

The Sacred and the Profane

Economies of the (Il)licit

It is 2009, and a grand celebration of the seventy-fifth birthday of P. Susheela is being held in Hyderabad. As part of the festivities, Susheela must be felicitated onstage by her colleagues and contemporaries in the film field. Near the beginning of the celebration, she has taken the stage, dressed in her customary white silk sari with the end draped over her right shoulder. The singer L. R. Eswari, her slightly younger contemporary, ascends the stage to greet her. Also in a white silk sari, but without the end draped over her right shoulder, and flashing prominent gold jewelry, Eswari addresses Susheela as a venerable older sister (*akkā*), riffing on the Telugu/Tamil word *akkā* and wishing her health for many years to come. Then, in the midst of her sentence, Eswari suddenly bursts into song, in English: a rousing, vibrato-laden rendition of “wish you many happy returns of the day,” her voice full of the husk of advancing age. As the orchestra behind them comes to life, she rocks to the beat, turning around to conduct the orchestra, and gesturing on the word *you* to Susheela, who stands stationary, with an occasional knowing smile at her colleague’s antics. Eswari finishes and hands the mic to Susheela, who sings a Telugu film song in her trademark style, slow and smooth and, while perhaps a little lowered by age, still “sweet,” looking down at her notebook of lyrics.

In just a few minutes, with just a few gestures and a few lines of song, two archetypes—diametrically opposed to each other in self-presentation and vocal sound—have been animated. These two iconic singers inhabit the same system, presenting two possibilities for female public performance, now so well-worn that Eswari and Susheela hardly need to perform anything for the audience to get who they are. In chapter 3, we saw how the archetype that Susheela embodied was elaborated in the 1950s and 1960s. But what did it mean to flaunt one’s difference from respectable norms in this context? What did this act entail for singers, and how did L. R. Eswari come to master it?

In the decades following India's independence, conflicting aesthetic ideals shaped the possibilities for female singers. One ideal was encapsulated in the concept of *nalla penmani* (good womanhood), a cornerstone of Dravidian ideology, embodied by the woman who devoted herself to ensuring the productivity and harmony of the domestic realm. In the 1960s, however, the figure conjured by this phrase was juxtaposed with another: the woman who embodied the modernity and mobility of the "jet age"—the 1960s and 1970s—with its bringing together of East and West in "near coevalness" (Yano 2017, 129). An element of postwar modernity that permeated global popular culture, the jet age aesthetic entered Tamil films through scenes of airports, planes, and cars and through the image of a skirt- or pants-clad woman speaking English and dancing wantonly in what came to be called "Western" and "cabaret" songs.

In keeping with this moral dichotomy between good Tamil womanhood and jet-age femininity, a structural position was opened in the 1960s for singers who sang these "club" or "cabaret" songs, in which an actress dances suggestively before a male patron or audience within the film's diegesis. While Susheela's and Janaki's voices occasionally strayed into these areas, especially for female characters who were eventually disciplined or brought back into the fold, it was the voice of Eswari that really came to represent the other side: female characters who had strayed beyond the pale of respectability. Eswari started out singing for second heroines and comic characters in the late 1950s, but in the 1960s, her voice came to be associated with "vamp" characters. Her performances in cabaret and club songs were vehicles for bringing in foreign musical elements; film music directors of this period liberally used the instrumentation and melodic and rhythmic structure of Latin and rock music to represent jet-age femininity.²

A typology emerged in this period, dividing female voices that were heard as clean and licit and voices from those considered "husky" or immodest. Singers like Susheela and Janaki presented themselves as "just the voice" in an effort to control the forms of performative excess generated by playback singing: the potential for the singer to be seen as not merely singing or animating but actually authoring or owning, feeling, acting, or embodying the emotions or characters she was voicing. But the affect that the singers' voices generated, and the bleeding through from character or actress to singer, were issues that had to be constantly negotiated. Singers like Susheela and Janaki did not simply strive to avoid the performative mode; rather, as we saw in chapter 3, they sought to control it by making sure that their singing excited only licit kinds of affect. "Singing" constituted a frame within which singers could safely and respectably presence themselves.

Lying outside this frame was a whole repertoire of vocal sounds and techniques that came to stand as signs of illicit female desire and of unrespectable femininity. These included "folk" pronunciation, vibrato, melismatic vocal drops or rises at the end of lines, and loud and quick singing. Such vocal sounds and techniques

functioned as “qualitative icons” of brazenness (Harkness 2014, 123); not only did they represent characters who were brazen, but they were considered to require the singer herself to possess the quality of brazenness in order to perform them, because in doing so she was perceived as bringing her own intention and body into play. In semiotic terms, the singer needed to venture out of the representational mode, which shields the singer’s offscreen identity and persona by having her stand under someone else’s authorizing role (she is “just the voice” or “just singing” what the music director tells her to sing), and into the performative mode, in which the performance suddenly refers to the singer’s offscreen persona and identity instead of, or in addition to, the onscreen character or situation (Nakassis and Weidman 2018). The performative excess of the playback singer’s voice was crystallized in moments in songs that spilled out of the singing frame entirely. These moments were known as “effects,” and as we will see, Eswari was the undisputed master of them.

This chapter explores the complex mix of associations attached to Eswari’s voice and persona through the decades and the strategies she employed in negotiating her place within the possibilities for female public performance. Although Eswari animated the “modern,” Westernized woman onscreen, in offscreen publicity, she accentuated her Tamil identity. This was not, however, rootedness in idealized Tamil culture and the domestic realm in the way of the docile *nalla peṇmani*. Rather, as she retreated from playback singing and made a name for herself as a devotional singer in the 1970s and 1980s, Eswari became known for her songs on Amman, the sometimes benevolent and sometimes fierce Tamil mother goddess associated with lower-caste and village-based Hindu religious belief. Further defying the usual career path for aging female playback singers, in the 2010s she reemerged into the film world to sing several hit songs in which her audibly aged voice is matched with the sexually charged performance of current “item” actresses.

My focus in this chapter is not only on Eswari as an individual but also on the effect of her presence and voice in the public cultural sphere. Performers like Eswari necessarily create new possibilities for female performance even as they and the media surrounding them negotiate their place within existing structures and expectations. Eswari did not just fit into a preexisting spot in the typology of female voices that emerged in the 1960s; rather, she enabled the typology to emerge. Her voice and performance persona defined the singing frame by embodying all that lay outside of it. Yet although the transgressive aspects of her persona and performance have been managed by being slotted into a particular spot in the typology, Eswari’s voice has been markedly mobile, transforming from being the voice of licit second heroines to that of vamps, traveling between the sexualized cabaret scenes of the 1960s and the goddess Amman, and popping up again in postmillennial Tamil cinema. Such mobility lends Eswari’s voice a particular power to disturb the performative dispensations that attempt to govern what its effects should be.

THE TOLĪ WITH THE “PECULIAR” VOICE

Eswari was born in Madras into a Tamil Roman Catholic family as Lourde-Mary Rajeswari. Unlike most other singers of her generation, she was not led into the film field by a father or husband but by her mother. Eswari's father died when she, the oldest of her three siblings, was only six years old, leaving the family struggling to make ends meet. Her mother was a good singer and, to support the family, started working for Gemini Studios in the late 1940s as a chorus singer. Eswari left school after tenth standard at the age of sixteen and joined her mother in working at Gemini Studios. There, Eswari's voice was recognized as a peculiar type, with unique capabilities. After several years, the director A. P. Nagarajan and music director K. V. Mahadevan decided to give her solo songs. To differentiate her from an already known playback singer of the time, M. S. Rajeswari, Nagarajan changed her name to L. R. Eswari in the film credits. The name stuck, and she quickly became well known in the next few years.

