Engendering the ‘Mysticism’ of the Alvars

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Abstract: This essay explores the relationship between gender, power, and mysticism through an examination of the Tamil Vaiṣṇava Āḻvārs and how two scholars, Friedhelm Hardy and S.M. Srinivasa Chari, interrelate Āḻvār mysticism, female voice, and the one female Āḻvār, Āṇṭāḷ. Although both Hardy and Chari define Āḻvār mysticism through female voice and uphold Āṇṭāḷ as mystic par excellence, they miss important nuances of Āṇṭāḷ’s poetry that radicalise female voice and frustrate gendered expectations. Āṇṭāḷ’s mysticism proves to be socially and theologically subversive, laying claim to authority even over the divine.

In her gendered genealogy of Christian mysticism, Grace Jantzen shows how the definition and delimitation of mysticism is inexorably connected with power and gender. While her thesis concerns the history of Christian mysticism and its scholarship, Jantzen raises important questions for all scholars of religions. What are the implications of characterising certain Hindu religious traditions as mystical? And what might they reveal about gender? I take up these questions here, examining the Tamil Vaiṣṇava Āḻvārs, their characterisation as mystics, and how some gendered understandings of female voice are entangled with the construction of the one female Āḻvār, Āṇṭāḷ, as mystic par excellence. Indeed, Jantzen’s argument is helpful in exposing the ways in which gender assumptions influence the definition of Āḻvār mysticism; but a study of Āṇṭāḷ’s poetry can also challenge Jantzen’s own gendered assumptions, which themselves tend to essentialise female mystics.

First, I briefly explain Jantzen’s argument that gender and power struggles are entangled in the production of mysticism. Next I look at how two scholars, Friedhelm Hardy and S.M. Srinivasa Chari, interrelate Āḻvār mysticism, female voice, and Āṇṭāḷ. Although both Hardy and Chari define Āḻvār mysticism through female voice – thereby leading them to uphold Āṇṭāḷ as the pinnacle of Āḻvār mysticism – they miss important nuances of Āṇṭāḷ’s poetry. I therefore examine the longer of Āṇṭāḷ’s songs, the Nācciyār Tirumōli, to show the complexity of her poetry. A brief study of Āṇṭāḷ’s use of words for heart, mind, and breasts shows, not an essentialised female voice, but a radical female voice that frustrates gendered expectations. Āṇṭāḷ’s mysticism is anything but an essentialised relationship of emotional dependence, ideally portrayed through the female voice. Although her framework is that of a woman who is fulfilled in marriage to a male (divine), she subverts that very framework in her language-play. Indeed, she creatively argues
for an authority that claims power over the divine, even as she draws on traditional categories of female virtue and devotion.

**Grace Jantzen’s *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism***

In *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism*, Grace Jantzen follows Michel Foucault in connecting power and the production of knowledge, and writes a gendered genealogy of mysticism that illustrates the gendered power struggles over the delimitation of what ‘counts’ as mysticism. As she says,

> The fascination of the subject of mysticism is not, I suggest, simply a fascination with intense psychological experiences for their own sake, but rather because the answers to each of these questions are also ways of defining or delimiting authority. The connection of questions of power to questions of mysticism is obvious as soon as one stops to think of it: a person who has acknowledged to have direct access to God would be in a position to challenge any form of authority, whether doctrinal or political, which she saw as incompatible with the divine will.³

Moreover, ‘knowledge and power are regularly interconnected, and just as regularly gendered.’⁴ This can be seen in the very definition of mysticism, both historically and in contemporary studies of mysticism. Mysticism is therefore socially constructed, rather than an essential reality, experience, or knowledge. Jantzen’s genealogy of mysticism illustrates through brief historical vignettes how mysticism itself has been constructed throughout time and how this construction is often related to gendered power struggles. While the modern privatisation and subjectification of mysticism functions to allow women to be mystics, it isolates them in a hidden world of intense emotional experiences, far away from the world of secular privilege and authority.⁵

Although her main thesis has been well received, Jantzen’s presentation is not without problems. Lawrence Cunningham points out that Jantzen’s genealogy is, at times, reductionistic:

> Direct experience of the divine grants power, and when women were involved, a patriarchal, misogynistic, and power-greedy institution sometimes resorted to suppression. To each of these assertions one can adduce many compelling proofs, but to allow this perspective to be the exclusive lens through which to read the tradition brings its own distortions.⁶

This reductionism means that Jantzen’s history ‘call[s] out frequently for correction.’⁷ Self-taught, Jantzen makes no pretensions about being a historian; yet, she does engage in a deeply historical subject. Her postmodern feminist perspective on history at times distorts the very primary materials she aims to read so closely and re-cover.⁸ Even so, Jantzen’s move to connect gender, power, and the construction of mysticism cannot be ignored. Elizabeth Dreyer concludes that, ‘this volume is a
rich and provocative contribution to the philosophical discussion of mysticism. It raises historical, philosophical, theological, linguistic, and gender-related issues that will be revisited again and again, and we can only be grateful to J. [Jantzen] for entering into and furthering this conversation.9 Jantzen may stretch her conclusions and historical claims, but she is correct to point out what is at stake for women in the definition and delimitation of mysticism: historically, politically, philosophically, and theologically.

