

## Fragments and Interruptions

### Sensory Regimes of Violence and the Limits of Feminist Ethnography

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The ethnography of violence presents dilemmas that are at once ethical, corporal, intellectual, and political. Drawing on fieldwork experiences from the study of mothers and female infanticide in south India, this essay elaborates on one ethnographic encounter that both informed the representational process and talked back to its normative assumptions. The dynamics of the encounter are used as a point of departure to reflect on gendered violence, the limits of feminist ethnography, and the admissibility of fragments as evidence of subaltern subjectivity.

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The process and politics of representation assume complex overtones as we attempt to write about women's suffering in remote regions of the global South. Experiences in the field clash with academic expectations and practices resulting in dilemmas that are at once ethical, corporal, intellectual, and political. In this essay, I want to elaborate on some bracketed moments from my ethnographic encounters to reflect on the difficult intertwined project of writing and witnessing. Faced with the subject of erasure, absence, and failure, how do we receive, respond, and represent the accounts of systematic violence in women's lives? Or as a feminist researcher, render in text the vulnerability of subaltern experiences with a commitment to preserve the dignity of the lives we expose? All social protocol and methodological sense-making fall apart as one enters a world that is closed, unspeakable, and often unshareable—the world of mothers who

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have taken the lives of their infants. How does one present this world to the outside gaze of a reader without sensationalizing misery or reducing it to mere spectacle? These questions arrived with a daunting set of new challenges as I tried to understand the lives of mothers I encountered during my fieldwork studying female infanticide in Tamil Nadu. I offer these reflections on the ethnography of violence toward a chance encounter one hot summer afternoon in a small rural community in south India.

It was the time of the *Agni Natchatra*, the phase of the Indian lunar calendar when the sizzling heat rises like glistening water creating a mirage on the tarred surface of the road that ran right through a small village. I drew the ends of my sari over my head trying to shield myself from the scorching summer sun as I walked from the main thoroughfare down a muddy path with two social workers from the area. One of the women, Amrita, had an errand to run in the area, which was her counseling beat assigned to her by the social services organization she worked for. As we turned into a narrow alley lined with run-down shanties, a woman's loud voice, appearing to come from nowhere, stopped us in our tracks, "Oh, you've come have you?" From a small tenement, with a makeshift door of palm leaves, angry words from a woman within, darted forth with no preparation into the fiery outside.

Now what . . . now this. What is it that you told me, let me see—I'll get you a loan, if you keep the child. Get out bitch, take your little box of clothes and shove it. *That's what I said.* I don't want this child, and you're talking about a loan. *That's what I said . . . bitch get out of here. That's what I said.*

The shriek "*that's what I said*" reverberated like an echo from a deep void. The disembodied voice belonged to a woman who had obviously seen us walking by through a small window of her tenement. Her angry string of seemingly incoherent words was directed to Amrita, the social worker I was traveling with. With a drastic economy of utterance, the words both demanded and set the tone for a confrontation about an incident that had happened earlier. The reference was to a highly charged altercation over a gift and a newborn child that the woman claimed she did not want. The words seemed to forewarn us about the contentious and volatile nature of the interaction that was to ensue. Within seconds, we were all interpellated into the mise-en-scene of an unfolding story. Not budging from within the recesses of her street-side hut, the unseen commentator had succeeded in constructing her performative space and fast forwarding the narrative chronology with directorial urgency. Her strident address and the interaction that followed seemed to test the meaning of feminist commitment in the ethnographic pursuit.

The voice belonged to Kumari, a deeply agitated young woman in her early twenties, who had just given birth to a daughter. Our small group, her audience, was drawn immediately into the particularities of Kumari's life and its entanglements. In a context where sons are favored and daughters are seen only as an economic liability, here was a mother deeply distressed by the birth of a daughter. In Kumari's case, this was not the first daughter and evidently the social workers were a little suspicious about her reproductive history and the possibility of infanticide in the past. Her explosive fragment, defying narrative tradition of a ritualistic beginning, instantaneously burst the myth of a pure experience waiting to be recovered by an ethnographer's textual skill and account. Although it was very unclear how this meeting would proceed, Kumari provided a point of entry into her rage. Her words were unsettling on many fronts; in particular, they forced reflection about the epistemological coherence and academic surety that travel implicitly with the ethnographic enterprise.