Eswari's first hits were all licit “marriage” songs, with lyrics voicing the perspective of the heroine's *tolī* (female friend), a culturally recognized role in Tamil society and literature (Lakshmi 1984). These included “Pūtu peṇṇē pūtu peṇṇē nimirntu pāru” (New bride, new bride, lift your head up and look) (*Nalla idathu sambandam* 1958), “Manamakalē marumakalē vā vā” (O daughter of my heart, o bride, come) (*Sarada* 1962), and “Vārāy en tolī vārāyō” (Come, my friend, will you come?) (*Paasa malar* 1961). All three songs feature Eswari's voice as that of a friend who encourages and advises the bashful or reluctant bride. Although the lilt, youthful mobility, and playfulness of Eswari's voice, embodied in the descending glissando that often finishes her lines, is foregrounded in contrast to the silent bride/heroine in these sequences, the songs are coded as licit through their lyrical content, visuals of female sociality and wedding preparations, and the female chorus sections that repeat portions of Eswari's solos. These songs became hits and were played and performed at weddings all over Tamil Nadu. “Vārāy en tolī” was particularly popular as a kind of auspicious song that became a must at wedding proceedings. As a fan of Eswari's remarked to me, “Without that song, the wedding couldn't happen” (*Anta pāṭṭu ille ṇṇa, kalyānamē kitaiyātu*).

While Eswari's voice could not signify the pious, modest womanhood of heroines, it did stand for a variety of other types of women in the early years of her career. In *Nalla idathu sambandam*, Eswari's vocal roles ranged from the licit to the playfully immodest, serving as a versatile foil for the sedate performance of classically trained Soolamangalam Rajalakshmi, who sang all the songs for the film's heroine, a pious woman who desires only to be a good wife but is matched with a cruel, womanizing husband. In addition to providing the voice for the heroine's *tolī* in “Pūtu peṇṇē pūtu peṇṇē,” Eswari sang “Poṇṇum māppilaiyum,” a joyous song anticipating the wedding; voiced the performance of a courtesan whose salon the hero frequents in “Ivārē tān avarē”; and provided accompaniment to a

dance performance that the hero watches at the end, after he has been reformed, in “Tūkkatilum sirikkaṇum.”

COMIC, MADWOMAN, VAMP

In the early 1960s, Eswari also began singing comedy songs. The role of the comedian has long been associated in Tamil cinema with lower-caste characters whose backwardness and village ways serve as a foil for the hero's status and urbane persona, as well as for the heroine's physical beauty and modesty (Srinivas and Kaali 1999; Nakassis 2016). Female comic characters of the 1960s were straight-talking, sassy figures who appeared in public, open spaces and flirted with or fought off the advances of men. In the 1960s, Eswari often sang for the comedy actress Manorama, and her voice was featured in song sequences of films with comedy actors such as Nagesh and Chandrababu, often in the character of a village girl. These songs capitalized on the playfulness and mobility of Eswari's voice. The songs often involved singing nonsense syllables or vocables, as well as elements like a quick rise in voice at the end of a line—a vocal gesture that signifies folkness and sassy village femininity. For instance, in “Gubugubu nān engine,” from the film *Motor sundaram pillai* (1966), Eswari's voice imitates the sound of an engine, and the male voice imitates the sound of a train car, as they enact a flirtatious song about the inseparability of a man and woman who are in love.³

While Eswari's voice was seen as a good fit for Manorama, equally as important was its association with Jayalalitha, who emerged as an actress in Tamil movies in the mid-1960s, often playing the role of an overeducated, rich, spoiled, snobby young woman who must be disciplined. Just as Susheela's voice was said to match the actress B. Saroja Devi, who was known for her gentle and cultured heroine roles, Jayalalitha's image and Eswari's voice were seen as uniquely suited to each other (Vamanan 1999, 624). Eswari's willingness and ability to sing Western-style numbers, peppered with English words, aligned with Jayalalitha's English-speaking, skirt- and pants-wearing screen characters. The similarity of their life circumstances further cemented the association, despite differences of caste background and education (Jayalalitha came from a Brahmin family and was highly educated; Eswari was from a lower-caste background and barely studied up to tenth standard). Unlike others who were brought into the film field and chaperoned by fathers or husbands, both Jayalalitha and Eswari bore the taint of having no fatherly presence and a mother who had taken work in the film industry to support the family.⁴ And, as they both reached and passed marriageable age, they shared the taint of being unmarried.

These extratextual details shaped both Jayalalitha's screen roles and the way Eswari's voice was used: to signify womanhood outside the bounds of normalcy and modesty. In *Vennira adai* (1965), Jayalalitha's first Tamil film, she played the role of a young woman who has gone mad because of a previous misfortune.

The song sequence “Nī enpatu enna,” in which she is introduced to but rejects the psychiatrist who will eventually cure her, is a raucous number that features Eswari’s voice screaming, singing at high volume, practically yodeling with maniacal stylized laughter, and sometimes sinking into a low pitch. The extreme mobility of Jayalalitha’s body is matched by Eswari’s vocal performance, which extends far beyond the limits of the singing frame.

Importantly, the capacity of Eswari’s voice to represent forms of feminine uncontainment and immodesty crossed class lines and urban/rural distinctions. There was a fine and permeable line between female comedy and sexualized female performance; the flirtatious forwardness of the village girl could easily transform into a salacious performance of female desire. In the 1968 film *Panama pasama*, Eswari sang for the comedic character of the fruit seller (actress Vijaya Nirmala) hawking her *elanta paḷam* (a small gooseberry-like fruit), brazenly approaching strangers and dancing in the street. Eswari’s performance featured a tremulous tone, open-mouthed “folk” diction, audible moments where the pitch of her voice dropped from its “singing” register to one more suggestive of speaking, and a tune that evoked the traditional folk *makuti* or snake-charmer’s music (Paige 2009, 61). This, combined with the innuendo of the lyrics (*elanta paḷam* refers to sexualized female body parts) and the actress drawing attention to her body by dancing sinuously in the street, made the song an immediate sensation. In every interview Eswari gave, journalists would comment on the song. In one such interview from 1968, the interviewer, clearly fishing for some way to connect the content of the song with Eswari’s persona, asked her if she ate *elanta paḷam* in real life. “From a young age,” Eswari replied, “I had a loathing for it. I was afraid there would be a worm.” She went on to note the peculiar paradox of being so famous for singing a song about a fruit she wouldn’t even touch that she was requested to sing it at least three times in each stage concert she gave (*Bomma* 1968b, 29).⁵

Eswari’s voice came to be associated with other forms of feminine uncontainment as well. Female sexual desire and drunkenness were consistently intertwined in the cabaret songs that entered Tamil cinema in the late 1960s, many of which were composed by music director M. S. Viswanathan and sung by Eswari. They featured rock- and Latin-inspired rhythms with guitar, brass, piano, and drum sections and a consistent set of visual elements: the actress, dressed in a form-fitting dress or pants, dancing on a stage with a microphone, or in a club setting, the male band members visible behind her and the club patrons drinking and smoking. The sequences are dark with glittering lights, sequins, wafting cigarette smoke, and silhouetted figures embracing or drinking wine. The female character dances seductively, while the song lyrics invite the audience to come close, to watch her, and to dance. In “Varavēṇṭum” (You must come), from the 1964 film *Kalai kovil*, the character entreats her lover to come “even just one time,” comparing a woman without a lover (*sērāta peṇ*) to an eye that can’t see. Eswari sings in a low-pitched, jazzy style, her voice dropping seductively on the last syllable of

the word *varavēṇṭum*. Her long notes feature vibrato, a vocal technique that was unknown among the licit female singers of this period; it was a marker of Western-club-style singing.

