Untimeliness as Moral Indictment: Tamil Agricultural Labouring Women’s Use of Lament as Life Narrative

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How do Dalit women forge certain forms of critical perspectives in relation to their existence? This paper explores the very particular poetics that shape the women’s responses to an invitation by the ethnographer to tell her their life stories. Their narratives made use of several dominant discourses in South India that ritually construct a woman’s life as a teleology of an unfolding essence, an embodied force that comes into flower and fruitage, and must be socially shaped and tended in order to bring about an auspicious confluence for both woman and the social order. The women also made use of the structure and tropes of several styles of performance that have tragedy at their emotional heart, and which gain their force against the normative construction of life cycle as temporality. By using these forms, women were able to bring into discourse several aspects of their experience of marriage that would otherwise gain no social recognition. In particular, they highlighted the prematurity of their marriage, having wed while still children themselves. The wider argument of this paper engages with two very different versions of agency—one predicated on the use of reason and consent by the individual, the other derived from an examination of the Dalit women’s narratives.

[The Tamil deity] Kattavarayan does elicit a kind of devotion toward himself, of a type quite distinct from other forms of bhakti... This is not the bhakti of separation (viraha)... nor is it related to the intellectual bhakti... e.g. In the Gita. One could, perhaps, call it cathartic, in the Aristotelian sense... Its outstanding symptom is not ecstasy (the painful delights of viraha) but mourning or lamentation—pulampal. ... This type of devotion requires a victim for its lachrymose display of emotion... Ritualized mourning for this divine victim seems here to be accompanied by a fascination with death, with violence leading to death, and with the notion of (fragic) fate. The type is surprisingly widespread in myth and ritual on the level of village religion in South India. (Shulman 1989: 56)

This paper develops a long-standing concern I have had with understanding the cultural sources of critique available to subordinate groups. I pursued this question in earlier work in relation to women in the Makkalvar floating caste on the west coast of Tamil Nadu (Ram 1991). In the 1990s, I returned to undertake comparative fieldwork among women on the east of Tamil Nadu in the Hindu Dalit agricultural castes of Chengalpattu, close to the major regional metropolis of Chennai (Madras). Following Gramsci’s lead, this paper seeks to understand the gap between hegemonic discourse and subaltern experience (see Gramsci 1971). However, Gramsci was concerned with more than experience. He was concerned with representation and, as befitted a communist intellectual, his political stakes were high. How, he asked, could subaltern experiences, desires and aspirations escape their trapped confines within the seemingly particular and exceptional, and come to enjoy the universality that currently marks the hegemony of the bourgeois world view? Gramsci found the resources of subaltern classes falling well short of what was required for such an ambitious project. Subaltern world views remained fragmented, and, as an amalgam of world views acquired from dominant classes both past and present, necessarily incoherent. It therefore required the sustained and dedicated efforts of intellectuals aligned with a socialist party to perform the necessary work of picking out the genuinely critical elements, systematising them, and generalising them into a broader vision so that they could become the shared horizon of a broad range of classes.

These socialist aspirations and judgments represent only one of the political constructions of agency bequeathed by modernity, though one that has been widely influential in India’s socialist and left traditions. These political traditions have an impact on rural Tamil Nadu through political parties and non-government organisations, some of which have in turn been influenced by the politics of anti-caste movements in Tamil Nadu. In all these traditions the forms of agency favour the role of intellectuals. From the perspective of such intellectuals, the agency I elucidate in the discourse of Dalit women in this paper would be found to be negligible, even disappointing. Villagers in Tamil Nadu are also exposed to other modern constructions of agency which are quite different in tone and expectation, but even less likely to recognise the pre-requisites of agency among poor women. These discourses circulate a liberal construction of agency as consent between free, knowing individuals. In this construction, the clear light of reason and free choice guides the agency of individuated, contracting adults, unburdened by myth, tradition, and such irrational authorities inherited from the past. Such a view connects, in a thoroughly transnational fashion, the discourses of Western intellectuals to the work of non-government organisations in rural Tamil Nadu. This is Habermas on the subject:

The idea of an agreement that comes to pass among all parties, as free and equal, determines the procedural type of legitimacy of modern times. ... Corresponding to this is an alteration of the position of the subject. Myth was taken for true in a naive attitude. The ordo-knowledge of God, the Cosmos, and the world of man was recognisable in the past as the handed-down teachings of wise men or prophets. Those who make agreements under idealized conditions have taken the competence to interpret into their own hands. (Habermas 1976: 185)