Kumari's interjection served to transport her audience immediately, aggressively to the sensory regimes and pulse of her violent world where girls and women were marked by their absence and invisibility. I focus in this essay on this one brief meeting to demonstrate how violence becomes the organizing focus of women's existence in a rural community as it weaves into the "the recesses of the ordinary" (Das, 2007, p. 1). This discussion also elaborates on the meaning and process of writing an ethnographic account of violence, especially one driven by a sense of feminist politics. I elaborate on the details of this meeting with Kumari, not with a view of solely rehearsing a self-revelatory angst or staging my academic positionality with its obvious power advantages. Instead, I want to situate Kumari's radical posturing within an unexpected and interruptive meeting that forced reflection on the very project of narrating violence. What Kumari offered was a countersketch, a fragment to ground and refunction the feminist pursuit of recovering subaltern narratives.<sup>1</sup> Kumari provided an explanation about her stance and her ways of accommodating the violence of infanticide into her life.

Ethnography situates us within "delicately negotiated and fragile 'face-work' that is part of the intricate and nuanced dramaturgy of everyday life" (Conquergood, 1991, p. 187). In these brief and tense encounters, we gain access to fragments of subaltern experiences. I was overwhelmed by the impossible options facing Kumari, yet it is not my intention to describe Kumari as a deviant mother or for that matter condone her for her stance on female infanticide. As a feminist ethnographer, my goal is to present how

Kumari emerges as a political subject within a moral economy that participates in both censoring and creating the violent mother. What emerges, as Scheper-Hughes (1992) writes, "in the act of" "writing culture, is "a highly subjective, partial, and fragmentary—but also deeply felt and personal—record of human lives based on eyewitness and testimony" (p. xii).

Fieldwork forces us to come to terms with tough ethical and political questions as they relate to epistemological perspectives. In fact, every feminist scholar engages in the exercise of recalibrating the relationship between vision, representation, and feminist politics (see Haraway, 1991). The exercise has yielded much scholarly discussion and created a rich discursive space of radical critique.<sup>2</sup> The challenge of scholarship driven by a transformatory politics is to represent what we profess without degenerating as Said (1994) writes into "an automaton acting at the behest of a system or method" (p. 121). Feminist methodology is never just about defining method in a technical sense but is about a syncretic coming together of the multiple strands of theory, politics, and praxis. In short, the simple yet complex question that needs to be restated: How do we connect inquiry with a commitment to feminist politics? How do we represent lives and sensibilities from a space of otherness and render them intimate and with the dignity they deserve.

This meeting where Kumari presented a self-report while being subjected to the scrutiny of multiple gazes restaged some classic feminist methodological dilemmas concerning voice, speech, silence, the politics of location, and the recuperation of experience. After all, one can never be sure as Narayan (1997) writes that "there are any methodological guarantees that can ensure that feminist politics do not create their own misrepresentation and marginalization" (p. 37).

Kumari's defiance served in itself as a critique on ethnography as reportage and the limits of our methodological reach. As Taussig (1992) notes "for all the talk of giving voice to the forgotten of history, to the oppressed, and the marginal, it is of course painfully obvious that the screen onto which these voices are projected is already fixed . . ." (p. 52). The criteria and assumptions ingrained within methodological imperatives evict the possibility of capturing sensory nuances of remote experiences similar to the one I describe here.<sup>3</sup> The mere recitation of power differentials or the injunction to study up does not take away from what Taussig writes as "our profound entanglement and indeed self constituting implication" in that screen of interpretation (p. 52). When we construct the subaltern subject as an object of study, we draw her into the inherited vocabularies and structures of institutional language.

The complexity and remoteness of Kumari's oppression have to be made audible and palpable to recuperate her from sliding into the stereotype of the third world victim.<sup>4</sup> Without spectacularizing the subject as a token from a primitive past, I want to capture as much as possible the contradictions she posed as an unapologetic defender of her actions. Through three vignettes, I present the encounter and my methodological reflections to discuss issues of violence, methodological transparency, and the subaltern body.

### Repudiation/Retellings of the Gift

The first vignette returns to Kumari's words, which made our party of three stop outside her shanty. Kumari had defied us to accept her challenge, enter her quarters, and receive both her cogent logic in defense of infanticide and her unapologetic stance about her choices. Here was a new mother who claimed that she really did not want her new born daughter and was clearly offended by an earlier offer of a gift by the social workers. Her angry words made repeated reference to an earlier visit made by Amrita, the social worker who had obviously come bearing a gift of baby clothes and an offer of a small loan to help Kumari with her immediate expenses. Kumari had refused the gift and in fact had mocked both the gift and the one who came bearing it to her doorstep. Kumari belonged to the Kallar community where patriarchal traditions combined with modern consumerism have led to dowry demands that impose severe financial stress on families. In the context of the squalor and poverty that surrounded Kumari's life, the birth of a daughter brought only despair and financial fear about the future.