If Jantzen is at all right in her gendered genealogy of Christian mysticism, the implications are great for any study of mysticism. The question must therefore be asked not only of how scholars would define a Christian or Greek mysticism, but also of any study of a so-called mysticism. No application of the category of mysticism, even if used loosely in Hindu studies, is without the question of power; and if Jantzen is right, no use is moreover without the question of gendered power. With this in mind, let us now turn to the Ālvārs. The Ālvārs serve as a good test case for Jantzen’s thesis; for not only have they been called mystics, their use of female voice can also allow us to consider the specific role of gender in the construction of their mysticism.

Māyōn mysticism

Friedhelm Hardy has written one of the most ambitious texts on the history of bhakti in South India.10 In six parts, Hardy traces the development of Kṛṣṇaism11 as it moves from North to South India. His concern is the development of emotional Kṛṣṇa bhakti, a distinctive brand of bhakti that coalesces in the song-poems of the Tamil Ālvārs and bears first Sanskrit fruit in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa. Hardy provides an important, although problematic, western construction of Ālvār mysticism.

For Hardy, emotional bhakti is more specifically viraha-bhakti, a devotion that centres on one’s separation from Kṛṣṇa, or Māyōn (the Dark One).12 Hardy describes his viraha-bhakti as a kind of bridal mysticism,13 which has three levels: the personal, the poetic, and the mythic.14 These levels further possess three elements: the aesthetic, the erotic, and the ecstatic.15 These conditions must all be met for a particular phenomenon to qualify as emotional Kṛṣṇa bhakti. Hardy is clear that, ‘Any religious phenomenon which does not include the three planes and all three elements on each plane – however “emotional” it may be – will be excluded.’16

Part Four of Hardy’s book is exclusively on the Ālvārs and their Māyōn mysticism. The developing stories of Kṛṣṇa’s love-play with the gopīs (cowherd lovers of Kṛṣṇa) travelled South and became integrated into Tamil literature, culture, and religion. Hardy identifies the classical Tamil literary motif of the girl in separation to be uniquely significant for understanding the poetic form of Ālvār emotional Kṛṣṇa bhakti.17 Hardy therefore focuses on the Ālvār use of gopīs (in their union and separation with Kṛṣṇa) and on the girl poems in the Ālvārs, where the experience of agony in separation from one’s lover (Kṛṣṇa) is dramatised. For example, Nammālvār’s Tiruvāymoli (Ālvār from ca. late seventh century)
includes 23 songs of a girl love-sick for Kṛṣṇa and three songs concerning the cow-herd lovers of Kṛṣṇa.18 Periyālvār (Ālvār from ca. end of the eighth century, the adoptive father of Āntāl) drops the girl songs and focuses instead on the explicit narratives of the gopīs, shifting perspective to the mother of the lovesick gopī.19 Āntāl (or Kōtai, ca. ninth century CE) is in a unique position to integrate the girl, gopī, and female voice into her own spiritual drama. “[A]s a girl, she [Āntāl] had direct emotional access to the world of the gopī- myths, and frequently she sees herself as a gopī. Thus, by being a girl herself, Kōtai [Āntāl] can establish a direct analogy between (the mystic’s) I, (the poetic) girl, (the mythical) gopī, and the actual speaker of a Kṛṣṇaite folk song.”20 For Hardy, Āntāl draws on typical Tamil poetic conventions; but the direct relationship between these conventions and her female emotional development allows her to integrate the elements of Māyon mysticism in a way the other Ālvārs cannot.21 The female voice takes on new significance as the personal, poetic, and mythic are united in the person of Āntāl.

The characters of the gopīs and lovesick girls are central for cultivating and (re) producing the drama of divine-human union and separation. This is Māyon mysticism, a mysticism of separation rather than a mysticism of union.

Empirically no mystic has obtained physical union with Kṛṣṇa on earth, and theologically Kṛṣṇa’s nature as the Absolute precludes such a union with a contingent being. Thus the I and you find themselves ‘separated’, which in theological terms (according to Nammālvār) means that they meet in a manner which does not eliminate the fundamental difference and distance between them.22 Māyon mysticism, then, is predicated on the absolute difference between human and divine, where “‘separation” is in fact seen as a particular mode of experiencing Kṛṣṇa’s presence.”23 Āntāl’s unique position as a girl allows her to exemplify this mode of experience that is Māyon mysticism: ‘[E]motional Kṛṣṇa bhakti has reached not just its climax, but also its most critical point. As a physical being, love of Kṛṣṇa keeps her nevertheless from physical fulfilment ... in this world. On the other hand, the cosmos of myth – which figures so pronouncedly as the one and only alternative to physical reality – remains inaccessible to her. The dilemma seems complete.”24

Theistic mysticism

S.M. Srinivasa Chari fundamentally disagrees with Hardy’s approach to Ālvār mysticism. Hardy’s phenomenology of Māyon mysticism is clearly defined with western categories external to the Śrīvaishnava (and even wider Indian) context.25 Hardy’s historical account distinguishes between the emotional bhakti of the Ālvārs and Bhāgavata Purāṇa and the intellectual bhakti of the great Śrīvaishnava thinker, Rāmānuja (eleventh century CE), and later Śrīvaishnava tradition, emphasising the discontinuity rather than the continuity of developing tradition. For Chari, this
approach is problematic. Instead, Chari situates what he calls Ālvār theistic mysticism squarely within Śrīvaśīnavā philosophy and theology. Chari’s philosophical and theological construction of Ālvār mysticism from within a Śrīvaśīnavā horizon therefore provides an important, although also problematic, alternative to Hardy’s construction.

