststructuralism is able... to explain the working of power on behalf of specific interests and to analyse the opportunities for resistance to it. (Weedon, 1997:40)

On the other hand, Nnaemeka contends that:

Poststructuralism's focus on discourse and aesthetics instead of social action encourages the egocentricity and individualism that undermine collective action. (Nnaemeka, 2004:364)

Despite Nnaemeka's critique of poststructuralism, I believe in the value of "destabilising subject and text" (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000:149) and hence, interrogating the centre of power and knowledge. Understanding how knowledge is produced, how it comes to be constructed in a certain way, who benefits from this construction and whose voice may be advanced or compromised in the process, is also an important form of social action. Part of this social action is to acknowledge other 'ways of knowing' and recognise the nuanced power dynamics inherent in narrative representations. Gqola points out that "writing and imagining *is* doing – it is action and politically consequential, not retreat" (2015:26)⁹. Here I would like to add that re-writing and re-imagining is just as important. Poststructuralism also affords an opportunity to problematise and challenge "the single story" (Adichie, 2009).

Hence, the poststructural feminist approach has facilitated an interpretative, reflexive, interrogative and, possibly, subversive analytical platform with which to critique the representations of Pat Pillay in the two biographies. This approach recognises, firstly that Pat's lived experiences are embedded within a real and specific system of oppression (post-apartheid South Africa, in a racially divided township, in poverty), while on the other hand, her identity is constructed through 'social discourse'. As Gunaratnam suggests, "social discourses and lived experiences are co-constituted" (2003:7). In other words, within the context of my research, although a poststructural framework challenges the idea that Pat's identity is fixed or predetermined because of her religion, it does not seek to undermine her lived experience (Mohanty, 2003:510). In recognising these nuances, I have also used intersectionality as a theoretical lens.

3.1.2 *Intersectionality*

Intersectionality is embedded in this study on three platforms. Firstly I have examined the texts at the intersections of gender, religion and sexual and reproductive health rights. I have interrogated how Hindu religious practice, intimate partner violence and feminism might intersect within the context of the two primary texts and the supporting textual material. This

⁹ Emphasis mine

multidisciplinary lens, therefore, seeks to understand the relationship of these overlapping paradigms.

Secondly, intersectionality, as referred to by Crenshaw (1991) and Hill-Collins (2000), recognises that many women are subject to a “matrix of domination” (Collins, 2000:39). For women on the margins, oppressions such as race, class, gender and religious alterity, meld to form a network of social problems which cannot be treated in isolation from each other. In the context of South Africa, various oppressions continue to exist as debris from the apartheid legacy, with identity politics still deeply situated (entrenched) in systemic and institutional inequity. I assert that these unique intersections contribute to the shaping of the experiences and resistances of Pat Pillay within the narratives.

The third intersection is situated in the analysis of the texts and interview transcripts. In other words, there are intersecting layers to these stories and how they could be interpreted. These layers of story include its “literal meaning”, its “symbolic meaning” and the biographer’s understanding of the text (Sosulski 2010: 40).

A fourth layer of inquiry pertinent to this research is my own standpoint and interpretation of the text.

The various intersections of theme, theory and analysis will, I believe, enhance an understanding of the complexities inherent in the narratives, thereby excavating and deconstructing the “subaltern” (Spivak, 1988) voice.

3.2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.2.1 Research Paradigm

Based on the theoretical framework of poststructural feminism and intersectionality, I have used a qualitative research methodology in order to interpret, interrogate and deconstruct the data produced in this study. The qualitative research paradigm places emphasis on the production of data through this theoretical lens rather than merely the collection of data, because “interpretation precedes data” (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000:261). Within this paradigm is the recognition that data is always produced and influenced by the researcher’s ontology, background, biases and location.

3.2.2 Producing the Data

Textual Data

The ‘Shakti’ Narratives

My methodology comprises a combination of empirical and textual data production. At the beginning of my research, I had envisioned producing my data purely from the ‘*Shakti*’ stories, interrogating them in relation to each other. As other questions began to emerge from these initial readings, I considered interviewing Pat Pillay. An empirical angle, especially an unmediated account of her experiences documented in the texts would, I felt, enrich the data production. Alleyn Diesel, who agreed to a preliminary meeting, notified me that Pat Pillay had died in 2009. Diesel was very helpful in steering me towards the prolific literature which she has produced about the Hindu community in KwaZulu-Natal, as well as newspaper archival material about Pat Pillay and the issues of the fire-walking ban. This body of work by Diesel, as well as my informal meeting with her, spurred other questions, strongly contributing to the concept of representation within my research questions. With the understanding that “*any* biographer’s view is a socially located and necessarily partial one” (Stanley, 1992:7), I wanted to investigate the ways in which the biographer’s location might ‘story’ and inscribe someone like Pat Pillay, a devout Hindu practitioner, an activist and a survivor of IPV.

*Alleyn Diesel's Articles and Papers on Amman Worship*¹⁰

Diesel's literature on *Amman* goddesses, Hinduism and Hindu women made up a considerable body of the textual data. Many of these papers and articles focused on the worship of *Amman* goddess being potentially empowering for women. These scholarly articles are written for an academic audience while the narratives featured in '*Shakti*' was published for a wider public audience. These articles are significant in that they are reflectors of the author's perspective and, underscore some of Diesel's conclusions about *Amman* worship, Hindu women and their relationship to suffering. The integration of the '*Shakti*' texts and the academic articles constitute the textual data of this research.

Newspaper Articles

There are selected newspaper articles focussing on Pat's fire walking activism, in which other representations of Pat's narrative are highlighted¹¹. The articles form part of the secondary data and provide the context and the viewpoint of a selected group of journalists. While several other newspapers –including The Post, a provincial newspaper specifically focussing on 'Indian' matters – would most probably have covered some of the events of the firewalking, I was unable to trace these in the system. The choice of articles and the journalists who cover the stories are an important element to the analysis of the narratives because they form part of Diesel's records of the events. The journalists are also part of Diesel's network. I will elaborate further on this in the analysis in chapter 4.

Empirical Data

The empirical aspect of my methodology comprised four semi-structured interviews, two with author, Alleyn Diesel and two with former journalist, Nalini Naidoo¹².

Interviews

I chose to interview Alleyn Diesel, primarily, because I believed it would enrich my understanding of the author's reflections of Pat Pillay within '*Shakti*' narratives. Diesel had known Pat Pillay and observed her spiritual practices for over ten years. Many of the

¹⁰ Diesel, A. 1998. The empowering image of the divine mother: A South African Hindu woman worshipping the goddess. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 13, 73-90, Diesel, A. 2002. Tales of Women's Suffering: Draupadi and other *Amman* Goddesses as Role Models for Women. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 17, 5, Diesel, A. & Maxwell, P. 1993. *Hinduism in Natal: A brief guide*, University of Natal Press.

¹¹ Appendix F

¹² Nalini uses the married surname, Dixon now. At the time of publication she went as Nalini Naidoo. I will refer to her as Naidoo throughout this study

interview questions focused on her interactions and relationship with Pat Pillay, before, during and after her religious activist pursuits and during her experiences of IPV. Secondly, I wanted to interrogate Diesel's own narrative within these texts through her ontological positioning as a researcher and biographer. The interview material could build upon the data extracted from the academic articles, further elaborating on Diesel's historic connection to Hinduism in South Africa, and her scholarly and personal relationship with Hindu women.

I chose, as my second interview participant, former journalist Nalini Naidoo, who I had been told was familiar with Pat Pillay and had been a journalist at *The Natal Witness* during the time that the petition against the fire walking ban had been published. I wanted to gather Naidoo's perspective on Pat, the context of the narratives, Naidoo's own relationship with Pat and, finally Naidoo's memory of Diesel's relationship with Pat.

Interview Process

I contacted Diesel and Naidoo in advance, informing both of my request and the parameters of my study. Diesel agreed to two, one hour interviews, on condition that she was allowed to see the questions prior to the interview. An interview schedule ¹³ was designed uniquely for each participant in that the questions differed for each of them. The schedule was designed as a semi-structured interview thereby encouraging my participants to engage in the narrative unfolding of data (Riessman, 2001). The semi-structured interview allowed for greater conversation and hence, richer data (Riessman 2008:23).

The interview schedule was emailed to Alleyn Diesel a week prior to the first interview. Diesel chose the time and venue – the Tatham Art Gallery – a place which she frequented and was comfortable within. We met over coffee and although there were some background sounds and one or two interruptions from people who knew her, the interview went fairly smoothly. Diesel was given an opportunity to peruse the informed consent form¹⁴ and we commenced with the interview after she had signed the form. I recorded the interview on my smartphone and asked if I could also back-up the interview on a video camera. Diesel was comfortable with this but I averted the lens of the video camera. The back-up proved to be valuable because the sound quality was clearer than the phone. Diesel had read through the interview schedule and both stories to refresh her memory to the incidents from nearly twenty years ago. I was aware that the time that had passed would impact on the

¹³ Appendix D

¹⁴ Appendix C

trustworthiness of the memories. The fallibility of memory would prove significant during my interview with Nalini Naidoo. I will, however, elaborate on that later in this chapter.

Diesel brought along her own copy of '*Shakti*' and many of the articles which she had written. Although we began the interview with the first question, some of Diesel's answers overlapped as she described what she remembered about Pat. I also prompted and encouraged elaboration whenever possible. Although we had scheduled an hour session for each interview, this session extended to nearly two hours. At its culmination, we had already covered the entire schedule of questions, albeit not in that particular order. The second interview was less structured and steered into a personal reflection on Diesel's part. I also engaged more with Diesel and it was less of an interview and more of a conversation. The first interview and excerpts of the second interview were transcribed. These were emailed to Diesel who returned them to me with a few typographical corrections.

My interviews with Nalini Naidoo did not unfold as smoothly as did those with Diesel. Naidoo had not had time to read the questions before our first meeting and needed to remind herself of the events of twenty years ago. The session was mainly social and vague in terms of details. We agreed to meet for the main interview a week from then. During this time Naidoo read through the '*Shakti*' narratives and found the article which she had written about the lifting on the ban. Upon reflecting on the dates, Naidoo determined that, although she had covered the lifting of the ban in 1999, she had actually not been involved with any of the petition coverage. Her CV placed her elsewhere during this time. She admitted, with some amusement, that having read so profusely about the temple ban and the circumstances around the petition, she had convinced herself of her personal involvement in the petition.

I was forced to acknowledge that in asking both Diesel and Naidoo to recount the incidents of twenty years ago, I would also be asking them to reconstruct the past from "memory with all its faults and tricks" (Stanley, 1992:62). In her reconstruction of the past, Naidoo had "fictionalised" her contribution to and coverage of the temple petition (Stanley, 1992:62). Hence both Diesel and Naidoo rely on the written documentation to reconstruct the past in a way which seems less fictitious. In Chapter five I will come back to how the interviews may contain elements of fiction in remembering the past, and how they may become a tool for destabilising the text.

3.2.3 Data Analysis Strategies

I used Ribbens' "voice-centred relational method" or VCRM (1997:136), to ask questions of both my transcripts and my textual data. Ribbens *et al* apply this method to transcripts but I found that it worked just as well on the two narratives. The method has two stages with the first stage comprising four readings, while stage two reveals the themes which emerge from these readings. The four readings in stage one encourage an examination of multiple perspectives: the first reading begins the overall structure and plot of the data, as well as, the researcher's (my own) response to the data (1997:126); and the second reading highlights "how the participant ... speaks about herself". At this stage I adapted the "voice-centred relational method" marginally by omitting the third reading and moving on to reading four, which places the responses of interview participants (and the responses of the text) within "broader social, political, cultural and structural contexts" (1997:132). In chapter four, I will expand on this method in greater detail. This approach to the texts and interview material provides multiple viewpoints to emerge while highlighting the complexity of the texts.

Amalgamating the interview transcriptions, the primary data and the secondary data, I went on to deconstruct the hidden layers of meaning within the data; to look at how these narratives may have been produced, and why they might have been produced in this particular way. In keeping with stage two, I began to extract strong theoretical concepts and themes which began to emerge from the close text reading of the data and the VCRM process. Themes which I felt were pertinent to addressing my key research questions were: representation, the inscribed body, ways of knowing and lived experience, agency and power, intersectionality and intimate partner violence.

As an analytical tool, in alignment with my theoretical framework, I used Baxter's feminist poststructuralist discourse analysis or FPDA (Baxter, 2008). Resembling Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), FPDA positions itself as having a "transformative" approach rather than CDA's "emancipatory agenda" (Baxter, 2010:19). In other words FPDA attempts to unseat the dominant narrative but does not seek to replace the 'master-narrative' with the 'counter-narrative'. Baxter (2008:3), describes FPDA as

an approach to analysing intertextualised discourses in spoken interaction and other types of text. It draws upon the poststructuralist principles of complexity, plurality, ambiguity, connection, recognition, diversity, textual playfulness, functionality and transformation.

In Chapter four I will expand on the FPDA analytic tool in greater detail.

3.2.4 Validity, Rigour, Reliability

Riessman attempts to establish guidelines for validity and trustworthiness in qualitative research (2008:186-200), noting that there are no fixed rules when testing validity when narrative is open to subjectivity and situatedness (2008:200). She recommends that data produced should ‘correspond’ with other information, either factually or conceptually (2008:186). Within a subjective and poststructural study, such as this, the only reliability is that the possibility exists for multiple, complex readings and findings to the research questions and the questions posed to the texts and transcripts. In reading multiple documents, namely the interview transcripts, the narratives, newspaper articles and other works written by Diesel, I have attempted to offer an intertextual context which can be cross referenced. It has not been my intention to arrive at an indisputable or accurate verification of the narratives but rather to arrive at clues – inherent within this cross section of texts and empirical data – as to possible reasons why these texts have been written in this way. Constant self-reflection or reflexivity was necessary in order to also cross check my own responses and reactions to the data.

3.2.5 Reflexivity

Reflection [reflexivity] means interpreting one’s own interpretations, looking at one’s own perspectives from other perspectives, and turning a self-critical eye onto one’s own authority as interpreter and author (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000:vii)

Acknowledging that I locate myself theoretically within a feminist paradigm, I also recognise that this is a feminist approach which is aligned to the view that there are overlapping discriminations including patriarchy which influence the lived experiences of women of colour in South Africa. Apart from my academic positioning, my personal ontology is always implicated in the research. I am aware that as I have read the texts, formulated the questions for the interviews, conducted the interviews, transcribed them and reread the transcriptions, I have, all the while, engaged in this process through a particular lens, infiltrating the data with my own interpretation and subjectivity (Ribbens and Edwards, 1997:124, Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000:261).

I approached the ‘*Shakti*’ narratives firstly as an ‘Indian’ woman, searching for voices which might resonate with my own lived experience. Secondly, I read the texts as a scholar of

literature, hence recognising elements of ‘fiction’ even within these ‘true’ stories. Thirdly, I realised that my readings were already filtered by an underlying scepticism about how ordinary people claim back their faith so that it works for them. This translated into the tone of the empirical process, or, in other words, how I structured the questions and engaged with the participants.

With regards to the power dynamics between myself and my participants, I was aware that my own power as a researcher allowed me ‘airtime’ to interview Diesel, a well-established and renowned academic. My position as a relatively young researcher was non-threatening to my participants who both had prior experience of being interviewed on their work.

3.2.6 Ethical Considerations

The participants were given an informed consent form to view and sign. They were made aware that their identities would be disclosed and both participants were comfortable with this arrangement, signing and returning the informed consent forms. They were both sent transcripts for review.

3.2.7. Conclusion

In this chapter, I covered the theoretical framework and methodology which show the data production strategies, sampling and instruments used, ethical consideration, reflexivity and trustworthiness of studies. While the interviewing process was not without its challenges – such as having to rely on the, often deceptive, memory of my participants – the empirical data added a nuanced and human element to the research. Although I was aware that the content of what was elicited during the interviews might not be reliable, I was more interested in how the interviews uncovered the perspectives and worldviews of the participants. Reading the transcripts and texts using feminist poststructural discourse analysis as an analytical tool afforded me the opportunity to interrogate and deconstruct the data in alignment with the feminist poststructural theoretical framework. The voice centred relational method provided the platform to dissect the multiple layers of the texts while recognising the multiple ‘voices’ which construct the research product (Ribbens and Edwards, 1997:140). The following chapter will elaborate on the method and analytical tool used to answer the critical questions underpinning this study.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA ANALYSIS

Having motivated for and explained my chosen theoretical frameworks in section 3.1 of the previous chapter, I went on to unfurl the methodological processes utilised in producing my data in section 3.2. Given that this is a qualitative methodological paradigm and, that I use a feminist post-structural lens which is underpinned by intersectionality, I chose feminist post-structural discourse analysis or FPDA as my analytical tool.

