

LIFE WRITING: MONOGRAPH SERIES
SERIES EDITOR: G.S. JAYASREE

**OF MOTHERS AMONG
OTHER THINGS:
LIVED TEXTS, TEXTED
LIVES**

Priya V.

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Institute of English
University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram

**Of Mothers Among Other Things:
Lived Texts, Texted Lives**

Priya V. is an independent researcher based in Bengaluru. She took her doctoral degree from the Institute of English, University of Kerala. She is currently working on her first book which is a recuperated representation of the devadasis of Keralam elided from its official histories and cultural common sense.

This study attempts an invested examination of the maternal subjectivity invoked by and for Saalumarada Thimmakka, a veteran environmentalist, by placing her oral reminiscences against the many life stories that have tried to capture her legacies over time. Arguing for the relationality and the constructed nature of motherhood wherein normative power structures delimit and decide on its intelligibility through various representational media and socialization of gendered subjects, the attempt here is to put in place a feminist slant to maternity wherein the resilient female subject converts the victimhood of childlessness conferred on her to agency precisely by using typical registers of power. Probing the sociality of motherhood, the study further tries to read the interface between cultural texts embedded in lives and its affirmative politics often lost sight of in redemptive attempts at texting lives. Insights from life-writing theories and later feminist thought are garnered to gravitate towards an understanding of the complicated character of life-narratives themselves through an examination of the narrative performativity involved in texting lives.

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Through the prism of life...

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Introduction

I met Saaluramarada Thimmakka at her rented house, which she refuses to call home, in Bagalkunte village on the outskirts of Bengaluru. Accompanied by Jayaditya Vittal, a friend and former student of mine who could understand the Kannada dialect that Thimmakka speaks, I went to meet Thimmakka intrigued by the stories surrounding this veteran environmentalist². Almost every media house had already done a story on her, especially after she secured a place in BBC's list of hundred most influential women of 2016. Several of these stories, including her biography as well as the many awards and mementos at her house, repeatedly refer to her as the mother of the trees she had nurtured over the course of an exceptionally long life. This attempt, at the outset itself, eschews any pretensions of having captured the meanings and legacies of this centenarian's remarkable life. The meagre hours spent listening to her reminisce are instead placed against the maternal subjectivity evoked to make sense of her painstaking act of rearing up the banyan trees that today line a stretch of four kilometres between Hulikal, the tiny village where she has practically lived all her adult life and a neighbouring one, Kudur in Karnataka. This project understands that attempts at biography remain precariously susceptible to, at times pronounced, at times involuntary, predilections towards

autobiography, that texting the messy, unwieldy experiences of a life itself involves succumbing to “seductions” that betray the objective claims of biography (Rhiel and Suchoff 1996). A life-narrative with a feminist slant that is attempted here is unapologetically subjective, but reflexively so, and hence the same can also be considered an introspection on the predicament involved in narrating lives itself and the shifting grounds they occupy. Drawing from assorted insights proffered by life writing theories and later feminist examinations of maternal subjectivity, this study tries to investigate the relationality of maternity and the often overlooked aspect of its sociality. Understanding motherhood as a historical, cultural construct, the thrust here is to scrape together alternative possibilities of understanding maternal experience beyond its apparently inevitable mooring in private domesticity and biological determinism which locate care as some innate aspect of women’s ontology while also using the same argument of naturalism to point out the inner domain of home as her rightful place. If motherhood is a text that is produced, disseminated, consumed and played with, what implications does it have in avowed repetitions of this motif in texts that seem to churn out gendered notions of mothering in their attempts to grasp the overarching legacies of a very long life? Why does motherhood repeatedly emerge in its representations in widely disparate media as inherently possessing some quintessential, singular narrative to it? This attempt at understanding the maternal subjectivity voiced for and by a woman who made the better of her socially stigmatic and experientially traumatic status as a ‘barren woman’ thus probes the othering involved in representations of mothering, while also plumbing the agential capacities that resilient women draw on in their own derivations to mainstream maternity.

I did not go to meet Thimmakka with a prepared questionnaire, I was instead hoping for a protean chat where her memories would unspool with minimal interruptions from my side. But certainly, I had questions in mind which I had hoped she would address as and when they popped up in between our triangulating conversation. While this study seeks to be intensely aware of the problems involved in recording a life and hopes to

retain a certain reflexivity, it needs to be stated here that this also meant relinquishing ambitions regarding understanding the subject's life. As Frank Kermode notes in his own memoir, "The honest truth, in so far as this suggests absolute fidelity to historical fact is inaccessible; the minute you begin to write it you try to write it well, and writing well is an activity which has no simple relation to truth. For memory cannot do the necessary work independent of fantasy; and if it tries, the result will be a dull report" (37). Attempting to retain a certain reflexivity, hence, also comes with the extra baggage that the candour that marks such writing can also be an engaging stylistic device which hides the crafting involved in all telling. But once we extend the by now accepted position in social theory that there is no truth waiting to be accessed out there to the actual act of putting together an academic study, it has to be also accepted that the latter is a story as well wherein the fantasies and predilections of the researcher encounter those of the subject she tries to represent. What this avowal of the narrative slant within an academic study means is that it hopes to be reflexive about the reflexivity accessed in this study as well so that what emerges in the following pages is a meditative examination of the two-way street between experience and representation.

Before meeting Thimmakka, I had entertained an idyllic fantasy of meeting and listening to her while her trees whistled stories to the winds in the background. It, however, did not happen owing to her arthritic, swollen feet which now circumscribe the ambit of her movement. Her adopted son, Umesh instead suggested a meeting at Bagalkunte, since they both had just come back from a stay at Belur, where the international foundation under her name has an office. She sat before mementos which were heaped in corners of a dimly lit front room, or piled on top of a table as she talked animatedly, betraying a somewhat amused and almost irreverent wit. She would not mount them on the walls of the rented house because home to her was still at Hulikal; the 'show-case' built into a niche in the wall and meant to exhibit the many honours she has received stood empty, as if it were some metaphoric enactment of the charged dynamics between longing and belonging.

Thimmakka unspooled her memories in a zig-zagging narrative that went into a loop every time she needed to locate the prolonged miseries of a distant past against the acceptance and adulation that came to her late in life, as if like an afterthought. ‘Back then’ and ‘now’, emerge as two distinctly coloured experiences in such retelling. Her age seemed to me an equally dynamic thing; according to her own account she is 106, if we are to follow the narrative in her published biography, she must be 108 as the year of birth calculated therein is 1909 (Beluru 2015). While there is no denying the extreme old age that she is in now, any attempt to calculate her exact age feels like a ludicrous act. The long arc of her continuing legacies makes short work of any such attempt to locate her story on any temporal scale of veracious calibrations. They branch out, it seemed to me, very much like her trees. May be, time itself is lived in different ways in different spheres so much so that questions like “do you know when you were born” seem to boomerang from another template where something akin to an arboreal experience of time holds good. If Hulikal for her is the place against which she frames her tale, time is felt not in terms of exact years. Events do not happen here in particular calendrical years, but are measured in distances using such gauging scales as how long she bore the misery of being childless, or how long she and her late husband, Chikkaiah cared for the saplings. Seasons of human emotions and experiences may not neatly fit into the nameable, cyclical character of nature’s seasons and are perhaps more prone to vagaries, and yet, there is something about the slow grinding nature of these cycles that seems to palpably echo something arboreal about it all. I wondered how many times she had told her story by then, and whether it lapses into some set pattern every time she regales her past, also whether like a dance which is never the same dance in repetitive performance, if there were versions to her memories. A definite framing to these memories was, however, given when after pleasantries, our first question, “why trees and why not pets” was answered with an explicit linking of the same to her childless status in a long gone past.

A look at the echo from A. K. Ramanujan in the title of this study becomes relevant here. And yet, in a curious way, it was

not just the eponymous poem by Ramanujan that had hooked my imagination. The many stories of Thimmakka's life I had read before meeting her reminded me of one of the women's oral tales curated and translated by Ramanujan, called a "A Flowering Tree" in a collection that carries the same name (1997). It depicts the life of a girl who can magically transform herself into a tree that produces fragrant flowers and then return to her former self. The transformation for it to work well, however, has to be accompanied by rituals of care and nurturing. The tale further explicitly cautions against unrestrained exploitation of the tree's produce, which can also turn the girl when she shape-shifts, into a mutilated being reducing her ontology to that of an inanimate 'thing' in the story even though redemption comes to her later. This tale, told by women draws an equation between flowering and sexuality, having profound resonance in the cultural imaginaries of many South Indian languages, in the semantic overlapping of the respective regional words for *flowering* in Tamil, Kannada and Malayalam, which can also stand for menstruation. What is of interest to us here is that Ramanujan also talks about how common symbols found in oral takes also have divergent meanings in tales that circulated among women which leads him to wonder over "the gender of the genre" as such (218). I use this as a point of departure in order to examine maternity as an experience accessed by a childless woman who uses it to make a coherent, intelligible narrative of the way in which she has made verdant a sun-scorched stretch of her village by spatializing that experience, pushing the ambit of maternity itself bit by little bit, a few saplings at a time, a few more in the next.

Going back to the way Thimmakka unpacked her memories, it is to be noted that, like all other accounts of her life, she attributed causality here again, to her childlessness after being over two decades into her marriage. Such attribution also lends a certain structuring to her life in narration, bringing into focus the *whys* and *hows* of the subject as the initiator of the actions that later came to represent her life, even as, according to her own confession, in that long gone past she had no inkling at all about its lasting impact:

See, my own village is quite far from here. I grew up in Hulikal, in Magadi Taluk, and then, later, I got married. We waited twenty-five years...twenty-five years! But we could not have children. That's when my husband said there's no hope of our getting respect and care like this, so let's plant trees, and acquire merit that way. So the next morning – we had a *patte-gaadi*— he and I, together, we got on the vehicle and went out. He went ahead, and I followed, and we got saplings of the trees that we wanted. So that day, we dug holes, and planted the saplings, and that's how the journey started. He and I *together* planted so many trees like that, for ten years³.

One year we planted fifteen, another year we planted twenty, like that.... every year we increased the number of trees we planted. On *four* kilometres we planted... from Hulikal, going forward to Kudoor. And now they're still there....from being so small, they've become this big [gestures with her hands]. For some ten years we did that, and then, when they became big, may be, ten years after that⁴, the country got to know of our work and now they call me to functions and honour me and do all that.... they give me presents like saris and shawls and jackets and so on [gestures around] and....look [points to the photo], my husband's photo is there, over there on the ground... [pausing, may be, collecting her thoughts] In *my* home⁵ – Hulikal – there in my home, I've kept it properly, I've put it in glass and put it on the wall. After some three years of my coming to Bangalore, we got this house.... This is just a *badige-mane* [rented house], I can't put it in glass here. And now of course, the country has recognised me, they treat me with respect, call me to functions and give me awards and shawls and saris and jackets. You tell me, madam, isn't it that way? The respect I've got; it has come like that....

See, we all want to have children; we have dreams of having them, and we do as our mind says. For me, I prayed, I asked Hari-Brahma [said with great force], but I could not raise children from my own womb. Perhaps he meant

me to raise my children from the earth itself; you can say I borrowed a womb from the earth. So, I'm telling you, when we felt like having children, we did what we had to. But anyway, I tell everyone this: "You should all grow trees. Especially young people..." It is good for us, good for the country and the people... (Thimmakka, Personal Interview 2017)

The only published biography of Thimmakka prefixes this phase of her life with a sympathetic narration of the long drawn out miseries of her childhood where she contributed to the pittance her father earned as a bonded labourer and her mother as a helper in the houses of land owning neighbours, by collecting leaves of the *buruga* tree and selling it at a nearby marketplace. It is to be noted that this account once it was written was read aloud to Thimmakka and was approved by her for its veracity (Beluru 2015). There is a conspicuous bitterness about the representation of her mother who emerges here as a very harsh and violent person totally unlike her affectionate father. Further, her biological mother is also clearly distinguished from a generous female benefactor at whose house she was employed as a domestic helper during the formative years of her childhood whom little Thimmakka took to thinking of as a foster mother. What looms large in her memories of her biological mother, however, are painful vignettes of frequent thrashing for minor evasions of duties or even for her overt kindness which made her freely give away hard earned vegetables or groceries at home, along with total neglect and absence of any 'motherly' warmth (Beluru 2015). All of these pool together in cementing her reasoning that, she was unable to become a mother because her own mother did neither take care of her when she was bitten by a poisonous snake, nor offer any propitiatory rituals to the snake gods afterwards, to ward off future ills. In a study that seeks to go beyond the obviousness of maternal experience and probes alternative meanings of maternal subjectivity, this bitter memory of the subject's mother looming large in her memory demands some critical attention. But before that, I would need to theoretically problematize some of the issues involved in telling and recording lives.