Chari agrees with Hardy in the sense that it is appropriate to characterise the Ālvārs’ poetry as mystical. However, he wants to construct a definition that comes from within Śrīvaśīnavā tradition, rather than taking a western phenomenological or historical approach.

Mysticism is often identified with certain kinds of psycho-physical states and some supernormal mental experiences. But more commonly it is applied to a variety of religious experiences. In the context of the experience of divinity by the Ālvārs as portrayed in the Tamil poems, this term bears a different connotation... The quest of an individual for the union with God cannot be treated as mysticism. According to the Vedānta, any individual can develop an ardent desire for mokṣa or union with the Supreme Being. Such a person is known as mumukṣu and he is not necessarily a mystic. Nor does a direct and comprehensive vision of God constitute mysticism because that kind of vision, which the Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta is known as paripūrṇa-brahmānubhava, arises in the state of mokṣa only after the soul is disembodied by totally getting rid of the bondage...

Mysticism with reference to the Ālvārs may be defined as the spiritual quest of an individual for a direct and comprehensive vision of God culminating in an eternal, uninterrupted divine service.

Mysticism in this sense comprises both a way of life and also a spiritual goal to be achieved. The way of life involves an intense devotional love to God (bhakti) and the observance of prescribed religious discipline such as meditation (dhyāna) and other methods of worship. It also presupposes, as preliminary requisites, the acquisition of spiritual knowledge (jñāna), the development of detachment to worldly pleasures (vairāgya) and cultivation of certain ethical virtues. The spiritual goal consists of a state of existence in which the individual soul after being liberated from the bondage enjoys eternally the Supreme Being in His full glory.

If Hardy reduces that mysticism to emotion (and a specific kind of emotional expression), Chari expands that mysticism to be all-encompassing, at once way of life and spiritual goal that preoccupies one’s entire being. As he explains, “The Ālvārs gifted with divine knowledge not only possess a mental attitude of total dedication to God, but also display it in every mode of their thought, word and deed.”

Rather than delimiting Māyōn mysticism according to three phases and three characteristics, Chari defines theistic mysticism according to four phases:

(1) bhakti or loving devotion to God; (2) para-bhakti or perfected devotion causing mental perception of God; (3) para-jñāna or occasional clear glimpses of God followed with joy during communion with God and anguish during separation from
Him; (4) parama-bhakti or the climax of bhakti leading to the direct, comprehensive, eternal communion with God.30

Although this is the general framework for Ālvār mysticism, Chari concedes that there are different patterns that structure Ālvār theistic mysticism. For example, while Nammālvār becomes the lover of God in temporary separation, Periyālvār adopts the voice of Yaśodā (foster mother of Kṛṣṇa).31

Like Hardy, Chari argues that Āṇṭāḷ’s position is unique among the Ālvārs, precisely because of her gender. Yet it is her theological status that is key to her mysticism.

Āṇḍāḷ’s mystic experience of God is described by some scholars as bridal mysticism. The word ‘bridal’ is not an appropriate epithet, because Āṇḍāḷ as a maiden was not an ordinary human being aspiring for matrimonial union with God in the ordinary sense of marriage. She as an incarnation of Bhūdevī represents symbolically the individual soul (jīvātman) which is inseparably related to God (Paramātman). It is temporarily separated from God and it therefore, longs for reunion or to use the symbolic language, the spiritual marriage with her Beloved Lord. She is God-minded; all her deeds and words are directed towards God. The mystic experience of God as exhibited in her poetical composition reflects this theological theme and it should, therefore, be characterised as theistic mysticism instead of bridal mysticism.32

What makes Āṇṭāḷ’s theistic mysticism different from other Ālvārs is that she does not need to adopt the voice of the lover of God: she is the lover of God. As incarnation (avatāra) of Bhūdevī (Earth Goddess), Āṇṭāḷ IS the relationship towards which all devotees aspire. ‘[W]e have a unique type of mysticism in respect of Āṇṭāḷ whose ardent craving for union with Lord Kṛṣṇa culminates in her spiritual marriage in the philosophic sense of the individual soul being reunited with God.33 If Hardy assumes that what sets Āṇṭāḷ’s mysticism apart is her status as a woman (such that the personal, poetic, and mythical merge), Chari sets Āṇṭāḷ’s mysticism apart due to her status as Goddess, ontologically one with her Lord and representative of the ontological relationship that all persons have with God. In both cases, Āṇṭāḷ’s gender is seen to intensify and exemplify Ālvār mysticism.

Āṇṭāḷ’s language-play and the subversion of gendered expectations

Vasudha Narayanan has effectively argued that Hardy overstates the experience of separation in his account of Māyōṇ mysticism, undernuances the emotionalism of the Ālvārs by focusing only on the girl poems, and ignores important passages in Nammālvār that show elements of more mental, or intellectual, bhakti.34 At the same time, Francis X. Clooney has pointed out that Chari has so emphasised the Śrīvaiṣṭāṇava tradition that he imports later theological and philosophical
developments into the Āḻvār poetry. Both tendencies result in a certain idealisation and romanticisation of the female voice, which then becomes solidified in Āṇṭāḷ. The realities of Āṇṭāḷ’s poetry are more complex than an emotional, lovesick girl or of Goddess as lover of God yearning for reunion. This can be seen by a brief look at the longer of her two songs, the Nācchiyār Tirumolī. To flush out the complexities of the poetry, I focus on Āṇṭāḷ’s use of terms for heart, mind, and breasts and how those terms both play into and subvert gendered expectations.