4.1 Feminist Post-structural Discourse Analysis – FDPA

Feminist Post-structural Discourse Analysis, as explained by Judith Baxter, bears the most resemblance to Critical Discourse Analysis, “that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context” (Van Dijk, 2001:352, Baxter, 2010:19). Baxter proposes that amidst the differences between FPDA and CDA, is that FPDA as a post-structural tool prefers to deconstruct the ‘grand narratives’ of social discourse without turning the aim of turning the counter-narrative into yet another grand narrative (Baxter, 2010:19). Baxter believes that CDA has a particular “emanicipatory agenda”, hence,

while CDA in principle (e.g. van Dijk, 2001) seeks to deconstruct hegemonic power relations inscribed within texts, and in so doing, may produce a single, oppositional reading that may eventually become authoritative, a post-structuralist, supplementary approach encourages the possibility of several competing readings. This means that no single reading of a text is regarded as fixed, but that every reading can be reviewed and perhaps contested in the light of competing perspectives or methods of analysis (Baxter, 2010:19)

While I am cognisant that structural, ideological and systemic inequalities exist, and while I have interrogated these inequalities within the broader social context for this study, I also subscribe to Baxter’s notion of multiple readings, and “the multiplicity of reader’s identities”, recognising that power and resistance are also fluid (19).

4.2 Voice Centred Relational Method/VCRM

I have used this method to interrogate the ‘Shakti’ narratives and the interview transcripts, in order to extract and explore pertinent themes within the data. Using VCRM, I have briefly examined the overall structure of the plot, my own responses to the text and Diesel’s presence within the texts. Quite importantly, VCRM takes into consideration the

“broader social, political, cultural and structural contexts” of the texts being read (Ribbens and Edwards, 1997:132). From an intersectional feminist viewpoint, it is thus, crucial to interrogate the broader context in which Pat Pillay and Alleyn Diesel are located within the narratives. The VCRM, as an integrated reading process, offers us a more composite and multi-layered account of Pat, devout Hindu and survivor of extreme intimate partner violence, located within a social, political, cultural and structural context.

4.3 Deconstructing Pat

In analysing Pat’s narratives, I try to deconstruct Pat to elucidate the ways in which she may have been produced. The analysis which follows tries to understand how and why these narratives come into being. In the deconstruction of Pat, it is not my intention, even if that were possible, to arrive at some universal counter truth. Deconstructing Pat, in some ways means deconstructing her biographer, all the while being sensitive of and cognisant to the complexities of reading, writing and researching the lived experiences of others. It is, therefore, not my intention to dispute the value of a book like ‘*Shakti*’ as a resource not only for Indian women but for all South Africans. My interest is in how the biographer’s standpoint may influence the telling of a story, and how power relations may affect the outcomes of these narratives. In the following analysis I also question how much of the biographer resides in Pat’s narratives¹⁵ and to explore outside the centrality of Diesel’s telling of Pat’s trajectory, by juxtaposing and integrating the two stories.

Diesel’s compilation, ‘*Shakti: Stories of Indian Women in South Africa*’ could be divided into two parts, the first of which contains a kaleidoscope of narratives which Diesel asserts ‘reveal the [Indian] women’s view of themselves’(Diesel, 2007:vii). *Breaking the Silence*, Pat Pillay’s experiences revealing her violent domestic life, is amongst these stories. The second cluster of stories called *Hindu women worshipping the goddess in KwaZulu-Natal* contains *Walking on fire* the second of Pat’s stories. ‘*Shakti*’, therefore, contains stories of a group of Indian women compiled by Diesel, which she asserts ‘would not otherwise have been recorded’ (vii). While it could be argued that first person narratives are more autobiographical, I refer to both as biographies, particularly in Pat’s case, because Pat is illiterate and the mediation of the biographer would have been inescapable in terms of the writing up and editing of the narrative, albeit in a sensitive, ethical and rigorous way. Diesel says in the preface to ‘*Shakti*’,

¹⁵ The two narratives are entitled *Walking across fire* and *Breaking the silence*

Wherever possible, I have allowed the women to speak for themselves, in their own words as captured on a tape recorder. Each woman in this collection has seen what has been written about and has expressed her satisfaction with the tone and accuracy of her story. (Diesel, 2007:vii)

So although Diesel is scrupulous about ensuring that the women were happy about the final product, it remains, perhaps necessarily so, under her direction. We could also interrogate the gaps and what may *not* have been ‘allowed’ into the final text. We cannot, therefore, merely take these narratives at face value. As Stanley succinctly asserts, while:-

Both biography and autobiography lay claim to facticity, ...both are by nature artful enterprises which select, shape, and produce a very unnatural product (Stanley, 1992:4)

Hence, I analyse *Breaking the silence* and *Walking on Fire* as products of fiction, co-produced by storyteller, biographer and, myself as researcher. The plot of each of the narratives is presented separately and as fully structured pieces which do not seem to have any association with each other. However, in reading the narratives together and piecing together a timeline to this trajectory, I was able to reconstruct Pat within a different paradigm. Each narrative offers its own structure and plot independent of the other, yet it is in reading them side by side that a more textured exposé of Pat Pillay begins to surface.

The following analyses and deconstruction is broken down into two sections. Firstly, *The deification of Pat*, explores the textual similarities between Pat and the *Amman*¹⁶ goddesses, particularly *Kali* and *Draupadi* who are central to Pat’s devotion. By drawing on some of Diesel’s other published works on *Amman* worship, with particular focus on *The Suffering Mothers. The Hindu Goddesses as Empowering Role Models for Women* (Diesel, 2005), in relation to the ‘*Shakti*’ narratives, I assert that Pat’s characteristics are often conflated with Diesel’s interpretation of these *Amman* goddesses.

Pat’s body: public and personal, in chapter five, investigates how Pat’s body is inscribed through her religious practices and by her experience of abuse. This section also looks at the body of the text, by combining both narratives into a woven trajectory revealing thus, the complexity of her lived experience. Juxtaposing *Walking across Fire* and *Breaking the Silence* in this section primarily examines how Pat’s body is violated and how her spirituality is enacted within her body. Additionally, both texts are interrogated to examine how her body

¹⁶ *Amman* or Mother goddesses are primarily non-Brahmanical goddesses with folk or village origins. In South Africa they are largely but not exclusively venerated by the South Indian diaspora. More on *Amman*, *Kali* and *Draupadi* will follow later in the chapter.

is written about. Both narratives focus strongly on the agential and non-agential aspects of Pat's body, with its public (religious and textual) and personal (domestic and relational) inscriptions. I also explore the nuanced dynamics of power, resistance and agency that are implicit in the narratives, while constantly drawing on the interview material. This section looks closely, in part, at the complex power relationship between Pat and Diesel, as researched and researcher. Pat's own resistance and agency within her domestic, religious and textual life are also explored in this section.

4.3.1 *The Deification of Pat*

Alleyn Diesel's significant research on Hinduism in South Africa places great emphasis on *Amman* worship. Early in her research, having recognised that literature on the subject of *Amman* worship in South Africa was scant, she began reading some of the available material on goddess veneration. In 1995 she met Pat Pillay, a devotee of Kali and Draupadi, who had been immersed in the rituals surrounding these deities. The combination of prominent works by scholars such as Alf Hiltebeitel's *The Cult of Draupadi* (1988) and Diesel's own research on Pat Pillay's lived religiosity, provided much of the substance for Diesel's later publications. In an interview with Diesel, she says,

And so I had Pat showing me the ritual and Alf Hiltebeitel saying what was going on in India and the mythology behind it
(Interview with Alleyn Diesel: 29 September 2016)

Diesel's publications endorse a liberatory "feminist theodicy" (Diesel, 2002:5) in which she asserts that *Amman* goddess veneration and knowledge around their mythology, could be empowering for women (Diesel, 2002, Diesel, 2005). Juxtaposing the 'Shakti' narratives with Diesel's related articles on the subject, I contend, through the evidence below, that Pat's characteristics are often conflated with those of the *Amman* goddesses, amongst them Kali and Draupadi. In other words, not only is Diesel's interpretation of the deities informed by Pat's experiences but conversely, so are Pat's narratives imbued with Diesel's notion of the *Amman* goddess. Similarly, my analysis shows how Diesel's, sometimes essentialist, notions of Hindu women and Hinduism, is subtly woven into both narratives.

There has been a wide range of material written about Hinduism and more specifically the diverse Hindu goddesses. Not surprisingly however, the goddesses who are traceable through scripture and what Kinsley calls the 'great tradition' (Kinsley, 2005:2), have been analysed in more detail than the popular goddesses who are more commonly worshipped in

the local village traditions (Foulston, 2002). This great tradition, also referred to as the formal, Brahmanical, Aryan, Pan-Indian (Lewis, 2016) and sometimes the canonical tradition, is widely documented in scriptures such as the Rg-Vedas, the Puranas, the Mahabharata, the Upanishads and the Ramayana. Many scholars have noted that less scriptural evidence has existed about the village or local goddesses despite the vast reach of their veneration both in India (Foulston, 2002) and in South Africa (Lal and Vahed, 2013). *Amman* or mother goddesses form part of this lesser documented oral, village tradition (Foulston, 2002:62), also known as the *gramadevata* tradition (Lewis, 2016). Sometimes the formal traditions are associated with North Indian religiosity while the village or *gramadevata* traditions become synonymous with Dravidian religious practices. I make reference to the goddesses in this way because of the way two separate camps or clusters of apparently disparate spiritual strains seem to present themselves in Hindu history. However, despite the tendency to distinguish between them, the goddesses – the village *Amman* goddess and the formal Brahminical goddess – are not binarily opposed categorisations, and their complexity is sometimes blurred in the classification process. Within the South African context, the relationship between North and South Indian, *Amman* and Brahmanical is even more complex and more porous, with the traditions strongly influencing each other (Kumar, 2012:23).

Dichotomies and disparities are drawn between the Pan-Indian goddesses as well, with what Foulston refers to as “essentially benign” and “essentially fierce” goddesses. Laxmi, Saraswati, and Parvati are referred to as “essentially benign goddesses...equated with conventional human feminine ideals” (Foulston, 2002:16). Kali and Durga, “essentially fierce goddesses”, have been appropriated by the *Amman* tradition and display many of the characteristics of the rageful, autonomous *Amman* goddess. I will first explore these so-called ‘essentially benign goddesses’ below,

Many feminist scholars including Diesel have viewed the benign goddesses in a somewhat disparaging light. This could be because the benign goddess is portrayed in a “wifely role”, usually physically smaller than and, subservient to their husbands (Foulston, 2002:16), the great gods Vishnu, Brahma and Shiva. In *The Suffering Mothers. The Hindu goddess as empowering role models for women* (2005:42), Diesel asserts that,

[t]his human situation is reflected in the two kinds of Goddesses: those who are married, the consorts of males to whom they are submissive and obedient; and those who are independent, ‘virgin’, uncontrolled by males, and therefore potentially threatening to the usually accepted stereotype of gender relations.

The underlying, not uncommon, sentiment here is that the consort goddesses are less powerful and by implication so then are the many Hindu women who regard these goddesses as role models. The benign representations reflect the “traditional status of Hindu women” (Diesel, 2005:44), if not the essential Hindu woman. Hence, the benign goddesses become associated with what is normative and expected of women in Hindu society.

In *Walking across Fire*, it is Pat’s external environment which is represented as the normative, traditional and oppressive aspect of Hindu society. Pat is born to parents who are very “traditional and conservative” and do not approve of Pat’s devotion to Kali or the Kali trance which she first experiences at the age of eight (Diesel, 2007:194). Pat’s “strict” upbringing is seen as conventional and her parents “encourage” Pat to get married in order to take her focus away from her Kali worship (Diesel, 2007:194). Pat’s other challenge is the “all male” temple committee in Pietermaritzburg who have taken it upon themselves to ban women from walking the fire. Despite the fact that this is the only fire-walking temple in KwaZulu-Natal to implement such a ban, the act is significantly oppressive to women who want to participate in the ritual (Diesel, 2007:199). The temple seems to endorse the notion of the ideal woman who is no more than a support to men; the women of the temple, despite their devotion or capabilities, are “confined to circumambulating the pit and encouraging the men” (Diesel, 2007: 200). Hinduism is portrayed as normatively patriarchal and oppressive, with the all-male temple committee portrayed as a microcosm of this inherent oppression.

So if my argument is that Pat’s oppressive religious and family environment require her to be submissive like the benign goddesses, then Pat’s representation in *Walking across Fire* can be said to epitomise defiance and power, features of the “essentially fierce goddesses” such as Kali, Durga and the vengeful *Amman* goddesses. Among other things Diesel’s Pat is cast as rebellious and fiery.

The evocative opening lies of *Walking across Fire* introduce us to Pat Pillay in the throes of a Kali trance, where Pat has become “a human manifestation of divinity, ...commanding and fierce, emulating the characteristics of the powerful goddess” (Diesel, 2007:194)¹⁷. Trance or possession by a deity is a significant feature of *Amman* worship wherein it is believed that once “the goddess takes over the mortal body, the recipient *is* the goddess, therefore the profane [devotee] has become sacred” (Foulston, 2002:145). So while it is normal for Diesel to describe Pat *as* Kali in her trance-like state, I will illustrate below

¹⁷ See Appendix E for full narrative

that interspersed within the textured '*Shakti*' narratives are aspects of Kali and Draupadi which become synonymous with Pat the devotee.

Pat's portrayal in *Walking across Fire* bears many similarities to Kali, an 'essentially fierce' goddess. According to Kinsley, Kali can be found on the "periphery of Hindu society (she is worshipped by tribal or low-caste people in uncivilized or wild places)" (2005:117). It could be argued that Pat's racial, gendered, cultural, educational and economic marginalisation, similarly, place her on the edges of society. Having grown up and having remained in abject poverty throughout her life, Pat is also illiterate and, within the context of this narrative, is further discriminated against in the temple at which she worships because she is a woman. As an Indian woman – Indians already a racial minority in South Africa – practicing rituals deemed "inferior" (Kumar, 2013b:78) and "branded as superstitions"¹⁸ (Ganesh, 2010:33), Pat seems even more Kali-like, producing in her an unlikely heroine.

Pat, from the edges of society, is the heroine of *Walking across Fire* for she does battle with the all-male temple committee, and is at the end victorious. Kali mythology, and the myths surrounding many of the *Amman*/village goddesses, revolve around ferocious women doing battle with errant men, demon, human or god (Kinsley, 2005:118,202). Kali is said to embody female "wrath", and in one myth is "summoned by Durga to help defeat the demon Ratabija" with the aid of Durga's "fierce band of goddesses" (Kinsley, 2005:118), ridding the world of the enemy, usually male, in a gory and violent way.

Pat's battle with the temple committee is neither violent nor gory, but it could certainly be read as being defiant and subversive against the men standing in the way of justice. Pat, as constructed by Diesel, does seem to contain an element of rebellion quite early in *Walking across Fire*, when it is revealed that Pat "secretly" continues to worship goddess Kali despite the disapproval of her parents (Diesel, 2007:196). It is, however, the fire-walking ban and the proceedings leading up to its being lifted, which best emphasises female action over male injustice. Diesel sees the reasons for the ban as being "blatantly sexist" (Diesel, 2005:43), while Pat's actions are viewed as feminist. One of the reasons given by the temple chairperson for the ban was that "'Women have tender feet and burn easily'" (Sunday Times

¹⁸ The Hindu reform movement, circa 1909, also tried to suppress the ritual based South Indian religious practices, arguing that rituals such as fire walking were not aligned to the principles of Hinduism Desai, A. & Vahed, G. H. 2007. *Inside indenture : a South African story, 1860-1914*, Durban, South Africa, Madiba Publishers. The South Indian goddess and the rituals associated with her were seen as uncivilised and primitive by the reformists who wanted to cultivate a purer Hinduism, which was firmly entrenched in the Vedas.

12.5.96 George Mahabeer: *Temple takes heat over ban on women*)¹⁹. It is also stated that their long saris were a fire hazard, although the women suspected that the real reason was that menstruating women were seen as unclean for the ritual. Hence, Pat and “a small group of Pietermaritzburg Hindu women” (Diesel, 2002:10) come together, perhaps metaphorically like Durga’s band of goddesses, to “challenge...the patriarchally controlled temple committee”(Diesel, 2002:11). A petition, attributed to Pat, is published and distributed to others in opposition to the temple’s fire-walking restrictions on women. Pat’s opposition to the ruling goes a step further when she and her sister attempt to cross the fire pit without permission. Pat, in a Kali trance during the rebellious act, causes great consternation and the event is widely publicised. Her actions can be seen as Kali-like resistance.

It is fairly apparent that Diesel often sees Pat as an embodiment of Kali, as the following description of Pat can attest.