Telling the Tale, But Whose Tale?

Recent theories of life-writing, drawing certainly from other discourses on subject formation, have successfully demolished the classical notion of the subject as an autonomous entity who arbitrates her destiny from her own knowledge of herself and initiates actions thus. As Barbara Johnson puts it, any act of telling involves a competition for controlling the narrative; it could be between a certain version of a subject and the narrator in a biography, in a memoir, it could be between a former self now retrieved by the narrating self, which plays with both in the act of narration (119). In her introduction to a section of the critical anthology, *The Seductions of Biography*, aptly titled, “Whose Life is it Anyway?”, she makes a strong point:

Twenty years ago, the question of literary biography was marginalized in literary studies by a tendency to focus on the practice of reading the internal workings of literary texts. Freed from the control of origins and authorial intentions, the text became a playground for readers’ ingenuity. As Roland Barthes famously proclaimed, “The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author.” Yet as recent biographers have come to discover, the death of the author sometimes results in the birth, not of the Reader, but of the Estate.... In other words, to interpret is to treat as dead, perhaps even to kill. Barthes was right. Yet the living goes on claiming the right to control the story.... To be observed is to be dispossessed: our lives are precisely what we can never own. (119-120)

It is hence that any attempt at narrating a life inevitably needs to address the ethical dilemma involved in the way in which narratives, even protean reminiscences, shape subjectivities and how they get emplotted, caught as they are in the desires and pulls that confer meaning on the same. Judith Butler, continuing her earlier thesis of the performativity imbricated in subject formation elaborated in her previous works, eruditely argues in her first full-length work on moral philosophy titled *Giving an Account of Oneself* that the ethical question of ‘who is this I’ is always already implicated in the social norms that enable the

production of the narrating subject which it may still play with all the same:

...the “I” has no story of its own that is not also the story of a relation— or set of relations— to a set of norms. Although many contemporary critics worry that this means there is no concept of the subject that can serve as the ground for moral agency and moral accountability, that conclusion does not follow. The “I” is always to some extent dispossessed by the social conditions of its emergence. This dispossession does not mean that we have lost the subjective ground for ethics. On the contrary, it may well be the condition for moral inquiry, the condition under which morality itself emerges. If the “I” is not at one with moral norms this means only that the subject must deliberate upon these norms and that part of deliberation is bound up with the operation of critique. And critique finds that it cannot go forward without a consideration of how the deliberating subject might actually live or appropriate a set of norms. Not only does ethics find itself embroiled in the task of social theory, but social theory, if it is to yield non-violent results, must find a place for this “I”. (5)

Butler here argues that the common idea of the rational, transparent, always already existing ethical subject is a reductive notion of what it means to be human. This evidently becomes a vital question in life-narratives, because if we are somewhat opaque to ourselves, and by extension to others, how do we deal with the ethical question inevitably embroiled in narrating lives? Far from denying the agential possibilities of life writing, what she clears space here for, is a reconsideration of ethics itself as a critique of the social norms of our world that always predate particular subjects and mould them in ways we cannot fully grasp. This affirmation of our shared fragility and vulnerability, however, also points to the teller’s responsibility involved in giving accounts of oneself or others. This issue of critical responsibility and moral agency in the face of the partial opacity of the subject has been brilliantly studied by Annika Thiem in her intensive examination of Butler’s oeuvre in her major work, *Unbecoming Subjects: Judith*

Butler, Moral Philosophy and Critical Responsibility and in so doing faces head-on the oft repeated charge that the poststructuralist notion of the shifting subject is saddled with the quandary that it cannot explain the subject's agential potential. Reading Butler alongside an engagement with the Levinasian model of alterity, Thiem argues that "instead of generalizing responsibility into that which comprises every form of moral inquiry and is characterized only by the question of what one should do", it may be regarded as a responsiveness or "being a demand for a response that arises through our relationality and being addressed by an other." (5) Further, reiterating Butler's critique that subject and agency cannot be seen as mere ontological conceptual constructs which betray metaphysical residues at the core of normative understandings of what make ethics and politics possible, Thiem clarifies the problem thus:

In order to consider questions of self-formation, it remains important to analyse what kinds of acts and subjects become recognizable within the given conditions and are legitimized by a dominant set of epistemological frameworks. Moreover, agency cannot be theorized as a practice of self-formation without reflecting on the complicating challenge that Butler's work poses by arguing that the ways in which we are formed through social norms and processes of normalization constitutively cannot be fully known by us.

Yet the problematic of agency does not stop here at the level of not being able to know in what ways one is entangled and formed, blinded by, and invested in the social norms to which one comes to relate. The question of agency is more complicated, if we take seriously Butler's argument that the agent that is identified as the source and cause of an action and its effects is a belated construct and that the effects of actions reconstitute both the initial action as well as the agent to whom the action is attributed. Butler does not eliminate the intentional subject but she has consistently argued that the intentional subject and its intentions cannot fully control the action and its effects and meanings.

In her contribution, “Contingent Foundations” in *Feminist Contentions*, Butler contends that the act exceeds the agent, which in turn exposes the problematic of agency because the effects of an action can inaugurate effects themselves in places and ways that had not been foreseen. Nevertheless, when Butler argues that “the action continues to act after the intentional subject has announced its completion,” she invokes an intentional subject that is able to reflect on its action and consider it completed. (89-90)

In a different vein, Thiem’s reconsideration of responsibility as responsiveness to an other finds an eloquent reverberation in the way Adriano Cavarero probes the connections between storytelling and selfhood and the unalienable relationality that sustains any act of narration (2000). Arguing that memory itself has a spontaneous narrating structure, she recasts the self as *narratable*, instead of being narrated, and goes on to inflect this narratability with its desire to confer uniqueness and unity to itself, which involves a relational space and is possible only through an exposure to an other. Cavarero, drawing from and extending Hannah Arendt, explains that this uniqueness, claimed by the subject, paradoxically is a relational exercise, because “the relation with the other is necessary for her self-designation as unique”; this also directly impinges on the very nature of autobiography which hinges on the idea of creating unique stories (70). Such solipsism is misplaced, she affirms along with Janet Varner Gunn, because a space emptied out of all others to occupy the ‘authentic’ self can only be a “non-place”, literally the kind in which Narcissus drowned (Gunn 137).

Storied Lives, Lived Stories

The above vantage points afford me profound clues to address vital questions that remain at the heart of all political and ethical queries. Even as one strives best to make one’s political deliberations ethical and to retain a certain ethics in one’s politics, there is no free space from which one can know the viability of both for others. Perhaps, ‘why do we do the things we do’, or ‘when did I become this self I now inhabit’, are questions to which we

may never find satisfactory answers. This dissatisfaction perhaps, also explains why humans are attuned to both listening to and telling stories; as Arendt explains, storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it (1970). In the face of our shared fragility and fragmentariness, stories can offer a unity denied to our lives as they are lived and in telling stories about oneself and others, we borrow something akin to that unity. Such emplotting of experience to a storyline also implies a staging of past and present dramas and future possibilities wherein the teller herself can watch her as well as watch her being watched, even if it is by some abstract and assumed person to whom the story is told. As Arendt explains: “Without spectators, the world would be imperfect,” one cannot see “how all the particular things in the world and every particular deed in the realm of human affairs fit together and produce a harmony which itself is not given to sense perceptions and this invisible in the visible world would remain forever unknown if there were no spectator to look out for it...” (*The Life of the Mind* 132-133). Given that such telling involves encounters with various others through which the self designs the shape and meaning of its own tale pushes us to consider the othering vitally involved in conceiving the self.

This prompts me to reflect over the finality of meaning, the rounding off given to Thimmakka’s memories of her biological mother who would neatly fit ‘the unmaternal mother’ stereotype, too often castigated in mainstream representations and our cultural common sense. This does not in the least imply a doubting of her memories, instead it points to what Cavarero refers to as the narrative structure contained in memorizing itself that gives unity and finality to remembered objects. There are no fully finished portraits of actual people waiting to be accessed in our memories, instead they become representable people right in the portraiture of memory, where loose ends are tied up, a touch of colour added here, in the form of what one remembers and an evening out of shades there, in terms of what one cannot remember, giving coherence and fullness to it. As Thiem succinctly puts it, drawing from Heidegger, “Remembering at its heart is forgetfulness”, it is an attempt to seemingly cough out, rather in practice re-create, that which is understood as having

experienced once (“Narrative Performativity” 7). I will come back to this issue later in this study; at this point, however, we need to examine the relevance of the bad mother vs the good mother oppositionality drawn between two women in Thimmakka’s early years and its possible connection to the maternal subjectivity accessed by her later. There is no need here to elaborate on the currency of such typology in popular narratives; our myths and movies, fiction and familial fantasies, iconography and ideals are saturated with them. There has been a spate of studies that has tried to analyse the problematic nature of such stereotypical representations which I would briefly map out later in this study. Stepping into the slippery terrain of how such representations give salience and intelligibility to ‘real’ experience, at this point, I would briefly reflect on the valences attributed to maternal subjectivity and its naturalization as something biologically and temperamentally inherent in women. Such a line of reasoning would help us understand the mutually generative ties between texts in their interpellation in our lives as well as lives in their embedding in texts.

Mothers and Others

A. K. Ramanujan’s poem from which this study has borrowed the initial half of its title presents a fondly remembered picture of the speaker’s mother, who is interestingly, smelt by the speaker in a mystical manner on the black bone of a twisted tree. The unnamed speaker sees her in a subliminal vision that plummets back to a past, where a younger version of her runs in the rain to bawling cradles. But she is also partly an eagle with talons where hands should be, one of them crippled when her fingers, instead of a rat, were caught in a trap set for rodents. She however, can flex “her four still sensible fingers” to pick a grain of rice from the floor whenever she chances upon it, seeing which the speaker’s parchment tongue licks the “bark” in the mouth (*Collected Poems* 61). In a few lines, the mother here mutates from a tree, to an eagle perched on the same, to its possible prey, a rat, all of which come together in the final image of the old mother bending and perhaps resembling a beast on all fours, to pick a grain of rice with

four human fingers. Ramanujan's portrait seems to whimsically capture ambivalent memories of a mother; we may however, take the same as a trope to examine the problem of evoking maternal subjectivity itself, riddled as it is in an either/or thinking which fits experience of maternity to handy antinomies.

While mainstream representations of motherhood are tediously populated with patriarchal notions of the sacrificial, self-effacing stereotype and its polar opposite, the woman who cannot live up to such glorified notions, this typology has also had remarkable historical usages. The extendable structure of such stereotyping of docility makes it possible that it can be superimposed on other things like the nation or some natural phenomenon that necessarily has to be spoken for. Truly, the maternal body has had many claims made on it historically. In her major work, *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, Marianne Hirsch, taking the conspicuous silencing of Jocasta in the Oedipus myth as a central motif, points both to the larger absence of the mother's perspective as well as the theoretical difficulty of representing or writing as a mother. Tracing the continuity of the missing mother both in the conventional plots of western literature as well as in the reliance of psychoanalytic theories on Greek myths, she points to the way in which the absented maternal has helped to reinforce silence itself as a maternal attribute.