Kumari's husband sat outside on a chair smoking and paid no attention to the voices from within. Swatting flies and shielding himself from the sun, her husband seemed amused and distant as he motioned us nonchalantly to enter and see Kumari. His aloofness indicated his masculinist distance from the turmoil that was brewing within the tenement and by implication, the private world of women. The space within was an extremely small, dark, room with a small window, the same one through which Kumari had seen us walk by. Sitting on an old worn-out charpoy, Kumari looked intensely at us and continued to mutter about a cheap gift of baby clothes. Despite the loud and angry noise, her infant daughter, a few days old, slept in her makeshift cradle made out of a sari hanging from the ceiling. It was the gender of the sleeping child that consumed Kumari with anxiety and fear.

Kumari looked tired and disheveled yet ready to argue with anyone who challenged her. In a corner of the room, on the floor was a small stove and around it were scattered a few earthen pots. Little girls were flitting in and out of the room. Kumari's mother, older and more composed, sat very quietly on one end of the room. The two social workers, my companions, immediately got into a heated conversation with Kumari. They each recalled the same event differently and the versions collided with one another. Accusations flowed, arguments were staged, and the interaction grew both intense and animated.

It is through the altercation about the gift that Kumari's story emerged in bits and pieces. Married for 10 years according to her husband, Kumari did not know her own age and calculated that she might be "26, 27, or maybe 28 years." As a result of societal and family pressure, Kumari was intent on having a son but so far she had given birth only to girls. Right through this last pregnancy, Kumari was being watched closely by the social workers who suspected that she might resort to infanticide. Kumari had three girls and now the fourth, the newborn daughter. In fact, Kumari was very unclear about the number of pregnancies she has had. Slowly listening to the arguments, I pieced together the details.

For all the suspicion harbored by the social workers, there had not been any infanticide. Here was a little baby girl fast asleep in her crib. Kumari, however, was still seething with anger about the gift and the fact that she had given birth to a daughter. There was no clear chronology of events offered about her reproductive history but rather a piecing together of explanations and protestations. We kept returning to the gift, the deceptive commodity that was wrapped with complexity. Both the parties rationalized the giving and refusal from two very different logics of gift exchange and expectations. The exchange of gifts is a part of a total system of reciprocity in which the honor of the giver and recipient are involved (Mauss, 1990). The gift that so repulsed Kumari was from an agency, and therefore had all the ramifications of institutional power and authority. Here was an organization of modernity, promoting social development and establishing its authority through its benevolence and charitable concern. The gift, in question, was brought by the social worker Amrita, not as personal gesture but on behalf of the welfare agency. Kumari questioned Amrita's personal intention and accused the social workers of lacking genuine concern—"you are here because they pay you; you are here for the money, isn't it." As the conflict unfolded over the value of the gift, intent, and expected gratitude, there was a blurring of boundaries between the gift and the giver, the recipient and the refusal. The argument escalated as the language got personalized.

The social worker Amrita, a young woman in her 20s is embarrassed and clearly upset by the fuss being kicked up about a gift that she had brought in all earnestness. She recounted again with urgency how she had brought over a gift box containing two baby wipes, baby soap, and one baby powder. Amrita recalled that after waiting 3 hours for Kumari who was not home on that day, she had left the gift behind with Kumari's neighbor. Then pointing at Kumari, she added "this one here would not receive it. She told all the women in her street about the gift." Kumari interjected, "yes they all know." Intrigued, I asked quietly "what did they . . . ? That you wouldn't take the . . ." This set Kumari off instantly.

Yes, yes, her box, what do you think? I am going to raise this child with this stupid 10-rupee gift of powder and wash clothes! Take it you bitch and leave. Take your box with you. That is what I said, when she came back, that is what I said.

The two social workers, Amrita and Suguna were clearly irritated by this repetition but responded rather casually. Sugana, the senior staff member from the center turned to me and explained, "It's all because, she doesn't want this baby girl." To them, Kumari was a successful "case" from the point of view of their counseling—she had not resorted to the act of infanticide. Kumari seemed completely disgusted but wanted to drive home her point once again. "See again, there's your powder box, that's worth 7 rupees; two pieces of cloth worth not more than 7 rupees. You think I haven't seen these things."

Turning to me, Kumari talked about how the entire community was suspicious of her. She emphasized that this was all due to the interference from these social workers. The gift, according to her, came with the expectation of disciplining her motherhood but it also represented a trivial intervention in terms of the enormity of the social burden that she and her daughters were to face. From my perspective, standing as a silent witness to this interchange, Kumari's anger was suggestive of a much larger issue and one that was directed to far more than the two women in the room. The gift was a contradiction in terms; a ritual of a petty donation that merely deferred the need for structural help and intervention. To make matters worse, the agency had also extended the offer of a loan. To which Kumari retorted,

All girls, I have given birth to only girls. That's why, from this street to the end of the town, everyone is saying "she killed, she killed her child." If you stir me up, won't I get angry? If I sit on the roadside, people come up to me and ask me, hey did you kill your child? Even people I don't know. What are

they going to do for my child? This is making me very angry and then this gift. Oh yes, I am going to get them married with your so-called loan of 10,000 rupees.