Myth and ritual, these great obstacles to agency according to liberalisms, certainly continue to shape hegemonic constructions of gender relations in India. To be a woman is to be a potential wife and a potential mother. This is true, of course, not only of rural India, but of South Asia more generally, in all classes, and indeed, in the West, where marriage is lauded as an agreement between free and equal parties. Even in elite Indian circles, the ritual sacral understandings of marriage and sexual relations within marriage alter and reflect the juridical meanings of marriage as they emerge in High Court and Supreme Court judgements on matrimonial cases (Uoberi 1996). What I seek to highlight in this paper, however, is not the hybrid nature of Indian modernity, nor the sameness of gender ideology across ‘West’ and ‘non-West’, but rather to contest the notion that myth and ritual cannot provide rich resources for reflexivity and critique, and indeed that they are the very opposite of agency. The urgency of this task derives from my wider corpus of work investigating the circulation of modern notions of reform and agency in rural Tamil Nadu, where concepts introduced to ‘empower’ poor women have the effect of simultaneously creating forms of inequality between modernisers and those yet-to-be-modernised (Ram 1996, 1998, 2001).
Dominant discourses of gender in rural Tamil Nadu

I begin with the specificities of region, describing regional nuances in the dominant gender ideologies to show how they produce their naturalizing effects. In the South Indian region of Tamil Nadu, several interrelated discourses converge to construct woman in terms of an essence that has an energy and a temporality that can be understood like the life history of a plant. Women's essence comes to flower at puberty, requiring careful social cultivation by the kin who care for her. This cultivation entails organizing the socially appropriate marriage for her. Under the protective shade of sexual and emotional tenderness by the appropriate husband, this essence reaches fulfillment as the woman comes to maternal fruition.

Certain pervasive figures recur repeatedly in a variety of Tamil discourses relating to the female body. It is precisely this repetition across diverse domains that allow meanings to become culturally salient, and to form part of the taken-for-granted 'horizon' of subjectivity. The fact that many of these discourses are not ostensibly about gender at all, but about healing the body or about worshipping the goddess, makes them all the more effective, for constructions seem most natural when they come up alongside their object rather than directly representing their object. One of these recurrent tropes on the female body is that of flowering. Through its repetition across culturally salient phases of the female life cycle, it serves to integrate the body of female puberty with that of bride status and of maternity. Moreover, the trope connects the ritual language of the puberty ceremony—found right across Tamil Nadu—with the language of Tamil literary practices, and with the language of medicine, and recalls other ritual contexts such as the worship of the Tamil goddess. These tropes perform precisely the function of all rhetorical devices in creating cultural pathways of signification connecting apparently disparate domains and discourses (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Johnson 1987). In this paper I will be able to briefly describe only two of these fields of discursive practice; that of the female ritual life cycle and that of Siddha medicine.

'Flowering' in the female ritual life cycle and in Siddha medicine

At sixteen Punnakkal and Tunnakkal were fully developed flowers—like water lilies opening out, they had blossomed. And they were truly beautiful. ... More beautiful than any woman. (The Marriage of Muttupattan, trans. Blackburn 1988: 190)

The meanings of páippu² or flowering are prominent in the ritual that heralds to the world the coming of age of a young Tamil girl. The well-known South Asian value of impurity attendant on menstruation is far outweighed in the case of first menstruation by the values of auspiciousness or maakkalam (Skt. manjusya). The girl's mode of dress and adornment as a young woman are regarded as simultaneously beautiful, propitious and blessed for all who see her. These modes of adornment and auspiciousness will be echoed again by such significant female life cycle rituals as her wedding and her first pregnancy ceremony.

Together, these three rituals construct a teleology of female embodiment as the passage of an inner volatile energy or female calki (Skt. šakti) that needs to be socially and culturally channelled into a safe and auspicious port of marriage and motherhood. The doubling of the puberty and the wedding ceremonies serves to orient the community towards the girl's marriage, and alerts those most centrally concerned to the fact that she has now reached a stage of pokkuvam, or appropriateness. The very equation of puberty with marriage—as well as the differences between them—serves to emphasize the

come to the ritual and attend upon her are also the people who expect to welcome her into their family as a bride. The ritual bath, as well as key processes in the ritual, are performed for the girl by those who stand in the role of prospective in-laws to the pubescent girl. There are the wives of her mother's brothers (whose sons are potential grooms), her father's sisters, and her brother's wives (whose sons are potential grooms for her future daughters).

The puberty ceremony works to anticipate a specifically feminine future for the girl who stands on what is discursively marked, through the ritual, as a triple threshold: a threshold of the transition from girl to adult woman, from pre-sexual to sexual being, and from girl to a wife-to-be. There is a simultaneous invocation—a coming into being—of bride status, of adult femininity, and of fertility. What emerges is not simply a cultural discourse on sexuality, but a much wider-ranging and more integrated discourse on what it is to inhabit the female body of well-being. The ritual transformations acquire their efficacy in transforming subjectivity through the emotional framework within which the ritual is conducted. These emotions celebrate the sacred aspects of female maturation with the same jubilation as occurs at a marriage.