Heart and mind in the Nācchiyār Tirumolī are difficult to distinguish, similarly utilised as indicators of the primary place of unification with the divine. It must be noted that word choice in the Nācchiyār Tirumolī is clearly related to rhyme and meter; nevertheless, there are also theological and philosophical implications in how these words function together. The divine-human relationship is one of both intellect and passion, interrelated and inextricable in the human person. A brief study of Tamil words Āṇṭāḷ uses to describe heart, mind, and breasts not only illustrates the unity of heart-mind, but also shows the subversive nature of her use of traditional gender categories.

Uḷḷam, meaning within or inside, is an ambiguous term for both heart and mind. It appears twice in the Nācchiyār Tirumolī. In Song Two, Verse Five, the gopī’s uḷḷam melts with love for Kṛṣṇa, despite his naughty play that destroys their sandcastles and ritual drawings. A clearly emotional verse, the use of this term is less intellectual—although never completely separated from mind. In Song Five, Verse Two, again uḷḷam occurs, with a heightened emotional component.

Entering my heart/mind [uḷḷam],
He spoils me all day
Watching, playing around, scattering my life. (5.2)

The Lord has entered the girl, playing on her uḷḷam and torturing her. The unification of human and divine is linked here, with the uḷḷam as the place of supreme bliss in union and supreme agony in separation.

Maṇam, a more obviously intellectual term, appears four times. Nevertheless, the ways maṇam is used suggest a more complex reality. In Song Twelve, Verse Seven, the maṇam has weakened due to Āṇṭāḷ’s love-sickness. There is at the very least, then, an entangled relationship between matters of the heart and matters of the mind. Moreover, maṇam is connected with love and devotion to the Lord in the other three times it appears (4.8, 9.7, 14.10), making the distinction between heart and mind unclear. The Lord dwells in the maṇam of only those who desire him and maṇam is therefore the site of human-divine unification.

If he comes to my mind [maṇam],
Residing within me,
I will forever be his slave! (9.7)
In this verse, the maṇam is clearly the site of unification. Finally, in Song Fourteen, maṇam appears in Verse Ten, indicating that those persons who put Kōṭai's words in their maṇam [tammanattē vaittukkoṇṭu] will be united to the Lord. Placing the Nācciyyār Tirumoli in their maṇam brings about the Lord's union in the maṇam. Maṇam, then, refers to both the method and place of unification. It is also connected to both intellectual and emotional devotion.

Cintai, like maṇam, is more specifically intellectual. Just as maṇam blurs the meditative and mental with the emotional and unitive, however, cintai is similarly ambiguous in the Nācciyyār Tirumoli. In 2.9, Govinda (cowherd Lord Kṛṣṇa) has also broken their cintai. In Song Four, Verse Ten, it is said that Viṣṇu is in the cintai [cintaiyuḷ] of the cowherd girls, which seems to indicate that the cintai is the place of unification. In Song Eight, Verse Three, Āṇṭāḷ is left bereft of cintai. Here, too, the lack of cintai, of thought, simultaneously evokes the discomobulation of the emotions that accompanies confusion of mind. Separation and union (and the means to attain union) concerns heart and mind, indivisibly and interrelationally.

Neñcu means simultaneously mind, heart, and breast, and it functions importantly to reveal Āṇṭāḷ’s anthropological understanding. Āṇṭāḷ has swept the ground in front of her house, drawn kōḷams, and bathed at dawn in keeping a vow to her Lord throughout the month of Tai (mid-January through mid-February; it is the month after Markali, the month of Āṇṭāḷ’s other song, the Tiruppāvai). If the Lord does not fulfil his promise of union, in response to her ritual vow, Āṇṭāḷ reveals her burning neñcu (1.3). In Song Ten, Verse One, Āṇṭāḷ’s neñcu runs to find the Lord’s sacred basil. Again, the wild emotion and sense of being out of control with desire is conveyed with neñcu. In Verse Eight of the same song, Āṇṭāḷ’s neñcu is clearly stated to be the place of divine-human union. Finally, in the song’s climax (Song Thirteen), a look from her divine lover pierces her neñcu (13.3). In the varied uses of mind, heart, and mind/heart language, Āṇṭāḷ makes no clear differentiation between emotion and intellect or love and mental/yogic disciplines.