Determined and fiery...powerful! She was commanding. You noticed her. She actually really woke up every morning and lived for her religion. Mother Kali.
(Interview with Alleyn Diesel: 29 September 2016)

Even though Kali seems to be portrayed as the antithesis of a mother –“emaciated, lean and gaunt” (Kinsley, 2005:126) as well as destructive and associated with death – she is firmly entrenched in the *Amman* tradition and for Pat she is certainly Mother Kali. Interestingly, Diesel asserts that the term *Amman* or mother should not be understood in the conventional sense of birthing and rearing children, but rather as it pertains to the goddesses’ “life-giving, creative powers” (Diesel, 2002:16). In promoting the goddess as a feminist role model, Diesel emphasises the powerful, “undominated and autonomous” aspects of the *Amman* goddess (2002:16). *Amman* goddesses share with Kali, not only the power to take men to task but they also exude an independence from men while maintaining full control over their own sexuality (Diesel, 2005:41). Although Pat is a married woman, she is sometimes presented as an autonomous individual in *Walking across Fire*. Diesel alludes to an inherent independence in Pat,

[S]he sometimes expressed the wish that she was unencumbered by a family, with no distractions from her full-time service of the goddess, thus showing a typical tension between her *stri-dharma* (womanly duty) to her family, and her *bhakti* or loving devotion to her chosen deity. (Diesel, 2007:195)

¹⁹ See Appendix F

Pat is shown to be torn between her family and her religious devotion although later in the narrative we learn that two of her children are ‘cured’ from their illnesses after she asks ‘Mother’ for help. It is only after the remarkable recoveries of her children that Pat “regards the Mother as ‘the first priority in [her] life’” (Diesel, 2007:196).

In *Walking across Fire* Reuben, Pat’s husband, is given a cursory mention, underplaying his relevance in Pat’s religious life, once again foregrounding Pat’s independence. In an interview with Diesel she says,

Reuben was in the background. Reuben came and went. Reuben was sort of dismissed as very unimportant. So he had no influence over her. She did what she wanted... (Interview with Alleyn Diesel: 29 September 2016)

Diesel dismisses Reuben as fairly insignificant in Pat’s trajectory and, it seems, to Pat herself, even though, by the time of my interview with her, she is well aware of Reuben’s infliction of pain on Pat. *Breaking the silence* revolves around Pat’s memory of Reuben’s incessant violence against her. Yet, in Diesel’s memory, it is a ‘deified’ Pat who remains. In order to preserve the myth of Pat as strong, fierce and unimpeded by a husband, it is necessary for Diesel to almost negate Reuben’s existence. If the reality of Reuben’s significance in Pat’s life is undermined, so then is Pat’s recollection of her lived experience of intimate partner violence in danger of becoming silenced once more.

We also learn in *Walking across Fire* that Pat’s sexuality is affected after she participates in a blood sacrifice. Pat reveals to journalist, Anthea Garman²⁰ that after this sacrifice in which she drinks the blood of the sacrificial animals, she no longer menstruates and that she regards this incident as a return to purity – the ‘virgin’ state which characterises many of the *Amman* goddesses (Diesel, 2005:42). In the narrative, we are told that Pat also believes that she has become “‘both man and woman for Kali’” (Diesel, 2007:196) now, not only of ambiguous sexuality but also, unwilling to have sexual relations with her husband. Pat not only seems to exude sexual agency but she also appears to be cited for her resemblance to the sexually independent *Amman* goddesses.

Perhaps one of the central themes surrounding *Amman* mythology is theme of suffering, especially “at the hands of men”(Kinsley, 2005:201). Diesel highlights the theme of suffering by focussing on the mythology surrounding Draupadi, the goddess central to the

²⁰ Appendix F: The Natal Witness 15.4.96 Anthea Garman: *Banned from walking worship’s fire*

fire-walking (Hiltebeitel, 1988:440) ceremony in South Africa²¹. Draupadi mythology emanates from the classical Mahabharata, most well-known for documenting the epic battle of Kurukshetra between the Pandavas and Kuruvas²². Draupadi's trajectory in the Mahabharata, referred to by Diesel as a 'text of terror' (2002:9), is peppered with incidences of sexual harassment towards Draupadi (Black, 2013:171). She is the wife of the five Pandava brothers who are the heroes of the epic and quite significantly, she is one who is exposed to abuse and harassment, as a consequence of the actions or inactions of these husbands. The disrobing of Draupadi is probably one of the most notable scenes of female defilement and indignity in the Mahabharata. After Yuddhishtra, one of Draupadi's husbands, 'loses' her in a dice match to Duryodhana, his enemy and cousin, Draupadi is dragged to the centre of the court where she is publicly humiliated. Attempts are made to strip her off her sari, in front of her husbands and the rest of the court. Draupadi is also said to be menstruating at the time. Enraged and very vocal about the violation, Draupadi seeks retribution and revenge, vowing never to tie her hair until her perpetrators are punished. Draupadi is, of course, vocal about all of the violations upon her body by men and about what must amount to betrayal by her husbands, in the light of their choices and perceived impotence (Sutherland, 1989:69). In one myth, Draupadi vows to leave her hair untied and untidy until she has used "Duryodhana's blood for her hair oil, his ribs for a comb, and his intestines as a garland" (Hiltebeitel, 1988:432). Once her defilement is avenged, Draupadi then walks through fire to restore her chastity. It is this act of walking through fire which transforms and elevates Draupadi from mortal to goddess.

In exploring Pat's deification, it would be tempting to see parallels between Pat and Draupadi in *Breaking the Silence*, where Pat, like Draupadi, experiences multiple violent injustices caused by a man. However, in reviewing how the stories come to be written and when they are written²³, I suggest, instead, that *Breaking the Silence* is a counter narrative which destabilises the myth of the deified Pat who is produced in *Walking across Fire*. I will elaborate on this further in the next section, which looks closely at Pat's body at the

²¹ According to Kumar, it is only in South Africa where the firewalking ceremony is performed solely for Draupadi See Kumar, P. P. 2013a. *Hinduism and the diaspora : a South African narrative*. In India, the firewalking is part of a larger *Amman* veneration, depending on the geographical location of the devotees. In Tamilnadu, the ritual is associated with Draupadi and Mariamman See Foulston, L. 2002. *At the feet of the goddess : the divine feminine in local Hindu religion*, Brighton, England; Portland, Or., Sussex Academic Press.

²² The Mahabharata is a most complex and multiply interpreted epic with North and South Indian origins. For my purposes I have precised Draupadi's narrative to contain the main elements which I feel pertain to Pat's context and Diesel's scholarly extractions. Alf Hiltebeitel (1988) has produced two volumes on the Draupadi cult alone, exploring the varying and evolving dynamic of this fascinating mythology.

²³ Please see Figure 1 in Chapter 5, which shows a timeline of events surrounding Pat's trajectory

intersections of faith and intimate partner violence. At this stage, however, I will focus on *Walking across Fire*, for it is, I believe, within this narrative that Pat is constructed as an icon of women's empowerment.

Diesel interprets Draupadi's revenge as,

[A] quest for spiritual perfection where, after enduring and overcoming various trials and hardships, she finally achieves victory over her adversaries and, with it, purification and sanctification (Diesel, 2002:9).

It is this righteous indignation which, Diesel feels, empowers women who have suffered injustice. In *Walking across Fire*, Pat as Draupadi experiences 'suffering' caused by men, when she is prevented, by an all-male temple committee, from performing the fire-walking ritual. She suffers indignation, firstly, by being dismissed as a "backyard temple troublemaker" and secondly, when she decides to disobey the ban and cross the fire, she is physically and forcefully removed from the fire pit. However Pat, too, is "spirited and outspoken"²⁴ (Diesel, 2002:9) and she is finally vindicated and victorious against the male induced injustices when, through her own efforts, the ban is lifted and she is finally able to walk across the Pietermaritzburg temple fire pit. In extending this metaphor, one could say that Diesel's narrativisation of Pat takes her over the porous divide between human and deity.

Diesel's portrayal of Pat as exhibiting character traits of the goddess feeds into Diesel's view as scholar that scripture is superior to the rituals performed by Hindu women like Pat. Referring to the *Amman* traditions she says,

Here is a *textual* tradition which gives centre stage to women's experience of injustice, suffering, and vindication. (Diesel, 2002:13)²⁵

In her quest to understand the tradition as practiced in South Africa, Diesel discovered that,

Although the rituals performed for these deities in South Africa appear to have been very carefully preserved, it appears to me that the ritual has tended to become divorced from its controlling mythology, with most people only aware of some very rudimentary, and at times garbled, details of the various stories. (Diesel, 2005:43)

As a scholar, Diesel's research has included both textual and ethnographic investigation and despite her intensive observations of the rituals performed in the *Amman*

²⁴ This is a description of Draupadi in *Tales of Women's Suffering: Draupadi and other Amman Goddesses as Role Models for Women*. See Diesel's earlier description of Pat as fiery and determined.

²⁵ Emphasis mine

tradition, her scholarship around the Hindu goddess as a feminist role model is heavily invested in the mythology around the goddess. In the statement above, Diesel infers that the rituals without an awareness of the ‘controlling mythology’ are inadequate for the empowerment of women. This could be indicative, as Schilbrack suggests, of a tendency to view ritual as “mechanical or instinctual and not as activities that involve thinking or learning” (2004:2). Schilbrack suggests that a less Cartesian approach be taken to ritual ‘ways of knowing’ and that we begin to view rituals “as activities in which ritualists are not simply repeating traditional gestures but are rather raising and seeking to settle a problem” (2004:3). I will explore the notion of ritual as way of problem solving further in the next chapter.

While Diesel reiterates the importance of the lost mythology, she ironically, focusses on Pat to exemplify the empowering possibilities of the *Amman* goddess. I believe this to be ironic because Diesel reveals that Pat, like many of the diasporic Hindu community, is not fully knowledgeable about the mythology around Draupadi. As the following excerpt from an interview with Diesel illustrates (29 September 2016)²⁶,

Diesel: It (the Amman myths) is empowering for women you see. I think Pat empowered herself and a lot of other women.

Me: Yet without knowing the mythology?

Diesel: By fighting the battle with the males of the temple committee and winning...

The statement above reveals that Diesel still places emphasis on the goddess mythology, for even if Pat does not know the *Amman* mythology, she becomes the myth – an embodiment of the goddess doing battle against men.

I suggest that Diesel’s quest for an empowering Hindu feminist theodicy not only valorises Pat in *Walking across fire* and other publications, but also romanticises the *Amman* tradition as one which is “ancient, and possibly pre-patriarchal” (2002:16). In this perspective of the goddess like Draupadi “can be viewed as an Amazon-like matriarch” (2002:13), for not only is she “determined and courageous” (2002:13) but she is involved in “polyandrous relationship with five husbands” (2002:13), thus implying an exoticism of an atavistic, “timeless Out there culture”(Lavie and Swedenburg, 1996:156). These assumptions not only present the *Amman* goddess (and by association Pat) as an “anti-male” role model, but infers that the tradition itself is static and unchanging (Mohanty, 2003), or should at least remain so.

²⁶ Earlier in the interview when asked if Pat knew the mythology of Draupadi, Diesel responds “Not much”

In the process of valorisation, thus, the traditions are not seen as evolving and dynamic, influenced, as they are and were, by politics, geography and relocation. Pat, too, is portrayed as having to only deal with patriarchy despite her complex constitution as a poor, uneducated, Hindu woman living in a racially oppressive country.

In the following chapter I examine how both narratives are inscribed upon Pat's body and explore a more complex understanding of Pat's lived experience. Although, the analysis integrates Pat's experiences of intimate partner violence with her religious practices, it also takes into consideration how Pat's social, economic, racial and cultural circumstances help to shape these experiences. My contention is that *Breaking the silence* destabilises the romanticised and exoticised inscription of Pat as a fierce goddess, a signification which is implicit in *Walking across fire*. Furthermore, I suggested that a close examination of Pat's performed rituals, as described in *Walking across fire* in relation to *Breaking the silence*, not only subvert the deification of Pat but reveal a lived experience fraught with numerous tensions at the intersections of religion and intimate partner violence.

CHAPTER FIVE

Pat's Body: Public and Personal

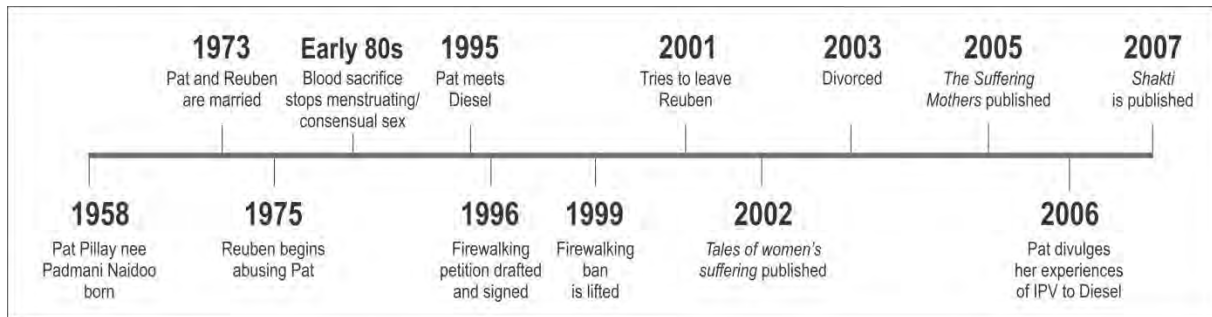


Figure1

In the previous chapter, I focused primarily on the voice of the biographer, Alleyn Diesel, exploring how her scholarly and “socially located” (Stanley, 1992:7) framework is imported into *Walking across Fire*, a biography of Pat Pillay. This chapter explores Pat’s embodied experiences in each of the narratives at the intersections of faith and intimate partner violence. Juxtaposing *Walking across fire* and *Breaking the silence*, I examine the parallels between the narratives and some of the ways in which Pat may have negotiated her pain and reclaimed her body through her religious practices.

The chapter deals with how Pat’s body is inscribed as a devotee and as a survivor of intimate partner violence. I explore how each narrative although distinct in its respective structure, can be seen to destabilise the other, so that Pat is able to re-inscribe her body in each narrative, to offer a larger, more complex trajectory. Interrogating *Walking on Fire* and *Breaking the Silence*, I argue that it is at the intersections of these two narratives, where the inscriptions of goddess and victim/survivor can be subverted. At this intersection, her personal and public personas can be interrogated, juxtaposed and integrated, hence revealing complex perspectives of Pat and her negotiation of her embodied experiences. These perspectives challenge the ways in which her body is inscribed by Reuben her husband, by the temple committee, by the media, by her biographer and the language of her biographer. I suggest that Pat’s body resists being deified or reified by either narrative inscription in the ways in which she “does [her] body” (Butler, 1988:521).

5.1 *The Body violated/ the Body reclaimed*

Breaking the silence, as the title suggests, is Pat's eventual articulation about her abusive marriage that had been guarded from the public eye. She breaks her silence to Diesel who has already known her and researched her spirituality for more than ten years. The narrative at once offers a different perspective to the deified Pat portrayed in *Walking across fire* but more importantly suggests parallels between her embodied spirituality and her experiences of abuse. I also suggest that it is within Pat's body that a reclamation or transformation of her experience takes place. This is, in my view, a more nuanced perspective of Pat's power and resistance as a woman negotiating her lived experience. Her choice to articulate her experience publicly within a body of text, which she is unable to read, also suggests agency and reclamation, not only of her body but also of her specificity (Spivak, 1988, Mohanty, 2003).

Pat is only fifteen years old when she is "encouraged" to marry Reuben who is seventeen at the time. Just a child, Pat relocates from her family home in Mount Edgecombe to Pietermaritzburg. Reuben's abuse begins when she is seventeen, so she experiences this pain in isolation, away from maternal protection and love. After the first incidence of abuse, Pat says, "All I could think was that I wanted to go home to my mother, but I knew I couldn't because she would feel I was disgracing her name" (Diesel, 2007:158). Not only does Pat feel that she would be blamed for Reuben's violence but there is also a sense of abandonment from the one source where unconditional support should be a given – her mother. Her shame is already so internalised that she believes that she cannot seek consolation from her own mother. Alternatively, she may already have been warned not to jeopardise her marriage. Whatever her reasons, Pat suppresses her pain and keeps it from her mother – "She never found out what was happening with Reuben" (Diesel, 2007:159). Pat's mother dies two years later, and Pat is officially without a mother. As an 'orphan', Pat's vulnerability is exacerbated and the on-going inscription of her body as that of victim seems inevitable.

The void created by the lack of a mother who can console, protect and support Pat is, in my analysis, filled by Kali as *Amman* or mother. Despite Pat's possession trances where she is said to 'become' Kali, Pat always describes 'Mother' as a presence outside of herself, 'someone' who is readily available to communicate with and rely on. This 'Mother' is ironically more approachable than her biological mother. When she experiences health challenges with her children, she is able to ask for help from 'Mother Kali'.

‘The child in me is about to be born, and the child in my hand is cripple. Have I sinned to deserve this? Please help me.’ (Diesel, 2007:196)

The negotiation shows that Pat has an intimate relationship with Kali and here she even calls Kali into question. Even though this is a question about the merits of her devotion and whether Kali, as goddess is dissatisfied with her, Pat’s underlying fear is that Kali might be abandoning her, leaving her without support as her mother has. It is the only time in the narrative that Pat reveals her feeling of isolation from the goddess. When her crippled daughter begins to walk after Pat’s plea, Pat registers this as Kali’s unwavering support for Pat. For Pat, Kali does not only represent the “[u]nconditional love and acceptance from their supreme being” (Gillum et al., 2006:240), which together with a supportive religious family is able to help women through difficult circumstances. Kali is also the Mother always on hand, leaving Pat with the feeling that she will always be protected. Talking about what the Mother means to her, she says,

“She is everywhere; look outside, she is there. She is there. She is the silent listener. She comes to me in my sleep; in a deep sleep she comes, and she comforts me, she cheers me up. She says to me, ‘There is no suffering for you; you will not suffer.’ (Diesel, 2007:201)

Pat finds that Mother Kali offers emotional consolation and support and Pat, in turn, makes Kali “the first priority” in her life (Diesel, 2007:196). Pat’s way of devoting herself to Kali is to perform the various embodied rituals around which the Kali worship revolves. It is within her body that she can transform the pain inflicted upon her by Reuben into an act of choice and devotion for Mother Kali. They are acts of trust, but also something we are told she is able to control.