The trope of flowering or páippu that accompanies the puberty ritual has regularly been glossed in anthropological exegesis of the South Indian female puberty ceremony as signifying the appearance of female sexuality (McIlvray 1982, Good 1991). The term 'sexuality', however, remains relatively unproblematised in the literature. It has been argued by Kapadid (1995) that the puberty ritual's elaboration in the poorest of agricultural castes is a reflection of the value attached to women's fertility and labour. Yet within the core metaphor of flowering, a great deal else is encompassed: certainly the meanings of a fertility which is specific to women, but also an aesthetic of feminine beauty, and a complex of ethical ideas, cognitive maturation, and their accompanying emotions which now apply with renewed force to the girl (Ram 1998: 290ff).

We see this broad-ranging notion of 'flowering and femininity' in the Tamil medical discourses known as cittavatitiram (Tamil transliteration) or Siddha (Skt.) medical traditions. Descriptions of conception and reproduction in ancient Tamil medical texts such as Veitthiya vallai by the sage Akkatiyar describe the entire process in terms of the dominant metaphor of the flower:

From the day of menstruation, for fourteen days, like the sixteen petals of the lotus flower, the girl's reproductive parts will unfold. From the fifteenth day, each petal will close one by one. Between the fifteenth and the thirty-first day, if a vintu (male semen) reaches the womb through union, the womb that had flowered like a lotus will close its petals one by one daily. (Venkaiyan 1986)

This text does not confine itself to the biological, but moves without any sense of incongruity or of crossing a barrier to list the appearance of certain qualities and emotions in the same breath as listing changes in the female body of puberty. Thus, alongside the appearance of breasts, hair, and the flowering of reproductive organs, there is the flowering of certain emotions. The qualities emphasized are aama, nātum, nātum, payyippu. The English terms given in the Tamil lexicon are occurrence, desire; ignorance, folly, anteness; nātum: shyness, coyness as a specifically feminine quality, but also shame, sensitive dread of evil, keen moral sense, shrinking like a startled plant or an animal when touched; and payippu: disgust, abhorrence, delicacy, modesty, shrinking from anything strange. Although these are emotions, Tamils commonly list them as specifically feminine qualities or kuanakal (plural). The notion of kuaaam (Skt. guna) is commonly used to refer to specific personal qualities, and most accounts of this subject produce an understanding of the kuaaam as applying to the person (see Daniel 1984:...
182(I). However, understood as feminine qualities, these *kunakal* fuse together emotions, forms of ethical conduct, and forms of cognition, all said to spontaneously flower along with the girls’ sexuality. All four *kunakal* emphasize a dawning of self-consciousness, of fear and aversion to anything unknown, and of a certain naïveté combined with an acute moral sense of feminine conduct. A word of caution is needed in translating the terms ‘embarrassment’ and ‘shyness’ as applied to the girl’s new awareness of her changing body: in the Tamil discourse it relates not so much to a negative appraisal of one’s sexualised body as to a secret awareness of its beauty and desirability to others.

We are dealing here with tropes and metaphors that are interconnected in ways that put into question conventional distinctions between text, religion, medicine, and the separate compartments known as daily life. These tropes are performative. They enter into the performativity of gender relations (cf. also Busby 2000), colouring the ordinary experience of eroticism and becoming actualised in styles of embodiment. Such embodied gestures in turn give shape and form to the emotions, stylising and exaggerating the women’s ‘natural’ fear, embarrassment, shyness and timidity when confronted with the bold and appreciative overtures of masculine sexuality. In turn, the trite movement connects the everyday to the world of performance. The movement between performance and the embodied affectivity of everyday life is explicitly theorised by the *rasa* theory of Indian aesthetics, which sees the transformative work of aesthetics as located precisely in the stylisation and exaggeration of embodied relationships, whether between men and women, between sovereigns and subjects, or between humans and the non-human world. This transformation, analogous to the cooking of raw ingredients, is designed to draw out the emotional significance and ‘flavour’ of everyday experience, for the delight of spectators.

Although systematised and developed in Sanskrit treatises, this particular understanding of aesthetics exists in a diffuse form in most performance traditions in the subcontinent, and quite independently of the Sanskritic traditions. It is to be found quite centrally, for instance, in the vast popular world of modern Indian cinema, where the much-loved song sequences feature an exaggeration and stylisation of everyday gendered embodiment. The bold gestures of *filmi* masculinity and the heroine’s pursuit of the initially elusive and retreating heroine in settings that further exaggerate and emphasise the distance from the everyday, have been the staple of both Bombay and South Indian cinema throughout their rich histories. In this construction of romantic love, the woman’s femininity forms a particularly salient element in Tamil cinema. The blockbuster film *Bombay*, directed by the highly successful Tamil film director Mani Ratnam, founds its central love scenes on the man’s pursuit of his wife—twin sons in train—around the conjugal bed, demanding that she now give him a girl child. Another hit song from the ’90s titled *Ulampeppi Penn Kuthu* (with music by talented composer Ilavaraja) has the heroine exclaim: ‘You only have to look at me out of the corner of your eye, and I am pregnant’ (author’s translation). Fecundity and eroticism are inextricably interwined, fashioning the aura of ‘rightness’ that surrounds the female body as it blossoms and comes into cultivated fruition.