Feminist interventions from India have similarly unravelled how centuries of sanskritization have successfully facilitated the gradual conversion and absorption of ancient mother goddesses as spouse goddesses to male deities, a process only abetted through the striated political ramifications of colonial and postcolonial community reforms. A frequently raised problem from the Indian cultural experience is that in spite of a long history of mother goddess worship, gendered oppression has remained here the norm rather than the exception. It is only since feminist revisions of the legacies of anticolonial movements that the complex ways in which the mother goddess iconography has been tapped by early nationalists in their attempt to forge newer notions of a rebellious generation of sons who shall protect the 'honour' of the wronged mother started becoming evident. This places the entire

prehistory of mother goddess worship in a chaotic situation and ideological uses made of glorified notions of motherhood itself emerge as a central motif in deciding what spaces women were stipulated to occupy in the incipient nation-state. As Jasodhara Bagchi explains, Indian feminist theorizing had to take on board the complex process of the ideological use of keeping family as the regulating and regulated order, thereby confining women to the reproductive domain of home and denying them access to the world (2017). Such glorification of motherhood as the epitome of ideal womanhood with the upper caste and class Hindu family as the norm successfully contributed to a re-framing of patriarchies along with the long drawn out processes of community reforms. Bagchi draws attention to the telling ways in which motherhood came to play the gatekeeper of a newer patriarchal order, now acceded to women as mothers of ‘worthy’ sons:

Motherhood thus came to acquire the paradoxical glorificatory role which was the other side of the powerlessness that surrounded women in the so called traditional Indian society. As the mother of a son, she kept the clan/kinship/race alive by conserving the so called ‘tradition’. This is where Indian feminists drew, very effectively, upon the internationally accessible feminist theory that the mother also reproduced the patriarchal values of the dominant class and race hegemonic order. Hence, in both systems, there was a felt need to control not only the outer conduct, but also the inner world of the woman. Both were subject to subtle manipulation and surveillance. Thus, while women’s schooling was tabooed by the traditionalists for its threat to incipient widowhood, the so called ‘modernizing’ advocates of girls’ schooling likewise advocated women’s education for its efficacy in mainly producing good wives and mothers of sons. (14)

It is hence not a happenstance that the title of a pioneering volume of feminist theorizing from India by Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid which unravels the ideological investment of cultural reformation epitomised in Bengali reformer Kailash Nath Basu’s pronouncement that the education afforded to Hindu

women should facilitate her recasting and regeneration bore the title *Recasting Women* (1990) and a dedication, ‘To our mothers’ (Bagchi 2017). Feminist engagement with this determining phase of Indian history has brought out how motherhood has functioned as a vital icon not only in state formation, but also impacting the everyday lives of women in trenchant ways. While the women’s question has been shrewdly deployed as an excuse for their ‘civilizing’ agenda by the colonisers, as Maitreyi Krishnaraj argues, vital anxieties about the contours of femininities that reformation would bring about may be seen in the framing of the Hindu Code Bill itself while it was being debated in the parliament in the 1940s (2010). The fear that manifests here concerned any possible deviation from “our culturally grounded notions of motherhood as selfless understanding and not needing any rights, and of femininity as non-aggressive and suppliant” (Krishnaraj 334). Similarly, Uma Chakravarti’s brilliant readings have unspooled how the deploying of myths surrounding Aryan women have been channelled in the writings of Dayananda Saraswati and others in the reductive equivalence they drew between womanhood and motherhood: “Motherhood for Dayananda was the sole rationale of a woman’s existence, but what was crucial in his concept of motherhood was its specific role in procreation and rearing of a special breed of men” (*Everyday Lives, Everyday Histories* 56). Elsewhere, she has argued that the *kanyadan* of upper caste Hindu wedding ceremonies implies a ritualized gifting of not only the girl, but of ‘her woman’s quality’ and procreative powers understood as her ‘essential’ *matr shakti*; the eminently reproducible aspect of this archetype has been further enormously tapped through multiple representational media (2001). Sukumari Bhattacharji’s studies of ancient goddesses scattered in her various works trace how marriage and motherhood are axiomatic in Vedic texts; more antique notions of independent mother goddesses emerge as accommodative of patriarchy in the Vedic imagination as evidenced in their depiction in the *Atharvaveda* as protected by Indra, the storm god (1990, 1998). Women thus continue to be located as a counterpart of fertile land, as the passive factor of reproduction who even in the rituals would only pray for the wellbeing of her

menfolk; glorification of motherhood hence, can be seen as a compensation where women merely gratified society's preference for male progeny (1990, 1998). The trajectories and contours that the motherhood imagery accumulated in various parts of India, nevertheless, were not exactly the same. Veena Das' study of the Santoshi Mata cult of northern India popularized by a Hindi movie released in 1975 has mapped the bizarre popularity of this newest entrant into the Hindu pantheon; the benevolent, longsuffering goddess who embodies *sati*, rather than *Shakti*, found a cultic following in the changed cultural grammar of the Hindi heartland of the nation in which ritual fasting to seek contentment in honour of this goddess quickly became a popular religious fad (1989). Elsewhere, in the Tamil speaking regions, motherhood achieved much complex formations drawing from texts as early as *Silappadikaram* and remarkably aiding the Tamil Pride movement spearheaded by Periyar. C. S. Lakshmi's work on mother-politics analyses the formations of maternal imagery against the functional context of Tamil culture and politics which facilitated a splitting of the emotionally loaded category of the mother into mothers and non-mothers, pure mothers and whore mothers and so on (2010). Following the wide reach of maternal imagination in a culture where respectfully addressing young girls as mothers (future mothers?) is a norm, she brilliantly unpacks the emergence of the mother as metaphor:

In 1892, the first printed version of the entire *Silappadikaram* came out through the efforts of U. V. Swaminatha Iyer. It coincided with efforts being made at that time to discover a 'pure' Tamil language as the beginning of establishing a 'pure' Tamil identity. In the process of this discovery, evolved the 'pure' Tamil woman whose embodiment was the mother. *Tirukkural* talks about children, but does not have a special chapter on motherhood. However, the neo-Tamilians needed a peg to hang all their ideas of purity and sanctity which validated the depth and greatness of their identity. The mother figure seemed to be the epitome of all that they were seeking in terms of identity since all women were seen as potential mothers. In this interpretation and elaboration of Tamil culture, the Tamil mother became

the central element as guarantor of purity of progeny and authenticator of historical continuity. In the mother's body is vested the totality of an identity. Once the mother's body is established as a sacred site, all other elements of identity are rendered valid and hence necessary to revive and hold on to. The mother's body then becomes a metaphor for anything considered sacred and pure like land or language. Anything that is valued is turned into 'mother' to validate its existence and continuity. The mother-metaphor is used as being congruent to ideals of purity and chastity—Tamil language is referred to as virgin Tamil and Mother Tamil. Time and again, purity has been the operative word in assessments of events and personalities, in perspectives, and in evaluations where purity and ownership is a matter of debate or pursuit. The mother-metaphor is invoked sometimes as a yardstick of measure, sometimes as a goal, sometimes a touchstone and sometimes as a tool of punishment. (192)

Mrinalini Sinha's work *Spectres of Mother India: The Global Restructuring of an Empire* has studied the slew of events set off by the publication of Katherine Mayo's controversial book, *Mother India* which had declared India as incapable of self-government embroiled as it is in irredeemable complications steeped in its Hindu culture. Sinha's rich historical narrative explains the far-reaching impact of this book in contributing to the passing of the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929 and effecting a reconfiguration of social and political spheres of colonial India as well as initiating the coalescence of a collective identity of women (2006). In a different vein, Indira Chowdhury Sengupta has addressed the complicated nature of the mythmaking surrounding the nation as a mother that steadily took root in colonial Bengal by pointing to the symbiosis between the surrender and devotion claimed by the Mother Goddess figure, the affect quality of the mother-son relationship in an acutely patriarchal social order and the loyalty demanded by the queen who helms the British empire (1992). What this implied is a strange juxtaposition of Mother Victoria and Mother India wherein the queen's "pure family life" and "her virtuous

motherliness”, which made her “the most suitable mother to her Hindu children” that Kshithindranath Tagore toasted to, could fuse with the brahminical image of the chaste mother goddess now retrieved to imagine the nation (qtd. in Sengupta 165). The spread of the motherhood iconography attributed to the nation through songs, plays, fiction and poems in colonial Bengal has been insightfully studied by Tanika Sarkar; she explains how from a melding of mythology and the urgencies of the historical moment was carved out possible paths for women to take up in the emerging nation, literally “a *mayer jati*, a race of mothers” themselves who would foster worthy sons (165). The most iconic deployment of mother as nation, it has been pointed out, emerged in the superimposition of the Nehruvian vision of India on the struggling, long-suffering, self-sacrificing, disciplining mother portrayed by Nargis Dutt in Mehmood’s *Mother India*; as a mother from the agricultural labouring class she is made to symbolize the future of India captured in the inauguration of one of the Bhakra Nangal dams (Bagchi 2017). In stark contrast to this future vision lurks Mahashweta Devi’s *Hazar Chaurasir Ma (Mother of 1084)*, both fiction and film, which depicts the story of a mother whose son gets killed in a Naxalite rebellion and gets reduced to the number allotted to him in prison (Bagchi 2017). The nationalist appropriation of motherhood as essential femaleness, it has been pointed out, has both hegemonized and homogenized women’s experience which made it possible to locate the same within an idealized notion of ‘pure’ domestic space (Uberoi 1990). Leela Dube contends further that such massive reliance on ‘natural’ maternity understood through a widespread use of the seed and earth symbolism has further helped to perpetuate inequalities of gender in multiple ways: “While tying her down to the supreme duty of motherhood this symbolism is instrumental in denying her the natural right over her own children and in creating and sustaining the ideology in which strategic resources of both types— material as well as women— remain in the hands of men” (136). Such discourses further contributed to an erasure of other facets of female identity accessed by women while also negating any individuation of experience. This othering of the female body leads to it emerging as a “body-for-others”: it becomes

“an instrument and a symbol for the community’s expression of caste, class and communal honour” as chastity, virtue and above all, purity get “extolled as great feminine virtues embodying the honour of the family, community and the nation” (Thapan 6). Moreover, it has also been pointed out that the idealized mother image as the signifier of the nation was also instrumental in undermining the agency of working class mothers who have historically combined participation in productive labour with maternal responsibilities (Sen 1993). Samita Sen contends that instead of creating support systems for such mothers, the upper class-caste prejudice subjected them to a ‘mothercraft’ through a eugenics oriented discourse of unhygienic breeding and negligent mothering, thereby perpetuating both class antagonism and colonial racism (1993).

Feminists have further argued that the exclusionary nature of the motherhood ideology and its prescribed role of mothering ‘a special breed of men’ has influenced Indian thinking on motherhood in disastrous ways impacting issues as varied as female infanticide and escalation of dowry deaths to rampant devaluation of women as a lesser gender in countless routine ways (Bagchi 2017). Further, societal stratification along gender-class-caste axes has also drawn from the motherhood typology of Indian patriarchies because the regulation of upper class and caste Hindu family as the norm also implied a devaluation of women belonging to lower castes, religious minorities and the labouring poor as breeders of inferior stock of population. Indian feminists have further unpacked how a eugenics-oriented racial prejudice took over the colonial attitude to native males, who now prided on being sons of the ideal mother, gradually morphing as a signifier for the ideal Hindu nation (Bagchi 2017). The seeping of these ideologies as common sense in the middle class imaginary has effected the establishment of an elaborate Indian patriarchal order where producers are invariably upper caste/class men and women are relegated to the status of reproducers (Dube 2001). In the latest work in this rich thread that tries to examine the legacies of the collusion of motherhood imagery and nationalism, Sugata Bose questions assumptions about any necessary contradiction between cosmopolitanism and patriotism and the tendency among

religious majoritarians and secularists alike to confuse uniformity with unity (2017). Offering an invested reading of the ways of imagining the nation as mother, Bose illuminates different visions of India as a federal union that have acquired renewed salience in contemporary times: arguing against the dangers of an intolerant religious majoritarianism, this book makes a case for concepts of layered and shared sovereignty that might enable an overarching sense of Indian nationhood to coexist with multiple identities of the country's diverse populace (2017). The long shadow of this continued reliance on motherhood typology on the everyday lives of women has been unpacked further in recent feminist studies that have examined the evolution of the mother goddess symbolism in the subcontinent from independent symbols of fertility to docile spouse goddesses, that gendered oppression has endured not in spite of mother goddess worship, but partially because of the latter's precise nature: "Such a seeming paradox... reveals itself to be its inverse, a parallel whose propositions are consistent with each other. In other words, women are violated not in spite of being worshipped; they are violated because the idealization of the desexualized maternal validates the desecration of the irreverent sexual female body, in a cultural context which promotes the splitting up of the maternal object into a divine spirit and a profane body." (Aneja and Vaidya 2). The fact that the worshipping of some abstract notion of maternity can coexist with the devaluation of maternity as something that comes to women along with gendered oppression, not to mention the remarkable utility of motherhood motifs in the vicious nationalism of contemporary right wing politics, makes it difficult in the Indian experience too, to theorize alternative versions of maternity beyond its location in the registers of the patriarchal family.