A related cluster of Tamil words indicating breasts or chest makes this discussion even more complex. The Tamil word for breast or udder, mulai, appears seven times in the Nācciyyār Tirumoli. In Song One, mulai appears three times (1.4, 1.5, 1.7), each time referring to the narrator’s own breasts. This first song is addressed to Kāma, begging him to join Āṇṭāḷ to her Lord. She has willed her breasts to Viṣṇu (1.4, 1.5); and these breasts (and her womb) will be renowned (1.7). In the first song, breasts symbolise womanhood as well as earthly life and the duties associated with that life. Instead of her breasts being for her earthly husband, Āṇṭāḷ dedicates them to her divine love. Breasts are therefore a symbol of womanhood and its realisation. The mention of mulai in Song Two (2.6) is in the voice of the gopīs, who have breasts that are not fully developed. Fully developed breasts would indicate the onset of maturity and womanhood. With maturity come the duties associated with it – for women, marriage and the bearing of children. For the amorous gopīs and for Āṇṭāḷ, however, those duties are transferred into union with the divine. And again, in Song Eight, Verse One, mulai is connected to womanhood: as tears fall
down her breasts [mulai], Āṇṭāl’s womanhood [peṇṇirmai] is being destroyed. Mulai appears twice in the thirteenth song, the fiery climax of the Nācciyaṭ Tirumoli. Verses Seven and Nine use the language of breasts to symbolise the female desire for her divine lover. They describe Āṇṭāl’s fitness for her divine lover (7) and articulate the agony of waiting (9). Again, the desires of a woman for her lover provide a grammar of human desire for unification with the divine. Mulai, then, serves to transpose the ends of female life onto the ultimate end of human existence, signifying the drama of self and self-fulfilment.

Koṅkai refers specifically to female breasts. It occurs four times in the Nācciyaṭ Tirumoli and illustrates a gendered relationship between heart, mind, and breasts. Verse Seven of Song Five connects Āṇṭāl’s desire for union with the Lord with her heaving breasts; Verse Seven of Song Eight connects union with the Lord with wiping away the saffron paste adorning Āṇṭāl’s breasts; Verse Four of Song Twelve asserts that her breasts will go to only Viṣṇu. Āṇṭāl sets herself apart from the matters of ‘mere mortals,’ dedicating her breasts to her divine lover. There is a symbolic connection between breasts and womanhood, which allows Āṇṭāl to articulate the drama of the human desire for union with the divine through the lens of a female-centric anthropology.

The Tamil words, mār, mārpu, and mārvu, mean chest or breast (either male or female) and are therefore used more loosely in the Nācciyaṭ Tirumoli. In Verse Four of Song Eight, mārvu refers to Lord Viṣṇu on whose mārvu is Śrī. The other four times the terms appear, they are all in Song Thirteen. In Verses Eight and Nine, mār and mārvu, respectively, are used to indicate the Lord’s chest. Verse Eight is particularly notable, as Āṇṭāl says it is at his chest where she will throw her own torn breasts.

The desires of a woman for her lover provide a grammar for human desire of unification with the divine; but this grammar is not simply defined by the dependence of wife on husband or human on God. Climactic Song Thirteen is most illustrative for the intricate language-play between breasts, gender, and divine-human union.

If he will give it without deception,
   Bring the basil garland decorating his chest [mārvu],
   And put it on my chest [mārvu]! (13.3)

I will pluck out my fruitless breasts [koṅkai] at the root
And casting them on his chest [mārvu],
   I will quench my fire! (13.8)

If I cannot succeed in this birth,
   In my impure services to Govinda,
   And in quenching the affliction of my round breasts [mulai],
Why even do penance?
   One day,
   Join me to that beautiful Sacred Chest [mārvu] (13.9)
These verse fragments show the complex interplay of Ānṭāḷ’s language. There are three parallels drawn between Viṣṇu’s chest and Ānṭāḷ’s breasts. First, Ānṭāḷ requests that the garland on the Lord’s chest be placed on her own. Second, Ānṭāḷ threatens to rip out her fruitless breasts and fling them at Viṣṇu’s chest in a raw display of power and accusation. Third, she asks to be joined to Viṣṇu’s chest – a reference to Śrī, who is a jewel on his chest (8.4). These parallels connect the breasts of Ānṭāḷ and the chest of Viṣṇu in intimacy, power, and ontological union. In light of this, Chari’s theological move to emphasise the ontological union holds. But there is a very real human goal that ought not to be glossed over: Ānṭāḷ wishes to avoid marrying a human male and is launching an effective argument (to human and divine listeners) to achieve marrying the male divine.

The transference from breast to breast is a powerful image of intimacy and grace, illustrating a complex vision of female power. When Ānṭāḷ threatens to pluck out her breasts, in order to quench her fire of desire, she recalls a similar event in the Tamil epic Cilappattikāram (ca. fifth century CE), where a woman’s breast serves as the focal point for the power of a virtuous woman. Breasts therefore become a site of gender-play and theological construction, the place where Ānṭāḷ is transposing and subverting gendered expectations. There is an unstated accusation that accompanies the threat to tear off her breasts: Ānṭāḷ has pursued her path as devotee properly, so why has he not accepted her? This verse not only concerns Ānṭāḷ as a woman and as a devotee, it concerns the very being and propriety of Viṣṇu, as well. This reference is therefore a claim of female virtue, and even an accusation against divine impropriety. In this sense, then, Ānṭāḷ claims female power over the male divine. Ānṭāḷ does not use the struggle over her desire to be with her divine lover only to idealise the ‘mystical union’ through female voice: there is a human goal of marriage (albeit divine marriage) as well as a claim of female virtue and power (both as human and divine female). This challenges both Hardy’s and Chari’s accounts, which tend to emotionalise Ānṭāḷ, essentialise female voice, and fail to see how her language frustrates gendered expectations like female dependence on male or human dependence on the divine.

