



# Cast Out: Women and the Politics of Impiety

Tuesday 5 September 4.30 – 5.45pm

## Speaker

Prof Rajeswari Sunder Rajan  
New York University

## Location

### Theatrette

Sir Roland Wilson Building,  
Building #120, McCoy Cct, ANU

Lecture followed by light  
refreshments

## Enquiries

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the public

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The focus of this paper is women's expulsion from religious community. Prof Sunder Rajan takes for her examination three literary texts, twentieth-century works of (quasi-historical) fiction written in southern India: A. Madhavaiah's novel in English, *Clarinda* (1915); Lalithambikai Antharjanam's short story in Malayalam, 'Praticara Devata' ('Goddess of Revenge') (1939); and U.R. Anantha Murthy's novella in Kannada, *Ghattashraddha* (1963/English translation 1999) and the landmark film based on it (1977). The protagonists of all three texts are Brahmin women who are excommunicated by their caste orthodoxy for sexual transgressions; and all the texts are located at points of historical change indexed as crisis, marked by religious conversion and reform. Prof Sunder Rajan juxtaposes these fictional works with situations in contemporary law in which the issue is perceived in similar terms, as a conflict between tradition and modernity, secular state and religious authority, law and ritual, and individual rights and community and custom. She ends with a comparative theoretical framing of the problematic in terms of the *homo sacer* of Ancient Roman law, resurrected by Giorgio Agamben as a figure of our political present. As an instance of how the ethical imperative of hospitality is obstructed not only by a community's hostility to the stranger but also by its rejection of its *own* members, excommunication alerts us to the shifting boundaries of inside and outside, selfhood and otherness. An understanding of practices of expulsion—of their success as much as their limits—strikes Prof Sunder Rajan as a matter of considerable theoretical interest and political urgency.

**Rajeswari Sunder Rajan** is Global Distinguished Professor of English at New York University