While feminist re-readings have successfully unravelled the collusion of motherhood typology as a patriarchal pact, it needs to be also understood that, stemming from the same predicament, maternal subjectivity has historically had a vexatious relationship with feminist politics. Elaine Tuttle Hansen offers a brief summing up of the trajectories maternal subjectivity has taken in western feminist thought over the years:

Often, though not always, the story of feminists thinking about motherhood since the early 1960s is told as a drama in three acts: repudiation, recuperation, and in the latest and most difficult stage to conceptualize, an emerging critique of recuperation that co-exists with ongoing efforts to deploy recuperative strategies. This story usually begins with key first-act figures like Simone de Beauvoir, Shulamith Firestone, Kate Millett and Betty Friedan, early second-wave feminists who point out a strong link between women's oppression and women's naturalized position as mothers. In retrospect, as others have noticed, the arguments of these early feminists, may seem more subtle and ambivalent than they have often been taken to be. However, the assumption that feminists reject motherhood is so ingrained as early as 1971 that in an anthology of writing from the women's liberation movement published in that year, essays on "family" are prefaced with this disclaimer: "We are not against love, against men and women living together, against having children. What we are against is the role women play once they become wives and mothers."

In the second act, many feminists seek to reclaim and reinterpret motherhood and revalue difference, although their efforts are almost always coupled with indictments of the negative aspects of "the role women play" as mother.... This work begins in the mid-seventies and takes a wide variety of forms, in the hands of feminists as different as Adrienne Rich, Nancy Chodorow, Dorothy Dinnerstein and Sara Ruddick in America; Mary O'Brien and Juliet Mitchell in England; and Luce Irigaray, Helene Cixous and Julia Kristeva in France. In the third and as yet incomplete act, critiques and negotiations as well as applications, extensions, and defenses of this work begin to appear in the mid-eighties and continue into the present. Although some of these critiques tend to reinforce the notion of a historical shift from early feminist attack to subsequent feminist celebration, others point out that the story is...less straightforward. Several of these more

recent critiques attempt to revive and integrate as well as complicate earlier insights into the oppressive aspects of motherhood. There is also a growing sense of impasse. Feminists have demanded and gained new attention for the previously ignored problems of motherhood, but they have not arrived at consensus about how to redefine the concept or adjust the system. Many (but by no means all) women wish to refuse motherhood on the old terms without abandoning either the heavy responsibilities or the intense pleasures of bearing and raising children. The fear that no one will take care of our children if we don't, makes it difficult to go forward, even as it seems impossible to willingly go back.... Feminism started out hoping to demolish both pronatalism and its dark underside, maternal devaluation. However, divided and conquered by the eighties backlash, the movement has been less able to achieve the former goal. "Indeed" [as] Snitow speculates, "it may well be that the earlier reaction to the pressure to mother was so historically specific that it can have no direct descendants". (5-6)

Several attempts have been made in India as well by feminists to break open the contours of motherhood idealized as an institution and address it through the eyepiece of experience. I will briefly discuss some of these major attempts to historically locate this analysis of maternal experience against them. *Motherhood in India: Glorification without Empowerment?* edited by Maitreyi Krishnaraj reads experiences of maternity from institutions as varied as language, religion, law, media and technology and argues that the centrality of motherhood in a woman's life is manufactured (2010). Pursuing different stages and shapes motherhood has assumed in India- from goddess worship to nationalism, to being a vehicle for reproduction for the sexual division of labour and inheritance of property through the male line- and pointing to the dialectics between them which have facilitated control over women's reproductive powers and the ways in which motherhood is understood, the feminist engagement here seeks to deconstruct such essentialism and humanise the experience of mothers extending the woman's

search for autonomy over her body to her role also as a mother. Two collections of personal narratives need to be mentioned here; *A Space of Her Own: Personal Narratives of Twelve Women* edited by Leela Gulati and Jasodhara Bagchi (2005) and *Janani: Mothers, Daughters, Motherhood* edited by Rinki Bhattacharya (2006). Both anthologies attempt to break free of the straitjacket of institutionalized motherhood by thinking through their mothers following Virginia Woolf's exhortation, to clear space for experience oriented narratives of maternity. This search for renegade predecessors- initiated by feminists like Mary Roy, Nabaneeta Devi Sen and Vina Mazumdar among others- who had carved a space for themselves in extremely constraining bushels of domesticity in the former case (2005) is also an attempt to answer back to the staple thread in mythical narratives where mothers come into significance only as mothers of sons. In the latter case (2006), where the contributors include veteran feminists like Shashi Deshpande and Kamala Das to Urmila Pawar and Maithili Rao, the thrust is more towards expanding the semantics of the experience of motherhood itself by reflecting on adoptive motherhood, step-mothering, single motherhood, abortion etc. In the same breath may be mentioned a collection of writings edited by Jaishree Mishra comprising contributions from feminist writers as varied as Urvashi Butalia to Tishani Doshi and ruminates on surrogacy, adoption, childlessness embraced as a choice, bereavement and so on to further create a politically febrile space for maternity (2013). Another major contribution in this direction consists in *Embodying Motherhood: Perspectives from Contemporary India* co-authored by Anu Aneja and Shubhangi Vaidya which focusses on experiences of motherhood in urban India (2016). Addressing patriarchal ideologies of motherhood and covering its entrenchment in ancient myth, psychoanalysis, care-work to autistic children, literature and cinema, it brings to the fore narratives of oppression and resistance to it. Tracing the sociocultural frameworks within which women are marked as 'able' or 'disabled' mothers, the authors seek to "go beyond the half-way house within which women perform their mothering roles under strict patriarchal surveillance, to imagine the possibility of unfettered maternal agency, subjectivity and freedom of choice—

in other words, to follow Susan Sulieman's suggestion and to 'imagine the mother laughing'" (1).

This attempt to carve out alternative experiences of maternity, it has to be said, nevertheless, occupies a tricky terrain. Compared to the rich scholarship from India that has successfully unpacked the collusion of motherhood typology in India's cultural history and politics, impacting the lives of women in multiple everyday ways, there is very little scholarly output here. Understandably so, considering the entrenched ways in which the typology surrounding motherhood has remained a mainstay of patriarchies in the Indian cultural experience. Any attempt at embarking on a quest for alternative ways to understand motherhood further needs to be wary not just of the historical collusion of maternal subjectivity in mainstream common sense and its naturalization through biological determinism as well as hegemonic ownership of its meanings, but also the fact that celebratory stances taken in redemptive attempts at re-articulating maternity through female pleasure can traipse too close to other gendered essentialisms of the female body. From the purview of this study, it also makes me wonder what vocabulary such celebrations of 'female' pleasures of maternity can afford to women who access this metaphor to make sense of their experience despite or because of being branded as 'barren' and endure traumatic social stigma on its behalf. What gradients would we use to understand such 'female' pleasures articulated by women whose thwarted maternity remains as some inerasable shadow in their everyday lives? Does it mean some 'lesser' kind of 'female' pleasure? This predicament persists in spite of the fact that, as has been seen from the above discussion, it is only in reductive readings of our much complicated pasts that one-dimensional images of mothers emerge. Indeed, as Butler would remind us, that these stories remain 'off-beat' and not mainstream is an effect of power which works by refusing to give both currency and intelligibility to their assorted experiences.

Feminist interventions to salvage alternative histories through re-visitations of female characters of epics, exhumation of the works of a train of female authors that can tackle head on the male bias of mainstream literary canon, recuperation of

experiences excised from histories themselves accessed through 'forgotten' testimonials left by women of yore and so on have drastically changed the way we envision our collective pasts. And yet, attempts to theorize an alternative maternity remains a problematic exercise in spite of the fact that singularity cannot be attributed to maternity as an experience. Attempts to bring in politically driven, affirmative expressions to words like *caring* and *nurturing* that are tediously overloaded with affective attributes and tacit assumptions rampant in patriarchy, commodified and exploited to its fullest potential in the market as well, seem like a dilution of feminist politics itself. It seems so much easier to relinquish maternity as a feminist enterprise itself! This difficulty of finding another vocabulary to represent maternity with a feminist slant, (a frustrating exercise for women like this author who sees herself as a feminist, is mother to a teenager and has done her little bit to ensure a home-space from which gendered roles are evacuated) is precisely why there should be other kinds of stories available. Such stories would unpack the ruptures of sentimentalized maternity in patriarchy and the agential capacities charted out by women in the divergent ways in which they have added differentials to motherhood, even if they may not always sound like success stories, they are legitimate stories too, that tell us something about the tedious nature of the expectations of motherhood as an institution (Hansen 1997). In the chaotic possibilities unleashed by such stories in bold relief against mainstream patriarchal 'wisdom', we may have an alternative (*m*)*otherspeak* in many tongues⁶ wherein the Jocastas of yore or the ancient mother goddesses come alive. What the throbbing hum of such a plural language would demystify at the outset itself is the common sense that there is some essential 'reality' about maternity itself that can be known. The choral tongue of such a language should make room for maternity as something other than the archetypal location of alterity in subject formation as understood in psychoanalysis and given ontology exclusively from the perspective of the infant (Garner et al 1985, Hirsch 1987).

The life-story of Thimmakka attempted here is such a *motherspeak* and hopes to reinstate maternity as a legitimate

feminist enterprise. Because what is recuperated here is a narrative of a woman's accessing of maternity right when biological mothering was not available to her, the mother in question here is one who talks about that thwarted connection to the human child that most often becomes the cynosure of maternal experience. Moving from the particular to the general, this reading also hopes to reclaim a number of verbs attributed to maternity itself- like *nurturing* and *caring*-as loaded with fecund politics and a kind of sociality in a world that badly needs those verbs. It is a story of resilience in the face of prolonged trauma wherein a woman whose only bulwark against misery is a gritty persistence borrows the staid metaphors of maternity as commonly understood themselves, to have her name mean something, right within the circumscribed world that had denied her that meaning. Such resilience that confuses our understanding of the private and the public, gives another differential to maternity which will be probed in the rest of this study along with its central trope of private, gendered domesticity.

I would take a detour here to briefly sum up and comment on the motherhood metaphor that pervades representations of her long life in the many media stories that have tried to understand the legacies of this veteran environmentalist. To a researcher schooled in social theory, whose commitment to feminist politics has not remained exclusively academic, the repetitive nature of this typology was disturbing to say the least. My initial thought, when I was planning my journey to meet her and secured an appointment through her adopted son, was to displace and deconstruct this typology. There is a need to record this scepticism as it has definitely impacted the shape of this study; it spills over in my anxiety to reconcile the critical desire of the researcher to the trajectories of reminiscences articulated by the historical subject whose life is recorded. The evocation of maternal subjectivity, interestingly, is voiced right at the dawn of Thimmakka's fame in Karnataka. Tracing this spike in popularity temporally is significant here even though it would be difficult now to establish whether the *vrikshamata* metaphor was first voiced by Thimmakka or something she picked up from the way in which the earliest of these stories represented her.