Rethinking the ‘mysticism’ of the Ālvārs

By physicalising the mind/heart union through breasts, there is a radicalising of Ālvār and classical Tamil conventions in order to challenge religious and social gendered expectations. Particularly in the ways Ānṭāḷ utilises the image of breasts, she can be interpreted as utilizing common gender assumptions to subvert them. She argues that it is her male God who fulfils her biological, social, and cultural identity as woman. While the ideal of womanhood is ultimately fulfilled in relationship to Viṣṇu, it is simultaneously subverted in its re-telling. Even more, womanhood becomes the lens through which the divine-human relationship is viewed and is the basis for Ānṭāḷ’s authority.
Hardy’s preconstructed criteria for delimiting emotional Kṛṣṇa bhakti and Māyōn mysticism lead him to be reductive in his understanding of the emotionalism of Āṇṭāḷ and the Ālvārs, falsely separating it from the intellect and missing the gender politics of Āṇṭāḷ’s poetry. While it is true that Hardy’s definition of mysticism mythologises, eroticises, and feminises Ālvār poetry, thereby making Āṇṭāḷ the pinnacle of emotional bhakti and mysticism, it misses large chunks of Ālvār thought and practice. In the process, female voice is reduced to emotion and Āṇṭāḷ is turned into a stereotype.

Chari’s understanding of theistic mysticism attempts to articulate a mysticism internal to Ālvār and Śrīvaiṣṇava understanding. This leads to a more expansive understanding of Ālvār mysticism— one that includes an all-encompassing way of life, avoids western binaries, and allows for more flexibility in understanding the theistic mysticism of individual Ālvārs. Yet Chari’s theological approach to Āṇṭāḷ as incarnate Goddess who mirrors the jīvātman in relation to Paramātman still plays into the same gendered assumption of Christian bridal mysticism: (human dependent) femininity in relationship to (divine prerogative) masculinity. Although Chari argues that Āṇṭāḷ’s mysticism is fundamentally different from a bridal mysticism, there is clearly a parallel in the gendering of relationships. Moreover, Chari assumes Āṇṭāḷ exemplifies theistic mysticism, in part because of her gendered (albeit divine) position.

It is dangerous to assume that Āṇṭāḷ exemplifies Ālvār mysticism simply because female voice is utilised by the Ālvārs, and that, since she is female, Āṇṭāḷ therefore embodies that female voice exactly. It plays into many of the gendered stereotypes that Jantzen exposes in her own study, such as the privatisation of mysticism that allows women to become mystics without concomitant implications for women’s socio-political authority. The use of female voice in Ālvār poetry does indicate gendered expectations on the relationship between human and divine, but it does not determine the discourse into neatly packaged constructions of the human-divine encounter. Nor does it necessarily mean that the one female Ālvār therefore will fit those expectations perfectly and become an idealised paradigm for Ālvār mysticism. Āṇṭāḷ does utilise many of the received conventions on poetry and female voice, but she also subverts gendered expectations through dynamic word-play and parallelism. Āṇṭāḷ operates out of common gender constructions, but is not determined by them. In fact, she draws on them to lay claim to a social authority to avoid human marriage in favour of divine marriage and to argue for a theological authority over her divine Lord.

Jantzen’s genealogy of Christian mysticism documents the process of privatisation of mysticism, a process that allows women to be mystics without socio-political consequence. Such privatisation can be seen in both Hardy and Chari’s construction of Ālvār mysticism. Āṇṭāḷ becomes an ideal mystic in a space that implies no real socio-political authority. But Hardy and Chari are not alone in this a-political depiction of Āṇṭāḷ’s life and work. Āṇṭāḷ is celebrated in Śrīvaiṣṇava
tradition; but in becoming a universal model, she is often used to reinforce social norms rather than challenge them. Vasudha Narayanan says,

Every Sri Vaishnava bride is dressed like Andal and during wedding rituals, a particular set of songs in which Andal describes her dream in which she gets married to Lord Vishnu is recited. In one sense, the human bride is likened to Andal; but the theological explanation is that all human beings – the bride, the bridegroom, and the guests – ought to be like Andal, all devotees of the Lord. While this theme of Andal as paradigmatic devotee is unquestioned, it seems to me that the Sri Vaishnava community subscribes only to selective imitation of certain features of Andal’s life. What is important to note here is that the community has avoided the issue of making Andal a social or dharmic role model, and has instead opted to make her a theological model or a model of one who seeks moksha; she then becomes a model for all human beings. Thus, the Sri Vaishnava community, does not encourage young girls to socially imitate Andal’s life; that is, girls are not encouraged to be unmarried and dedicate their lives to the Lord. Andal’s rejection of marriage and her subsequent union with the Lord is seen as a unique event and as suitable only for her.36

Thus, Āṇṭāl is domesticated in the process of universalising her importance.37 Retrieving the subversive heart/mind/breasts language-play of the Nācchiyār Tirumoli suggests an entirely different strategy of universalisation: a woman is claiming total authority in her devotion, an expansive authority that stretches out even over the divine.