‘I am sacrificing my all, my flesh, my body, myself, everything, to her.’... ‘I feel that Mother is calling me; my head gets heavy; I feel strange, but I don’t want to go now.’ (Diesel, 2007:201)

Pat has little control over her body when Reuben abuses and violates her. She is, however, able to choose and control almost parallel embodied experiences for the Mother (Kali and Draupadi). In the first act of abuse, Reuben pushes her into the fire over which she is cooking. Pat describes the incident in *Breaking the silence*, saying that her hair was,

in a loose bun...he suddenly grabbed me, loosened my hair, and pushed my head down to the flame so my hair caught fire. It all burnt before I could put it out... (Diesel, 2007:158)

Among other abuses, Reuben stabs Pat on several occasions.

Then he slapped me hard, turned me over and stabbed me again with the ‘three star’. At first I just felt something piercing me and didn’t know what was happening, but then I felt blood and I screamed. (Diesel, 2007:162)

In both incidents Pat is vulnerable and in a compromised situation and her body experiences the burning of her flesh and the pain of her bleeding stab wounds. I compare this with Diesel’s description of Pat in the opening lines of *Walking across fire* just before a fire-walking ceremony:

Someone loosened her long hair from its neat bun so it tumbled free... a long decorated skewer was pushed through her tongue, another through her cheeks, and hooks strung with marigolds, limes and coconut shells were pinned through the flesh of her chest and waist. (Diesel, 2007:194)

We learn that Pat does not feel “the skewers and hooks in her flesh nor the heat of the fire when she walks across it” (Diesel, 2007:201). The rituals, it seems, transform her private non-agential pain into a public act of power. While privately her inscribed body is one which is humiliated, burned, pierced and raped; in public, amidst the other devotees and in front of thousands of spectators, Pat can choose to re-inscribe her body through her embodied acts of devotion. Throughout these embodied rituals Pat believes that Mother protects her and the rituals could be seen as “occasions of mutual testing” (Foulston, 2002:132). Pat’s faith as child/devotee of the goddess is tested by her “willingness to submit to potentially dangerous practices” (2002:132), while “the power of the goddess is tested, evident in her ability to protect the devotees [Pat] from situations that would be injurious to them under normal circumstances” (2002:133).

The negotiated rituals allow Pat to experience a sense of power and protection whereas Reuben’s acts upon her body are acts that emanate from his contempt and revulsion and result in her pain and degradation. Amongst many other abuses, Reuben “rapes” (Diesel, 2007:162) Pat and has sexual relations and, consequently, offspring with her sisters (2007:159). Soon after the discovery of his infidelity Pat performs the blood sacrifice ritual after which it is said that she stops menstruating and decides “that she no longer wanted sexual relations with him” (Diesel, 2007:196). She attributes her need for celibacy on her devotion to the goddess, and in the process attempts to retrieve her body from Reuben’s inscription. If she no longer consents to sex with Reuben then it is, in fact, rape. Pat reveals to a journalist, Anthea Garman²⁷, that having stopped menstruating, she felt in a “constant state of purity”. There is a sense that, not only must she be pure in order to serve the goddess but

²⁷ Appendix F: The Natal Witness 15.4.96 Anthea Garman: *Banned from walking worship’s fire*

that the rituals performed for the goddess have the ability to purify her too. Pat associates the fire-walking ceremony as one which will “cleanse” and “renew”, something she does every year (Diesel, 2007:201). Through the rituals, Pat attempts to re-inscribe her body.

Bourguignon asserts that “women’s possession trance must be understood as a psycho- dynamic response to, and expression of, their powerlessness” (2004:559). In other words, women who feel particularly subordinated are more likely to experience trance as a way of asserting power where they are usually disempowered. Diesel also suggests that the “possessing Goddesses can... be regarded as the ‘alter egos’ of the women” (2002:11), with the trance thus liberating women who are ordinarily oppressed. Pat’s combined experiences in the two narratives do seem to correlate with this theory. In her trance state Pat is regarded as a vehicle for the goddess by those who seek her counsel and healing. As part of her healing work, Pat helps “women who are experiencing problems with husbands who are unfaithful, drink too much, beat them, or abandon them (Diesel, 2007:198). While Pat experiences almost identical issues in her private life, in her public and possessed state she is able to console, if not ‘solve’ the issues affecting those who approach her.

There exists, however, the possibility of an alternate relationship between Pat’s spirituality and the violence which exists within her marriage. In *Walking across fire* we learn that Pat has her first trance at the age of nine (Diesel, 2007:195), long before she marries Reuben or experiences intimate partner violence for the first time. Pat’s way of practising her faith influences her ability to endure the suffering imposed on her by Reuben. Pat is usually in a trance during the fire-walking, the piercing and the pinning of hooks into her flesh and she reveals that she does not feel the pain, “although she wishes she could” (Diesel, 2007:201). Could it be that Pat sees the endurance of the pain produced within her marriage as a test of her faith or a manifestation of the pain which she wishes that she could feel within her religious practice? From whichever angle we approach these bodily inscriptions, I suggest that the two narratives are not as dichotomous or paradoxical as they initially appear. Rather they constitute a lived reality; Pat’s specific, lived reality with tensions, negotiations and transformations, which serve to destabilise how Pat’s body may be inscribed.

5.2 *The Socially Located Body*

Some of the tensions implicit in the way Pat’s body is inscribed is linked to her social and historical situatedness. In both narratives we have to always remember that Pat’s body is also socially and historically located, and its inscription is already determined by race, class,

culture, as well as gender. Pat is subject to a “matrix of domination” (Collins, 2000:23) even though her oppression and suffering is presented as being caused solely by men, namely the all-male temple committee and Reuben, her husband. So while I concentrate on exploring Pat’s embodied experiences, negotiations, resistances and reclamation, they should be viewed within the context of these multiple oppressions. Sokoloff says,

[T]he need to question the primacy of gender becomes apparent when one realizes that the violence and control by an individual batterer is not the only form of violence experienced by marginalized battered women. Instead, the lack of adequate institutional support in the form of social services and public housing as well as the intrusions and coercive controls by the state and its agencies (e.g., welfare) is another level of violence experienced by battered women, which occur in ways that are racialized as well as gendered and classed (Sokoloff and Dupont, 2005:44)

Pat’s abuse begins in the 1970’s when the country is still under apartheid law and the Group Areas Act has managed to essentially isolate and further marginalise minority race groups. Pat also has a distinct class disadvantage with no education or the ability to read and write. In my interview with Nalini Naidoo, who had been investigating the temple committee at the time she says,

...looking at this temple committee that had a stranglehold on one of the oldest temples in the city. It was male dominated, mired in allegations of corruption but more importantly it was very exclusionary and actually left out the poor, or didn’t cater that much for the poor. And that’s how I came across Pat because people thought I knew the story and they told me about Pat and this group of women from Northdale... And I remember at that time having a sense, you know what I mean, yes it was gender that they excluded them on but I also wondered whether it was also class because these were poor women from Northdale that had no voice and no representation.(Interview with Nalini Naidoo: 6 October 2016)

Naidoo’s musing reminds us that there are the other prejudices and discriminations facing Pat besides the gender issue. The temple committee also takes a disparaging view of Pat’s “backyard temple cult” (Diesel, 2007:205), showing the ‘official’ temple’s hierarchical condescension of the smaller backyard temples run by the ‘poorer’ women.

Pat’s economic circumstances impact both her public and personal life. Pat’s parents are financially unable to send Pat to school and Pat never learns to read or write, thus placing her at a great disadvantage in a literate culture. During her years of abuse there are many incidents when Pat fails to lay charges against Reuben. On one occasion, after Reuben throws Pat out of a moving car, she says, that the police who witness her fall,

charged Reuben then but, because I didn't go to make a statement, the charge was dropped (Diesel, 2007:159)

And on another occasion, after Reuben and her sister attempt to poison her, she says, “ He (the doctor) said I should charge Reuben, but I didn't want to cause any more hurt” (Diesel, 2007:160). One could speculate that it is Pat's illiteracy which prevents her from having Reuben charged. On the other hand, her reluctance to seek assistance may relate to a realisation that the legal and social system provided little support for women in Pat's circumstances. In *Breaking the silence*, there is cursory mention of social support in the form of a “White social worker” (Diesel, 2007:161) from the Child Abuse Unit who visits the family after Pat is stabbed and allegations of child abuse also emerge. Pat reveals to the social worker that not only has she been stabbed by Reuben but raped as well. Although Reuben was charged and told to stay away from Pat, there was no follow up from either the social worker or police. Pat reflects,

But they never came back, so nothing happened. I don't think they were interested. I never saw that social worker again, and I wonder what happened because nothing really changed. (Diesel, 2007:161).

After this incident, Pat shows resignation, because not only has she admitted to strangers that she has been raped by her husband, but she has done so having negotiated her own shame and embarrassment (2007:161). Having done so, she receives no further support or compassion. Gqola asserts that,

Not all people are seen as possible-to-rape. Sex workers, wives, slave women and men are all categories of people that have at different stages been placed in the category of 'impossible-to-rape'. This does not mean that nobody raped them. It means that when they sexually violated, it was not recognised as such, legally and socially. (Gqola, 2015:31)

At the intersections of race, gender and class, Pat's 'rapeability' seems all the less credible or punishable.

5.3 *Righting/Writing from the Margins*

The timeline suggests that Pat endured the circumstances of her public and private oppressions for more than twenty five years. Naidoo believes that without access to an outside perspective, Pat might have continued living in much the same way.

She (Diesel) widened her (Pat's) frame of reference and she realised – yes we can do these things. You know she gave her a larger world view than the one she was confined to. (Interview with Nalini Naidoo: 6 October 2016)

Although Pat is said to have been respected for her healing work in the community, her lack of access and literacy, together with the socio-political confinement of the apartheid years must have challenged Pat's sense of possibility. I suggest that when, the illiterate, Pat is confronted with a 'White' academic who is interested in her spirituality, Pat recognises that Diesel holds the key to a world which includes writing. Diesel claims in an interview that Pat had approached her during a fire walking ceremony, whereupon, the thirteen year relationship between researcher and researched began and developed into, I suggest, a symbiotic arrangement. Diesel was able to research and observe Kali possession and fire-walking through Pat. For Pat, Diesel presented the possibility for her to share her love for the goddess with a larger audience. As an illiterate woman, Pat would have required a channel or vehicle to enter the textual world. Diesel becomes that vehicle in many ways by editing the petition and organising for journalists to publicise Pat's dissent on the temple ban.²⁸ Diesel recollects a time when Pat blesses her while in a trance,

When she knew I was writing and that I was writing these stories and things, she used to call me, put ash all over me, wipe her hand across my face so it was full of ash, put ash on my hair and then do this writing thing, put her palm out and write, write, write (gesturing with her hand in a writing motion)... "You write!" she put her index finger right in my face, "you write". (Interview with Alleyn Diesel, 29 September 2016)

It is the text of *Breaking the silence*, however, that points to an agency in Pat which surpasses any goddess-like resistance implied within *Walking across fire*. It is possible that Pat is complicit in her own myth making, enjoying the opportunity to speak about her religion, embracing the publicity around the ban and performing her faith subversively. Her public persona probably allows her reprieve from her private challenges. However, with *Breaking the silence*, it is Pat's decision to share a story that had, up to that point, been suppressed, which indicates a greater agency. Diesel says,

Somewhere very close to the closing of this book going to press – Shakti – she said, "I've got another story" (Interview with Alleyn Diesel: 29 September 2016)

As suggested before, this narrative destabilises the master narrative of a deified Pat and reveals a trajectory which is influenced by her social circumstances. The narrative does not reify her lived experience but rather it reveals her combined story as one which is dynamic, complex, intersectional and nuanced. Furthermore, she decides to articulate and

²⁸ In *Walking across Fire*, Diesel does not mention her own involvement in the petition or in contacting the journalists, attributed them both to Pat, Diesel, A. 2007. *Shakti: Stories of Indian Women in South Africa*. pp202-203. In her interview, 29 September, Diesel mentions how she had helped to write the petition and had organised the interviews

commit to printed word, her experiences which had caused her shame and embarrassment for many years. The transition from silence to articulation also suggests that Pat has acknowledged the violence against her person and become an active agent to its re-inscription. In *Breaking the silence*, Pat's is a resistance, similar and dissimilar to the defiant firewalk in *Walking across fire*.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion

Though we might adopt a bottom-up approach in that the starting point for our research is the perspectives and words of the individuals we study, we are nonetheless the ones who will be speaking for them. We are in the privileged position of naming and representing other people's realities. Thus, in turning private issues into public concerns, and giving our respondents a voice in public arenas, we have to ask ourselves whether we are in fact appropriating their voices and experiences, and further disempowering them by taking away their voice, agency and ownership. (Ribbens and Edwards, 1997:138)

The question of representation by the researcher of the researched has been the central focus of this study. Added to this, is my own interesting position of investigating the researched through the eyes of a researcher. Hence, the task of deconstructing Pat necessitated an excavation through a multitude of layers: Diesel, the author/biographer/researcher; Pat the devotee and Pat the survivor of IPV; Pat's own 'matrix of domination' and social circumstances; and my own biases and perspectives. My critical questions asked how and why Pat was portrayed in the way that she was.

Answers to the first critical question – What are the narrative representations of the Hindu women's spiritual practices in '*Shakti: Stories of Indian Women in South Africa*'? – were explored in Chapter four. They pertain to goddess or *Amman* veneration in the form of trance, possession, blood sacrifice and firewalking; all of which are narrativised in *Walking across fire*. Diesel's published work together with the interview material, provided insight into her perspectives on both Hindu religious practices and on Pat Pillay. I discovered, through my analysis, that Diesel's textual research into Hindu mythology had influenced the narrativisation of Pat in *Walking across fire*.

The second critical question involves Pat Pillay's portrayal within the context of Hindu spiritual practice and intimate partner violence in each of the two narratives. The analysis of the textual and empirical data, show that although the narratives seem to describe too different individuals (Pat Pillay is referred to as Padmani Naidoo, her Tamil first name and maiden surname, in *Breaking the Silence*), and initially seem incongruous, they describe the same woman. Pat's story of her abuse by her husband is less mediated by the biographer, perhaps because Pat's confessional occurs so close to the publication of '*Shakti*'. Diesel, up to that point, had had an impression of Pat which had bordered on her similarities to the *Amman* goddess. Thus, Pat's narrative of her experiences of IPV represents, perhaps a dissolution of

this image. A juxtaposition of the narratives, however, shows that the enactment of her faith and the acts of violence upon her body intersect and overlap, in as much as they represent her lived experience. Although Diesel closely links the embodied rituals to a liberating theodicy, Pat seems to gain solace and fortitude from the rituals themselves. Their enactment provides her with an agency over her body. Thus, in the very performance of religious practices lies Pat's empowerment.

If one views these rituals as performative or an act which is both socially shared and historically constituted (Butler, 1988:530), then Pat can be seen as 'doing' her identity as a Hindu woman, within the context of her public and personal life. Is it possible then that Pat performs a particular Hindu woman-ness during the temple ban coverage to promote her challenge to the temple. Although Pat is constituted by an integrated and complex set of circumstances, I would suggest that it is possible that Pat claims an identity based on an image of a Hindu woman who is oppressed by an all-male committee, while warrior-like in her fight against them. Her performance is for an audience of journalists and scholars who applaud this enactment of her spirituality. Thus Pat would choose to silence her experiences of intimate partner violence, which is in conflict with her performance. It is only once the ban is lifted and once she has left Reuben that she can offer a different iteration of Hindu woman-ness. As a Hindu woman surviving intimate partner violence, Pat can reclaim the integration and fluidity of her lived experience.

The third and last critical question concerns the reasons for why the narratives are constructed in the way that they are. In many of her publications, Diesel expresses dismay that the 'controlling mythology' (Diesel, 2002:7) associated with the ritual practices has been lost amongst South African Hindus. I, therefore, investigated what that controlling mythology might look like. Many scholars, including Diesel, have interrogated the hierarchical nature of text based Hinduism²⁹ over folk traditions like the *Amman* traditions (Kumar, 2013b:80). When the Neo-Hindu³⁰ movements entered the South African landscape promoting Hinduism as a rational and monotheistic religion, they also believed that the popularity of ritual folk traditions "would give way to more intellectual forms of Hinduism" (Kumar, 2013b:78). This prediction did not come to pass, however, but it was a significant development in South

²⁹ By text based religion I am referring to the Brahmanical traditions which can be traced to such canons as the Vedas, the Puranas, Mahabharata and Ramayana

³⁰ For more on the neo-Hindu movements in South Africa and what Kumar refers to as a "bad diagnosis" of the decline of folk traditions see Kumar, P. P. 2013b. Resistance and Change: Strategies of Neo-Hindu Movements in South Africa. *Journal of Sociology and Social Anthropology*, 4, 77-82.