To return to what has by now become a major turn in narrativizations of Thimmakka's 'discovery', it was an officer from the Public Works Department who first officially took notice of Thimmakka's efforts in 1994 (Beluru 2015). Apparently, a lecturer who had accompanied him on one of his surveys explained to him that the several hundreds of trees that flank the road from Hulikal to Kudur were planted and taken care of by an old couple. The official wanted to popularize this "selfless act of the couple" and asked the lecturer to write a piece on the same so that it would inspire others to emulate such endeavours (Beluru 66). The first media story of Thimmakka (her husband, Chikkaiah had passed away three years prior to this incident) thus came out in a local newspaper called *Prajavani*, by the lecturer who had been instrumental in bringing the attention of authorities. This story titled "Saalumara Sangathi", perhaps conferred on her the popular moniker meaning "row of trees" in Kannada which has by now become a prime honorific marker of her identity and popularity (Beluru 66). I was not able to locate this story, we only have the record in Thimmakka's biography that the article became a huge hit, fan mail started pouring in thousands of numbers and that NGOs and other organisations started convening meetings to honour her (Beluru 2015). Nevertheless, the author of this first article himself wrote another story on her in the following year, this time in English, for the Deccan Herald (1995). This story which came with the title, "Thimmakka and her 284 Children" was instrumental in establishing the connection between Thimmakka's childlessness and the trees she and her husband had reared up over the course of several years. We can only hypothesize whether this connection was first articulated by Thimmakka or something that the author imaginatively put together. Irrespective of that, we have a clear evocation of maternal subjectivity at the fount of her popularity; this story in English moreover had a wider reach and became directly responsible for the selection of Thimmakka's name for the National Citizen's Award which was conferred on her in the same year (2015). It is further mentioned here that the entire process of selection was also greatly accelerated by the fact that H. D. Dewagowda, who hails from Karnataka was the Prime Minister of the country then (Beluru 2015). Hereafter, we see

this mother narrative repeated in story after story in the media with their numbers escalating in the last couple of years.

The maternal subjectivity repeatedly invoked for her in the media and the words “Mother of Trees” or “Vrikshamata” embossed on the mementos and other recognitions at her home land one in a curious dilemma. It is beyond the scope of this work to elaborate on the narrative thread in these stories, considering how many times it has been repeated; sufficient it is to state here that the invocation to maternity and her childlessness as the vital cause to her emergence as an environmentalist runs through these stories like a strangely disturbing refrain. Some of them expand this attribution of maternity to poetically invoke Thimmakka as Mother Nature herself (Nandakumar 2017, Green Peace International 2017), others stick to the misery-to-accomplishment story of an illiterate woman from South India (Ganesh 2003, Archana 2015, Ahmad 2016, Eastough 2016, Ajman 2016, The Better India 2016, Hebbar 2016, Tanvi 2017, Schenker 2016; Batshon 2017, Madur 2017). I have cited only a few of these stories here; the internet however, is awash with this celebratory narrative of an illiterate woman who had ‘mothered’ hundreds of trees resulting in massive collective adulation towards the subject of these narratives. One trawls these stories for something other than the by now staid story line, but there is little else that incites the imagination. It is the same misery to accomplishment tale that confers on her some archetypal maternity, too often articulated in such simplistic terms that one wonders whether maternal experience is all that obvious necessitating no explanatory footnote and unidimensional. Nor is there any probing regarding what the subject of these narratives implies in her own evocation of a maternal subjectivity. This is disturbing because, it has been successfully established in social theory that identities are the result of ritualized iteration (Butler 1990, Derrida 1982). Disturbing also because since Thimmakka herself assumes possession of a maternal subjectivity, it becomes somewhat ethically confusing to discard the affective layers surrounding it altogether. Further, since there is a definite clustering in the number of these stories in the last couple of years, certainly helped by the recognition conferred on her by the

BBC, it becomes all the more significant to critically reflect over the bizarre relationships between popular stories and the political urgencies of the moment. As spaces of dissent of all kinds are being successfully liquidated, as celebratory mythologizing of the nation's history becomes the norm, as horrifying violence and lynching of Muslims and Dalits in the name of *Gomatas* becomes a routine affair, no longer as the work of some fringe elements, as the *Bharatmata* of the anticolonial discourse is back in business as the deafening clarion call of right wing majoritarianism, this sudden spike in affective recognition for a maternal narrative deserves some critical scrutiny.

What is of interest here is not in the least whether the international recognition that came to her materialized because the right wingers occupy the highest offices of the country. Instead, it is about the indeterminate ways in which the rise of certain ideologies cleave space for and buoy up certain gendered narratives and strengthen their auras enabling an accumulation of sentiment around them while simultaneously, stories of other kinds that involve any kind of dissent or deviance get silenced on a daily basis. This connection between history as it is unspooling in the present and stories in the name of 'good' causes (and the obvious common sense of its intrinsic importance) that proliferate in a certain historical climate that seem to have no apparent connection to contemporary politics precipitates a quandary. The intriguing question here concerns how to address the affective build up here and the obviousness of 'good' work against an examination of what spaces get to be allotted for gendered acts within a violently restrictive status quo. The uncanny ways in which emotional response to certain narratives fold into the larger politics of the place alert us to the ethics and politics that necessarily undergird affective resonance as well. The mass-mediated maternal subjectivity which has become eminently acceptable now, in this historical climate in India where all kinds of idealized motherhood narratives are on a comeback⁷ hence needs to be addressed as a continuum of the violent majoritarian politics rampant here.

The recent boom in affect theory has broken open the clichéd compartmentalization of sentiment as oppositional to rational

thinking as well as made redundant the common perception that the location of affective content in stories of human interest or their function in enabling some larger humanitarian cause should place such stories beyond the reach of critical scrutiny (Berlant 2011, Gregg and Seigworth 2010, Massumi 2002, Sedgwick and Frank 1995, Stewart 2007, Thrift 2008). Recent engagements of affect theory with environmental, queer and post-humanist thinking have been particularly beneficial in examining the dynamics of feeling around identities, practices and cultures. The patterns of feeling which animate relations and understood as sentient responses ranging from phototropism in plants to emotional reciprocation in animals and humans place it in a realm demanding something more than usual discursive modalities of reading. It has been aptly described as springing from the ‘in-between-ness’ of capacities to act and be acted upon in a world of encounters, both transitory and lasting, between bodies and worlds (Gregg and Seigworth 2010). But while affects are assumed to mark sentient responses of feeling, it has been strongly argued that there are definite interpretive historical frames that intercede and pattern such human relations; Ruth Leys’ objection to Brian Massumi who has designated affects as pre-interpretive stimulus responses is a useful point of departure here (Massumi 1995, Leys 2011). Relegation of affect to the inaccessible realm of the unconscious can be attempted, warns Leys, only through a harmful overriding of the historical interpretive frames that influence our responses to others. Similarly, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s usage ‘affect scripts’, drawn from Silvan Tomkins, as “sets of ordering rules for the interpretation, evaluation, prediction, production, or control of scenes” points to the theatricality and relationality involved in response mechanisms (Sedgwick and Frank 181). Judith Butler clinches the issue with brilliant insight:

Because such affective responses are invariably mediated, they call upon and enact certain interpretive frames; they can also call into question the taken-for-granted character of those frames, and in that way provide the affective conditions for social critique. As I have argued elsewhere, moral theory has to become social critique if it is to know its object and act upon it. (*Frames of War* 34-35)

Butler alerts us to the fact that no understanding of affect is feasible without a consideration of the frames of intelligibility that animate affect and how the same function as operations of power. Not only does this make affective responsiveness an extension of politics, but also directs us to the ethics involved in what and who get to be accepted as a recipient of our sentiment.

Butler's evocation of the opacities and gaps that affective response is riddled with is a crucial principle to bear in mind as one tussles with the indeterminate ways in which massive adulation surrounds a human subject. Nowhere, it seems to me, is this more clearly spelt out than in Sara Ahmed's objection to Martha Nussbaum's critique of Butler for her 'fatalistic' Foucauldian discourse which according to her, renders resistance to power futile and hence would not help a feminist cause (Nussbaum 1999, Ahmed 2004). Butler's theses of subject formation and the performativity of gender as well as its subversion through parodic acts, as Nussbaum sees it, simply valorises subversion without evolving a normative theory of social justice. This 'void' that Nussbaum locates at the heart of Butlerian politics in her line of thinking, cannot ultimately address or help in engaging the 'real' sufferings of 'ordinary' women (1999). Addressing this position, Sara Ahmed argues that such assumptions regarding the 'real' sufferings of 'ordinary' women only validate what is vitally problematic about redemptive feminist discourses that base their premises on unwitting fetishization of shared pain of others leading up to identification with the same (2004). The invocation of a category of shared pain, no matter in the interest of pushing forward political resistance, erases the complex histories of being hurt itself experienced by women located in varied experiential terrains of cultures. Nussbaum, Ahmed argues, presumes "that feminism could simply represent the suffering of ordinary women, which could then be the foundation of political action, without the work of translation" (173). It is hence that, affective build up around childlessness and the mass mediated maternal subjectivity repetitively evoked for Thimmakka need to be read from the purview of the limits of identification itself. Collective applause for an illiterate woman who has subverted the stigma of childlessness through an evocation of a chosen version of

maternal subjectivity and the repetitive invocation of her as *vrikshamata* are by themselves part of a continuum of the long discourse of motherhood in India which I have briefly mapped above. Neither can this evocation have any meaning outside of these registers of what it has been historically agreed upon in the Indian cultural experience to be a mother, nor can it presume some obviousness regarding maternity itself caught as it is always already in the interpretive frames that incite us to respond in particular ways. Butler puts it succinctly thus: "Affect depends upon social supports for feeling; we come to feel only in relation to a perceivable loss, one that depends on social structures of perception; and we can only feel and claim affect as our own on the condition that we have already been inscribed in a circuit of social affect" (*Frames of War* 50).

This study hopes to be intensely aware of the opacities and vulnerabilities that perforate affective response and the ethical responsibility involved in recording a life. I have a certain trepidation when I wonder over how my own work needs to be mapped against the larger discourse of maternity in India. Connecting dots in mind, this examination seeks to retain a certain split thinking between text and telling that shall unspool a process of maternal thinking and being, rather than some finished product of the same. It is hence that I would return here to the way in which Thimmakka talks about her past, the meanings she has conferred on it, the semantic locations she has allotted to people there, all of which emerge as key instruments in narrating her present. Her reminiscences of her mother as vicious and unkind precipitate in such emplotting as a major affective catalyst. The finality given to this portrayal is somewhat disturbing as there is no one alive who can either corroborate or disprove her account. The 'bad mother', retrospectively denied another voice, remains a bad mother. Reading Thimmakka's oral recapitulation against previous life-stories written on her affords us interesting insights into the problems vitally involved in telling lives itself. There is no linearity to her memories in narration as the conversation was mostly free-wheeling with random questions from my side; somewhere later in the narrative, while trying to reason out why it was not important then to keep track of children's birthdays,

she went on to say that her younger sister had twelve children. According to her biography, which incidentally also provides a family tree of Thimmakka's immediate kin, the number of children mentioned in this connection is eight. A minor lapse perhaps, or maybe the exact number does not matter at all in the face of what it meant to her in bold relief against her own understanding of her childlessness as "*garbbadosha*". Maybe, numerals are feeble indicators to something remembered now only as excruciating once upon a time, may be, the intensity of its remembered pain can only be qualified and not quantified.

This quandary of events and people mutating caught as they are in the eddies of memories was further brought to light with greater force at another crucial point in her narration. All former accounts of her life I have been able to study have as their lynchpin the stigma meted out to her by her husband's family, in particular her mother-in-law, as well as people in the vicinity in general for not begetting children. The memories thus recorded include social isolation, blatant insults flung at her which include accusations of being a 'barren woman', castigations that she is inauspicious and worthless, her own half-hearted consent to her husband getting a second wife and so on, which lead to her attempt to kill herself by drowning in a nearby pond. Thimmakka's biography (which was read out to her and had her sanctioned approval) has a two-page long record of that fateful day when she tried to take her life, the description of which contains details of the precise way in which she attempted the same (Beluru 42-44). The younger Thimmakka featured in these pages is one who feels painfully alienated by the sheer pressure of expectations on her body to bring forth progeny, which while it castigates that body as infertile, also adds to social dramas of exclusion. It is in such dire straits that while plans are being hatched by her mother-in-law to procure another wife for Thimmakka's husband, she decides to kill herself in crushing moments of alienation where she feels stripped off any desire to live. While her tired body is sucked into the depths of the water, something, however, stirs in her mind as her lungs are filling up with water. She somehow manages to get hold of some watery undergrowth and swim back to the surface. This vital episode of her life and the social actors who played key roles in pushing her

to the very brink, repeatedly mentioned in her life-stories were completely elided and negated by her in her oral reminiscence. Familiar as I was to some of these narratives in the media, our attempt to probe this experience elicited a response that had somehow gone through a major revamping process. Our question whether other people had abused her, said things to her because she could not have children was cut short in a total owning up of misery: “No, nobody said anything, there was nothing like that; I myself felt bad, that is all... We tried praying very much, we visited the doctor once, but...” (Thimmakka, Personal Interview 2017). Umesh, her adopted son who was present all through the interview and who wanted to keep the number of questions to the bare minimum owing to Thimmakka’s extreme age, but also curiously, gave me Thimmakka’s biography for perusal, which contains graphic details of this excised memory, instead of tiring her out with questions, fully backed this response when she stopped midway. This strange turn of events— including the elided mention of her suicide, the many litigations with surviving members of her extended family who tried to take away the land that she had inherited after the death of her husband and previously that of his brother who did not have any children as well— was perplexing. There were unpronounceable questions thronging within; the finality of that denial and the consequent subsuming of past trauma as her own to which no one else had any contribution was saddening and disturbing. Could it be because she has gone beyond even remembered accounts of what she went through? Did all of it no longer matter from the purview of her present? One can only conjecture what precipice of the present prompted this re-telling of her past. Past here anyhow, is no stable reality that can be accessed through rituals of recapitulation. It is something amorphous that hops along with the present, constantly in motion and in dialogue with the living, narrativizing self who gives it shape and another lease of life through words.