The senior social worker, Suguna admonished Kumari, "Why are you taking out your anger on everyone in town just because you have given birth to a girl." To which Kumari reverted once again to the baby clothes, "what you think, I can only use the clothes you bring." As she picked up the box that has been offered to her yet another time, the image on the "tin" as Kumari calls it, flashes the initials J & J<sup>5</sup> with the picture of a little white baby. The capitalist logo, imprinted in the culture of infants worldwide, ironically situated Kumari's deprivation within a consumer economy, which although unreachable encircled her existence.

Kumari's resentment and continual harping on the gift was more than being simply ungrateful or insensitive as the social workers accused her. She was trying to make a statement about her situation—a comment about the politics of gender that she was part of and could barely survive. Ultimately, it was about the magnitude of the economic and social problem of raising a daughter and the meaninglessness of the "gift" offered by the social support system available to her. As she sat on her charpoy, I noticed the faded, old, sari that she wore with a tightly fitted blouse. Her eyes deep set looked red and tired and she kept repeatedly knotting her disheveled hair back into a bun. Another little girl barely 2 years old was crying for her mother's attention. Kumari was overworked physically and emotionally, and the meeting that she had called did not seem to proceed well. There was not a shred of continuity in this conversation as it moved rapidly in tone and content from irritation, anger, and aggression and now macabre humor. To counter the constant reprimanding from the social workers, Kumari resorted to a shock tactic: "Now the next girl, I'll stamp it and toss it out." She turned and said directly to me for the first time complaining, "Amma,<sup>6</sup> she sees only this (*talk*) . . . Ok put me behind bars, what will you do if I want to kill. Or take my three girls and raise them . . ."

To the social workers, this loud enactment of anger was a demonstration of Kumari being "unworthy" of the gift and her erratic behavior that deserved censure.

If you keep talking like this, how will anyone feel like helping you? If you say, I will strangle it, bump it here and toss it out, how will we have the heart to help. You should say I will keep the child, give me a loan.



The other social worker, Amrita chipped in,

Why do you say all sorts of terrible things; just say no to the gift if you don't want it. You shouldn't take your anger on everyone else, or speak so rudely. You don't have the *right* to be so rude. If you don't like it, you could have said so mildly.

This episode of disciplining and taming Kumari kept replaying in my mind. The protest about the gift was Kumari's struggle for personal and political recognition.<sup>7</sup> Struggles for recognition are caught up in the logics of oppression and within an economy of domination (Oliver, 2001). Although Kumari exhausted herself trying to explain the social and political conditions of her reproductive experiences, only the repudiation of the gift was even registered. Kumari's plight underscored the fact that her story is not one that stands out alone but exists in tension with other narratives.<sup>8</sup> Her urgency to take center stage arose from the fear that if she did not take charge, others would speak for her and in her place. Her recapping of her position through the repetition of the phrase "That is what I said" was a protest lodged to an unheeding audience. Her story did not register even with the social workers who reminded her that she had no "right" to be rude. To the donor, Kumari was the unthankful recipient. In keeping with Mauss's (1990) insight that a genuine gift is never solicited, Kumari did not solicit the baby products but was outspoken about its relevance. What she was stressing or even demanding was the social support and recognition of her gendered presence in a violent system.

Kumari was brutally honest in her ramblings, mostly disinterested in my presence or pursuit or my presence but inadvertently opened her world to me. In doing so, she had revealed the limits of what ethnography can expect to understand, recover or translate. She had, in a sense, issued a warning as to how she should be represented. Her actions unsettled dominant, discursive registers that deny the embodied pain and materiality of her suffering. From her peripheral position, Kumari exploded the ways in which she is inserted into preexisting discursive frames that determine the conditions under which her story will be heard. Steeped in deprivation and positioned on the political periphery, Kumari shattered the myth of ethnographic recovery and the transparent Other.

### The Disclosure

The next vignette focuses on Kumari's recreation of the violence in her life through a disclosure about death and motherhood. In a hyperbolic

performance, Kumari spoke about the violence in her life and addressed her participation in it. The only speaking position available to her was that of a social deviant, an anomaly. Her defiant words about infanticide disrupted all expectation of logic or coherence. She was the fractious subject, a spectacle of excess, staging a disruptive performance to create her own political counter space. Although she seemed to take charge and establish her presence, her exaggerated style kept her at the level of parody. Her already marginalized discourse was actively dismissed by those around her leading to displaced abjection, the demonization of the already oppressed.<sup>9</sup> Here was a woman who used her position as an unruly and irrational subject to vent about the fact that she had been prevented from committing infanticide. As she ranted about death and killing, she demanded that her audience focuses on her agency and the material centrality of her body. She stood out as an overstated, carnivalesque, spectacle which, as Russo (1986) interprets, is "already transgressive-dangerous, and in danger" (p. 217).