Eswari continued to sing cabaret-style songs into the early 1970s, assuming the voice of drunk, lovesick, and promiscuous women who sang openly of their desire and lust. The idea that such women who bared their bodies and desires were destined to forever be “public” women was dramatized in songs like “Ellōrum pārkka en ullāca vāḷkkai” (My carefree life, for all to see) (from *Avalukkendru oru manam* 1971) and “Nān oru kātal sannyaci, nāl oru mētai en raci” (I’ve renounced everything for love, it’s my destiny to always be onstage) (from *Thavaputhalvan* 1972). In this latter song, Eswari performed the promiscuousness of the character by dropping her vocal pitch quickly and almost without control on the last syllable of *sannyaci*, much as she had done in “Varavēṇṭum” but in an even more exaggerated way. Literally dropping out of the singing frame, Eswari’s voice drop enacted the fall out of respectable womanhood.

Such a vocal drop constitutes, in Peircean terms, an indexical icon: a sign that, while iconically enacting what it stands for (a voice/body outside the bounds of proper singing), references recognized social types (loose women outside the bounds of propriety or decency). It was a kind of vocal gesture, one that aligned its producer to a particular model of personhood (Harkness 2011).⁶ Crucially, the voice drop also pointed indexically toward other songs in which Eswari had employed this vocal gesture. While the actresses who performed these kinds of song sequences changed, the songs all featured the same general visual elements and, more important, the same voice, lending them a certain stability as a recognizable genre, such that Eswari’s cabaret songs formed a kind of intertextual corpus built up over many different films. Meaning could be generated by means of intertextual references that pointed not just to other Eswari songs but to the corpus itself and, by extension, to the persona of the singer that held it together.

THE VOCAL DIFFERENTIATION OF TYPES

By the mid-1960s, the vocal juxtaposition of Susheela and Eswari had become a reliable pattern, with Susheela’s voice for the heroine and Eswari’s for the “second woman,” comic, and vamp characters. If Susheela’s *kuralinimai* represented a demarcated zone of sonic purity, Eswari’s voice was its constitutive outside, representing all those areas into which the licit female voice could not stray. Films, as well as singers and audiences, not only made use of this opposition but diligently maintained it.⁷ The division of labor between singers was stated in terms of a difference between “melody” songs and other kinds of songs, which were thought to require a different kind of voice and, by extension, a different kind of person. A female singer (S) who was a contemporary of Eswari and Susheela explained this to me in terms of an *alavu* (extent, limit) past which she herself could or would not

go in singing club songs. Notably, she blurred the distinction between not wanting to sing Eswari's type of songs and physically not being able to, using the phrase "enakku varātu": "they don't come to me." In fact, these seemingly amounted to the same thing for her, as if the voice's physical inability to sing such songs was a sign of being a certain kind of person:

- s. I had all melody songs only. The fast, Western type, like Eswari sang, don't come to me easily [enakku varātu]. I like comedy songs and have sung those. But the Western type songs did not come to me. They don't match my voice. Although, I have sung some of those Asha Bhosle songs [demonstrates songs with slight end line voice drop, audible inhalation, and melismatic singing on "mmm"]. Like this, to this extent [alavu], I'd sing. But not Eswari's type of effects.
- AW. Do you mean you didn't wish to sing effects? Or you weren't able to? [Effects pāṭa iṣṭam illeyā muṭiyātā?]
- s. Eswari is deepest in singing such type of songs. How can we compete? . . . Fact is fact. I am more interested in singing melody songs. That's what comes to me. This kind of effect songs, teasing songs, club songs, I'm not good at them. But I have sung some club songs if they have melody [demonstrates a song with a high-pitched melody and then a folksy "hay" uttered with voice dropping to a creak]. . . . Even Western songs [demonstrates a song where melodic line drops to lower register]. But melody has to be there. Then I will sing them in stage programs. But I didn't get known for those [Western and club songs]. In Western, I only sang soft songs like Susheela. Susheela has not sung Western songs much. Janaki sounds very good in Western songs. . . . But Eswari is first class. Nobody can beat her. Everyone has their own type [ellārukkum oru vakai irukke].

The difference between Eswari's and Susheela's voice types was exploited in the film *Nee* (1965), in which Jayalalitha acted in a double role. Playing on the ambiguity of Jayalalitha's conflicted star-text as a highly educated young Brahmin woman but also an actress who danced in pants and skirts onscreen, she played both the hero's girlfriend, who has no parents of her own and is taken in by his family as a bride-to-be, and, later in the film, Usha, who sings in clubs and works for the film's villain, and who happens to look just like the heroine. The hero's family mistakenly believes they are the same person, but the use of different playback voices for each "version" of Jayalalitha ensured that the audience was not fooled. Susheela provided the singing voice for the girlfriend, while Eswari sang the drunken cabaret number "Enakku vanta inta mayakkam" (This swooning that has come over me) that accompanies the scene in which Usha attempts to seduce and capture the hero. While the film was constructed around the ambiguity of Jayalalitha's persona, both onscreen and off, the contrasting playback voices used in the film allowed for no ambiguity. Eswari's vocal performance of drunken brazenness combined a wildly



FIGURE 11. Video still and clip of “Enakku vanta inta mayakkam” (This swooning that has come over me). Song sequence from *Ni* (1965), featuring actress J. Jayalalitha and playback singer L. R. Eswari.

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.104.3>



mobile singing voice with a variety of dramatic effects, including laughing that turns to crying, heightened speech in English, and drunken hiccups (see fig. 11).

The division of labor among the playback singers indicates just how important the female voice was in the differentiation of female characters. Although, as we saw in chapter 2, T. M. Soundararajan was able to voice the contrasting masculinities of Sivaji and MGR during this period, and sang for both “versions” of MGR in the latter’s double-role movies, Jayalalitha’s double role required strict vocal differentiation. The division of labor between Susheela and Eswari also reveals the differing standards and expectations for actresses and female singers at this time. While the ambiguity of the actress’s persona was a constitutive feature of being an actress, the investment in the female singing voice as a site of modesty and purity meant that female singers were subject to more rigid categorization.

ON THE SEMIOTICS OF “EFFECTS”

The potential for performatively exceeding the singing frame, going beyond being “just the voice,” was heightened in the case of songs in which the playback singer’s

voice was paired with sexualized bodily performance onscreen. In such song sequences, it was the female desired and desiring body—outside of the frameworks of societal, family, or other kin relations—that was foregrounded. And the bodily aspects of the singing voice—all those elements licit singers worked so hard to hide “in the throat” or remove—were played up. Singing such songs was taken to be a different kind of act from singing other types of songs; they were deemed to render the voice of the singer unfit for more respectable types of “melodic,” “love,” or “classical”-based songs. Being a singer of club and cabaret songs thus required a certain willingness to specialize and be branded.