**Temporality gone awry**

The same constructions, richly polysemous as they are in their co-mingling of fecundity and sexuality, exact a toll. The quickest way to convey this is by considering childlessness. If flowering is imminent in the female body, then childlessness is in turn constructed by the culture entirely as a problem to do with women’s embodiment. Childlessness becomes constructed as a withering or blight on the natural or teleological movement of flowering. If such a woman were to die, her death would be regarded not simply as premature, but as the thwarting of a force or energy that has not been permitted to find its natural fulfilment. In the Tamil district of Kanyakumari, where I did my earlier fieldwork, such women are transformed by death into volatile and restless spirits indistinguishable from deities such as the ferocious *Jalakki Amman* goddess who rules over northern Kanyakumari and invades the bodies of Catholic fisher-people (Ram 1991: 53f).

Such untimely deaths dramatise further what it is we are dealing with in Tamil constructions of gender. Gender is not only that which is ‘performed’, it is also an embodied power and energy which is as relentlessly bent on its own unfolding over time as the germinating seed of a plant. Social norms and ritual practices, culminating, in the case of the girl, in the ritual tying of the marriage knot around her neck, can only hope to cultivate and channel such a wild energy into socially fruitful outlets. When ruptured by untimely death, that burgeoning force jumps tracks, as it were, and turns destructive unless propitiated as a deity. A death that ruptures the blossoming energy of the female body or the unfolding masculinity of a young male hero has the force of an embodiment that has not found its appropriate destiny, and as such is latent, ready to re-enter the present. The ‘bow songs’, so called because of the ten-foot musical *villu* or bow that is struck by bardsic performers for emphasis, embellish and elaborate such themes when performed at the door of goddess temples in Kanyakumari. Many performers prefer, however, to dramatise the safer theme of the goddess taking birth as a human. Performers are justifiably wary of the power of death songs, for to narrate the tragic life and deaths of local heroes and heroines is to bring them back to life in the performers and in the spectators (Blackburn 1988).

Similarly, women whose lives do not allow them to sail into the open port of marriage and maternity are, regardless of the circumstances, in an ontologically unstable condition. They turn into women who are not-women. However, this instability can work itself out in quite distinct ways, depending on whether the women live or die. We have just seen that women who die before finding fulfilment in love, marriage, and maternity become more than women. They become indistinguishable from a version of the goddess who demands propitiation if she is not to unleash hostile and destructive forces on human beings and their world. The fate of women who are spared such a death is far grimmer. Their riddled ontology dooms them to be treated as ‘less than woman’, assimilated to a milkless cow, or to a withered plant. Unmarried or infertile women who live on as such become subjects trapped in the very tropes that assimilate their fertility to the inherent energy and fertility of all natural forms. They now become plants which are outwardly alive, but which lack generative power. The insalubrious of childless women that occur in epic ballads sung at the door of the goddess in Kanyakumari elaborate this anomalous fate:

*Women of my age*
*have mothered seven children,*
*Or they are married women,*
*carrying their first child.*
*Young full coconut trees*
*fruit abundantly.*

*They swell with mortality,*
*but what good are they? Had I been born as soil,*
*at least now I’d be a temple door*.
*Had I been born a jewel,*
*at least now I’d be a raja’s throne...*
UNTIMELINESS AS MORAL INDICTMENT

In the agricultural villages of Chengalpattu (Kavanipakam and Pernaka Ûr), older Dalit women in their sixties responded with generosity and eloquence to an invitation to tell the stories of their lives. Their names were Karpagam, Indrani, and Lakshmi. A further group of women, Veluchchi, Jaya, and Indrani’s daughter, joined us under the shade of the tamarind tree in the hot afternoon. All except Indrani’s daughter were in their fifties and sixties. For these older women, marriage had accompanied the arrival of first menstruation. First menstruation, puberty rituals and marriage brought a further onslaught of dramatic changes: separation from the maternal home, the onset of sexual relations, and adult female responsibilities of labour. These included labour in the fields for the husband and husband’s family, as well as agricultural labour. Becoming a woman entails for these women, not only marriage, sex and maternity, nor even household tasks, but also tasks in the rice fields and in the care of livestock.