As she turned every taken for granted social rule on its head, Kumari's exaggerated performance also opened up a provocative space of social interaction. Kumari was not sharing her life story but throwing out fragments shifting between anger, some humor, and a persistent irritation stirred by the presence of her visitors. The social workers continued to serve as the custodians of protocol; Suguna seemed particularly intent on taming Kumari, her raucous charge:

Suguna: (*very brusque*) Radha (*referring to the author*) has come to talk to you and you won't ask us to sit?

Kumari: (*snaps*) Sit!? Why should I? I'm the uneducated one, aren't I? What do I know?

Suguna: . . . And why are so angry? Is there any connection between asking us to sit down and your education?

Kumari: I am so angry. (*turns to me; I have been silently sitting on a stool nearby*). Because. I have a daughter. Won't you be?

From time to time, Suguna, shifting from social worker to guide, would provide explanatory comments to me: "You see, till a boy comes, she will keep trying to conceive, no matter how many more girls." She did this ignoring Kumari who kept shouting that she will kill as many as she likes as long as she gives birth to girls. She threatened to kill her sleeping infant in just one month's time and then came Suguna's admonition.

Suguna: Oh really, you are going to kill it then. Do you have no feelings, woman?

Kumari: Will you stop me? Will you shut me up? Remember, I am the one who gave birth to it, cleans its bottom and gives it milk. So if I get angry . . .

Suguna: If you are so angry, throw some dishes around, why are you taking it out on the child and everyone else.

Suguna assumed her counseling tone and this infuriated Kumari even more. She turned to me and repeated her complaint that the counselors just visit to collect their money from the agency. Then she began every few minutes to repeat, like a mantra, the words "I will kill till I get a son." Soon, nobody seemed to take her seriously and Suguna continued to scold her for her inappropriateness. Other women who were peering through the window and sitting at the doorstep were jeering and laughing at Kumari's unruly temper.

Kumari's husband who was still sitting outside said little and stayed uninvolved and distant. Only once did he interject to say "She is a nut, there is NO changing her." For Kumari, there was only one solution to take on the system—to give birth to a son. She dismissed her husband, "He can say whatever he wants. What will he do? Who will take care of my girls? Who . . . I want to know?" A son, in Kumari's mind, would be able to help her and a son, she said, was necessary "for good or for bad." This was the reason for her determination.

Kumari: I'll kill as soon as they (*daughters*) are born.

Suguna: Only those who say kill, kill, kill, will have girls.

Kumari: Some 10 more children I can have, I have time.

Kumari beckoned me to sit down beside her. I asked her if her mother had come to help with the pregnancy and birth as is often the customary practice. Kumari burst out, "That bitch, my mother stopped me from killing this girl. So I threw my mother out. Get out, go, I told her and chased her out of my house. What can I do? Will you keep five daughters?"

New mothers in this area repeatedly told me that they were too anxious to even take a look at the newborn in case it is of the *wrong* gender, or in other words, a daughter. So I asked Kumari, "Did you see the baby as soon as it was born or who told you that it was a girl?" Immediately Kumari replied, "If I don't see it who will? I wanted to kill it after 4 days but my mother said no, no. So I drove her out and made my own kanji (*broth*) and cooked myself right after giving birth."

The scene seemed unreal both in terms of Kumari's assertions and the reactions to it. The social worker, Suguna casually noted, "Why don't you say you want to have a family instead of repeating I'll kill, I'll kill." By now Kumari was a little calm and in fact blurted, "I'll keep this one, if next I get a boy, I'll get myself operated."<sup>10</sup>

Kumari's determination was intense and pathetic. In her perception, her body was a machine, which she could put on overdrive and work her reproductive potential. When I asked Kumari if she was concerned about her health, she replied, "I don't care about my body. I can carry 10 loads on my head; I can cut 10 loads and carry 10 children in my womb. I can do 10 times more work than any other." Her desire for a son and talk about death has to be situated against the rural and domestic economy, which utterly devalues girls and women. For Kumari, motherhood was a demonstration of her laborious endurance and defiance.