African Hinduism, in that it was a response to western text-based doctrine. The privileging of text over ritual is on-going, and the conflict between text and ritual underscores some of the tensions inherent in Pat's representation. In the '*Shakti*' narratives, Diesel begins with a "bottom-up approach", descriptively documenting how Pat, and other practitioners, live their spiritual practices. Diesel attempts to remain textually faithful to the intricacies of the rituals, describing and transcribing Pat's experiences of trance, fire-walking and her relationship with the Mother in great detail. However, Diesel also utilises a feminist theoretical framework to the study of Pat's experiences and an academic approach to the treatment of religion, and both of these factors influence how *Walking across fire* is told. In chapter four, I argue that Pat's characteristics become conflated with Diesel's understanding of the fierce, *Amman*. Pat's "strength of character" (Interview with Nalini Naidoo: 29 September 2016), her "powerful" (Interview with 29 September 2016) aura may well have informed Diesel's image of the *Amman* goddess. On the other hand, Pat's defiance against the 'all-male' temple committee is described as feminist and a coup against patriarchy. (Diesel, 2007:203). Naidoo says, with some scepticism of Pat's construction as a feminist that "for Pat, it was genuinely about the fire-walking, not about challenging these men" (Interview with Nalini Naidoo: 29 September 2016). This is not to presume that Pat is not agential or resistant to the exclusion of the temple but rather to suggest that Pat's anti-male stance is ontologically produced by the biographer, thus "appropriating" Pat's voice for the biographer's own epistemological and feminist standpoint.

Diesel's scholarly lens on the treatment of religion surfaces in her approach to the ritual practices which she says she "really wanted to understand but...couldn't find any literature on it at that stage" (Interview with Alleyn Diesel: 29 September 2016). Furthermore, the practitioners could not furnish Diesel with clear reasons as to why they were performing the rituals. The reasons which emerge out of Diesel's observations of Pat are consolidated, not merely through Pat's particular lived experiences, but in the scholarship around the mythology of Draupadi and Kali. It is through its mythology that Diesel is able to understand the *Amman* culture and religious practices even though the absence of the once known mythology does not influence the devotion of practitioners like Pat.

In reading through and between the '*Shakti*' narratives, and juxtaposing these with Diesel's academic publications I found that, within the context of these narratives, there seemed to be a gap between Pat's devotion to *Amman* and Diesel's strong focus on the goddess as a feminist. This is not to say that a feminist hermeneutic of the *Amman* goddess is

not a viable or liberating possibility for women. There have been several relevant appropriations of the goddess for empowerment of women, and Diesel's is certainly among them. However, this is where my critique lies. A feminism which is blind to the other oppressions experienced by women of colour in South Africa, does not fully acknowledge the ways in which the voices and lived experiences of these women also articulate a response to these oppressions. The ideal of the fierce 'Amazonian' goddess who rages against men, may not prove to be a liberatory role model for the woman who is also racially and economically marginalised. Secondly, Diesel indirectly privileges her own epistemology, having discovered the Hindu mythology³¹ through text, thus by inference excludes those who do not have access to this textual mythology. Thirdly, Diesel suggests that an ancient, pre-patriarchal Hinduism has once existed, which *Amman* worshipping women can access and through which they may thus be liberated.

Yet even Hildebrandt recognises that the traditions and mythology are not ahistorical or static. He says,

The Mahabharata cannot be viewed simply as a classical text, for even if there was a prototype, it no longer exists. Rather..., I approach the epic as an ongoing fluid tradition... (1988:xx)

I suggest that Pat's narratives trace a trajectory about a complex woman with multiple oppressions whose resistances to these oppressions are negotiated and enacted in various ways, revealing that she is, indeed, an agent in her spiritual and domestic life (Mohanty, 2003). Pat's *shakti* or agency may not be found amidst the colourful, textual descriptions of the *Amman* goddesses but if carefully deconstructed, traces of *shakti*/agency that are specific to Pat can be discovered within the pages of the '*Shakti*' narratives. A deconstructed Pat resists reification or valorisation as an anti-male goddess. A deconstructed Pat resists the label of victim. Most importantly, however, a deconstructed Pat resists reconstruction.

Although the enterprise of deconstruction has been of great significance to this study, the question remains as to why it is significant. What can we glean from a poststructural lens on intimate partner violence, faith practices, women and agency? Further study into other ways of knowing, especially within the field of faith practices is pertinent and could only be touched on in this particular study. Although the task of academia is to theorise and hence privilege text over experience, as scholars we would have to remain vigilant that the real lived

³¹ Diesel draws parallels between Hildebrandt's description of the fire-walking ceremonies in India and those performed in South Africa, Hildebrandt, A. 1988. *The cult of Draupadi*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

experiences of marginalised women is not obscured or relativised. The subaltern voice, neither super heroic nor insignificant, may already be strongly resistant to its unique set of oppressions (Mohanty, 2003, Spivak, 1988, Collins, 2000, Said, 2003). Recognising resistance from the periphery in its own iteration is equally significant, while taking into account the multiple systemic and social disadvantages already in place.

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Appendix A: Ethical Clearance certificate



12 September 2016

Ms Pralini Naidoo 852858722
School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics
Pietermaritzburg Campus

Dear Ms Naidoo

Protocol reference number: HSS/0982/016M

Project title: Reconstructing Shakti: Investigating narrative representations of Hindu women within the context of intimate partner violence

Full Approval – Expedited Application

In response to your application received 5 July 2016, the Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee has considered the abovementioned application and the protocol has been granted **FULL APPROVAL**.

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment /modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number.

PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

The ethical clearance certificate is only valid for a period of 3 years from the date of issue. Thereafter Recertification must be applied for on an annual basis.

I take this opportunity of wishing you everything of the best with your study.

Yours faithfully

.....
Dr Shamila Naidoo (Deputy Chair)
Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

/pm

Cc Supervisor: Professor Sarojini Nadar & Dr Fatima Seedat
Cc Academic Leader Research: Professor P Denis
Cc School Administrator: Ms Catherine Murugan

Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Dr Shenuka Singh (Chair)

Westville Campus, Govan Mbeki Building

Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban 4000

Telephone: +27 (0) 31 260 3587/8350/4557 Facsimile: +27 (0) 31 260 4609 Email: ximbap@ukzn.ac.za / snymanm@ukzn.ac.za / mohung@ukzn.ac.za

Website: www.ukzn.ac.za



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Appendix B: Turn it in report

Reconstructing Shakti: Investigating narrative representations of Hindu women within the context of intimate partner violence

ORIGINALITY REPORT

4%

SIMILARITY INDEX

3%

INTERNET SOURCES

2%

PUBLICATIONS

2%

STUDENT PAPERS

PRIMARY SOURCES

Alleyn Diesel. "Tales of Women's Suffering: Draupadi and other Amman Goddesses as Role Models for Women", Journal of Contemporary Religion, 1/1/2002

Publication

1%

[http-server.carleton.ca](http://server.carleton.ca)

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Alleyn Diesel. "The empowering image of the divine mother: A South African Hindu woman worshipping the goddess", Journal of Contemporary Religion, 01/1998

Publication

<1%

Submitted to Nanyang Technological

Appendix C: Copy of Informed consent letter

UKZN HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (HSSREC)

APPLICATION FOR ETHICS APPROVAL
For research with human participants

INFORMED CONSENT RESOURCE TEMPLATE

Note to researchers: Notwithstanding the need for scientific and legal accuracy, every effort should be made to produce a consent document that is as linguistically clear and simple as possible, without omitting important details as outlined below. Certified translated versions will be required once the original version is approved.

There are specific circumstances where witnessed verbal consent might be acceptable, and circumstances where individual informed consent may be waived by HSSREC.

Information Sheet and Consent to Participate in Research

Date: 28 September 2016

Dear Alleyn Diesel

My name is Pralini Naidoo from the School of Religion, Classics and Philosophy, College of Humanities, University of KwaZulu-Natal. I am currently enrolled for my Masters in Arts, in the Gender, Religion and Health Programme.

You are being invited to consider participating in a study that involves research around the narratives of Pat Pillay which you include in your publication *Shakti: Stories of Indian Women in South Africa*. The aim and purpose of this research is to investigate how Pat Pillay, as a Hindu woman is represented in the stories, her religious life and her domestic life and your understanding of them. It will involve an unstructured interview format, where you will be recorded, the recording will be transcribed and submitted to you for approval. The duration of your participation if you choose to enroll and remain in the study will not be more than two hour sessions. The study is funded by Church of Sweden.

The study may involve an indepth look into your position as a researcher and your relationship with Pat. We hope that the study will create a broader understanding of Pat Pillay and woman like her who may endure physical abuse and the role of religion in their lives. I will be analyzing the texts and drawing on your other literature on Hinduism. Other sources of data will be the archival material in the form of the newspaper articles about Pat's involvement at the temple.

This study has been ethically reviewed and approved by the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (approval number HSS/0982/016M).

In the event of any problems or concerns/questions you may contact the researcher at (provide contact details) or the UKZN Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, contact details as follows:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus
Govan Mbeki Building
Private Bag X 54001
Durban
4000
KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA
Tel: 27 31 2604557- Fax: 27 31 2604609
Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Participation in this research is voluntary and participants may withdraw participation at any point, and that in the event of refusal/withdrawal of participation the participants will not incur penalty.

Please be advised that you will be interviewed in your capacity as a researcher and scholar and there will be no anonymity. All recorded data belongs to the University of KwaZulu-Natal and will be stored at the University for five years after which it is destroyed.

CONSENT

I Alleyn Diesel have been informed about the study entitled *Reconstructing Shakti: Investigating narrative representations of Hindu women within the context of intimate partner violence* by Pralini Naidoo.

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study

I have been given an opportunity to answer questions about the study and have had answers to my satisfaction.

I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without affecting any of the benefits that I usually am entitled to.

I have been informed about any available compensation or medical treatment if injury occurs to me as a result of study-related procedures.

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study I understand that I may contact Pralini Naidoo, the researcher at pralini.naidoo@gmail.com or on 0845051711

If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researchers then I may contact:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus
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E-mail: Muruganc@ukzn.ac.za

Additional consent, where applicable

I hereby provide consent to:

Audio-record my interview YES / NO

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Witness
(Where applicable)

Date

Appendix D: Interview Schedule

Pralini Naidoo 852858722

MA Gender, Religion and Health.

PARTICIPANT: Alleyn Diesel

Format: Semi-Structured Interview

Date and Time of Interview:

Location of Interview:

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE:

NAME: Alleyn Diesel

INTERVIEWER: Pralini Naidoo

Categories of Enquiry/Questions
1. When and where did you first meet Pat Pillay?
2. Reflect on your relationship with her.
3. What led to your interest in Hinduism?
4. In your narrative about Pat, you write about her wanting to approach the temple about lifting the ban on fire-walking for women. Was this Pat's idea? What sort of support might she have had during the petition and lobbying phase?
5. If you had to describe Pat, what words come to mind?
6. How would you describe her when she was in a trance like state? Was there a noticeable personality change?
7. Were you aware of her situation with her husband at home at the time of the fire-walking activism? How did you find out? And were you surprised?
8. Whose decision was it to have the story published? And would you say that you used Pat's words in the first narrative?
9. In your opinion, why do suppose Pat stayed in her relationship with her husband for so many years?
10. Do you believe that you learnt anything from Pat and vice versa? If so, in what way?

Appendix E: Shakti Narratives

I lived in Mount Edgecombe until, when I was fifteen, I met Reuben Pillay who was seventeen. Soon after that, in 1973, we got married according to Hindu rites and came to Maritzburg to live in Northdale. For two years we were very happy, really very excited about being married, and Reuben got a job at Northdale hospital as a porter.

At that time I had very long hair that was down to below my knees, which I had grown for Mother Kali as I was devoted to her. I was very involved at the temple in Longmarket Street and took part in a lot of festivals. It was all highly rewarding, and I felt accepted there and met many good people. There was much friendliness and support from other devotees.

Then, after about two years, Reuben started getting jealous because I was so often involved with things at the temple. He was worried by my long hair as he thought that other men would come running to me, and take me away from him. He felt threatened by my hair and kept saying he didn't like it. So one morning I was in the kitchen cooking because his family were coming for a meal, and we were expecting 13 people for lunch. I had washed my hair and, while it was drying, I put it up in a loose bun instead of plaiting it as I usually did. While I was stirring the food in a big pot, bending over the wood stove, he suddenly grabbed me, loosened my hair, and pushed my head down to the flame so my hair caught fire. It all burnt before I could put it out, and my neck was badly burnt – I still have the scar, here on the side of my neck and chest. The top of my legs were also burnt because my hair was so long, and my clothes were burnt as well, but luckily not my face as I had tried to hide it from the flames. As soon as I could, I ran to the shower to put out the fire.

I was terribly shocked and in great pain, but finally when his mom and family came and asked what had happened to my hair, I had to lie to them. I told them it just fell into the coals while I was cooking. I didn't know what to do. All I could think was that I wanted to go home to my mother but I knew I couldn't because she would feel I was disgracing her name.

I thought of Mother Drobadi (Draupadi) who had been through so much pain when her enemies dragged her by her long hair. She had suffered so much, and I

was now suffering – not as much as her, but in the same sort of way. In a way this was comforting to feel I was suffering some of the same pain.

Then in 1977 I lost my mom. She never found out what was happening with Reuben, and after her death I had to look after five of my sisters from then on.

Some time later, in 1978, when my first child Sharon was a year old, Reuben came home very drunk. He sat down and lit a cigarette. Suddenly he just attacked me and started burning me with the cigarette, on my face and my neck. It was terrible, but I went on living with him because of the child.

Sometimes Reuben would lie on the bed with me and start to be loving, and then he would suddenly abuse me. It was dreadful because I knew it was not the way a husband and wife should be. But then I began to get angry.

While I was pregnant with my second child, I was puzzled because one of my sisters developed a large stomach. When I asked her about it, she said she had a growth but I noticed that she was not getting her periods. I had my second child Mergan in June, and in July my sister had a daughter. When I asked her who the father was, she wouldn't tell me, but a bit later she told my brother that it was Reuben's child. When I asked Reuben about this, he hit me so hard that he cracked one of my ribs so I had to go to the hospital. But our relationship carried on. I didn't know Maritzburg well and I didn't know where to go for assistance, so I just put up with it. I had to live with it as I didn't know what to do.

Then my youngest sister, my baby sister, got pregnant. She had two children with Reuben. When I said to him, 'Why are you doing this; you mustn't do it!' he hit me. One day he put me in the car, the old Peugeot 404 we had then, and drove up the road to my sister's because he said he wanted me to know that he was having an affair with her; she could acknowledge it and tell me it was true. I started arguing with him and he threw me out of the moving car. I fell on the pavement and cracked my head and hurt my hand. Just then a police van drew up and picked me up and asked me what had happened. They charged Reuben then but, because I didn't go to make a statement, the charge was dropped.

Luckily most of the time he was out with one of his mistresses, and I and the children were alone. I went on attending festivals at the temple, doing all the usual

things and putting on a happy face with friends and relatives, trying to make out that all was okay and that my marriage was fine.

Suddenly, one day I got sick with an awful pain in my stomach and I lay on the bed. My little sister came to visit me and gave me some milk to drink. I became very muddled and collapsed. I thought she had put some dope in it. My brother-in-law (Reuben's brother), who was kind to me, came to the house and helped me to bath and took me to Northdale Hospital. The doctor asked why I had taken an overdose and called a social worker. I told her what was happening, the first person I had ever told. We then found that my son's epileptic tablets were missing. My sister and Reuben had been giving these to me. The doctor was kind and helped me. He said I should charge Reuben, but I didn't want to cause any more hurt. When I went home to my brother-in-law, I was very weak and had some fits because of those tablets. He looked after me and took me for some walks to try to get me strong again.

Again I went back home and, on a Friday evening, Reuben arrived when he had just been paid. He was working at Eddels now, but he wouldn't give me any money for food or for the rent. The children went to school without lunch and I couldn't pay the school fees. The children's teacher and the principal were kind and helped them by bringing them lunch and sending food home for us. They told me not to worry about the school fees. I had to sell some of the furniture to get money for food, and when they turned off the electricity I had to cook on a fire outside in the yard.

Reuben, who hadn't been around for a while, then decided to come back and live at home again. One evening he just suddenly got angry and poked me, stabbing me with a three-star Okapi three times in the back. My son ran out and called the neighbours, who rang for the police. They came and called an ambulance. I was taken to Grey's Hospital where they kept me for a while. Reuben had run away because he knew the police were looking for him, but after three days he came back with his niece, who took his side. I called the police again but, before they got there, he ran again. The police called the Child Abuse Unit as they knew he was also hitting and swearing at the children because they had helped me when he attacked me.