To think analytically or philosophically here seems presumptuous in the face of the visceral finality of such denial. And yet, it is imperative to ask whether her grief at not being able to become a mother can have any life outside of motherhood as

an institution in culture. The issue that needs some addressing here is how what we understand as intimate private emotions are already referenced and conferred meaning and currency through gendered socialization in patriarchies which makes it relatable realities. I have two caveats to raise here, and both stem from the ethical predicament involved in employing the sophistication of theory, no matter it may be used to lead towards a deeper understanding of the issue at stake here, to make sense of the strange way in which an illiterate, but remarkably accomplished all the same, woman resolved her past against her present. The first of these has to necessarily sound like a disclaimer; this reflection about a transmuting past in no way implies that the narrating self is fudging 'facts' from her past. Secondly, the use of theory, even as it moves from the particular subject to larger ruminations on lives in narration in general and subject formation, it is hoped here, would instead bring out the rightful humanity that the particular subject in recording its past owns up in its conjunction with the general.

A wonderful opening to this dilemma is afforded in the etymology of that verb, *record* itself. As Cynthia L. Hallen observes:

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the verb *record* means 'to get by heart, to commit to memory, to go over in one's mind'. Etymologically speaking, to *re-cord*, is to learn things by heart, so that we can ponder them again and again. Records of personal and family history enable our children to re-member and re-turn to us. Scriptural records enable the hearts of the lord's children to turn to the hearts of the prophets, and they enable the righteous forbearers to speak directly to the hearts of their descendants. (106)

To record then for the subject is a kind of mnemonic communication to the past, a conversation that involves the heart. Should that which involves the heart be necessarily emotive? Popular idioms of our languages would have one think thus. Even if one were to rubbish this as handy romanticism, what is of interest here is how the particular subject learns to record and own up its own story and claim the emotions that it

understands as its own. Lauren Berlant's thesis of the intimate public sphere is a helpful compass here. This concept, elaborated through two of her major works, clarifies how heteronormative notions on attraction and desire involving intimate family matters can be imbricated as an extension of national fantasy or its idea of authentic citizenship (1997, 2008). In the latter work, she expands this to provide an incisive analysis of how such fantasies also erect in place what it understands as women's intimate culture which instead of being composed of private interactions and exchanges among a female sisterhood, creates 'useful' 'knowledges' about the same as an extension of feminine citizenship. The intimate public thus branches off from normative politics "without entirely becoming antagonistic toward, the political scene of inequality" that inscribed women as a subaltern population (*The Female Complaint* xii). Berlant's location of the same in the ideological apparatuses of capitalism can be replaced in this study by the technologies of gender calibration in casteist patriarchies even as their *modus operandi* may not be identical. The intention here is not to superimpose one over the other, rather to deduce the psychic function of power structures of various kinds, which even as their workings may not be identical, still works through various othering strategies for its own self-preservation and hence the continued maintenance of status-quo. Stories that circulate among a people need to be seen hence as effecting a certain circularity; while it may seem that tellers have command over the stories they tell, the stories nevertheless, are also deeply embedded in our cultural experience which also make them generative of identity paradigms.

One returns to Ramanujan here again; his thesis regarding the ambivalent echoes of women's oral tales from Kannada and Tamil speaking areas probes the anxieties as well as possible reconciliation of conflicts shared among a largely female population (even though the listeners may not be exclusively female at all times), affords interesting insights (1989). He points to a major divergence in the narrative structuring of women's oral tales in comparison to other more common folktales that feature a male protagonist. Where the protagonist is a male, his quest too many times involves a search for meaning through longing for

a lost father or filial-prototypes and culminates in adventurous escapades in the world, finally accorded trophies through the winning of a bride and/or wealth and a name. Contrary to this, women's oral tales with a female protagonist almost never feature trips into the past in search of a mother; they usually manifest a certain interiority in terms of milieu and her troubles far from ending with securing a handsome/accomplished groom, rather starts with marriage located either somewhere in the beginning, or the middle of the story. What this mythical realism seems to augur is that, not only is her quest of a different order, but she must also tide over severe tribulations that marriage itself brings wherein she has to, not just win the husband, but earn him as well (Ramanujan 1989).

To move ahead from the cautionary wisdom of oral tales to probe the bizarre relationships that a subject wields in the ways in which it narrates what it understands as its own tale is to also locate the profound meaning making drives at the heart of all storytelling. The diachronic relationships that the narrating self hatches out with the 'I' in the past need to be understood as a two-way street; they are ways in which the telling self reflects on and reconcile febrile longings of the present against the cacophonic noise roiling from the swamp of memory. I would go back to Annika Thiem here, to examine the triangulation between the narrating self, what it sees as its past and narration itself. Reading Judith Butler alongside Paul Ricoeur's major work, *Time and Narrative*, she tries to make sense of the kind of performativity and imaginative remembering involved in narrating lives:

The "self" is thus not a substance or primary immediacy, but a process of formation and stylization.... Time as lived time or human time is always fabricated. The aspect of lived time is constitutive for the emerging subject as someone who has a concept of oneself as oneself. This formation of a self-concept can be understood as emplotment.... The dialectic here is that neither is the meaningful event pre-existent to the plot nor is the plot as organizing idea pre-existent to the meaningful events, but both are formed through the other. The self-concept as the

story of one's life that one narrates is orchestrated by the function of emplotment. Emplotment thus is a conferral of intelligibility, rendering the contingent into a necessity and integrating it into a larger whole. The function of emplotment has been theorized and examined in the three volumes of Paul Ricoeur's inquiry into the relation between time and narrative. He contends that emplotment mediates "[the] relationship between a lived experience where discordance rends concordance and an eminently verbal experience where concordance mends discordance" (TN 1:31). Emplotment is the negotiation of the limits of concordance and thus the reflection on the dialectic of concordance and discordance. The fabrication of a concordance that is incessantly discordant is understood in terms of producing a remainder that continuously disturbs the concordance. This remainder escapes the totalization of absorption into reflection and hence the creation of discordant concordance—that is the creation of one's story—is never simply at one's disposal. This crafting of a self-concept is, for Ricoeur, the poetic activity of mimesis. Mimesis does not mean that a copy of some original real-life event is fabricated in terms of a "representation" or "redoubling of presence" (TN 1:45). Mimesis rather is a sort of "creative imitation" that constitutes the rupture that opens space for figuration and refiguration. In the movement of narrative fabrication, plot is inscribed into the story and here the mediation between the singular occurrences and the story as a whole, as well as between the "heterogeneous factors" (TN 1: 65) of agents, goals, motives, interactions, results, etc., takes place by rendering the individual incident more than an individual action through ascription of significance for the whole of the story. We can thus say that the connection between the events that infer coherence is the narration that comes too late as it always comes after the incident; it is only in the recounting that this coherence or concordance is possible at all. The intelligibility of the events and their relation to the whole depends on the conferral of a "sense of an ending" that is

plausible and thus acceptable. This exposes the operation of emplotment as subject to norms and rules of intelligibility that determine what counts as plausible and acceptable and what does not. Thus when Ricoeur asserts that “[t]he productive imagination is not only rule-governed, but it constitutes the generative matrix of rules” (TN 1:68), in a Butlerian vein this expresses the dialectic of subjection that is the condition for the emergence of the subject in which the subjectivating norms and rules expose themselves as never merely curbing, subjecting, and prohibiting, but also as productive and generative regarding both the formation of the subject and the transformation and resignification of the norms and rules. The freedom of signification is restrained by that which has to remain unsignifiable, because those narratives that cannot be crafted continue to be present in the form of the fragmentary trace or remainder that disrupts—the return of the repressed that tears the neatly woven narrative network and constantly necessitates renegotiation. This renegotiation and refiguration always means a reconfiguration of the praxis; as the notion of “narrative performativity” implies, the meaning of the narrative constitutes praxis and bears full weight only in its actualization in praxis. The direction towards future action elucidates that emplotment as narrative self-constitution cannot be captured as a function of a remembering that is merely retrospective. Emplotment entails the imaginative power of anticipating; one emerges as subject as one that has a concept of oneself with regard to future action and not only as one that makes sense of and thus identifies with “the one who I was in the past.” This identification is a phantasmatic staging of coherence, because the position of “the one who I was” as such is an imaginary location. (4-6)

It is thus narration, both the narrative tendencies of memory and actual acts of narration that gives coherence to the ‘I’ of the past. And this act of the self put together in narration confers coherence and uniqueness on the assorted nature of experiences, Caverero would remind us, through a space of relationality (2000). The story the subject tells about itself is then at once a

relationship worked out between what the story interprets and emplots as one's self now against 'I' in the past as well as one hatched out with all other stories told around the subject that emplot it in its dual relations both to the past and the future (Thiem 6). The subject's longing for coherence and meaning has complex connections to stories that mark the subject and confer on it some sense of a shared continuity and a common lived history. We here come back to the conundrum that longing and belonging have a lot going on between them. Also that the particular subject's story always already embedded in larger stories around the subject uses the latter as an arena for both recognition and reflection which equip the ceaseless dynamics of re-membering and forgetting that undergird the act of narration (Berlant 2008, Caverero 2000, Thiem 2002). As Thiem puts it: the subject, "emerges in being subjected to its story that enables the enunciation of the "I" in which the subject exceeds the occasion of its formation precisely through its limitation." (7). Further, it is precisely through such narrative rubbing of the particular against the general, as well as against its own intra-subjective realigning that the subject right in its limitation finds agential potentialities. The imaginative re-creation which the narrating self thrives on, even as it is susceptible to editorial instincts of forgetting, leaves space for future re-workings. The tellings, as long as they are told, then retrospectively give meanings to versions of the teller:

Imaginative remembering then is captured as a differential that constitutes human potentiality, rather than as a property inherent to a subject. The form of this human potentiality is that of always already being entangled in stories, but these stories are permanently only partially unfolded, and how they unfold in a given situation is never pre-determinable. One inevitably is entangled in a plurality of stories in both directions of past and future, and neither past nor future is ever brought to the point of full closure. (Thiem 7)

Even what we understand as the most private of human emotions, like grief for example, hence has a social counterpart.