Turning the very notion of motherhood around, Kumari portrayed herself as the radical mother who could both give birth and destroy. But unlike the terrible power of the mythological mother Kali who signified danger, Kumari was not feared but ridiculed and chided for her assumed danger. About her own maternal role, Kumari was prepared to labor till she got the "right" product. She did not see herself as plotting a murder but rather as an act of necessity to "save" the infant. How do we interpret her agentive potential, which can only be realized in a situation of violent degradation where all "normalcy is suspended?" (see De Mel, 2001, p. 205).<sup>11</sup> Kumari is trapped within a patriarchal system of social relations where in her perception, infanticide is the only proactive choice available and somewhat within her control.

### Boundaries and Inter-views

Violence constructs a culture of its own as it radiates through the crevices of everyday life. This "spirit of violence" writes Mbembe (2001) "makes the violence omnipresent; it is presence—presence not deferred (except occasionally) but spatialized, visible, immediate, sometimes ritualized, sometimes dramatic, very often caricatural" (p. 175). In Kumari's life, violence inflected not only her hopes and dreams but every aspect of her embodied presence. With a frenzied performance teetering between the ridiculous and the tragic, Kumari communicated the particularities of her complex emotions and in so doing removed the possibility of any totalized representation of her subalternity. Through her often bombastic and unconventional responses, Kumari pulled herself out of the stereotype hovering around her third world native informant status. She was not the "informant" who could be mined ethnographically for a coherent explanation and secure narrative. Rather, she exacts a different optic—"A perceptual space beyond all social conventions and with which *we* must now come to terms as an intimate, if foreign, part of our own story" (Feldman, 1995, p. 225).

During most of my brief interactions with her over the course of my fieldwork, Kumari did most of the talking in the same hurried, excited, manner positioning me to serve as a silent witness of her performance of subjection. She ignored the derision and repudiation that she received from her onlookers. Kumari was making and unmaking her story, keeping it open-ended and thereby resisting any type of essentialization. On that day, she seemed to be on the roll improvising on the theme of death and infants and to make her pain and isolation tangible.<sup>12</sup> Her one-room tenement was a space open to the public eye and for all to enter, receive, and judge fragments from her reproductive nightmare.

Inserting me into her story, Kumari communicated the harshness of her day-to-day experiences within the habitus of patriarchal violence. Her main prop for the narration was her sleeping child nestled within the folds of the sari hung from the ceiling. I was no longer just a bystander but was entangled as a cop performer in the shards of her intermittently produced story. She questioned my motives and caricatured the differences that separated us. Haphazardly, Kumari challenged me to experience, through her senses, the limits of her dispossessed world consumed and contaminated by violence. She would look to at times for support, to complete her fragmentary comments and at the same time mocked my presence and enquiring gaze while incorporating me as witness.<sup>13</sup>

With all the shouting and the noise in the room, the infant girl was awakened and began to cry and make noises. Kumari kept sitting on her bed with her feet up and kept pushing the cradle, sometimes quite forcibly that the crib rocked back and forth on a diagonal. On an impulse, I held the cradle from swinging too far. At this point Kumari started laughing, "What are you afraid that I'll kill it with my legs? What are you thinking Amma? If it is yours, you will keep looking at it, giving it vaccines." Then, rather unexpectedly, she began to rock an imaginary baby with her hands and talk in an affected manner, which I gathered was her imitation of my Tamil accent, "You will hold your child like this. You will carry it like this (*once again miming with her hands*). But I am an uneducated woman and I do this." The crib took off once again as she pushed it with a kick. This time I restrained myself from holding it. She continued sarcastically, "I will put this child down to sleep anywhere even on this hard ground, on a heap of cow dung . . ."

I felt the need to explain my presence to Kumari. On a couple of occasions, both the social workers and I had tried to introduce who I was but she had paid no attention. So I blurted out, "I just came to see the baby and talk to you, please don't be upset." To which Kumari snapped, "What is there to see? Haven't you seen a newborn baby? What are you going to do? A

woman has no *guarantee*." It sounded like *garaan* and not expecting an English word in the context, I asked with hesitance "and that means . . . ?" Her husband interjected from outside, "respect." Kumari had used the word *guarantee* to capture the fact that women's lives come with no assurance or promise of quality. Ironically, the unexpected use of terminology from the marketplace was made with reference to the female body—the ultimate flawed commodity.

When one meets women surviving intense oppression and suffering, there are so many unanswered questions. But one hesitates to ask or even broach the topic as the forms of our questions evoke particular patterns of responses (see Pandey, 2005). In this case, Kumari formed, predicted, and occasionally preempted my ethnographic queries. A neighbor of Kumari's who was standing nearby asked if I was there to find out about how they commit infanticide and offered to give me unsolicited details about the use of poisonous milk from the Errukula plant. Kumari shook her head in disgust and once again raised her voice, "No poison, no plant business, throw it out live and crying, that's what I will do."