A White social worker came and I told her about the stabbing. I also told her that he was raping me, which I had never told anyone before. I couldn't tell the children because I was ashamed, but they overheard what I said and asked if it was true, and I had to say yes. That day the police found Reuben and charged him, and he was told not to come near me. But they never came back, so nothing happened. I don't think they were interested. I never saw that social worker again, and I wonder what happened because nothing really changed.

Often I would be ready to go out to a festival or to do prayers at someone's house and, when the people arrived in their car to fetch me, Reuben wouldn't let me go. If I insisted and went, there would be a problem when I came home. At the end of 1984, he decided he was a Christian and not a Hindu any more. He said the Mother was a devil, which hurt me a lot. When we were fasting and not eating any meat, say for the fire-walking, he would bring meat, especially beef and pork, into the house and cook it.

The years passed and the children grew up. When I had been married for 28 years I said, 'I can't cope; I can't take it any more.' I was having bad nerves and I said to the children, 'I'm going to leave because you are all now big.'

So, in April 2001 I packed two bags and went to my sister in Copesville and explained what I was doing. She knew about Reuben and said I could live there, which was a great relief. But after three days Reuben arrived with his Okapi and threatened me again, so I quickly ran out. Reuben said I'd get nothing from the house; he would sell it all. I just said, 'Okay, I came with nothing and I will leave with nothing.'

When I left, the children had stayed in our house with Reuben and I heard that he was always drunk and abusive to them, shouting and swearing at them, saying awful things. So I decided to go back to talk to him. I sat with him on the bed to discuss things with him, and explained that we should try to reconcile and live together. He said okay, he'll try.

I got a job in a clothes shop in Manchester Road because we needed money badly. When I got home from work on the Sunday at 3 p.m., I said I needed a car to fetch the rest of my stuff from Copesville. My son borrowed a car and we went

and collected my clothes. When we got home, I saw that Reuben was smoking mandrax. I didn't say anything, but put my things in the bedroom and went to join the children who were playing cards. At 10 p.m. I said I was tired and wanted to go to bed. So I went into the room quietly and undressed, put on my nightie and got into bed, on my side of the bed. Reuben was lying there on his side of the bed and I thought he was asleep. I was very tired, so I dozed off. Suddenly I felt a great jump and Reuben leapt up on the bed and held me down with his knees. I begged him not to hurt me, and said, 'What do you want?' But he just put the radio on very loud so the children couldn't hear and he raped me. It was very painful. Then he slapped me hard, turned me over and stabbed me again with the 'three star'. At first I just felt something piercing me and didn't know what was happening, but then I felt blood and I screamed.

He ran out of the room and the children came out, and he yelled, 'Let the bitch die!' It was about 11.30 p.m. and the children ran out of the house into the street, screaming for help. The neighbours came and some women held me up to try to stop the blood, which was coming out of my mouth. The ambulance and the police arrived and asked what had happened. I just said, 'He poked me with the knife', but I was too embarrassed to say that he had also raped me.

Again they took me to Grey's and my eldest daughter came with me. The police asked the doctor how serious it was, and he said I needed stitches but it wasn't too serious. They sent me home at about 2 a.m., after 22 stitches and an injection for pain. And I slept because I was so exhausted.

The next morning the two older children went to work, my youngest – Rogani – to school, and I was left in the house with my grandchild, my oldest daughter's child, who was four years old. It was so terrible, as I was supposed to be looking after him but he did his best to look after me, so carefully.

Obviously the reconciliation didn't work. Reuben came home later and told me he had been to the police station and made a statement, so I didn't need to see them again. I was so stupid and shocked that I believed him.

A male friend of mine, a teacher, then contacted me to ask if I would come to his house to pray and help to get rid of some evil spirit that was causing a problem

there. I said I would help, but I needed money badly. He asked how much, and I said I needed at least R1500 to find somewhere to live, a room somewhere. He gave me R3000 so I could pay for a room with a kitchen and bathroom and have some over for food.

I went home to fetch some of my stuff. Reuben was there and he demanded that I give him some money. I lied and said I had no money. I told him that I was going to see a lawyer, but instead I went to organise for the room. Then I went back to the house and said I needed to take a bed, and he agreed as he was afraid of the police then. So I got the bed there, and I just lay on it and stayed in the room for a long time.

The next morning I borrowed a wheelbarrow and went to my temple at home to fetch my deities, my *murris* and pictures, to clear out the temple. I put everything in the barrow and had to make three trips to get it all away. I set up my shrine in my room, with my things around me. This made me feel very relieved and strong again.

I stayed there for about a year and the children didn't come to see me in all that time, which made me feel very sad and lonely. Then I heard Reuben was giving them terrible trouble again. My son came to see me, very drunk, and said he had been fighting with his father. He said Daddy slapped Sharon and shouted at Rogani. Megan blamed me for all that was happening. I went to see Sharon at work and she agreed to come and see me on Sunday for lunch. She spent three hours with me, which was really nice, but we were both afraid Reuben would come and make a whole lot of problems for us. He was drunk when she got home, and he shouted and swore and told them not to see me again.

On Mothers' Day 2005 all the children came to visit me with gifts. This made me so happy and I felt loved again. They told me, 'Mom, do you know you sold the house?' and I said, 'What are you talking about?' They said Daddy had told them and he was selling the house. It turns out he had gone to court and said I was abusive to the children because I was drinking and smoking. He got an interdict that I was not to come to see the children anymore.

So I arranged that we both go to see a magistrate for me to explain my side of the story. I told the magistrate, 'I would never abuse my babies, my precious

children. I am a very disciplined person.' And I told him what had happened with Reuben. The magistrate listened and said, 'What would you like to do about the problem?' and I said, 'Shoot him dead!' The magistrate granted me a warrant of arrest that if Reuben came again to worry us, I should call the police and they would lock him up.

I moved to my friends in Jaipur Road because I couldn't pay the rent where I was. At last, in 2002, Reuben applied for a divorce and the sheriff came looking for me to serve the divorce papers. We sat down and I saw how many papers there were, and I was suspicious. So I asked him to read them to me and he said, 'Here, can you read?' And I said, 'No, I can't.' So he read them to me and again Reuben was accusing me of all the trouble and all the bad things, which I told the sheriff wasn't true. He said to me, 'Help yourself. Go and see an attorney.'

So I spoke to a friend, my daughter's ex-husband Richard. He said, 'I can't believe what this is saying. This is not you he is talking about. You couldn't be like this.' He gave me ₹5 for a taxi to get to town and I went to see a lawyer who I know. I told him the story about the divorce papers and he said, 'I'll handle this. You go home and eat and rest, I'll sort it out.'

I decided to go to my friend Joey's – to his mother's house. I had known them for fifteen years from the temple, especially Joey from the fire-walking in which we both took part. I explained what was happening, that the lawyer was going to help me, and they let me stay there. His mother was wonderful to me.

Finally, in 2003, I got the divorce and it was over. But Reuben is still around and the children see him quite often. He hasn't changed and fights with Sharon, often trying to get money from her.

Joey had been married and had two children, but he was divorced and living with his mother. We were both on our own and in the same position, so one day Joey said, 'Let's live together, get a place together, as we're both alone.' So we asked his mother what she thought, and she said, 'Yes, go ahead, do it.' He went to see his children to tell them. My children were big, but Joey's children were quite small. I was rather worried about them, so I told him to talk to his wife to try to reconcile, but it couldn't be sorted out. His children were happy

with him living with me, but my youngest daughter still wanted me to go back to her father.

But Joey and I got a room with family friends in Jaipur Road. We lived there for many months and then got married with Hindu rites. We are now here in this very small place. He is doing work painting houses, and I am still seeing people to help them solve problems with the Mother's blessing. Joey is a wonderful man and does everything he can to make me happy. And his mother is wonderful too, and we see her often. She is a very supportive and loving mother.

My children are all doing well. Sharon has a job, and so does Rogani, who has now left school. Mergan married a Christian woman and they have two little girls, so I have three grandchildren, which is great. They often come to see me here, to spend the day or to sleep over.

I am now experiencing new things, and I'm happy. I didn't really know how to love a person until now, with Joey. He is the best thing that ever happened in my life. We do all our temple work together. Joey is studying with a man near here to be a Brahman priest and is hoping to go to India to continue his training. I would love to go too, but in the meantime Joey is doing lots of the rites, like funerals and the sixteen- and forty-day ceremonies after the funeral, to help in the community.

My hair grew again, but it's never been as long as it was before it was burnt.



As the drums beat louder and faster, the woman in a resplendent blood-red sari suddenly began to shake violently. As her body tensed and trembled, her eyes rolled back. Someone loosened her long hair from its neat bun so it tumbled free. She smeared her face with pink *kum-kum* paste, and threw her arms outward, shrieking as the wild goddess possessed her. Then she stood quietly as a long decorated silver skewer was pushed through her tongue, another through her cheeks, and hooks strung with marigolds, limes and coconut shells were pinned through the flesh of her chest and waist. She was now a human manifestation of divinity, and her whole demeanour altered as she became commanding and fierce, emulating the characteristics of the powerful goddess. People began to queue in front of her, some prostrating at her feet, to be blessed by her hand placed on their heads and a dot of ash on their foreheads.

It was Easter Friday in the early nineties and hundreds of worshippers and onlookers had gathered at the Dorpspruit off East Street, at the lower end of Maritzburg, to watch the annual fire-walking festival for the Hindu goddess Draupadi, where this handsome and confident-looking woman was preparing herself to participate in this ancient Tamil ceremony.

Pat (Padmani) Pillay was born in 1958 into a very traditional and conservative Tamil family, in which she says she had an extremely strict upbringing. Her father was a truck driver on the sugar estate at Mount Edgecombe on the KwaZulu-Natal

north coast, and her mother caught the train to Durban every day where she worked in a clothing factory. Pat was one of seven sisters and three brothers, none of whom went to school as her parents were too poor to send them.

At this time in the early nineties, Pat lived in Northdale, Pietermaritzburg, with her husband and three children. Their house was very small, with no bathroom or running water, except for a washroom in the back yard. They had no telephone. Both Pat Pillay and her husband had been unemployed for some time. In the small back yard of the house, Pat and her children had constructed a simple wooden shrine to her mother goddess Kali. Made of wood with a tin roof, it had colourful hangings and contained *murtis* and pictures of the goddesses Kali, Durga, Parvati, and other divinities. Pat's whole life and conversation were dominated by her consciousness of the goddess, and by her desire to serve the goddess and the community in every possible way. In fact, she sometimes expressed the wish that she was unencumbered by a family, with no distractions from her full-time service of the goddess, thus showing a typical tension between her *sri-dharma* (womanly duty) to her family, and her *bhakti* or loving devotion to her chosen deity.

Although she has a serious heart problem and suffered a heart attack some years ago, Pat does not take any medication and cannot afford the operation doctors have advised. After the heart attack, she was seriously weak and tired. But, with enormous determination and conscious of the value of her role in the community, she recovered remarkably. She communes with the goddess and 'takes ashes', confident that the Mother will either heal her or 'take' her. In saying this, Pat appears to be completely resigned to the possibility of her own death.

Pat first encountered the worship of the goddess in her grandmother, a Kali devotee, who came to South Africa from south India. She died when Pat was eight years old, but Pat remembers her with great fondness. A year later, Pat experienced her first Kali possession-trance. This did not frighten her as her granny had undergone the same experience, telling Pat that Kali is very caring, even though she is also so powerful. However, Pat's parents were disturbed by this manifestation of the 'spirit', fearing that it would come to dominate her life and prevent her from getting married and having a family.

From this time on, Pat went secretly to the Mariamman temple at Mount Edgecombe, where she continued to worship the goddess. When, after some years, her parents found out about this, they were again very disturbed by her interest. So they encouraged her to marry at the age of fifteen, thinking that this would put an end to her preoccupation with the worship of the Mother. Pat then came to Pietermaritzburg to live with her husband's family.

At eighteen, in 1977, she had her first child, a girl, who apparently had some deformity in her legs. Pat took the child to the Cripple Care Association where she was told that only an operation would help. So Pat went to the temple to ask the Mother Draupadi to help. By this time she was pregnant with her second child, and she said to the Mother, 'The child in me is about to be born, and the child in my hand is a cripple. Have I sinned to deserve this? Please help me.' Then the Mother 'possessed' her and she lost all sense of awareness for a time. When the trance left her, she heard her daughter calling and, as the child walked towards her, Pat realised she was cured. She recognised the Mother's work in this and, since then, regards the Mother as 'the first priority in my life'.

Her son, the second child, was born epileptic, and again she appealed to Mother Draupadi. When he was six he made a vow to walk across the fire to honour Draupadi, and has continued to do this for twelve years – he apparently no longer suffers from epilepsy.

During the early eighties, at a sacrifice for the Mother, Pat – possessed by Kali – drank some blood of the sacrificial goats and chickens. Since then she has not menstruated, now regarding herself as 'both a man and a woman for Kali'. Shortly after this Pat started healing and counselling others in her community, for which she has gained a considerable reputation. She insists this comes from Kali: 'Without Mother, I can't do it.' As part of her commitment to the Mother, Pat never cuts her hair. Shortly after this appearance of Kali, her 'marriage relationship became very unsuccessful' and she had to tell her husband that she no longer wanted sexual relations with him.

To do most of this work, Pat goes to her temple and calls on the Mother to hear her, being answered by a powerful Kali trance in which she believes she actually



Pat Pillay with skewers and hooks in her flesh
at the Draupadi Firewalking Festival

becomes Kali, acting and speaking as the goddess. Her healing work covers a range of ailments and community problems, such as curing sterility in women; helping women who are experiencing problems with husbands who are unfaithful, drink too much, beat them, or abandon them; helping young girls to find husbands; and exorcising evil spirits from houses. She tells a number of stories to illustrate her success in helping women who have been told by doctors that they are unable to have children, and how she has invoked the help of Mother Kali. These women are then assured that if they go home, trusting the power of the Mother, they will fall pregnant. In a number of instances, this is what has happened. With heart problems, she 'does a prayer' to the Mother and then gives the person ash, which he or she can mix with sugar water and drink, or rub on the body and forehead. Pat has also been consulted by people with skin problems, which she treats by telling them to put ash and cow's urine in their baths. (Because of the Mother's nurturing capacity, the cow is regarded as a manifestation of her, so all five products of the cow – milk, *ghee*, curds, urine and dung – are considered to be particularly holy and curative.) Husbands who drink too much and cause trouble at home are severely dealt with by the Mother (Pat speaking in a trance), and told they must give up the drink. On many occasions they apparently improve dramatically because of the Mother's censure. Even if the husbands will not come to see her, Pat says the wives are helped as the *darsban* of being in the presence of the Mother 'gives them marvellous support'.

Because news of these successes has spread, Pat now has so many people wanting to consult her that she has since the early nineties set aside three evenings a week to deal with this demand. Each evening, from twenty-five to forty people – Hindus, Muslims and some Christians – arrive to seek healing, advice or simply the *darsban* of the goddess in Pat. Then Pat, sitting cross-legged on the floor of the shrine, rocking gently back and forth in her trance, speaks as the powerful goddess Kali, and the people, either singly or in family groups, tell her their problems. These consultations usually last late into the evening. People 'pay' for Pat's services, either by leaving a gift of money or, at a later stage – if a favourable result has been obtained, by giving her things such as *puja* items (*agarbhati*, pictures of deities, etc.), jewellery, or saris.

When she wishes to call Kali to participate in the evening sessions at her home, she goes into her shrine, stands before the *murti* of Kali, lights incense and camphor on a tray, and calls the Mother. Then she 'feels her coming closer'. She smells the incense as overpowering, filling her with the 'most beautiful smell in the world. And then she comes, and the mountain falls on my shoulders!' She then claims she remembers nothing until she comes out of the trance, perhaps an hour or more later. But she knows that during this time she is Kali, and Kali speaks through her mouth. Somehow she has been unconscious on the ordinary level of awareness and operating at some deeper level, although she obviously retains some sense of what is happening, showing recognition of people and awareness of the location of various objects. She is very interested in photographs of herself taken while she is in a trance, and is sometimes surprised at how she looks and behaves. After the trance she says she feels 'like I ran very far; I've gone a long distance, I'm tired and my knees are aching, so that I need to sit down. But I am very happy, and feel very good. I usually drink some milk or sugar water which helps give me back the energy which she has used.'

Pat also performs prayers in which she helps 'the spirit to come out' in other women, so that they too may experience the goddess-possessing power in their lives. With Pat's encouragement, her sister Tillie (Yogavallie) Moonsamy has recently experienced possession trances, and has walked across the fire in Durban. Increasingly Pat is invited to attend privately organised goddess ceremonies where she is believed to bring with her, and to manifest, the presence of Kali. Her presence is regarded as adding sanctity to the rituals.