The potential for a song to spill out of the singing frame was most pronounced whenever a song included “effects”: those moments when there was some kind of voiced emotion, such as sighing, crying, or laughing, or voiced bodily reaction, such as swooning in delight or pain, hiccupping, and so forth. Unlike merely singing about an emotion or feeling, performing certain effects necessitated producing the sound of a body reacting, therefore introducing the possibility that the singer was indeed feeling what the song was “about.” While male singers sometimes performed laughing or heightened speech effects in songs, the variety of possible effects was greater for female singers, and performing them had more extensive ramifications for the star texts and reputations of female singers.

The category of “effects” came into the vocabulary of singers, music directors, and listeners soon after playback singing became established in the 1950s, as a way to maintain the separation between these moments in songs and the act of singing. The “I” of the singer was distanced from these effects in several ways. Effects were often preceded by a pause or full stop between the singing voice and the effect. They were also highly stylized, performed as a presumably easily reproducible citation of stylized emotion rather than a spontaneous expression of it. And the very concept of effects conjured the image of a technician turning knobs or a Foley artist manipulating objects before a microphone to trick the ears of listeners rather than that of an actor portraying an emotion.

Despite these varied ways of containing the potential excess of these effects, managing their performative force was challenging, and performing them was a liability for female singers. This was not only because performing effects came perilously close to acting but also because effects admitted sounds of the body and of breath into the voice. They compromised the timbral consistency of the singer’s voice and, in doing so, compromised the moral licitness of the singing frame, the singer’s persona, and the singing voice domesticated by the disciplining structures of melody and lyrics. Their potential “effect” was not just on listeners’ perception and emotions but on the singer’s voice and, by extension, her own self.

In addition to blurring the boundary between singing and acting, between representing and actually feeling or embodying what is represented, so-called effects generated other ambiguities, both semiotic and sociological. They were a site where the sound of the singer’s voice often mingled with and became indistinguishable from other instrumental and diegetic sounds, the creation and

management of which was a male domain. A whole crew of men, ranging from recordists to mimicry artists to “effects boys,” was in charge of producing these kinds of sounds and blending them with singers’ voices. Considering the range of possibilities of this relationship between voice and instrumental/other sounds will help to show what was entailed in this ambiguous zone of mingling, where Eswari’s voice was often located.

At one end of this range of possibilities was when a singing voice “matched” the quality of an instrument, a mingling that could often be interpreted positively as an indication of the singer’s skill. For instance, in Janaki’s well-known song “*Siṅkāravēlanē tēvā*” (from *Konjum salangai* 1962), her voice is matched in parts note for note with a nagaswaram; just as the story is framed as the licit love between a singer and a nagaswaram player, Janaki’s ability to “match” the sound of a nagaswaram was repeatedly cited by her and others as an indicator of her virtuosity as a singer. At the other end of the range of possibilities was a purposeful lack of mingling: moments when a voiced effect was called for but was provided by instruments or other sounds rather than the singer. In the song “*Āṭāmal āṭukiṛēn*” (from *Ayirattil oruvan* 1965), Susheela sings for the character of a princess who has been captured by pirates, who are getting ready to auction her off. She is made to dance as the pirate chief whips her. Before the whip cracks, she sings:

Āṭāmal āṭukiṛēn	Without dancing, I’m dancing
Pāṭāmal pāṭukiṛēn	Without singing, I’m singing
Antavanē tēṭukiṛēn—vā vā vā	I seek god—come, come, come
[whip strikes—instrumental interlude]	

In place of a voiced reaction, a chorus of frantic violins fills the space after the crack of the whip. And even before the whip strikes, Susheela’s voice trails off in a specially constructed fadeout seemingly created by having her move away from the microphone as she sings “vā vā vā.” Just as the lyrics draw attention to the separation of the character’s body and her “I,” the separation between Susheela’s singing voice and the voicing of bodily experience is accentuated by having the violins substitute for a voiced reaction. Here, the complete timbral, temporal, and spatial separation between voice and instruments contrasts with the parallel matching of voice and instrument in “*Siṅkāravēlanē tēvā*.”

Between these two extremes was a zone where the singer’s voice mingled ambiguously with instrumental and other sounds, often amplifying or exaggerating the singer’s effects. The song “*Ammammā kēlaṭi tolī*” (from *Karuppu panam* 1969) features Eswari’s voice in a “double role” as both the club dancer, confiding her ill treatment by her lover, and the friend who counsels her. Each verse alternates the dancer’s singing with her friend’s breathy, heightened speech and final sigh, which trails off into the sound of wind blowing in the dark night. As the friend speaks of pleasure, intoxication, dreams, unfulfilled desire, and wandering hearts, the sound of the wind amplifies the breathiness of Eswari’s voice so that it is hard to tell where one ends and the other begins.⁸

Since the 1950s, female playback voices have been subject to categorization based on the breathiness of the voice. While adding the slightest hint of breathiness to a voice could hint at female sexuality and desire, the logical culmination of this—the crystallization of a particular vocal timbre into an “effect”—was pure breath without the voice at all. Although licit singers would not do these breathy effects unless they were coded as crying, Eswari became known for her willingness and ability to perform them. At the climax of the thriller *Sivanda mann* (1969), the hero and heroine, in order to draw in and trap the villain, stage an elaborate act on a faux Egyptian set in which the heroine is disguised as a court dancer and must sing as the hero, also in disguise, cracks a whip over her. Eswari sings the song with a prolonged gasping effect each time the whip hits the heroine’s body, as she recovers from the blow and then returns to her singing voice. The sequence is strikingly similar to “Āṭāmal āṭukiṛēn” in its use of the cracking whip as a visual and aural element that punctuates the song. But while Susheela’s song was clearly in the voice of the heroine who is disavowing her performance, signaled by the lyrical content and Susheela’s physical retreat from the microphone instead of performing a vocal effect, “Paṭṭattu rāni”—both through its lyrics and performance—highlights the effects and the performance in general:

Paṭṭattu rāni pārkkum pārvai	To succeed in having the look of a royal queen
vēṛṛikku tān ena enna vēṇṭum	what do you need?
Nilluṅkal nimirntu nilluṅkal	Stand up straight
Solluṅkal tunintu solluṅkal	Speak daringly
[whip strikes—gasping effect]	

The structure of this song worked to bolster the conception of effects as something that could be simultaneously included within a song and kept separate from the singing voice. The complete stop before the effect is performed produces a formal separation between the singing voice and the gasp. But as the song progresses, the effects seem to bleed through to the singing voice as Eswari begins to sing in a breathy voice with audible inhalations, upsetting the neat separation between “singing” and “effects” (see fig. 12).

The stories about the making of the song further suggest that, rather than disavowing them, Eswari embraced the effects as part of her performance of the song. In more than one media interview over the years, she told the story of how she was chosen to sing “Paṭṭattu rāni” after Lata Mangeshkar and Asha Bhosle both said they were unable to (Kollytalk 2011; Stalin 2014, 66–72). She talked about how the director, Sridhar, had then suggested Susheela, but M. S. Viswanathan, the music director, had said, “It has to be sung without fear. So Eswari must sing it. The character is a woman who does not know fear. Only if Eswari comes it will be good.” She recalled that originally the idea was that she would do the singing, and a male mimicry artist would produce the gasping effect: “Mimicry artist Sadandan was there. In the middle, MSV and Sridhar started whispering. They were right near me. I heard what they were saying. I came to know that Sridhar didn’t like the



FIGURE 12. Video still and clip of “Paṭṭattu rāni” (Royal queen). Song sequence from *Sivanda Mann* (1969), featuring actress Kanchana, actor Sivaji Ganesan, and playback singer L. R. Eswari.