I told her that I was not asking her about these details. To which she taunted me:

I'm telling you . . . go tell everyone that this woman (*referring to herself*) has three girls and just threw one out alive—go, go tell everyone. I'm ready now to kill; after you people leave, just see. Errukula milk, yes, yes, I'll use it. I'll feed this child that poison and relax. Then, I will tell you it died hiccupping.

The social worker who was munching on some peanuts perked up and very casually said, "How come you have only three girls now, didn't you give birth five times?"

Kumari, riled up again, began to swear and gesticulate. The women both inside and those outside peering through the window started to giggle and laugh. "You want to know what I did to the other babies. I covered one with mud. I fed steaming hot chicken soup to another; Wa Wa, it screamed. No pain nothing . . . just 5 minutes that's all."

Fact and fiction collided in this surreal exchange about death to the background of laughter from a chorus of bystanders. No one really knew if she had actually done the violent acts she mentioned. A little girl of about 2 years walked in and Kumari tugged at her and pushed her my way. "Amma" Kumari said to me "take this one and you can also take the one who is in school, I'll keep the baby." Suddenly, I felt the hollow inadequacy

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of my own academic brand of feminism. There was no way I could remove the oppression that lay ahead for these girls. Kumari was right to mock me and cast back at me the insincerity of the compassion. No one knew for sure what exactly happened to her children. Would she consider giving up the child for adoption, "No way, not as long as I live." Her child was not to suffer the indignity of being an orphan put up for adoption. By now Kumari was impatient to get us out. "That's it, I'll see you later, and I have a murder to take care of," she quipped in her macabre style.

### Ethnography and the Feminist Optic

Over the course of my fieldwork in rural southern India, my meetings with women typically took place as they cooked, fed their children, cut vegetables, or were engaged in some sort of domestic ritual. The conversations would grow animated even though they were audibly drowned by blaring radios or children crying. In that same domestic scene, inevitably the conversation would veer to the staggering expenses associated with raising a daughter, followed by different versions of a defense of infanticide.<sup>14</sup> In a showing of sisterhood, most women I met subscribed to the argument that women in their community should be excused as they are driven to the act of infanticide by the forces of poverty, patriarchy, and rigid communal cultural practices. "After all, what can she do?"

I decided to focus exclusively on Kumari here because the time I spent with her was deeply disturbing and difficult on many levels for me. Her words strung together in random patterns, echoed within the room like a continuous drone. There was a lingering sense of incompleteness to the meeting; I wanted to hear more about herself, her past, her life. There were unanswered questions and questions waiting to be asked. Kumari, however, was not interested in filling in an ethnographic urge to know with biographical details; rather she persisted in her commentary mode. I huddled in the small space of Kumari's shanty along with the social workers and neighbors who occasionally wandered in and out. It was not a private meeting but rather a public and publicized encounter where Kumari held forth about the vulnerability of her situation through an idiom of excess. Women were walking in and out of a crowded room to hear Kumari's discourse, which was at once subversive and totally irrational. In the process, she swung from incessant talk to silence, from cogency to complete randomness. She made no eye contact with anyone in the room, staring up against the ceiling or scanning the room implicating everyone in her diatribe.



Through her outbursts, she revealed fragments of her life and laid open a range of mixed emotions. However, one thread remained central in her talk—her assertion that infanticide was a way out of the continuing misery and oppression.

Through her questions and protestations, Kumari actively attempted to foreclose any conversation or personalized exchange and thereby turned the possibility of a traditional interview into a process of inter-viewing. In so doing, Kumari pushed the limits of ethnography by directing attention to what Chow (1995) calls the primary event in cross-cultural representation, the act of "looked-at-ness" rather than the act of looking (p.180). Kumari destabilized the fixity of the ethnographic binary between the viewed object and the viewing subject by reversing the expectations to regain her speaking and subject position. Kumari raised the topic of death and infanticide, an act so universally considered abhorrent, in what would seem a most casual manner and thereby defamiliarized the role of motherhood situating it within an alternate system of justice and a new moral calculus. The meeting with me was incidental; to her, this was an opportunity to stage a protest about her situation. From her tenuous position, Kumari spoke what others, I had met on the field, would not. Her manic need to dominate the conversation was part of her attempt to draw attention to her distress and identify the social network of complicity that kept her locked in oppression. In spite of the transgressive spirit that she summoned, there was a desperation running through this meeting that defies textual description or translation.