Pat's devotion to the goddess has resulted in her participation in the Draupadi fire-walking festival, and through this was brought into a protracted clash with the Pietermaritzburg temple committee of the Mariamman temple, where the ceremony is held. For many years, longer than anyone could remember, the all-male committee only permitted men to walk across the fire, whereas at the two Durban temples both women and men were allowed to walk. Women in Pietermaritzburg were able to participate in all the preparatory activities leading up to the fire-walking climax of the festival, even to being a very obvious presence in the final

procession to the temple. But, on arrival at the firepit, only the men were allowed to cross the fire while the women were confined to circumambulating the pit and encouraging the men.

This discrimination caused considerable distress to numbers of women over recent years but, generally, they accepted the situation as being beyond their control: if this was the decision of the men of the temple committee, there must be good reasons for it. It was not for them to criticise – certainly not publicly.

Pat and a number of other women who earnestly wished to participate in a fire-walk, and who had the necessary transport, travelled to one or both of the Durban temples every year. Here they were welcomed and encouraged to participate in the entire festival. In Durban, Pat was finally able to fulfil her wish to undertake this greatest of all austerities for the Mother. Together with other women, Pat was able to come through the fire unscathed year after year, an achievement which brings a considerable sense of empowerment.

Because of the Pietermaritzburg temple committee's ban on women walking, Pat was unable to accompany her son in his fire-walking at that temple. Since about 1990 when her eldest daughter was only thirteen years old, both Pat's daughters have also walked the fire in Durban and are excited to be part of this tradition. Pat's elder daughter recently experienced her first trance and, like her mother, welcomes being possessed by the goddess. At each fire-walking festival, Pat – resplendent in a red sari (Kali's colour) and accompanied by her three children – has become a familiar and respected figure. When, during the period of preparation immediately before the walk, she hears the drums beginning to beat and smells the incense, she goes into a trance and remains in this state until after she has walked through the fire, a period of about one to one-and-a-half hours. As she goes into the trance, she loosens her hair and smears her face with pink *kum-kum* paste, a sign that it is Kali who possesses her – rather like putting on the mask of the goddess. Her whole mild demeanour changes as she assumes the character of the fierce, uncontrollable Kali. Her muscles tense, her eyes grow large and staring, and she often grunts and cries out loudly in a somewhat alarming fashion. She becomes an extremely commanding and fierce woman as she gestures for one of her chosen devotees to

push long skewers through her tongue and cheeks. The hooks pierced through the skin of her chest have strings of marigolds, limes and coconut shells. Because the skewers through her tongue prevent her from speaking, she grunts and gestures to people to approach and be blessed with ash from her tray of burning camphor, which she places on their foreheads. Many people prostrate themselves at her feet as she is now the divinity Kali herself.

Explaining why she participates in the fire-walk, Pat says: 'This is the Mother's day, once a year. We need to feed her; it's our yearly offering to her and we sacrifice our all to her. We need to ask her forgiveness and lay our burdens on her. She will cleanse us and renew us. It's a new start, like new year, and she will carry us through the year. Walking on the fire is proving your *sati* [purity] to people. You carry Mother Draupadi on your shoulder over the pit, and you are saying to her, "I can carry you and take your responsibility; I am totally dedicated to you."

When she is in a trance, Pat neither feels the skewers and hooks in her flesh, nor the heat of the fire when she walks across it, although she wishes she could. Often she also places a burning block of camphor on her tongue. Explaining why she does these austerities, she says, 'I am sacrificing my all, my flesh, my body, myself, everything, to her.'

While looking at photographs of herself and other people in trances, she suddenly put her hand to her face and said, 'I feel that the Mother is calling me; my head gets heavy; I feel strange, but I don't want to go now.' (Pat has learnt to control her trances and can enter and exit at will.)

Talking about what the Mother means to her, she says, 'She is everywhere; look outside, she is there. She is the silent listener. She comes to me in my sleep; in a deep sleep she comes, and she comforts me, she cheers me up. She says to me, "There is no suffering for you; you will not suffer." I would sacrifice everything for her. I depend on her for everything; she meets my needs, my dreams, my all. I don't want money, I don't want diamonds or a big house. My dream is to have a beautiful temple for the Mother; that's my dream home for her. Yes, I feel she uses more women than men; she will be more secure with them because women's bodies are closer to her than men's. She uses your body, your *bottu* [red dot on

the forehead], your *thali* [wedding thread worn round the neck], and your *manja* [turmeric colour on the face]. Yes, she has all that. When it comes to young women's bodies, she purifies them and makes them clean.'

In 1996, Pat felt the time had come to make some public protest about the exclusion of women from the Pietermaritzburg fire-walk. She felt increasingly unhappy about this blatant discrimination against women who form part of the core of worshippers at this temple. The reasons that the all-male temple committee gave for banning women were that women might trip on their saris



Pat Pillay walking the fire

and fall into the fire, which apparently did happen many years ago; and, probably more importantly, that women are rendered ritually unclean by menstruation and should not participate in worship during that time. Pat, however, was unhappy with both reasons. She pointed out that men who wear long *dhobis* might just as easily trip, and that in Cato Manor a woman did trip and fall, but that no-one considered this a reason to forbid all women from walking. With regard to the issue of menstruation, she explained that in general women are credited with knowing when and when not to participate in public worship, and no-one else should attempt to decide this for them. (She also pointed out that she and other post-menopausal women are excluded from this concern, anyway). All devotees, she said, are highly aware of the necessity to be humble and pure when they come before deities, and only the Mother can see into people's hearts and minds where true purity lies.

What gave her most pain, however, was the unfairness of this ban. 'If other temples can welcome us and allow us to walk, why not here? The committee can't choose who will walk and who can't. Everything is decided among the men, and the women are just left out. Women are being stopped from carrying out their calling to worship the Mother. Woman is Draupadi; she is closer to the Mother than men because she has the same body as Mother. Women can pin, get the trance, bless, join in the procession, but when the time comes to walk, they are told, "You are dirt." And this is a woman's festival! And in a remarkable flash of feminist insight, she continued: 'I think the men are threatened by us because we are closer to the Mother than they are; the men are frightened of our power. They want to have more power than the women, so they won't treat us as their equals.'

So Pat arranged an interview with *The Natal Witness*, the local daily newspaper, and an article expressing her concern was published on Monday 15 April 1996, with a photo of Pat, a week after the local fire-walking festival. When asked how she would respond if the temple committee reacted negatively to her views, she said, 'Let the sky blow! I hope they come to me; I'll talk to them. Am I wrong or am I right?'

There was much positive response from the public. The newspaper offices had about 25 phone calls, mainly from women who wished to consult Pat about various

ailments, and a few to support her call for the inclusion of women in fire-walking. Pat reported that the number of people attending her evening sessions rose quite considerably, including a couple of White women who came requesting healing. She reckoned about 46 women assured her that, given the opportunity, they would walk across the fire.

Most encouraged by this response, Pat was determined to follow her challenge through until the temple committee responded. She said, 'I don't need to fight for myself. I can walk in Durban, but some women haven't got the vehicles to get there. They need to walk here. I am fighting for them. I am very angry; from now till the day I die I will go at the committee till they change. I feel really super about all the women who have contacted me. Until the committee says, "Okay, at least give women a chance," I will not rest.'

The elderly temple *pujari* was adamant that women should not be allowed to walk as 'they get very fierce trances and could get burnt by falling into the fire'. He claimed that no women had ever indicated to the men that they wished to walk, and dismissed Pat's article as 'just for publicity'. Using a traditional patriarchal argument advanced by men who claim to know what is best for women, he assured me that the temple committee had the women's best interests at heart in not allowing them to walk. The young Sri Lankan *Kurukkal* priest, however, conceded that the situation would need to be looked into. He admitted he was aware that women participate in fire-walking in India, and that this could carry weight in deciding the local conflict. The priest agreed that it was probably only a matter of time before there would be change as the reasons were not good enough to continue resisting the women's request.

Two weeks after the initial newspaper article, *The Sunday Times* – the largest national weekly paper – interviewed Pat and published an article entitled 'Temple takes heat over ban on women'. The chairperson of the temple committee, asked to give reasons for their ban on women, claimed that the decision was taken 'after some women tripped over their saris and fell into the glowing embers ... Some of the women also suffered nasty burns on their feet. Women have tender feet and burn easily.' He added that 'another reason for keeping women away was to control

the number of people participating in the fire-walking ceremony ... as our temple ... has a small area where the fire-walking takes place ...' But he denied that his committee was sexist or discriminated against women. However, he conceded, 'If any of them make representations to us to lift the ban, we will certainly discuss this at our meeting.'

With the help of friends, Pat then drafted a short petition calling on the temple committee to lift their ban on women, which was signed by 89 people. This she presented at the temple office a few days before the annual general meeting. But, although the matter was raised at the meeting, no decision was taken. It became clear that the men would not easily be persuaded to change. Indeed, they seemed to be very threatened by the women, and the chairperson dismissed Pat as a 'troublemaker who runs a backyard temple cult'.

A year later, in 1997, at the Pietermaritzburg fire-walking, Pat decided that she would walk across the fire, despite all prohibitions. As the long procession of devotees approached the temple, Pat in a Kali trance, her sister Tillie, and a number of male supporters attempted to enter the crowd-control barriers that led the participants to the edge of the firepit. In spite of all efforts to prevent her, she and Tillie managed to push their way through and jumped onto the coals from the side of the pit just as a loud rumble of thunder rolled across the darkening sky. As her feet touched the coals, Pat began to dance, the coconuts pinned to her chest flying from side to side. The crowd at the edge of the pit roared its encouragement as she and Tillie made their way halfway across the pit. Then a large official leapt into the pit and lifted her out. Tillie was pushed out more roughly as pandemonium broke out, with some yelling their approval and others calling to 'close' the pit to prevent other devotees from coming across. These men appeared to consider that the women's presence on the coals had contaminated the pit. However, other participants continued to run across and the rest of the procession of male fire-walkers crossed without further interruption or mishap. Pat says she began to realise what had happened when she found herself surrounded by well-wishers, many of them throwing their arms round her. All around her people were saying, 'The women walked!' 'Pat, you did it!' And Pat's first question, because she had

been in a trance and did not remember what had happened, was, 'Did she dance, did the Mother dance?' Many women wept because they wished they had walked, and some said, 'We have waited a long time for this.' And the general feeling among the women was that the thunder and lightning was the Mother expressing her anger at the ban on women, and her approval of what had been accomplished in her name. Of course, those against the women maintained that the thunder was the Mother indicating her disapproval.

Commenting on this development in her work for the Mother, Pat said, 'I had decided that I had to break the rules. Somebody had to do something to make them agree to their wrong, and let us walk. We need communication and friendship between the women and the men, not a barrier. Mother Shakti created two sexes – the men must do their task and the women must do theirs. They must both serve her at the temple. I am not educated but, when it comes to Mother Shakti, I have knowledge, wisdom and power. And still they refuse to hear me. I have to fight for her, and fight for the women. Mother is making me a totally different person. She makes me happy every day. She gives me strength to go on. She supplies my daily needs. She's always there for me.'

The following year, 1998, the fire-walk attracted a considerable amount of bad press for the temple, precipitated by the temple committee's last minute call for a fee of R20 from all those who wished to cross the fire. Considerable dissatisfaction was expressed and the committee made no statement on whether or not women would be allowed to participate, even when they were pressed by a *Natal Witness* reporter the day before the event. A number of people then had to be hospitalised after being burnt as they crossed the fire. Again, the chairperson of the temple committee responded somewhat aggressively to criticism in the press, threatening legal action against those who voiced disapproval of his decisions. Most significantly, he stated: 'We have excluded women from walking across the fire in the past. We realise that we are the only temple which practises this discrimination and this year we did call for women to walk across the fire, but none came forward. We will meet with the women a few weeks ahead of the next fire-walking and discuss with them how we will accommodate them.' Pat said that

as far as she and the other women were aware, there was no such call. Pat said that someone who was at the firepit after everyone had walked told her an official then announced, 'Where are the women; aren't they going to walk?' but that no women present were prepared to come forward at that late stage. However, this statement from the committee was important and Pat was determined that the next year women would at last participate fully in the festival.

And this, finally, is what happened. The temple committee capitulated to popular pressure and bad publicity. It announced, when approached by a reporter from *The Natal Witness* two days before the ceremony, that the ban against women had been lifted. So, on Friday 2 April 1999, several women successfully crossed the fire, amid much rejoicing from their supporters. Tillie, quoted in the news on the following Monday, said, 'It wasn't me, it was Ma Kali doing the walking.'

Seven years on, women have become an accepted and highly visible part of the procession and the fire-walk. The indignities and injustices they suffered from the ban on their full participation are a thing of the past.

Many people still come to sit in Pat's small shrine and listen to her talking compellingly and charismatically about the Mother. 'And I talk and talk, and they listen. They feel good; it's a *darshan*, an education.'

FEATURES

Women quietly acting on their faith

The Easter weekend had profound significance for two apparently very different groups of women. But a closer look reveals that these Hindu and Christian women are working towards the same goal — the freedom to answer the deepest calls of their faith. MARINA BANG reports.



Firewalking

THE video camera pans slowly across the stage, taking in the myriad faces of Hindu devotees standing beside a long pit of hot coals.

Red, saffron and green — robes and fruit and flowers are bright against overcast skies. Devotees stare at the flames through their cheeks and skewers and the skin of their backs and chests. Fruit and flowers hang from these hooks.

The camera records the slow walking or dancing of the devotees one-by-one across the burning pit — a ritual to honour the goddess the *raupadi*, who first chastity and faithfulness and defilements. It is purity that is said to protect the faithful from the heat.

A close-up shows men naking the searing coals which steam as a light rain begins to fall. There is the rumble of thunder in the distance. Suddenly, a soufflé at the far end of the pit. Two women have stepped onto the coals and are crossing them with arms held out like wings. The camera shudders as the crowd surges forward to catch a glimpse.

Once the camera has been switched off, Padman (Pat) Pillay, almost the whole length of the pit when a man grabs her around the waist and lifts her free of the coals. Other men push her sister, Tillie Moonsamy, off. The women are not allowed near the soothing milk and turmeric pool that awaits the other fire walkers. "I shout, 'Close the pit,' and they close it. They are not among themselves. But the faithful continue to file across the coals."

Behind the camera is Kendall, head of the university's Drama Studies department, who has been preparing material on goddess veneration to promote Hindu religious practices and Indian religious practices. Kendall feels that the gender issue stole the day.

"The question of whether women should walk the fire dominated the festivities for many and, to some extent, detracted from the sacred nature of the day," she says. "The tension between men and women opposed to the women's right to walk. The women came quietly and presented themselves, and it was tragic that the anger between the men in these two factions diminished some of the beauty and peace of the ritual."

Many women felt that it was the mother (the goddess) who

had given Pillay and Moonsamy the courage to walk. They said the thunder was her voice of fury.

Pillay is a well-known and respected figure in her Northdale community for the trances and rituals she has performed by the goddess Kali and counsels and heals people.

She has walked the coals at two temples in Durban but — despite continued appeals to temple authorities — she has not yet been officially allowed to walk the coals in Pietermaritzburg.

The temple committee is silent. They have not verbally forbade her nor have they given her their blessing.

"Women have been forbidden to walk by the Sri Siva Soobramoniar and Mariamman temples in Pietermaritzburg because they are considered unclean," says Pillay. "and because their clothes might cause them to trip into the fire. But men have also had their feet burnt at times, and I believe women will voluntarily decide not to walk if they are menstruating."

Allen Diesel of the university's Religious Studies department says that his research into fire walking, feels

it is a pity that, despite all the sincere requests to end it, the Pietermaritzburg temple community persists with its ban against women.

"There appear to be no good reasons for continuing the ban and it is a pity that, despite all the sincere requests to end it, the Pietermaritzburg temple community persists with its ban against women."

"Like the men, women have allowed to fulfil them by walking. She says, 'I don't want to walk. I want to wash the other's feet in a gesture of love and humility, following the example of Jesus who, at the Last Supper, washed his disciples' feet.'"

Two things were significant about this gathering. Firstly, the usual practice is for a priest to wash the feet of 12, usually men, on the same day. Secondly, this small gathering formed just one of many groups of men and women on six continents who were, on the same day, taking part in the First Worldwide Day of Prayer For Women's Ordination.

Over the past few years, the Catholic Church has been elevated by the Vatican from one of policy and obedience to a matter of defined dogma.

The Vatican has, in a papal letter of May 1994 and in a Congregation For the Doctrine of the Faith communiqué of November 1995, forbidden Catholics to discuss women's ordination. That "we better underlying this is whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women" and that this teaching belongs to the "deposit of faith" and should be held always, everywhere and by all.

Two of the 11 women who took part in last week's footwashing are Mary Mkwana and Dina Cornick, who are both from Durban-based Women's Ordination South Africa (WOSA) — the local branch of a global network of Catholic women's organisations called Women's Ordination Worldwide (Wow). WOSA's aims include creating a forum for discussion and "achieving the ordination of women into a renewed priestly ministry in the Roman Catholic Church."

Cornick explains that the organisation consists of women and men calling for full participation of women in the ministry of the Roman Catholic Church.

Footwashing

LAST week, 11 women gathered in the Ukukhula Room at Durban's Ecumenical Centre to take part in a ritual that has been performed in the Catholic Church for centuries. Using an antique china bowl and a cloth, the women took turns to wash one another's feet in a gesture of love and humility, following the example of Jesus who, at the Last Supper, washed his disciples' feet.