The puberty ritual makes no mention of such labours in its construction of a ‘blossoming’. Indeed, the entire world of labour (other than the labour of childbirth) is elided in the construction of femininity. Far from suggesting any kind of spontaneous flowering or readiness to assume womanhood—as implied by the ritual—women’s accounts dwell on the pain of untimeliness, a lack of ripeness. Although the Tamil medical texts represent puberty as the occasion of an inevitable flowering of feminine forms of self-affirmation, these women represent themselves as abandoned before the dawning of any comprehension or aruvu. They effortlessly turned my encouragement to talk about their lives into a form of lament. The traumas and shock of marriage formed the pivotal point of the narrative. While I did manage to extract some charming recollections of games the women played as children, what they chose to highlight was the poignancy of suffering. Sometimes, this suffering was located in childhood itself; in the guise of poverty:

The previous night’s meal was left for us kids when the parents went out to work. It was a case of first come, first served—in fact the rest would go in pâjâmi [Iasting]. In those days the diet was restricted—just a lot of dishes made of râgâl [barley], such as appâ [barley rice] and kain [gruel and porridge]. We just added sugar and salt and cooked it on a mud pot. The only snacks were the flowers of the ilâpâ and the kottâl [kernels of the pîljî [tamarind]]. There was no money even for oil for our hair.

Even when the theme was that of the strong love and affection felt by the speaker for one of her parents, this too was related largely to emphasize the pain of parting, and the longing that was to ensue after marriage:

Karpagam: I was very attached to my father—I would get him to lift me up and throw me in the air, I would sleep on his tumm, and he would call me his butti ponnâ, the little daughter with a big tummy. To get me to sleep, he would tie a tambi [the smallest coin in the old currency] on my udâr [draw-string of the body]...
Untimeliness as Moral Indictment

Women’s laments are traditionally addressed to the mother whose womb has nurtured and who laboured to give birth (emme petta tāye). The anthropologists Träwicz (1991) and Clark-Deeves (2006: 29ff) have recorded laments over the loss of parents sung by women from similar villages of Chengalpattu and South Arcot districts of Tamil Nadu. Träwicz’s (1991) analysis dramatizes two kinds of tragedies in these laments: in the first, the mother is snatched away from her by death while the singer is still a child; in the second, the groom takes the singer away, while still a child, into a loveless marriage. Once again, we find the metaphor of the plant that withers, but now exploited in far less conventional terms. Unlike the excerpt quoted earlier from the male singers of bow songs, it is now made to work in dramatising the untimeliness of what was done to the woman:

We took root in your belly
O mother who bore me, if we had taken root in a forest
We would be colourful trees...
O mother who bore me; what you grew us was a full body, a beautiful
Cypress [men].
Now, having grown, we blacken,
In this distant land of Pūkkalam, and we have no mother to send us on
our way. (Egor 1986: 311)

I have written elsewhere about the gaps between the puberty ceremony and the lived experience of women. However, my previous writing was about the young women of the Catholic fishing caste of Kanyakumari and it concentrated on the experience of young women and girls (Ran 1998). The emphasis there, over-determined by the impact of Christianity and social workers, is very different—there is an embarrassment about the public nature of the ceremony, a new emphasis on the private nature of female puberty. The old Hindu agricultural labouring women, on the other hand, utilised the structure of the lament to pry open the gaps between their experience and the idealised representations of female puberty. In most of these cases, women emphasised that the new home did not provide female nurture but to replace that of their mother. Either the mother-in-law was cruel, as in Lakshmi’s case, or there was simply no mother-in-law nor any other women to help a young girl child come to social maturity:

Karpagam: My mother-in-law had no daughters, just five boys.

Indrani: Here [at her husband’s home] there was no mother-in-law, and my
husband’s sisters were all married. There were no women here for me to be with. I
did not know how to feed my husband. My father-in-law had to teach me. I would
not speak to my husband. My husband rejected me as too young and ignorant,
unable to do anything around the house. The elders of the [village] spoke and
said: Who will take this girl?

Un-preparedness and un-timeliness are encountered in many different forms. Karpagam emphasised that she was completely unprepared for any kind of agricultural work because, as her mother had many children to feed, she had been sent to live with her mother’s elder sister in Chennai. Her pēriyămma (mother’s elder sister) worked as a domestic servant and ayyil (nurse) for foreigners. She related vivid memories of the strange ways of the people they worked for:

Pēriyamma lived near the Liberty Theatre. She worked as a domestic servant for foreigners, those wearing dresses [Anglo Indians]. I would go with her to look after
their child. As my patti (Skt. buddhi) [intelligence] increased the lady asked me to
stay on. As I got bigger, I would put the child in a vondil [buggy], bathe and play
with it. Even at night I would stay there. I was nearly ten, but I never felt like
coming back. I could partly understand the Tamil they spoke. They would eat things raw [uncooked] and were very particular that there should be no meat in their diet.