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.104.4>



reaction to the whip hit. I came forward to do it myself” (L. R. Eswari, quoted in Vamanan 1999, 624–25).

A sound recordist at AVM Productions from those years recalled to me the effort that went into producing the whip sound and the singer’s effects:

Sridhar [the director] was very insistent that this whip sound must come. What to do for the whip, we were thinking. Finally we got the idea to use the gun from Deepavali festivities. You press it and it goes “tak,” similar to the whip sound. So we used that. . . . At that time it was single-track recording. No multitrack. This and the voice and orchestra all has to come in a single mic. . . . With the reverberation in the hall, it had even more effect, along with Eswari singing “ha ha ha” [the gasping effect]—all this came out by 2 in the afternoon.

He described how it was his idea to have the “effects boy” with the gun stand some distance from the mic and Eswari stand close to the mic, so that everything could be recorded simultaneously rather than recording the whip sound and effect separately and later synchronizing them: “I said [to him] you have to stand over there; otherwise we will have to sync it. He said, no syncing. That lady [Eswari] also said,

‘Sir, if it comes along with me, I can sing with better expression.’ She wanted it to be realistic.”

Unlike Susheela, who literally stepped away from the microphone, Eswari stepped forward to do the effects, herself mingling with the male world of sound recordists and effects boys. In an interview on Radio Ceylon, she took pride in being the only singer willing and able to perform effects, recalling that “it took confidence” to do the gasping sound in “Paṭṭattu rāni.”

And not only did she perform effects, but she was invested in their coming off as realistic—that is, exceeding their stylized form to suggest that the emotion or feeling was really being experienced. “In the song ‘Enakku Vanta Inta Mayakkam,’ crying, laughing, everything comes. People asked me, ‘kūṭicciṭṭu pāṭiniṅkalā?’ [Did you get drunk and sing it?] Because it was so realistic. I felt very proud when they asked me that” (Hameed 1979). Effects crystalized the performative excess of the playback singer’s voice, the excess of voiced emotion or feeling that interrupted the act of singing and sounded so realistic that it caused a listener to wonder about exactly what had happened and just who was in charge in that profilmic moment.

Indeed, effects seemed to generate a suggestive confusion between the singer’s voice and other sounds, instruments, and objects, highlighting the voice’s materiality and its physical impact on listeners. Unlike the constant references to “honey” and “nectar” that came up in discourse about Susheela and Janaki’s voices, discourse about Eswari’s voice emphasized its performative force, its capacity to move listeners, not in some sentimental way but quite literally to move their bodies. An article in the Tamil magazine *Pēcum Paṭam* from 1971 praised Eswari’s “unique voice structure.” “For night-time club dances and Western kinds of songs, there is no one equal to her. In those scenes, just as the actress causes her body to be like a coiled metal spring, Eswari causes her voice to be like a snake. . . . There is no one who can sing like this. Even if they wanted to they would not be able to sing a song like ‘Elanta Paḷam.’ And she can sing love songs excellently too. . . . All of Eswari’s songs make rasikars [fans] swoon” (*Pēcum Paṭam* 1971, 102). The sound of Eswari’s voice was described to me with the Tamil adjective *ganir* (*kanir*: ringing), like a bell being struck, or in words that directly recall the song sequence “Paṭṭattu rāni,” “like a rubber whip.” Speaking of the song, an actress at a function in Eswari’s honor said that “even the sound of the whip cracking is echoed in Eswari’s voice” (*Makkal Kural* 2009). There was a certain traffic between the onscreen image and the offscreen voice, as the qualities of things pictured on the screen—the cracking whip, the sensuous moves of an actress—seemed to be transferred to and from Eswari’s voice.

POTENT REVERSALS

Though the concept of “effects” seemed to clearly define a sound as something merely animated by the singer but “caused” deliberately by another authorial

agent, the very framing of effects as such generated a set of ambiguities around cause and effect. These came to the fore in live stage performances, where a singer's voiced effect could be matched to a visible body "causing" it, adding a whole new level of performative presencing. As one singer put it to me, singers could do effects onstage as long as they were understood to be coming from the music director's teaching. "Only then I give them. If we [playback singers] give the effects ourselves, they will say we are crazy [paittiyam piṭittu]."

But Eswari, in her stage performances, clearly took ownership of the effects, performing them in exaggerated and altered ways. For example, in a performance from the late 1980s with the Sri Lankan light music troupe ApSaRaS, she sang "Paṭṭattu rāni," rocking her body to the beat. Just before the whip strike, she made a hissing sound to suggest the sound of the whip cutting through the air and then gave a prolonged reaction effect that began with a scream rather than the voiceless inhalation of the original. Extending her effect to the sound of the whip itself, Eswari sonically inserted herself into the male domain of sound effects. And she did so physically, as well. Toward the end of the song, as the whip cracks became more frequent and the pace of the song sped up, Eswari turned her back to the audience and strode back into the musicians' space, leaning over them and conducting each to come in when it was his turn. By doing so, she clearly disrupted the "gendered geography" of the light music stage (Seizer 2005, 205–12). As Susan Seizer suggests in her analysis of stage and performance dynamics in the Tamil theatrical genre "Special Drama," the stage, far from being an escape from real life, both maps and is contiguous with social relations beyond its physical borders. Similarly, the light music stage has clearly marked zones: the front center, where the singers, including the female singer, always stand, and the rear portion of the stage, the exclusively male domain of the orchestra. Usually, only the conductor travels between these two parts of the stage, mediating relations between female singers and the unknown men of the troupe. Female singers like Susheela, Janaki, and Lata Mangeshkar might do half-turns to gesture to the conductor and wave their lyrics-book hand in a small, low motion as the orchestra played, but they never turned to face the musicians or entered their space as Eswari did.

In another stage performance of "Paṭṭattu rāni" from the late 1980s, Eswari put down her mic after her last verse and turned to conduct the orchestra in wide gestures with both arms, clearly usurping the role of the conductor as he stood facing her. The crack of the whip was provided by cymbals, and Eswari's gasping effect was a voiced exhaled laugh-cry that was significantly different from the inhaled gasping effect and final sigh in the original. In the course of the seven-minute song, Eswari performed this effect multiple times. She turned and waited for the whip sound, pointing at the percussionist and having him repeat his strike of the cymbals if it wasn't loud enough. By anticipating the whip sound, Eswari presented herself as the one in charge rather than a voice merely reacting to the strike of the whip. Her performance drew constant whistling from the audience.

After one effect toward the end of the song, which was followed by particularly loud whistling and calling, Eswari stopped and addressed the audience with her hand outstretched, palm upward in a commonly recognized gesture of confrontation and challenge. “Am I giving the effects here or are you? It’s a difficult effect. You want to give it? Ok, you give it. Give it!”