Two things were significant about this gathering. Firstly, the usual practice is for a priest to wash the feet of 12, usually men, on the same day. Secondly, this small gathering formed just one of many groups of men and women on six continents who were, on the same day, taking part in the First Worldwide Day of Prayer For Women's Ordination.

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SNIPPETS

WIPE THAT SMILE OFF YOUR FACE: Artist Karel Lee has painted the faces of the most beautiful women in the world. Most artists draw faces, but Newton distinguishes himself by specialising in butts. You know, *derrieres*. Behinds. Backsides. Whatever.

Newton lives in Dallas, Texas, but travels around the United States, drawing full-length butt portraits — sometimes in as little as two-and-a-half minutes — at conventions and art shows. If asked: "Why not do faces?" Newton answers: "Then I'd be like every other artist."

IDEA DOWN THE DRAIN: Batman has refused to help fight British dirt by associating his name with a lavatory cleaner.

The brand managers of Domestos had hoped to use clips from the forthcoming Hollywood blockbuster *Batman and Robin* to sell their product in a series of television advertisements. But Domestos brand manager Cloonen thought that his image would suffer if his name was linked to the toilet cleaner, the *Times* said.

SOLID FLIGHT: Given a choice of two flights from New York, Stuart Pike believed the later one might be less crowded. And how.

Pike was the only passenger aboard a British Airways Boeing 747 flight from New York on Sunday. "The captain even let me sit on the flight deck when we landed. It was terrific," Pike told a reporter at Heathrow.

"I had the run of the whole plane. When I went on board ... the crew told me I could sit where I liked ... so it had to be first class."

INSERT A HERE: Singapore's mass circulation *Straits Times* apologised to the public and a telecommunications retailer yesterday after an embarrassing typographical error was introduced into its business pages.

The error concerned a newspaper advertisement from the Singapore Telecommunications Ltd group, which offered pager services and urged the public to "Take Your Pager Now."

But an extra letter crept into the phrase when it was printed in the *Straits Times* business report on Thursday, causing red faces at TeleShop and the newspaper.

BROODY ENGLISH WOLDS: China has launched a last-minute campaign to clean up misspelt English words and phrases before the 1997 Asian Games. Hong Kong returns to Chinese sovereignty. "Toilets" at Shenzhen airport must be converted to "Toilets", while the Shenzhen Stadium has been ordered to change "W.D." to "W.C."

At the border crossing to Hong Kong, the strange sign ordering foreigners to produce "Valid Viss" will also have to go and be replaced with "Valid Visas", the *China Daily* reported yesterday.

THANKS A LOT JULE NEWBARR: A transvestite detained in the women's ward at a prison in Turkey was found out after he got a cellmate pregnant, the daily *Hürriyet* reported yesterday. The paper said Ugur Kilic, sentenced to 15 years in prison for murder, was placed in the women's ward after prison officials discovered he was a transvestite. He was a woman, but having sex with five of his fellow

City women walk the fire

by
**NALINI
NAIDOO**

Today will be the first time that women will be allowed to participate in firewalking ceremonies in their hometown.



this issue for many of the women who could not afford to travel to the other temples.

"These women have taken vows for certain things in their lives: sickness in the family, misfortune or other problems. They do all the prayers and they would like to carry out the ultimate fulfilment of their vows by walking over the fire."

Pillay has absolute faith in the healing powers of the firewalking ceremony. Fifteen years ago her son had suffered from epileptic fits, was healed after walking the fire. When she heard of temples in Durban which allowed women to cross the pit of burning coals, she travelled there for the final fulfilment of her vows. Over the years she has been joined by her daughters, the youngest of whom started firewalking when she was seven years old.

Alleyn Diesel, co-author of the book *Hindooism in Natal* and a lecturer in the Religion Studies Department at the University of Natal, Durban, said the temple committee has finally decided to stop the discrimination against women.

Diesel, in a column in *The Natal Witness* last Saturday, commented that the prohibition on women went against the spirit of the festival. She said it is very important the situation has been normalised and that women are once again allowed to participate fully. "The festival with its powerful and virtuous divine female as a role-model is essentially a women-centred ritual."

According to Diesel, the festival is a celebration of the goddess Drunadi's victory over the forces of darkness. She is known as the goddess of firewalking as she is said to have walked across a pit of burning coals to prove her chastity.

"The festival with its powerful and virtuous divine female as a role-model is essentially a women-centred ritual."

Crossing the pit is a culmination of days of fasting. The night before the festival, participants stay at the temple. Early the next morning, they go down to the Dorpspruit to perform a ritual washing. This is where participants who wish to do so have needles and hooks pierced through their bodies. These are decorated with limes, coconuts and flowers. They then form a procession and slowly make their way to the temple. On the way, people place flowers and coconuts across their path to request blessings from them. The procession arrives at the temple in the early afternoon for the culmination of the festival, the crossing of a 10 metre-long pit filled with burning coals.

The Pietermaritzburg firewalking ceremony has over the years become well-known. Thousands of devotees and visitors converge on the temple and lower Longmarket Street becomes a hive of colourful activity with stalls along the road offering food and prayer goods for visitors. The festival has become an essentially the same over its 115-year existence; this year it will be different.

PADMANI Pillay has an aura of calmness and serenity. She is a spiritual healer and a devotee of the Goddess Kali. Yet her calmness deserts her at the news that women will be allowed to cross the pit of burning coals at the annual firewalking ceremony at the Siva Soobramaniam and Mariamman temples.

Over the past 10 years, Pillay has participated in firewalking ceremonies at other temples but never in her hometown. Her brief attempt to cross the burning pit ago, resulted in her being physically hauled off the coals by men who felt she had defiled the pit. Yet her act was not done out of defiance but was an inspired moment. Over the years she has tried to represent the women who have wanted to fulfil their final vows by walking across the burning pit. She has spoken out on this issue and even sent a petition from a group of women to the temple officials.

She is grateful that the temple committee has finally seen the light and is making a final decision was guided by God. "I wanted to say that and I will pray that every man and woman has a safe journey over the fire."

Pillay, who on March 21 completed a walk at the Second River Temple in Cato Manor, is not sure whether she will lead the women in Pietermaritzburg as they walk across the coals.

"I may stand awhile just to watch our dream become reality but I will also be there to help every man and woman who is walking over the fire."

"I will help the women tie their saris so they can go over the coals. I know the women may trip on their saris, fall and get burnt but this does not have to happen."

Pillay says that when she walks she hangs coconuts from hooks on her chest and back and pierces 32 needles in the skin around her waist. Through each hook she threads 10 limes and 14 flowers. These form an ankle-length skirt around her sari and she has never fallen.

According to Pillay, it does not matter what happens. "I did not think I would have had the opportunity to walk across the pit at temples in Durban. I took up

KEEP IT AT HOME

"THE house is not for committing suicide. It is for discussing public issues." Speaker of the Indian Parliament after a deputy of the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh tried to swallow insecticide in the state legislative assembly to protest against alleged government apathy on granting relief to relatives of farmers who committed suicide. The deputy opened a bottle of insecticide after showing it to the speaker but was stopped from swallowing it by staff who grabbed the bottle.

WHAT'S THE MAGIC WORD?

NEW York's subway conductors will be allowed to keep saying the magic word. The city transit agency decided it doesn't take too long, after all, to say "please" before asking riders to "stand clear of the closing doors". Earlier, the agency said conductors could help speed the train service and save five seconds at every stop, by dropping the word "please". But the idea didn't sit well with riders and commuter advocates who insisted that there is always enough time to be polite. Transit officials were forced to quickly admit that the idea was silly.

GIRLS STILL WANT TO HAVE FUN

"WE succeeded in kicking the government out of our bedroom." — Sherri Williams, a plaintiff who managed to get an Alabama state law banning the sale of vibrators and other sexual aids overturned by a federal judge because it bears no "rational relation to a legitimate state interest". U.S. District Judge Lynnwood Smith ruled that the state's 1998 law is "overly broad" and said people who used the devices would be "denied their joy for, among other things, sexual dysfunction, the state's selling or distributing," and observed that the devices "designed or marketed as useful primarily for the stimulation of human genital organs" is a misdemeanor punishable by as much as one year in jail and a \$10 000 fine.

HAMSTERS LEAD RACE TO LONG LIFE

IF people are like hamsters, it is theoretically possible that brain surgery to repair worn-out biological clocks could lengthen human lifespans, according to research led by Martin Ralph at the University of Toronto.

Researchers at the school's research team discovered that surgical alterations or replacements of biological clocks in the brains of hamsters extended the animals' lifespans by 20%.

FEELING FOR HIS ART

"I STILL have to suffer a little while longer." — Tenor Andrea Bocelli. "I don't feel I'm really credible enough yet," for the opera, the Italian singer says. Bocelli's silky ballads have sold 20 million records worldwide and he sang a duet with Celine Dion at the Oscars.

MONICA DOES PARIS

"Bonjour. Merci, merci. Si... I'm sorry, I mean out." — Monica Lewinsky in Paris.



TREE TO ENJOY CONCERT TOO

A 100-YEAR-OLD karee tree is to survive next month's performance by the Three Tenors at Pretoria's Union Buildings largely intact. The trees would only lose one of its lower branches in terms of an agreement



Devotee Padmani Pillay — I took up this issue for many of the women who could not afford to travel to the other temples.

Banned from walking worship's fire

PADMANI Pillay sits cross-legged in the home-made shrine in the back yard of her Northdale home. The "temple", about three square metres in size, is made of slats of wood and has a corrugated iron roof. Inside it is hung with scarves which let in the sunlight filtered through gauzy colours. She has draped the goddesses Draupadi, Kali and Sarasvati in garlands of marigolds. Pictures of many other Hindu gods and goddesses are set on the walls. A picture of the guru Sai Baba spontaneously produces ash and is covered today with only the hands showing through.

On the floor is a tray of camphor and cloves which she burns when she prays.

Three times a week from this temple Pillay consults, counsels and heals.

People from all over the neighbourhood, Hindus, Christians and Muslims, come to her to request help with sicknesses, marital problems, infertility, unemployment.

"Auntie Pat" is well known and respected in the community for entering into a trance where she becomes possessed by the Goddess Kali and then blesses the sick and dispenses the kind of wisdom that allows those who've gathered here to leave feeling comforted and strengthened. On a Friday night the yard of the house is packed with people waiting to consult her.

On a blowy autumn Wednesday, we are sitting in her temple because she has decided to talk to a reporter about an issue that troubles her. She feels the time has come to make public her concerns.

As she always does on Easter Friday, Pillay participated in the cleansing rituals at the Dorp Spruit. She was pinned with coconuts and had beautifully-crafted silver pins placed through her cheeks and tongue. These lie in the shrine now as an offering to Mother Draupadi.

But, as always, when she came with the crowds up to the Marriamen temple pit of fire, she and the other women had to stand on the sides, offering encouragement to the men, who alone are allowed to walk through the fire.

With all the devotees she had spent 10 days of purification, fasting and temple worship preparing for the culminating moment of the firewalk. But being a woman, she was not allowed into the pit.

She says the denial always comes as a shock and an intense disappointment. "It is so unfair, women are treated as pieces of dirt."

Ever since Pillay came to Pietermaritzburg at 15 to marry and move into her husband's family house, she has been a dedicated worshipper of the Goddess Kali. She has been participating in the firewalking prepara-

Padmani Pillay is a spiritual healer who is recognised by the Northdale community as a powerful religious figure. For years her desire has been to demonstrate her piety by walking the fire on Good Friday, but the Pietermaritzburg temple will not allow women to participate in this part of the ceremony. She spoke to ANTHEA GARMAN.

tions for more than 10 years.

In 1985 her six-year-old son who had suffered from epileptic fits decided to walk the fire to gain his healing. He did so, and was healed, she says. This strengthened her desire to walk the fire herself.

About five years ago she heard that the temples in Durban would allow women through the fire, so after preparing in Pietermaritzburg and observing the firewalking on Good Friday, she then travelled to Durban, alone without her family's knowledge, to walk the fire there for the first time.

She now travels to Durban every year to walk the fire at either "Second River" temple in Cato Manor or Jacobs Road temple in Clairwood.

But Pietermaritzburg is the place where she goes through the purification rituals leading up to the firewalk. She is highly dedicated to this community and pained that she cannot firewalk in this town and at this temple.

Pillay has been given two reasons for why women are not allowed to cross the fire pit. One is that some time in the past a woman tripped over her sari, fell and was burnt very badly. Pillay points out that men crossing the pit often wear dhotis, and in fact, this year she prevented a man from tripping as he was about to enter the pit.

The other reason is that women are impure because they menstruate and could defile the pit for all the devotees. Pillay says it should be up to the individual woman to withdraw from the preparations if she begins to menstruate.

Pillay, now 37, then tells me an extraordinary story about her own "change of life" which she earmarks as the beginning of her total dedication to the work of the Goddess Kali.

When she was 25 a ceremony of sacrifice was held at her home. Having completed the purification ritual she went into the house to change into a new, red sari while the sacrifice was prepared. She entered a trance and in this state became the Goddess Kali

who drank the blood of the sacrifice and walked on knives.

On coming out of the trance she went to bath and change for the evening prayers at the temple and found she was menstruating. She was worried about being impure for the evening ceremony. But, later, in the afternoon the blood had cleared.

From that day Pillay has never had a period again. She interprets this as a constant state of purity and readiness to serve the Goddess.

So for her to be denied the right to walk the fire because of a general worry about "impurity" is ironic.

When she walks the fire in Durban she feels welcomed, she says. Last

year, a woman fell and was burnt, but the temple officials did not enact a ban on women. Pillay has talked to other women who say the ban here in Pietermaritzburg makes them feel worthless even though they are dedicated devotees. Given the chance to walk through the fire, Pillay estimates that about 70 women would join her.



Healer Padmani 'Auntie Pat' Pillay with her pet dog Snowy. — Picture by NASH NARRANDES



LIFT THE BAN . . . Padmini Pillay says the barring of women firewalkers is discriminatory Picture: BRETT ELOFF

Temple takes heat over ban on women

SUNDAY
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A TEMPLE has barred women from taking part in a Hindu firewalking ceremony "because they have tender feet and trip over their saris", but a spiritual healer and firewalker has described the reasons as "discriminatory and ludicrous".

The ban has prevented over 70 women from taking part in the annual ceremony which attracts 10 000 devotees to the Marriamen Temple in Longmarket Street, Maritzburg.

Temple chairman Prega Padayachee said the decision to ban women was taken after some tripped over their saris and fell onto the glowing embers of wood. "Some of the women also suffered nasty burns on their feet. Women have tender feet and burn easily," said Mr Padayachee.

Maritzburg spiritual healer and firewalker Padmini Pillay wants the ban lifted. She said sari-clad women had participated in firewalking ceremonies for centuries and she found it strange that they were only banned at the Maritzburg temple.

Mrs Pillay said she and several other women — all of whom had participated in the rituals required for fire walking — were turned away from the temple grounds recently where the firewalking was taking place.

By GEORGE MAHABEER

Women from Maritzburg travelled to temples in Durban where they were allowed to walk on the fire, she said. She had done so herself and there had been no incidents of women tripping on their saris and falling into the fire pits at those temples. There had also been no reports of women burning their feet, she said.

She believed women were banned at the Maritzburg temple because officials feared that women who were menstruating might take part in the firewalking ceremony.

"They believe women are dirty because they menstruate. Hindu women are taught from puberty that they are not allowed to participate in religious ceremonies during the time they have their periods," said Mrs Pillay.

But Mr Padayachee said the allegation that the ban had been applied to keep women out because they menstruated, was "absolute nonsense".

He also denied that his

organisation was "sexist" and that it discriminated against women.

He said another reason for keeping women away was to control the number of people participating in the firewalking ceremony.

"This year we had 220 men and boys taking part in the ceremony. We also had about 400 people, which included women, walk around the fire pit," he said.

"Our temple is in the centre of Maritzburg and has a small area where the firewalking takes place. We have to limit the number of people entering the firepit as we fear that someone may fall into it. We are responsible for their safety.

"We have not yet received any complaints from women.

"If any of them make representations to us to lift the ban we will certainly discuss it at our meeting," said Mr Padayachee.

ers stab family in l attack at home

By SANTOSH BEHARIE

IT TOOK just 10 minutes on Tuesday this week to change the lives of the Govender family.

For the past seven years Mr Johnny Govender, his wife Thilkvathee and their two sons lived safely in their Phoenix home.

But the couple and their 16-year-old son Ryan became the victims of a brutal attack when five armed men stormed through their front door and stabbed all of them before making off with the family car and R500 in cash.

Now Mr Govender has vowed to carry his gun at all times as he is not willing to take any more chances.

On the day of the attack his gun was locked in a safe.

Speaking this week from his wife's bedside at the Phoenix Hospital, Mr Govender described his family's horrific ordeal.

"My two sons were still sleeping as I was preparing to leave for work at around 7.15am.

"I was in the kitchen as I opened the front door