Thimmakka's retrospective evocation of her grief at not being able to become a mother as hers alone, is always already anchored in and against the entire narrative edifice of culture that confers intelligibility on that grief. Motherhood, it has to be argued, is perhaps one of the most performative functions of gender in a cultural experience where mother archetypes are worshipped and actual mothering invalidated as something that comes 'naturally' to women and hence not really a big deal. Thimmakka's strong evocation of her mother as a 'bad' mother draws the obviousness of common sense from repeatedly articulated notions regarding 'good' mothers and those who are just 'good enough'. The performativity involved in such recapitulation apparently is a temporal one of the daughter against her dead mother, the same, however, is already plugged on to spatial apparatuses that perform the witnessing act and recognize qualifications in terms of what can matter in the larger scheme of things. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues, the relationship evoked here involves not just the *I/you* encounter, but that of a triad that interpellates *I* and *you* against *they* and hence involves a triad (2003). It is against the referentiality of what she calls, peri-performatives that cluster around performatives and evoke a spatialization against the temporal repetition of performativity that the subject approximates towards its dispositions towards itself and others (Sedgwick 2003). The subject's avowal of certain dispositions or its opposite through disavowal and hence dis-interpellation can make sense only against the witnessing act that makes it legible in culture (Sedgwick 2003). The telling self hence is the result of such complex intra-subjective, inter-subjective and inter-narrative encounters and entanglements and it comes into being through the ruffled waves of telling. No emotion can be exclusively private, harboured as they are already in the social, but the narrativizing self can always realign itself against the past in yet another re-telling, in yet another attempt towards closure. Far from any of these making such emotions unreal or inauthentic, what we rather see here, are the phantasmatic ways in which, the teller, puts together its story and through the story emerges as a rightful subject owning up what it understands as its 'reality'.

Names and Namesakes: The Singer Who Had a Stammer

They say that names do not matter. It is common sense, one would be reminded, that names and the people who carry them are two things; ‘even Shakespeare says so’ would be the punch line in this line of argument. But what if it’s a nickname that we are talking about, a nickname that alludes to a certain bodily disability? Nicknames have a tendency to endure; one could say that they are sticky. Like something branded on skin with hot iron, it can get scorched into people’s selves. Naming can in praxis be branding as well (Laclau 2005). Thimmakka’s late husband, “Bikkalu Chikkaiah” would agree perhaps, if he could have given us his views on this matter. *Bikkalu* in Kannada means one who stammers. Chikkaiah, if he had wished to shake off this nickname, had no respite from it. It actually ousted his actual name which seems to have become his surname to the extent that Thimmakka’s biography which features a photo of the couple has this dutifully repeated in a caption attached to the couple’s photograph. Thimmakka confers a bureaucratic origin to the name in this narrative; as per this account the name was given to him by some officials who had come to inspect a breach in a local bund and because he had stammered while he tried to answer a question put to him. They guffawed at his disability and renamed him ‘Bikkalu Chikkaiah’ then and there. And this name had stuck ever since to a man who was a trained and accomplished *nadaswaram* player, and an extempore oral poet even though technically illiterate, who could conjure up two line ditties as if by magic and sing them. But of course, all of that got swamped over in his eponymous, bureaucratically sanctioned stammer. May be, every time words clogged in his throat, the name that he earned got another breath of life. Not all stories it seems would endure, some get excoriated, some re-written. But the singer who stammered had other things to occupy his mind, as Thimmakka recalls in her narrative. The way in which Thimmakka maps the fame she achieved late in her life against this man’s rather quirky ways affords one interesting, though vague insights into his interests. The short-statured, frail man

remembered in the biography is someone who watched the flow of water in the rainy season and harvested little water bodies where it naturally pooled together, on land that belonged to no one in particular. She remembers him taking water and fodder to stray cattle confined to a pen to prevent them from wandering into agricultural fields in Hulikal and whom no one would feed. These memories neatly fall into the hagiographic stance that her biographer takes wherein Chikkaiah as the orchestrator of Thimmakka's later legacy emerges as an almost saintly figure who "dreamt of an Eden on earth" (24). While there is no denying the historical legacies of the couple's act, such attribution of sacrificial altruism perhaps hides more than it reveals the human subjects in question whose portraiture can venture closer to life without the final judgemental touch that seeks to provide a complete picture. As Hermione Lee argues, in opting for an incomplete picture that leaves room for the "alternatives, missed chances, roads not taken, accidents and hesitations, the whole 'swarm of possibilities' that hums around our every experience", stories become less certain but more susceptible to interpretation and alternative shapes (2-3). Lives, it is beneficial to remember, are as much written from absences as from presences. The fixing of characters as selfless saints, robs something of their human predilections because only at the expense of the umpteen possibilities that buzz around human experience can definitive meanings be accorded to lives in narration. As Julian Barnes' puts it through an almost fabular imagination in *Flaubert's Parrot*:

You can define a net in one of two ways, depending on your point of view. Normally, you would say that it is a meshed instrument designed to catch fish. But you could, with no great injury to logic, reverse the image and define a net as a jocular lexicographer once did: he called it a collection of holes tied together with string.

You can do the same with a biography. The trawling net fills, then the biographer hauls it in, sorts, throws back, stores, fillets and sells. Yet consider what he doesn't catch: there is always far more of that. The biography stands fat and worthy-burgherish, on the shelf, boastful and sedate:

a shilling life will give you all the facts, a ten pound one all the hypotheses as well. But think of everything that got away, that fled with the last deathbed exhalation of the biographee. (16-17)

I must have riffled through the photos reproduced in Thimmakka's biography quite a few times, as if the mere act of staring at them could issue forth another story. Who is this man then, whose picture Thimmakka had mounted on the walls of her home in Hulikal, but remained stacked among her mementos on the floor at her rented place in Bagalkunte? One returns here to a potential jigsaw rather the final image, the shards shored up in his wife's memory. Retaining the assorted nature of those vignettes is perhaps all that is feasible against the ravages and desires of time and memory. Against the impromptu poet/singer who fed stray cattle and harvested rainwater on nobody's land, we also see the husband who attended at least two prospective bride seeing rituals at the behest of his mother to ensure progeny, one of who was out rightly denied because "she looked like black sesame" (45). Or the man who sold a cow for a thousand rupees and stashed it so that his funeral rituals may be smoothly performed. Or the one who ignored the summons from the village chief thrice because he was hurt that the ones who had filed the complaint were his own mother and brother. Or the partner who thrashed his wife with an areca sapling for attempting to kill herself and then consoled her and fed her with his hands. One might also think of him as the absolved party of a relationship in a world where infertility is inevitably located as a sense of lack in the woman's body. Or one, following the same line of thought, nobody would refer to as the one who 'fathered' the trees. There is also the silent sufferer who along with his wife witnesses the many botched attempts at adopting a child, two of these possibilities foreclosed because the respective children died before the deed could materialize. Even a random enumeration of different facets, from different episodes of the subject points to the fact that there is always the problem of what the teller latches onto in recording a life.

It has been pointed out that the way in which a life is narrated can sometimes be overdetermined by the nature of a subject's

death (Lee 2005). Human subjects can mutate into legendary beings because of the specific circumstances of their death which tend to loom large in our minds, at times to the extent of erasing the vulnerabilities and foibles of the human subject which can obstruct attempts at deification. Chikkaiah's death is marked by such bleak pathos which fester in the mind like some unhealable wound. The events that led to his death revolve around the passing away of a relative named Narsamma, for whose cremation her descendants were not able to procure firewood and Chikkaiah let them chop off a dried out branch from one of the trees he and his wife had planted. Chikkaiah was arrested for infringement on and destruction of public property and was incarcerated at a local prison. Even though he was released after a week, Thimmakka remembers that he was "shocked and hurt very much by the humiliation he had received in return for his selfless social service" (Beluru 29). In her own narration to us, she repeated some of these details and went on to mention how he fell ill immediately after he was released and never recovered in one evocative statement, "he lived for three days and the fourth day he died" (Thimmakka, Personal Interview 2017). The tragic poignancy here is exacerbated by the fact that the only official public recognition Chikkaiah had received for their combined venture was a silver medal presented to the couple at a cattle fair in 1958. Chikkaiah thus passed away before the world came and knocked on Thimmakka's door.

It's not surprising that Thimmakka's biographer in rounding off Chikkaiah's narrative, posthumously confers a certain 'nobility of the soul' on a man who died before recognition for his efforts reached him, thereby erecting a saintly glow to his final image (29). As Hermione Lee argues, such posthumous desire for a something else for the subject can cast its lived experiences into a shadow leading up to its mystification wherein ethically compromising episodes tend to be played down. While it is not my intention to strip him off the eminently deserved adoration the biographer confers on him, there is this wriggling thought within that, perhaps, looking at him in plain light beyond the tinted spotlight of hagiography can instead tell us something about the fragilities that mark human experience of the self itself. I am aware of the

abstraction involved in the evocation of a larger shared humanity here; I use this abstraction intentionally to probe “the swarm of possibilities” that throng our fragmentary selves as we buckle up the grit to perform what can only be retrospectively seen as great efforts (James 117). As Henry James evocatively contends, after an individual’s long work is over, the hand of death in passing over the person’s image tends to smoothen the folds making the figure retained in memory a ghostly being, from whom “accidents have dropped away” and “shades have ceased to count”; it “stands sharply, for a few estimated and cherished things, rather than, nebulously, for a swarm of possibilities” (117). We thus go back to the niggling questions. How do we get to be the persons we think we are at a particular phase in our lives? Can we attribute causality to idealistic attributes of ‘personality’ like nobility of the soul when the body that endures itself is an amorphous cocktail of environment, genetics, culture and socialization? Doesn’t metaphysical idealism have a psychic life too which can be vitally understood against the mundane and visceral hurts life throws at us on a daily basis? These questions may not provide neat and pat answers, but it is important to ask them. I take another look at the photo of the couple in Thimmakka’s biography and the caption which has retained his nickname as his first name. If human subjects flattened into single-dimensionality, whether of verbal narrative or of visual portraiture could look back on it posthumously what would they say about the blanched out relics of their selves? Thimmakka’s words offer us some insight here: “We waited.... but we could not have children. That’s when my husband said there’s no hope of our getting respect and care like this, so let’s plant trees, and acquire merit that way”. (Thimmakka, Personal Interview 2017). Chikkaiah’s yearning for “respect and care”, precisely a name, need not steal away anything from the profundity of his achievements. What one does in terms of goodwill to others need not be mutually exclusive from one’s demand for a dignified sense of identity. It needs to be asked how we situate performativity of selves within acts that seem to veer in an awe-inspiring arc towards self-effacement. If the self that performs acts of ethical largesse in the name of some social cause it strongly feels for partakes of some sense of joy and

pride from doing what ultimately becomes symptomatic of its life itself, it can be held culpable for that only from the twisted judgemental vision of mainstream morality⁸ itself. The vectors of power that too often bulldoze people into namelessness, or worse, claustrophobically confine their identity to a certain bodily disability and at the same time espouse a part-blown up-into-a-whole approach in the accounts of the lives of individuals who have benefitted the society in one way or the other overlook the fact that our private and public lives are not experienced by the individual in pigeon-holed chambers of memory. Not only are they experientially part of a continuum, but they also feed on each other in such a way that their vocabularies and metaphors may be interchangeable. Vignettes left in someone's memory of another person are at best shards which one can squint at against sunlight in the hope of refracting a few rainbow hued stories about the stockpile that the breathing body carried within. The man who decided to do something about the long stretch of road which the villagers had to cross for all practical purposes of living and the man who wished to earn a name for himself thus need not cancel out each other. Contrary to common sense, we may see that, there is quite a lot in a name, especially when names get swallowed up in namesakes.

Once Upon *Their* Time⁹

If we start inserting a gendered pronoun replacing the universalizing pretensions of indefinite references to time and place and hence stories, what shape would the stories that we tell our children take? How would, in that case, these stories inform the lived experiences of children thus *mothered*? May be, that is how we make possible a haunting of the spectral voices, if not the 'real' voices, of mothers of yore absented from old stories. May be, that is also how motherhood itself gets to speak in that choral tongue hoped for in the beginning of this study. But of course such stories would not fit into the narrative structures of fairy tales; they would instead be fairer tales instead, without writing off assumptions underlying the equivalence established between being fair and being just!