Addressing the audience directly in this way constitutes what Erving Goffman recognized as an act of “breaking frame”: breaking or interrupting the expected, constructed mood or “key” of an interaction or performance. Goffman described frame breaks as a kind of “flooding” in or out of emotions, words, or actions through the boundaries of the frame (1974, 351–52, 359). Breaking frame in the midst of a performance, as Susan Seizer has noted, can create a powerful moment in which the content of what is being performed “floods out” into real-life relations between performers or between performer and audience (2005, 221). Here Eswari herself takes on the persona of the “royal queen” (*paṭṭattu rāni*) of the song, a woman who “stands up straight and speaks daringly.”

All of these actions—conducting the musicians, altering the effects, addressing the audience directly—constitute potent reversals of playback’s protocols. They upset not only the physical and social separation of the singer from musicians and audience but also distinctions between cause and effect, authorship and animation, and the licit, sacralized domain of “singing” and its profane outside. During an award function in her honor in 2009, Eswari took the mic after a long evening of tributes and sang the opening lines of “*Nān oru kātal sanniyaci*” with exaggerated and prolonged end-line voice drops that ended in a creaky voice, much to the amusement of the audience. Then, tweaking the usual emphasis on playback singers’ god-given voices, she said, “These effects are the *prasadam* [sacred offerings] given to me by the grace of God” (*enakku kiṭaittu tuṇiyē aruḷ pracātam*).

TRADEMARK

Unlike her contemporaries, Eswari never married. She prided herself on her independence, personal and financial, refusing to use male mediators or assistants in her work. She had used her earnings to support other members of her extended family. For some years during the 1970s and 1980s, Eswari managed her own musical troupe, which accompanied her in live stage performances. As its leader, she was the one who negotiated and received payment for the performance, hired the male singers, and distributed the money to the other singers and musicians in the troupe. Unlike other female playback singers of her generation who had husbands, fathers, or male assistants accompany them, Eswari went to the studios initially with her mother and then by herself. Although the straitened circumstances of her family did not permit her to marry in her early twenties, as would have been considered proper, remaining unmarried was also a choice that enabled her to keep her own financial and artistic independence.⁹

In interviews from the late 1960s and early 1970s, Eswari was often asked whether she would act in films, perhaps because of the skill with which she rendered effects in her songs. Through the years, she had staunchly refused any such possibility: “*Enakku icaiyiltān muḷu nāttam. Naṭippil en manam ṭupaṭavillai*” (My whole inclination is toward music. My soul is not at all involved with acting) (*Bomma* 1968b, 29). When I met Eswari in the fall of 2009, she had recently agreed to make a cameo appearance as a singer in a club in the movie *Thillalangadi* (2010). For the shooting, they had wanted her to put on makeup and a special dress, but she was adamant that she appear as herself in the movie, just as she always appeared onstage. The cameo was not an acting gig but an important opportunity to project her own persona.

Similarly, after Eswari sang the hit song “*Kalasalā kalasalā*” for a 2011 film, some suggested that she should start wearing a *churidar*, like younger playback singers. She refused, saying that while she might wear a *churidar* for recording sessions, onstage she should only wear a silk sari out of respect (*mariyātai*) for her age and status. A complex term that, as Diane Mines argues, is best translated as “distinction,” *mariyātai* signifies not simply honor or respect but rather proper social distinction made in relations between people, an act of recognizing someone’s rightful position or status (Mines 2005, 81–100). To wear a *churidar* would suggest that, because she was singing for films again, Eswari was no different from young singers. The sari preserved her distinction, especially onstage, where it counted most.

Just as Susheela had her trademark white sari, Eswari also had a trademark look. Unlike Susheela, however, Eswari wore her saris with the end or *pallav* hanging free, never appearing with it draped over her right shoulder. And whereas Susheela harnessed the power of white, Eswari decked herself out in gold, from the wide gold borders on her saris to the *kuntalam* earrings, gold bangles, and long gold necklace she often wore. With a large *pottu* (dot, circle) of *kumkum* on her forehead and this prominent gold jewelry, her appearance made unmistakable reference to other performers: men who had used a sartorial style and trademark look to distinguish themselves against an upper-caste, Brahmin musical and cultural establishment. Among these was the flamboyant Karnatic violinist, composer of devotional music, and film music director Kunnakudi Vaidyanathan (1935–2008), whose unconventional and playful music ruffled the pieties of the Karnatic music establishment in the late twentieth century, despite his own Brahmin heritage. Eswari’s look also evoked the legendary nagaswaram player T. N. Rajaratnam Pillai (1898–1956), whose gold necklaces, finger rings, and extravagant lifestyle were an intentional marker of his *icai vellālar* identity, a challenge to the Brahminical norms of dress, demeanor, and lifestyle that were becoming hegemonic for classical musicians in the mid-twentieth century (Terada 2000, 475–76). Just as Rajaratnam Pillai presented himself as a “reversed image” of the “Trinity,” the saintly ascetic trio of Brahmin composers always clad in white and revered in Karnatic music (Terada 2000, 476), Eswari presented herself as a

reversal of the respectable lady that Susheela sought to embody, operating by a logic of visibility and display rather than containment and modesty.

Unlike married women who wore their marriage *tali* (necklace) under their sari, Eswari wore her long gold necklace on the outside.¹⁰ In the Tamil context, gold, a symbol of the goddess Lakshmi, the Hindu goddess of wealth and prosperity, is associated with auspiciousness: the uniquely female quality of producing beneficial effects for others. Women with abundant gold jewelry are classed with married women as auspicious persons (Reynolds [1980] 1991), whereas *illātavaṅka*, “those without” wealth, husbands, or children, signified by their “bald necks,” are, at least traditionally, considered inauspicious persons who can bring bad luck to others (Dean 2011, 85–88). Unmarried or never-married women are more likely to be identified with the capricious, and often destructive, category of South Indian goddesses known as *ammans* (Reynolds [1980] 1991, 43). Both the figure of the *tolī*, the female friend who helps marriage to happen, and, later, the gold jewelry counteracted the potential inauspiciousness that Eswari represented as an unmarried, childless woman in public.

Never far beneath the surface, however, this potential danger or risk bubbled up in certain performative moments. Somewhat later in Susheela’s seventy-fifth birthday celebration, as Susheela and Eswari stood together onstage, Susheela announced her bestowal of an award on Eswari. Affectionately touching Eswari’s face as a mother would a child’s, and holding her hand, Susheela spoke about how a voice like Eswari’s “doesn’t come often.” When she started talking about the kinds of songs Eswari became known for, she paused and stumbled over her words—a moment of disfluency that registered her distance from the kind of singing and singer that Eswari represented:¹¹ “God gave her that kind of voice [*allanti voice icheḍu*]. He gave me this kind, a sort of soft voice [*nāku koṇcam soft voice*]. But we’ve sung many duets in Tamil, very excellent, popular songs. . . . In those days, second—[pauses as if hesitating to say it] . . . club dances, Eswari sang. Like Usha Uthup.¹² But even Usha Uthup couldn’t sing some of her songs. Anyone can sing Usha Uthup songs. . . . But L. R. Eswari’s voice won’t come to anyone else. That kind of voice is a special voice.”

While Susheela acknowledged the uniqueness of Eswari’s voice with these last words, Eswari began blowing kisses to the audience, as she frequently did onstage, and the audience applauded. Playfully pretend-slapping Eswari’s face, Susheela admonished her: “Hey, I’m standing next to you; I’m standing next to you,” and chuckled. Eswari stopped blowing the kisses, and they again clasped hands. “I have always been like a mother to Eswari,” said Susheela. “Whatever I say, she listens.”