None of these experiences prepared Karppam for the work she had to do after marriage:

I knew no agricultural work, only housework. I did not know how to pound the rice, could not weed or plant. My mother-in-law let me be, saying I was still young. I learned gradually to sow and plant.

However, even for those who were growing up in the agricultural environment, marriage brought requirements such as sexual intercourse, for which they were entirely unprepared:

Indrani: When puberty came, there was a ceremony, and my husband’s sisters had to teach me. I knew nothing of sex. Somehow a baby was born. Over the next few years, I got habituated to my husband [pajakkam ay vittai]. He kept me well [palla vattiy runtan]. We were scared of sex. Today, even the kids in pavalai chatat [i.e. pre-pubescent girls] don’t have any embarrassment [kikatham]. One year after my first menstruation, I had a child. My husband’s sisters stayed with me daily for seven months. Initially, I did not buckle under my husband [purunakkukku asakhaI]. Later, I saw no alternative.

For these women, the appearance of menstruation was not remembered primarily for the fear occasioned by bleeding. Though all recall crying or being upset, the sight of blood was hardly the worst aspect of the whole transition. Indeed, they had a few laughs remembering the experience:

A woman called Jaya interjected, ‘Yes, yes, sometimes we do talk to the younger ones. My niece was crying and afraid. I consoled her, gave her fresh clothes, and said, and there is no need for verkkam [shyness]. If we are born female, this is what happens. Why cry? Have you not heard of your father?’ Another woman commented, ‘I cried too, and my cousins teased me. They said: “Have you given birth, or what?”’ Vellachi added, ‘And when my breasts came, I thought they were kattI [lumps] and showed them to my father!’ [They all laugh].

The harshness of life as a young bride was further magnified for women who experienced problems with fertility, bearing in mind that maternity entails not only the birth of children but the capacity to nurture them beyond the uncertain first years:

Karppam: After this, many years went by when I did not conceive. They called me a goddu matI [sterile cow], said I was worse than that—at least a cow was worth something. I had to have all kinds of cures, eat the juice of veppa illai [margosa leaf], have a head bath before sunrise, an alakkI [pestle] was placed across my path and I had to cross over it. I finally conceived, but then had a miscarriage. I had so many miscarriages, all at two or three months. Finally, I went through with a pregnancy. I could not eat, only survived on gruel and hot water. The labour was endless, went on for days. I had three babies, all boys, but two died; one of smallpox, another of stomach infection. I kept having babies, finally having six sons. I kept trying for a girl. Finally, I went in for sterilisation.

Vellachi: In those days, you could not sit down in front of your in-laws, not even to breast-feed your babies. We were just remembered by husbands for sex—auto nerativukku pigattI [a wife just for those ‘times’]. If we complained we were told we would be sent home [to mother’s home].

Karppam: Even after sterilisation, I have had over-bleeding and been taken to hospital twice. Finally, it all stopped two years ago.

Lakshmi: My husband took me away [from his family that was ill treating her], and we set up a separate house. I had five boys and one girl. All of them died. They were all in their first year or in the first year and a half of their lives. One died in just two days, another at six months, and another at two years. The fifth—how old would he have been? He was walking and running, so at least a year old. When I was pregnant with my sixth one, in my seventh month, I had a dream. There were hands coming out to grab me and I could not breathe. Then I saw a woman with a white veil [poukalai]. That converted me to Christianity. I went to Mass the next day, then to the shrine at Velankanni. The next child, a girl, has survived. There had been puvaiyam [sorcery] placed on me by the man who lives with my mother-in-law. There is not a köyI [temple] I have not been to, no penance I have not done. I have sometimes gone mad with grief.

My own early political socialisation into feminism predisposed me to expect accounts of suffering from women, so I was slow to recognise the strong element of deliberate shaping, in accord with convention, in the structuring of these narratives. I recall becoming alerted when every topic I introduced was responded to as a fresh source of suffering. I asked them how they evaluated Tamil politicians and their continual praise of Tamil culture for its reverential treatment of mothers and motherhood. These were some of the responses:

Vellachi: One of a hundred sons treats their mother as the tsivom [deity] they tell us we are. I know one son who actually does a namaskar [respectful greeting] to his mother and offers her food first.

Karppam: With most of us it’s the other way—we are the ones who bow [kumthI] to them right until the cremation ground [suvakI] claims us.

Another woman: My daughter-in-law won’t even feed me. The sons get food from a hotel. From time to time I try to go and stay with my brother, but my own objects. In my mother’s day, children and daughters-in-law listened to the parents. Parents in turn were kept well, with affection. Today? They eat well, and we eat scraps and leftovers, if they wish to give us even that.