In her recent book, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing asks a series of questions that prompts us to ponder over the imminent need to reformulate knowledge production against the urgency of the Anthropocene exacerbated now all the greater, by the rise of conservative nationalism across the world (2015). Investigating the life of one of the most sought after varieties of weed that grows in human ravaged forests, Tsing probes the possibility of collaborative survival in the aftermath of capitalist destruction. Perhaps it's time to think beyond the 'rights' oriented approach of various schools of Humanities compelled as we are, as Dipesh Chakrabarty argues, to think of history as it is used in the Humanities itself against the larger ecological one (2009). Indeed, as Elizabeth Grosz asks, there is a need to investigate what would a Humanities— a knowledge of and for the human— look like if we placed the non-human in its rightful place, not only before the human, but also within and after the human; one that looks at itself not in opposition to its 'others' but in continuity with them (2011). Given the calamitous present that colonialism and globalization have landed us in, nevertheless, as Slavoj Žižek argues, it seems unlikely that even intersectional affinities that ignore the continuing legacies of these two forces can emerge as a possible road ahead (Crenshaw 2012, Žižek 2010). Relationships between humans as much as those between the human and the non-human matter all the more now; as queer theorists have contended, no feasible programme can evolve from a politics that assume that axes like gender, sexuality, race, ability and so on are separable entities that can be disassembled even in intersectional imagination (Puar 2007). What that possible path could be does not seem to be clear in any pristine manner, however, what it should not be can be imagined in fits and starts at least. In the place of the numbing academic conceit that talks about performativity of selves on the one hand and neatly overlooks the traction effect of the same in their own deliberations in the next breath, we need to bring back the self-critique that Audre Lorde had so wisely implored long back in particular, for those who occupy power positions of any kind (1979). It demands that any politics should retain in language

the self-reflexivity that Deleuze and Guattari had hoped would unpack the micro-level totalitarianisms and privileges accruing in all of us that make us overlook the multiple everyday ways in which we perpetuate power as well (1980). Beyond community oriented politics, we may need what Leela Gandhi, drawing from Derrida and Jean Luc Nancy, refers to as a politics of friendship and affective ties across particular affiliations with a radical commitment to ethics in politics (2009). Against a fashionable cynicism, it needs to bring back a radical hope as a social force, because as Gustavo Esteva puts it, losing hope is the same as dying (2013). Alternative possibilities of healing and nurturing our connections to the non-human world first demand affective ties across alterities against the patriarchy inherent in capitalism bringing in a queering of politics itself and opportunities of relational co-becoming (Suchet-Pearson et al 2013, Grusin 2017). It goes without saying that our story telling habits should hence orient to such possibilities of relational becoming against such crises of imagination which would necessarily force us to rethink human understanding of time and place and tellable stories themselves.

Thimmakka might not be familiar with the concept of the Anthropocene, but there are things that people who have worked on land for long years otherwise know intimately. The cover photo of her biography tells us something about such intuitively learnt knowledge. It has captured her standing with her face looking up as if in supplication, with her arms raised to the sky, while the thick canopy of her trees behind her equally raise their branches upwards, green fingers laced as it were, from both sides of the village road. It is difficult not to be affected by this picture of a frail, very old woman who seems to be conjuring up something from the air itself, while her saree flutters in the wind and her entire frame seems to us as something arboreal. When asked about this picture, she however, laughed at our sense of awe and said that she was just showing the photographer how the trees sway in the wind and was caught unawares. The affective ties that she has with nature comes out at times in one expressive phrase or the other, as in the following one, “things that fall remain fallen” (Thimmakka, Personal Interview 2017).

This would not fit within the easy mystification of love for nature, it is instead framed against the familiar scene for harsh survival where intimate engagement with it and sweating hard on it is necessary. This is knowledge gained from scavenging for survival which makes intimacy with the land a life skill to be acquired. There is no mistaking the sense of reasoning and analysis that has gone into the way she understands her past:

I did a lot of things to live, you name it and I have done it; other than driving a vehicle, I have done almost everything else. I have done farm-work, quarry-work, tarring, making *raagi* in many houses, large houses. You can't say that I didn't know anything. (Thimmakka, Personal Interview 2017)

She makes us taste her frugal meal, her staple diet over the years that she has twice a day, comprising a *ragi* ball and a *soppu* made of green chillies, salt and curry leaves. If one was on the verge of going poetic over such simplicity, her sense of humour would jerk one out of that fantasy when she declares: "Raagi balls alone have been my strength... Saalumurada Thimakka is a big name now, you shouldn't refuse the food!" (Thimmakka, Personal Interview 2017)

We asked her why she and her husband thought of planting trees on roadsides and not on the little land they owned. She took a moment to digest the question and then answered in an expressive unfinished statement, "I had land, I haven't forgotten about it, but see, it was on those four kilometres that I first had space, and somehow that was where we felt..." (Thimmakka, Personal Interview 2017). I tried to imagine the couple engaged in planting and caring for the saplings after the many things they did every day, day after day, over the years to survive. For space to become 'my space' one needs to root down one's longing as belonging. As for time, the appalling weight of it sat somewhere in my throat as I wondered about the sheer grit that sustained their effort; the years that it took until a sapling was big enough not to need water, the slow inching ahead as younger saplings are tended to. Time here again is experientially distance, it is space; ten years equals four kilometres between Hulikal and Kudur that need to be crossed in an arboreal version of time.

People are cutting them [trees] down. They'll say, we need roads, they want roads, and there are more cars, more buses, lorries... they come and they have big loads to carry and all, and they say, we need roads, so the trees get cut down. Nothing can be done about it. They need roads, for buses and lorries and other things, so they're cutting them down. In the cities also, the population has increased very much.... nothing is to be done about it. People do what they want... they raise homes and sometimes they raise trees and of course dogs, perhaps children.... I feel like, by my not being able to have children, it was better for the country, for everyone. Instead, I grew trees, it was good for all, and I am happy as it's good for the birds. It is good for the animals too, and all forest dwellers. The birds, when *they* have children¹⁰, they need to build nests, for that they need to have trees... the trees... from them only the water comes. Back then, for almost twenty years, there was no water in our lakes. After the trees, it filled up... If girls grow trees... not only trees should be grown by girls; the nation should be grown by them. It is from girls that everything - from little birds to the country to.... anything at all originates... But of course, everyone has to do it.... you must... get everyone to do that, not just girls (Thimmakka, Personal Interview 2017).

There are clear ecofeminist echoes in her words; and yet it is something else as well. The mythopoetic imagination that sustains her reasoning equates a woman with the earth as symbiotic female entities of creation from which "anything at all originates" (Thimmakka, Personal Interview 2017). However, it is also a vision that sees *other* things that *other* people pursue in their own quests wherein raising trees, homes, dogs, children all occupy an endless chain of possibilities. The relationality in question is further stretched in her reasoning that she did what she did because of what she could not (and the unmentioned stigma surrounding childlessness) which made her swap children with trees. The maternalism claimed here paradoxically stems precisely from the thwarted biological and experiential act of mothering itself which made her "borrow a womb from the

earth” (Thimmakka, Personal Interview 2017). Further, the experience of motherhood as it is paradoxically accessed in its absence points to the fact that it can be “borrowed” and hence not something that essentially comes from the body but picked up from the outside (Thimmakka, Personal Interview 2017). It clearly vivifies the weight of expectations that motherhood as an institution in patriarchy foists on women; but also plays on the same metaphors in opening itself to something else. Moreover, this maternalism just as it goes beyond biological determinism is not homebound, it has an affirmative extendable format wherein the act of raising is relational- ‘trees, dogs, homes, children, the country, anything at all’- and it expands into a sociality beyond ‘my’ things on ‘my’ space, to ‘my’ things on everybody’s space wherein ‘I’ first experienced “my space” (Thimmakka, Personal Interview 2017). *Care* here needs a major ideational makeover; neither is it a private activity of ‘me’ caring for ‘my’ children in ‘my’ home while ‘I’ get entrenched more and more in a domesticity that apparently defines ‘my’ ambit; care here emerges as a public engagement, a social and ecological exercise of engaging alterity and power that subverts the latter’s vocabulary by accessing its metaphors outside of private domesticity. As if responding to the very relevant feminist suspicion of care, which can suck women back into an essentialized body not to mention the archetypal abode of care, the patriarchal home, Thimmakka’s story seems to unspool a divergent experience of care itself. Thriving right on patriarchal myths of motherhood, it emerges here as something infused with political agency and sociality which derives not from self-effacement, but a persistent desire for a name.

There is no denying the reclamation of the ‘I’ in this process: “Saalumara Thimakka is a big name, now” (Thimmakka, Personal Interview 2017). It would be a reductive exercise to call this altruistic sacrifice. Rather, it is an act of imagination that plots the self defined in terms of a lack, attributed to and painfully carried within by the self leading up to a near fatal erasure of the self itself, re-telling its story wherein it clearly sees itself emplotted against a chain of others. It borrows a copy as well as the register of what is denied through a painfully slow enactment of endurance and resistance in order to reclaim both

what it was told that it lacked and a sense of a name as well. In so doing, it is also a covert clamour for dignified living, the name that the fusillade of human violence— violence of imagination turned into realities by mainstream stories of culture – can snatch away from human subjects. The self that thus reclaims its name through an enacted association with the other- both the human other and the non-human other- thus also points to what performances of the self themselves are possible for peaceable coexistence. Such dialectics between names and actions seem to point to the fact that in spite of the longing for the name, actions are to be prioritized, so that the name may be earned. As Gustavo Esteva insightfully puts it, this could be a possible programme in the abyss of the Anthropocene:

How do we move? In what direction? How do we do this in the city? There is a consensus of urgency, but what action do we take? Here is one way to begin to suggest how we do it: we change the nouns for the verbs. If we say ‘education’, we submit ourselves to someone educating us, but if we change to the verb ‘learn’, we recover our ability, for it is we who learn. We need to find the way that we can all learn, and give away our dependency. So, health becomes healing.... (“Recovering Hope”, *Upside Down World*, 2013)

And because the name is already the effect of an opening to the other, names are less essentials about individuals and more about relationalities: “Saalumarada Thimakka is a big name, *now*”(Thimmakka, Personal Interview, 2017) ¹¹. Our stories about our pasts take shape in such reciprocities; our hope for the future as well. But what can stories do? May be, they can be maps to scale seasons from now to then, even in the absence of actual seasons perhaps. Thimmakka, along with her partner, shows us how to measure four kilometres in ten years, and in so doing, they have remapped those four kilometres for a very long time to come. One could say that between her then and now and a long way ahead stand some four hundred trees.

Endnotes

- 1 The title of this study is borrowed from A. K. Ramanujan's poem of the same name, "Of Mothers Among Other Things". Italics mine.
- 2 An astute Literature Honours Undergraduate student who hopes to run an animal shelter someday, he was the perfect companion on this journey. He taught me that the lichens we saw on Thimmakka's trees are not harmful parasites, but substrates that are formed from a symbiotic relationship between algae and fungi. As both my interlocutor and translator, the communication between Thimmakka and myself that he facilitated was full of parenthetical comments on her usage of words.
- 3 Emphasis Thimmakka's
- 4 Emphasis Thimmakka's
- 5 Emphasis Thimmakka's
- 6 Garner, Kahane and Sprengnether in their work use the appellation "The (M)other Tongue" in their attempt to think beyond the psychoanalytic reductionism of the mother from the binding perspective of the infant's desire. See Garner et al 1985. This work, though a significant step in thinking about alternative ways to probe maternal subjectivities has been critiqued for its assumption that even such a redemptive stance seeks to think of the same in terms of 'the mother' and 'feminism' which themselves have the effect of repressing 'other' stories of maternity itself. See Hirsch 1987. My use of *motherspeak* as a choral voice seeks to overcome this issue and bring back the plurality of maternity as an experience.
- 7 The first half of 2017 has already seen two eponymous Bollywood revenge narratives of a mother who kills to avenge the rape and in one case the gruesome murder of her young daughter: *Maatr* (April 2017) and *Mom* (July 2017)
- 8 I follow here the distinction drawn between ethics and morality by Deleuze and Guattari building on Spinoza which explains that while morality speaks of essences and what should be done, ethics point to possibilities and what can be done. See Young 2013; Deleuze & Guattari 1987.
- 9 'Once Upon Her Time' is the translation Janet L. Beizer gives to a series of 22 French biographies that came under that appellation between 1987 and 1993. Referred to as mirror biographies, they were written on well-known female personalities of the past by equally famous writers. Beizer draws attention to problems arising from the assumption that past stories can be mirrored thus, because the subjects in these works were mostly submerged in the 'bio-autobiographies' of the writers. See Beizer 2009. My use of the plural noun probes the manyness of the mothers' voices beyond their suturing up in old stories.
- 10 Emphasis Thimmakka's
- 11 Emphasis Mine

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