In this brief moment, Eswari has changed from *tolī* to stage diva and is converted back to *tolī*/daughter/younger sister again. Susheela’s gentle reprimand is tellingly phrased: *don’t do that while I’m standing next to you* suggests the contagion of Eswari’s persona while she engages in such inauspicious behavior, transacting with an audience of unknown people. Even standing next to someone giving such

a performance could compromise one's respectability. The giving of *mariyātai*, as Diane Mines has suggested, is not just a recognition of distinctions but a way of maintaining them (2005, 92–100). Praising Eswari's uniqueness, the fact that "her voice won't come to anyone else," is also a way of keeping it separate. This emphasis on Eswari's uniqueness stands in contrast to the common discourse, which we saw in chapter 3, about Susheela and other singers being "duplicates" of Lata and of each other, representatives of a common, valued type.

GOD SPEAKS, ESWARI HEARS

Along with her career as a playback singer, Eswari also gained tremendous popularity in devotional music.¹³ Appearing in public as a religious devotee is an acknowledged and accepted role for older women because the exemplary devotee is understood to have renounced her sexuality and attachment to the material world. Susheela and Janaki have also made devotional albums in their retirement; for them, singing devotional music serves the double function of distancing them from the "vulgarity" of contemporary film music and producing appropriate extratextual knowledge about themselves. But Eswari's devotional career began when she was still relatively young. In the 1970s and 1980s, through numerous temple concerts and devotional cassettes, Eswari developed a large fan following for her devotional songs.

This difference is significant because singing devotional music, as a younger singer explained to me, requires a different mode of performance from singing film songs. Unlike in playback singing, in devotional songs the singer's *mana nil-amai* (emotional situation) is important; she is understood as a devotee rather than a mere singer; thus, she is expected to be experiencing the same emotions as those she sings of. She has to have *bhakti* (devotional sentiment) in her voice. *Bhakti*, however, can range from relatively sedate to passionate devotion, potentially transforming into *avēcam* (fury, passion), a state of possession in which the singer's emotions become ambiguously mingled with that of the divine being. Female religious passion displayed in public shares some of the same signifiers as those for a woman's immodesty or uncontrolled sexuality: loose hair and a body that moves and dances in wild and unpredictable ways. In devotional music of this type, another singer, in her thirties at the time, explained, "You really have to belt it out; there has to be *avēcam* in your voice." For that reason she would record devotional songs in the studio but not perform them live; *avēcam*, the passion of a woman possessed, could not be performed by a young woman, she said, without being mistaken for uncontained sexual desire.

The excessive energy of Eswari's voice, along with her real-life unmarried status, signified both ways: as uncontained female sexuality and as the power of the divine. And not only did she perform devotional music live onstage; she also sang several devotional songs in films in the late 1960s and early 1970s, songs in which her voice was linked to the sight of a woman possessed. For instance, in the 1967



FIGURE 13. Still of actress J. Jayalalitha acting as a young bride-to-be possessed by the goddess Amman in the song sequence “Ammanō samiyō” (from *Naan* 1967), sung by L. R. Eswari. Photo courtesy of E. Gnanaprakasam.

movie *Naan*, in a semicomical song, “Ammanō samiyō,” the bride-to-be, played by Jayalalitha, becomes possessed by various versions of the goddess Amman and dances wildly, her loose hair swinging, much to the horror of her relatives (see fig. 13). Eswari’s voice, backed by a loud chorus of nagaswarams and tavils that

saturate the soundtrack with a 6/8 beat, sings a variation of the *makuti pāṭṭu*, snake charmer's tunes, both common musical clichés used to signal lower-caste "folkness" in Tamil film music (Paige 2009, 61). Eswari's almost ululating vocal effect is accompanied by Jayalalitha's performance of the bride jerking her upper body forward menacingly toward her male relative, captured in a fully frontal close-up for several seconds.

In Hinduism, gods and goddesses with fierce aspects are the ones who invite possession. Eswari's persona came to be identified with the goddess Amman, an incarnation of the mother goddess, alternately protective and destructive, associated with rural and low-caste Hindu religious practice throughout South India. Through the 1980s and early 1990s, after releasing a flood of cassettes,¹⁴ Eswari dominated the devotional music industry. Friends recalled to me the total saturation of public sonic space by Eswari's recorded voice blasting through conical speakers, whether from an Amman temple in Madras or in Madurai in the early 1990s during the Amman festival, when there would be nothing but Eswari songs played for several days.

Not only in her popularity and ubiquity, but in other ways as well, Eswari's connection to devotional music exceeded that of other playback singers. In the 1990s and initial decade of the 2000s, Eswari made devotional music videos in which she herself appears, singing to the statue of the goddess; many of the videos alternate between close-ups of the goddess statue and of Eswari singing, presenting her simultaneously as an avatar of the goddess, an exemplary devotee, and a privileged intermediary between the goddess and the viewers.¹⁵ There is also an important sonic difference between Eswari's Amman songs and those by Susheela and Janaki, which are sung in sedate, melodious tunes with veena, flute, or violin and tabla accompaniment and Karnatic-inspired rhythmic cadences. Eswari's Amman songs, in contrast, are set to decidedly folk or folk-inspired tunes and filled with the distinctive sounds of drums such as *pampai* and *urumi*, which are identified with Dalits and lower-caste Hindu communities (Paige 2009, 83).

Moreover, Eswari presented the Amman songs as coming naturally from her. Commenting on her career as a devotional singer, she told me that at a young age, a woman has a high voice, but as she gets older, her voice acquires "bass" and "depth," making it "naturally" suited to *Mariyamman pāṭṭu*, the genre of devotional music centering on the benevolent, but often fierce and protective, mother goddess known for avenging wrongs to lower-caste people and women. Through the years, in recognition of her devotional singing, she was bestowed with titles such as "Amman arul perra L. R. Eswari" (Eswari who has received the grace of Amman) and "Amman pukaḷ pāṭum L. R. Eswari" (Eswari who has sung the praises of Amman). In 2014, she was even invited to sing at a Mariyamman Temple in Florida for the *kumbabishekam*, a blessing ceremony in which the statue of the deity is endowed with divine power.

In this and other ways, Eswari made the persona of the goddess part of her own image and identity. She capitalized on Jayalalitha's transformation from flirtatious and sassy screen actress to "Amma," Jayalalitha's self-appointed name during her tenure as chief minister of Tamil Nadu in the 1990s and early 2000s. Drawing on the maternal/divine power that Jayalalitha channeled, Eswari proudly claimed, "I was the first to give voice to Amma" (LRE on her career and "Kalasala"). And at the same time, she channeled the masculine power of "Superstar" hero-actor Rajinikanth, punning on a slogan from his film *Arunachalam*, in which the hero proclaims his divinely sanctioned power: "Āntavan solṛān . . . Arunācalam seykiṛān" (God says . . . and Arunachalam does).¹⁶ In a catchy slogan that she repeated often in interviews with journalists, Eswari identified herself as a vessel for the divine: "Āṇṭavan solṛān . . . Eswari kētkiṛā" (God speaks . . . and Eswari hears).