Vellachi: While my father was alive, he thatched my roof, and I was surviving while my mother was alive [to take care of me]. Now a brother cannot take that place.

The tales of suffering did not, therefore, pertain simply to a few painful episodes in their lives. Put simply, every phase of life provided an occasion for dramatisations of suffering. Certainly, they underwent no transition to a stable or contented old age. They now experienced the barely-relieved suffering of old women, neglected and abandoned by their children, carried over into anticipating trouble in the lives of their daughters.

Indrani: I gave away my daughter as I was given away. I married her to my husband’s sister’s son. But now my daughter has run away from her husband.

Indrani’s Daughter: My husband makes me afraid. The tsivom [village] talks badly of me, but I will not marry any other suitors. There is a tuvcum (Skt. dosha) [illness, evil constellation] in my naividikam [horoscope]—a cervaiv tucum [insidious flaw].

Lakshmi: I have some land now, but no one to work it. My husband is infirm, my daughter is young, I still have my sisters to marry. But it is my daughter I worry about. Will I see her married while my eyes are still open? Will she find a husband? In this community [given LakshaI’s conversion to Christianity], that will be hard.
Conclusion

In her account of the performance of suffering among the Pakhtun-speaking women of Swat in Northwest Pakistan, Grimm (1992) identifies the centrality of suffering (gham) to women’s entitlement to speak and to tell their life stories. Young, unmarried women are not regarded as having suffered as yet—and they themselves refer the ethnographer to older women who have the most ‘beautiful’ stories: to those who have experienced hardships and dealt with them, in accordance with both the code of Pakhto honour and Islamic notions of the reductive quality of enduring trials and hardships with dignity. Each crisis in a woman’s life is performatively elaborated by the woman and witnessed by others, so that when it comes to telling a life story, it is remembered as a chain of crises and stresses. Even closer at hand, since the writing of this paper, fresh anthropological evidence from Clark-Dexes strikingly converges with my argument that ‘the language of crying songs can be seen as a cultural model for Tamil women to use to talk about themselves and their lives’ (2006: 52). In her book, Clark-Dexes also notices the temporal features of the lament. Instead of ‘progress or simple maturation...what is evoked is death, decay and death’ (2006: 53).

The fuller significance of this divergence emerges, however, only when one considers both laments and life narratives against the backdrop of a normative temporality as it is constructed in the ritualised female life cycle, as the embodied unfolding of an immanent essence. As Kapadia’s informants (1995) explained it to her, the girl’s puberty ritual declares to the world: ‘She is ready, come and get her!’. This dominant discourse celebrates the engineered coincidence between social temporality and the temporality of the female life cycle: under the watchful eye of kin and the safe haven of marriage, female embodiment prospered emotionally, sexually and morally. The laments and narratives of these older women quite deliberately re-work this temporal ontology in order to eloquently proclaim the pre-maturity of what everyone considers to be ‘ripeness’. As we have seen, the celebratory aspects of such announcements of ripeness are accompanied by a number of practical consequences, including separation from one’s parents, marriage, the move into the groom’s household, and initiation into heterosexuality. Of labour in the fields and in the home, there is no mention in the ritual discourse, although these too are very real aspects of initiation into adult female status for Dalti women. Yet into their narratives, Dalti women manage to weave the body of female labour, both domestic and agricultural. Like the songs sung by Japanese coal mining women (see Some, this issue), they bring into discourse a dimension entirely missing in conventional poetic constructions of feminine embodiment. And their narratives are all the more effective for using the same poetic structure as the discourse that ignores their work. The emotional heart of the narratives makes little distinction as to whether we are discussing sex with the groom, labouring in the fields, learning to tie one’s sari, or being harassed for delays in bearing children. All facets are integrated by generating an affective awareness of the plight of a child abandoned prematurely by those she loves and knows most intimately.

We can return now to the theme proposed at the start of this paper, to critically examine the modern presumption that agency can only be located in opposition to the ‘traditional’ realm of ritual, and indeed of any inheritance based on authority that is simply ‘given’ to the individual rather than nationally understood and enacted. The inheritance of style is not at odds with innovation. Contrary to the Habermasian dichotomy between the inheritance of authority and the assertion of an individuated agency, it is the very inheritance of a style and of discourse which makes it possible for the women to introduce new experiences and have them acknowledged as meaningful, let alone as unjust.