A careful study of each of the Ālvārs is necessary before we can make any claims regarding the extent to which the Ālvārs as a whole utilise female voice to engender a distinctive mysticism. Nevertheless, whether Ālvār mysticism is defined through external (Hardy) or internal (Chari) criteria, Jantzen’s insight clearly holds: due to Ālvār uses of female voice, there is an important connection between gendered expectations and the delimitation of Ālvār mysticism. At the same time, this particular study of Āṇṭāl can challenge Jantzen on three points. First, Jantzen herself has a Hardy-an tendency to draw too strong a line between what she calls intellectual and affective mysticisms.38 As we have seen with Āṇṭāl, such characterisations are prone to missing important nuances of mystical practices. Second, Jantzen literalises the sexuality in female mysticism of the high Middle Ages in order to distinguish their work from erotic male mysticism. She says, for example, “The sexuality is explicit, and there is no warning that it should not be taken literally. There is no intellectualising or spiritualising, no climbing up into the head, or using the erotic as an allegory hedged about with warnings.”39 On this point, too, Āṇṭāl shows such a bifurcation to be problematic: rigorous mental disciplines and speculative knowledge are inexorably connected with sexual union. Finally, there are points where Jantzen indicates that female mystics almost helplessly internalise misogyny or gender dualisms and are virtually shut out of ‘male-defined’ mysticism and authority.40 Āṇṭāl’s poetry proves, however, that – at least
in one case – female mystics are active (and even authoritative) agents in shaping religious traditions, drawing on their received theological, philosophical, and literary traditions and offering creative ways to re-imagine humanity, the divine, and their own power.

**Some concluding reflections**

Given how problematic and power-laden the process of defining mysticism is, the question arises as to whether or not the term ought to be utilised, to say nothing about its use outside of Greek or Christian contexts. Jantzen herself remains agnostic on the matter of whether or not there is any essential core or truth to Christian mysticism; but while she advocates the importance of deconstructing the term, she does not necessarily recommend its banning. She says,

> [I]f Derrida is correct that it is precisely the demand of justice which requires the deconstruction of legitimacy, if it is precisely the idea of God which requires the critique of every concept of God, then the deconstruction of mysticism and of contemporary spirituality is an urgent task. Perhaps, indeed, it is the mystical task.41

This intriguing statement, left unexplained, points tantalizingly towards mysticism as *practice*, rather than *experience*. Jantzen, then, may deconstruct mysticism, but she inevitably points to its reconstruction and to her own gendered rewriting of mysticism and authority.

There is no easy answer on the use of 'mysticism' in Hindu studies. One strategy is to avoid the term altogether, arguing that such external terms are at best unhelpful for illuminating Hindu practices, and in its worst forms, are underhanded attempts to essentialise Hinduism according to western orientalist interests and goals. In his genealogy of mysticism, Richard King has exposed the extent to which the characterisation of the 'mystic East' and western, colonialist production of the Indian 'Other' are entangled.42 For King, the mystical 'has been projected onto Indian religious culture as a way of controlling, manipulating and managing the Orient'.43

It is unrealistic to believe avoidance of the category of mysticism will solve the problem. Any term that we use in Hindu studies, even terms that are internal to a tradition, can be contested and used in problematic ways. For example, the category of bhakti is complicated by the sheer number of Hindu traditions and approaches to bhakti. The study of one form of bhakti will inevitably privilege one tradition’s definition of bhakti over another. A.K. Ramanujan addresses a similar problem on a reflection on his use the word ‘saint’:

> After the sixth century, a new kind of person comes upon the historical scene in India, first in Tamilnadu and later in other parts of the country. Their poems are their best introduction. There is no single word, like the English word ‘saint,’ in Indian languages for this kind of person, but one can find different words
depending on the religious group: the Kannada Vīraśaivas call them śarana, the Kannada Vaiṣṇavas dāsa, the Tamil Śaivites nāyamār, the Tamil Vaiṣṇavas ālvār. In northern traditions, such religious persons are called sants. In what follows, we will call him/her a saint, for want of anything better. 44

The conundrum of terminology is therefore pervasive; and jettisoning mysticism will not remove the problems inherent in categorising and theorising religious phenomena.

Moreover, to deny the term’s usefulness in Hindu studies because of the history of western orientalism and colonisation is to deny also constructive reclamations within Hindu contexts. 45 This is simply a further imperialism in the power struggles over who produces knowledge and meaning. Chari’s theistic mysticism is therefore an important counter-discourse for complexifying and challenging constructions of mysticism both outside and within Śrīvaśnavā thought and practice. In fact, his reconstruction is clearly a claim of authority that destabilises western ownership of the term. Jantzen is correct to connect constructions of mysticism to claims of authority. In this sense, then, to insist on the usefulness of the category of mysticism for the Ālvārs is therefore an insistence both on the authority of the Ālvārs and on the power of Śrīvaśnavā (and non-Śrīvaśnavā) constructions of mysticism.

The characterisation of Ālvār poetry as mystical can be either helpful or problematic in flushing out important elements of their thought and practice. Chari’s retrieval of mysticism – a deliberate response to Hardy – is an example of a conscious deconstruction (and reconstruction) of mysticism. We can see in Chari the development of an understanding of mysticism that seeks to be consistent with his religious tradition’s self-understanding. Such a move destabilises the received definition by constructing a distinctively Śrīvaśnavā understanding of mysticism, an understanding that would need constant deconstruction and reconstruction in different contexts and in light of developing concerns. At the same time, however, a certain hermeneutics of suspicion is important, as constructions of mysticism can cover over important elements that do not fit into a particular definition. In Āṇṭāḷ’s case, the gendered expectations of both Friedhelm Hardy and S.M. Srinivasa Chari essentialise female voice, missing the subversive language-play in Āṇṭāḷ’s poetics. Thus, although mysticism can be a helpful category in demarcating spaces of authority, scholars of Hindu studies must adopt a healthy caution in categorising and theorising religious traditions, attentive to the dynamics of power (and gendered power) in their work.