AN ICONIC VOICE

In the 2010s, after a roughly twenty-five-year hiatus from playback singing, Eswari reemerged into the film world, first with her cameo appearance in *Thillalangadi* and then with a series of item songs for films.¹⁷ The first of these was the hit song "Kalāsālā kalāsālā" from the film *Osthi* (2011). Rather than seeking out a young singer to perform this song, the music director, S. Thaman, employed another strategy that has become noticeable in Tamil cinema since the 1990s: the inclusion of references to films, songs, and actors from previous decades. The novelty of the song lay in its resurrection of the aging but immediately recognizable voice of Eswari in a new context.

As an "item number," a song sequence in which the female "item," as the actress is known, is presented in fully frontal tableaux to both the viewers and a diegetic male audience, the song conformed to a number of conventions. It employed a specially hired North Indian actress known for her item numbers, Mallika Sherawat, just for that scene, and a female singer, Eswari, who sang only in that song sequence. Its suggestive lyrics make multiple sexually suggestive references to biting, stinging snakes, chewing, and the constant refrain that "Mallika is calling you."¹⁸ Not only is the item actress playing herself in the song, but Eswari is, in a sense, as well. The song is built around the assumption that audiences will recognize the voice, and just to make sure they do, the film credits afford her a prominent place, beginning with a statement of "our sincere thanks to Kalaimamani L. R. Eswari."

Prior to the film's release, the hero-actor Simbu declared that the song would become "an evergreen hit" (Kollyinsider 2011), categorizing it in a way that would seek to contain the potentially transgressive fact of an elderly playback singer singing a modern item number with a scantily clad and gyrating Mallika Sherawat lip-synching her words. But various elements of the song itself and its

publicity worked against this containment. For although Eswari's voice is meant to be recognizable, it is not presented in the spirit of fidelity to the voice she put forth in so many of her earlier film songs. While the English words in the refrain, "my dear darling," evoke the 1960s cabaret and Western songs for which Eswari became famous, there is no attempt to clean up the aged quality of Eswari's voice, which now has what would be called a "husky" timbre and is significantly lower in pitch than it once was. Instead, the huskiness of age is ambiguously conflated with the huskiness of youthful sexual desire.¹⁹

Most notably, Eswari's crisp articulation, with its pronounced *ch* (alveolo-palatal affricative) sounds, and particularly her aggressively rolled *r* in the half-English refrain, "My dear darling unnai Mallika kūppiṭṭṛṛā" (My dear darling, Mallika calls you), are exaggerated "folk" vocal gestures that draw attention to lips, mouth, and breath, to singing as a physical act. The heavy trill coincides with the double entendre of *kūppiṭu*, to call or invite (to sex), a kind of sonic icon of the "looseness" of Mallika's character. The trill became a particular site of enjoyment even during the recording session. In an interview with the press after the release of the song, Eswari recounted the pleasure others took in hearing her perform this vocal effect: "Everyone wanted me to sing that part 'Mallika kūppiṭṛṛā' again and again" (Indiaglit 2012).

The song displayed the edge of Eswari's persona—a persona and voice that seem to evade efforts to gentrify film and film production since the 1990s (Ganti 2012) or to contain the products of earlier decades within a nostalgic frame.²⁰ Following the release of the song, Eswari failed to give the proper signals of disavowal, appearing instead in a series of press meets and fielding speculative questions about her next moves. Rather than shying away from the public eye, she embraced the attention. Speaking to a group of largely male journalists on one such occasion, she fielded the questions herself, challenging the men to ask the questions straightforwardly instead of "comment-aṭi"-ing, as she put it, using an expression commonly used to describe catcalls directed to young women in public. Rather than confirming that her singing the song "Kalāsālā" was just a onetime occurrence, she proclaimed her readiness to sing whatever young music directors might give her, addressing them informally and using the very same verb of the song's double-entendre: "Icai amaikkīriyā? Kūppiṭu. Vantu pāṭaren" (Are you composing music? Call me. I'll come and sing) (Kollytalk 2011).

Rather than participating in the societal disavowal and devaluing of sexualized song sequences and the singers who performed them, Eswari took her public appearances as opportunities to bemoan their degraded status. During Susheela's birthday celebration, just after being playfully reprimanded for blowing kisses to the audience, Eswari took the mic and spoke for several minutes. In contrast to Susheela's hesitant and hurried utterance of the words *club dance*, Eswari uttered the words with a grand pause to allow the audience to applaud. "In those days, they would say 'club dance.' Now you are calling them 'item songs' [gestures toward

audience; audience cheers]. These days . . . in item songs, you can't even hear the words. But if I sang my songs even standing like this [turns her back to the audience] you would understand the words very clearly [*spaṣṭaṅkā*, pronounced with exaggerated articulation], and the music was good." And during a press meet after the release of "Kalasala," she voiced a similar sentiment: "They used to call them club songs. That is, it was relaxation, entertainment for men to watch the dancer. Now they call it 'item.' Cutting. Small. As if you are going in the car and ask your friend, 'Did you bring that item along?' That's the situation of women these days" (Kollytalk 2011).

THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE

Inadmissible into the singing frame that contained and legitimized the act of playback singing, but constantly pushing up to its edges, Eswari's voice and persona constituted a kind of extimate obstacle to the ideal of *kuralinimai* and the performative dispensation within which it existed. The extimate entity is both the cause and product of an ongoing structural contradiction. Though "inadmissible within the unified self-understanding of the would-be dispensation" (Mazzarella 2013, 152), it is "foundational in an ongoing structural sense, the potential/obstacle . . . constantly sensed at the edge of every performative dispensation that tries to lay sovereign claim to mass publics" (Mazzarella 2013, 189). Durkheim noted this dynamic at play in the relationship between the sacred and the profane; as he observed, strenuous efforts must be made to keep two domains distinct and apart from each other precisely because the sacred is continuously overflowing the boundaries so carefully erected around it: "The sacred world tends . . . to flow into the profane world whenever that latter world comes near it. . . . By virtue of that exceptional volatility, the slightest contact or least proximity of a profane being, whether physical or simply moral, is enough to draw the religious forces outside their domain. . . . Precautions to keep them apart are all the more necessary because they tend to merge, even while opposing one another" (Durkheim [1912] 1995, 322–24).²¹

The very category of "effects," a name given to contain and domesticate those wild moments when singing blended into or became something else, emerged out of this same structural contradiction entailed in being "just the voice." Effects marked the moments in songs where the claim to being "just the voice" was most tenuous, where the morally licit and sacralized domain of "singing," marked by vocal consistency, inability or refusal to act, and the imperviousness of the voice to the emotions being sung about, was compromised. The successful production of effects rendered the agency of the singer unclear: was she under control, merely animating effects from behind the scenes with a music director's guidance, or was she overcome by the emotions and passions herself, like a woman possessed?

Eswari's voice and performances exploited this ambiguity. As Durkheim pointed out, it is not the "sacred" as such but rather the distinction between sacred and profane that must be carefully guarded, requiring ongoing ritual maintenance. The extreme mobility of Eswari's voice—its transformation from being the voice of licit second heroines to that of vamps; its travel between the goddess Amman and the cabaret scenes of 1960s Tamil film; its conflation of the huskiness of old age and the huskiness of sexual desire—transgressed many boundaries. It wasn't simply that the effects Eswari performed were vulgar or profane but rather that she transgressed the most foundational boundary of all: the one between "singing," which was constructed as sacred, and its profane outside. Effects marked the site where being "just the voice" wavered ambiguously between figuring the singer as a sacred vessel and bringing into being its very opposite: the voice, stripped of the domesticating structures of melody and words, overcome by bodily passion.