Furthermore, such a formulation allows us to glimpse the fact that this is not so very different to the way in which ‘modern’ liberal understandings of agency have been introduced into colonial contexts such as that pertaining to India. Agency as modernity, understood as individuated and reasoned consent, makes its appearance in India in moulded in colonial forms of authority, imposed on Indians as an indictment of their social structure, interpreting both their gender relations and labour relations as nothing but ‘unfree’. In this sense, modern agency is itself an imposed inheritance rather than one consented to by Indians. Yet it has been reutilised by Indians for their own purposes, and women have not been slow to take up the explosive conjunction of liberal notions of freedom and the scrutiny under which gender relations had been placed. Child marriage in particular became one of the institutions most contested from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, first in Bengal and then in Bombay Presidency. Upper caste reformers, such as the Bengali Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, agitated over the plight of child widows and successfully fought for laws allowing widows to remarry. Key court cases in the late nineteenth century culminated in bills raising the age of consent (Kosambi 1996; Noiri 1996). One of the key court cases of the nineteenth century involved a young woman by the name of Rahimabai, who in 1885 brought her husband to court on the grounds that the marriage had been orchestrated when she was eleven years old. This legacy continues to shape middle-class feminism. Most of the twentieth-century Indian feminist campaigns around rape, sterilisation and the use of women in testing new contraceptive drugs and devices, have revolved around the utilisation of consent as the key form of agency.

However, the Dalit women remind us that there can be another understanding of agency, one which relies little on liberal notions of freely given consent, and more on the capacity of users to reutilize that which is given, and to put it to fresh and innovative uses. This understanding of agency is one that avoids the familiar anachronisms bequeathed to us between religion and an individuated ‘Man’, between the mystification of non-transparent social systems and the modern promise of transparent accountable communication. Even at their most idealistic, these modern conceptions of agency are unsatisfactory in neglecting the range and breadth of what one might describe as the socially situated character of human agency. What is more troubling for an ethnographer working with poor women is the way in which these anachronisms, unrealistic to begin with, turn into discursive sites of inequality not only between ‘West’ and ‘Rest’, but also between social classes within India, between middle class modernisers, Dalit women and the rural poor in general.

One aim of this paper has therefore been to show that the world of ritual is not the closed universe it is painted to be, and that critiques, even of the same institution of child marriage, can flow from very diverse premises. The loss these women mourn is not loss of the freedom of an individuated choosing subject. Instead, the indictment is that the girl child, far from blossoming, as the teleology would have it, is made to ripen too fast under the burden of sexuality, maternity and hard work. In the continual return to this moment of rupture on the part of these old women there is an arrestance of the flow of time, a dwelling on experiences that receive no recognition from the dominant discourses but which obdurately fail to recede into the past. This is not a critique based on Reason. Instead, the women use the affective voice of crisis and tragedy, indicting for its callous and unthinkingly marrying-off of girls, a social order that prides itself on recognising the moral responsibilities that flow from the temporality of female life cycles. The women do not simply highlight their misery within marriage: by using the trope of untimeliness in order to frame their traumatic experiences, the women effectively strike at the central and
still popular ethical justification for early marriage for girls, which is that marriage and maternity provide tranquill havens of reassurance in which the unregulated force
of female energies may be safely contained.

My second aim in this concluding section has been to show that the version of agency
forged by the women in this paper is one that cannot be confined to ‘the traditional’ in a
gesture that repeats the sequestration of ‘the modern’. Reutilising that which is imposed
or given is a way of describing not only the Dalit women’s criticisms, but equally a way
of understanding the agency that was at work in the very incorporation of liberalism itself
into the colonial and post-colonial contexts. In this sense, we are dealing with an agency
which, besides undoing many of the binarisms of liberalisms, is itself prior to the actual
terms of liberal freedom.

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Notes

1. This characteristic of Gramsci is based on a pattern that runs through his entire corpus of
writing gathered and edited as The Prison Notebooks (see Gramsci 1971). But for more
specific locations within The Prison Notebooks see, for example, his ‘Notes on Italian History’
where he describes the ‘necessarily fragmented and episodic’ history of subaltern groups,
whose incipient tendencies to unification are continually ‘interrupted by the ruling groups’
(Gramsci 1971: 54-5). The subaltern classes therefore need to become a state in their own
right, but in order to do so, must already exercise ‘intellectual and moral leadership’ (1971: 57).
Yet such leadership is denied precisely by the features of subordination, which have
effects in the intellectual sphere where, as he describes it in ‘The Study of Philosophy’, a
subordinate group has ‘adopted a conception which is not its own but is borrowed from
another group’ (1971: 337). Subaltern conceptions of the world show up only in flashes of
concerted group action for Gramsci (1971: 327). He shared with the type of Enlightenment
modernity I critique in this paper, an uncompromising political dismissal of anything
’medieval’ that had survived into the modern present, including ‘the little old women who has
inherited the lore of the witches’ (1971: 323).

2. Throughout this paper the dialectical marks for Tamil words follow the scholarly conventions
established by the Tamil Lexicon, and where relevant, Sanskrit equivalents are indicated in
brackets as Skt.

3. This text was translated for the author of this paper by Dr A. Kandiah, a retired Tamil scholar
and prominent figure in Tamil cultural politics in Sydney.

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