Notes

1 The Ālvārs are twelve South Indian Tamil saints who lived between the sixth and nine centuries CE and wrote devotional poetry to Viṣṇu and his many forms. Their poetry is canonical for Śrīvaśnavas, a Tamil Vaiṣṇava tradition that views as inseparable Viṣṇu-with-Śrī.

For the purposes of this paper, however, I will focus on Friedhelm Hardy and S.M. Srinivasa Chari, both of whom deliberately interrelate these themes in their construction of a distinctive Ālvār mysticism.


Lawrence S. Cunningham, review of Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism, by Grace Jantzen, Commonweal 123.20 (22 November 1996): 28–30, 29. On this point, Ulrike Wiethaus adds that Jantzen does not consider other complicating factors in her study. While gender is indeed important for understanding the relationship between power and the production of knowledge, class, sexual orientation, and religion must also be taken into account. Ulrike Wiethaus, review of Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism, by Grace Jantzen, Speculum 73.2 (April 1998) 541–544, 543.


Kṛṣṇaism, for Hardy, is to be distinguished from Vaiṣṇavism; for while Vaiṣṇavism views Kṛṣṇa as one avatāra of Viṣṇu among others, Kṛṣṇaism sees Kṛṣṇa as Absolute. Hardy, 6.

Hardy concedes that these characteristics are western categories, and indeed “no name for our phenomenon can be found that is easily understood by all or most Indians.” Hardy, 9. The fact that Hardy’s definition uses criteria external to the tradition is problematic, particularly given Hardy’s stated strategy to exclude anything that does not fit his definition. Vasudha Narayanan raises a similar concern, as the effect his criteria means that he must “exclude about 75 percent of Nammālvār’s Tiruvāyumoli and most of the ālvār poetry.” Vasudha Narayanan, review of Viraha-Bhakti: The Early History of Kṛṣṇa Devotion in South India, by Friedhelm Hardy, Religious Studies Review 11.1 (January 1985) 12–20, 16.

18 Hardy, pp. 353–358.
19 Ibid, pp. 406–413.
21 Ibid, pp. 427–228.
22 Ibid, p. 443.
23 Ibid, p. 571.
27 Ibid, pp. 151–152.
28 Ibid, p. 152.
31 Chari, p. 157.
32 Ibid, p. 199.
33 Ibid, p. 208.
34 Narayanan, 16–17. Hardy himself concedes that there is an intellectual component to Ālvār poetry, although it is a lower practice or precondition for the paradigm of emotional bhakti.

The actual *locus* where Kṛṣṇa abides and is realized is styled variously; most frequent are *maṇam, cintai, neिउcami/neिउcam*, and *uḷḷam*. The denotations seem to flow into each other, and together they demarcate an area which we would describe as ‘soul, intellect, mind, consciousness, self’ ... The process of realizing Māyōṇi in the heart is referred to by verbs like *uḷ-, ēr-, nīna-,* all meaning ‘to think, meditate, ponder’ ... I have treated these words indiscriminately as pointers towards (intellectual) bhakti. (Hardy, 292).

Indeed, Hardy seems to think that Āntāl herself has a rather single-minded focus: ‘[I]t is quite clear in Āntāl that any conception of Viṣṇu’s immanence as *antaryānī* or as the goal of *yoṣa* exercises is without emotional relevance.’ (Ibid, 428) But the very words Hardy dismisses often also mean “heart,” making the place of divine-human union (and the activity of realising this) both “mind” and “heart.” Ālvār bhakti is therefore both intellectual and emotional, without simple differentiation or hierarchy. But by creating the artificial separation between heart and mind, intellectual and emotional, union and separation, Hardy disassociates intellectual bhakti and emotional bhakti, and relativises the significance not only of the intellectual but also the wider horizon of the emotional.


37 Narayanan points out that divinising Āṇṭāḷ further pushes Āṇṭāḷ away from the lives and choices of real women. Āṇṭāḷ becomes an exception that actually reinforces the gendered rule. However, Narayanan notes that Āṇṭāḷ and other female saints have become inspirational for many women’s groups in India. Āṇṭāḷ and those who are inspired by her therefore escape complete domestication. Ibid, 42-47.

38 See Jantzen, pp. 109–133.

39 Ibid, p. 133.


41 Ibid, p. 353.


45 Indeed, King’s strategy of ‘changing the subject’ is not about moving on to other topics in western religious studies, which without careful interrogation would unwittingly serve neo-colonial agendas, but is instead about ‘redirecting’ the conversation through careful processes of decolonisation. He says, ‘The study of non-Western cultures by Western scholars necessitates an awareness of the wider power dynamic in which such discursive practices operate and are received, as well as an openness and appreciation of indigenous categories, theories and forms of life in and on their own terms.’ (King, 185) This appreciation should include ways in which scholars creatively reinterpret those western categories.