Claiming a commitment to feminist politics through a pro forma rehearsal of self-reflexivity does not, as we have come to know, ameliorate the epistemic violence that is perpetuated by the process of representation. Although feminist methodologies have historically attempted to resuscitate the silent subject by recovering subaltern voices, there has been a sharp critique about the nature and democratic shape of such a project.<sup>15</sup> The act of looking, argues Chow (1995), pierces and bares the other for public scrutiny (p. 29). She further argues that the active evidence of the native's victimization may no longer exist in any intelligible, coherent shape thereby compounding the untranslatability of "third world" experiences. Silence then becomes the most important clue to the native's displacement.<sup>16</sup> Ironically, although loud and aggressive, Kumari's words rebounded only within the confines of her tenement. Yet without the power to author a broader narration, she powerfully exposed the layers of violence and the forms of power, which erased the very possibility of being heard.

I engage Kumari's voice to shuffle through the layers of material and discursive defilement under which her subalternity gets defined. Kumari's

range of offensive and defensive interactional moves opened a window into how gendered oppressions seeps into her lifeworld. Her situation was harrowing; her terror of being punished, abandoned, and doomed was palpable. Yet throughout the meeting, Kumari adamantly refused any chronological narration of her life and revealed few personal details about herself. She dismissed the possibility of entertaining predictable questions about the deed of infanticide and her role in it. She kept redirecting attention away from her personal world to the larger framework of poverty, class politics, and the infrastructure of social support.

The raw details filled in the outline of a figure rendered invisible in the clinical population discourse about skewed gender ratios and son preference among India's rural poor. Hers was also a marked body, the prototype of the well-worn image of third world women whose representational endurance has been subject to extensive critique.<sup>17</sup> Her protest from the margins unsettled all essentialized notions of motherhood. Her macabre humor and invective was perceived by all in the room as mindless ranting. As one of her neighbors pointed out "she will keep saying the same thing." To all present, Kumari was completely irrational and crazy.

Responding to the challenge of chronopolitics and meeting the Other on the same ground<sup>18</sup> has a special resonance for feminist scholarship. In a world where the categories of civilized and barbaric are so easily overlaid on North/South, First/Third world dichotomies, subaltern bodies and their lived experiences, like the one I have described here, are either rendered invisible or surface as aberrations. In the pursuit and production of the ethnographic text, we draw the Other into the inherited vocabularies and structures of our disciplinary frameworks. Kumari and other third world mothers in similar situation are predominantly portrayed in popular representation as mindless reproductive bodies trapped in premodern depravation. Once frozen in an incomprehensible difference and declared illiterate and unreasonable, then she is no longer an agentive subject but instead the essentialized Other available to be delivered from the irrational by modernity. Then all that is possible in an encounter with subalternity would be either a stance of recoil or an affectation of benevolence, both arising from a "politics of selective recognition," which effectively displaces the need to attend to the substantive complexities of lived experience.<sup>19</sup> Kumari informed the representational process and at the same time talked back to its normative assumptions. From her confinement, she offered a fragment that emerged at the limits of intelligibility,<sup>20</sup> forcing a methodological and political interruption.

## Notes

1. I draw the term *refunctioning* from Taussig (1992) who writes powerfully of an ethnographic encounter which draws attention to the "long overdue task of refunctioning Anthropology as a First world pursuit" (p.51).

2. There is a large and growing body of work in this area. My research builds on feminist ethnographers across disciplines who have theorized among other things about power, the role of native informants and methodological responsibility. I list only those which have been influential to my work here: Abu-Lughod, 1990; Aggarwal, 2000; Fine, 1998; Fonow and Cooke, 2005; Halsey and Honey, 2005; Harding and Norberg, 2005; Lewin, 2006; Naples 2003; Narayan, 2004; Patai and Gluck, 1991; Visweswaran, 1994; Wolf, 1996.

3. See Paul Stoller (1989).

4. See Mohanty (1991).

5. J&J stood for the Johnson and Johnson baby gift boxes. The one Kumari got was a rather old faded box with a few baby products inside.

6. Amma means mother in Tamil, the language mainly spoken in this area and in the state of Tamil Nadu. It is also a word of respect used when there is an age or status difference—an indication of how she perceived and defined my role as a visitor.

7. On the politics of recognition and oppression see Fanon (1967) and Oliver (2001).

8. I am indebted to Steedman (1987) who writes "All the stories that follow, told as this book tells them, aren't stories in their own right: they exist in tension with other more central ones . . ." (p. 21).

9. See Stallybrass and White (1986, p. 19.)

10. By operation, Kumari and most others in this area refer to sterilization.

11. In her compelling analysis of women militants, Neloufer De Mel (2001) writes,

And even if, as a result of patriarchal containment within their chosen militant groups, they enjoy only agentive *moments* in an interregnum where normalcy is suspended and there is license to transform taboo and social convention, should these women not behold accountable for loss of life and destruction of livelihoods. (p. 205)

Although the comparison of women like Kumari who participate in female infanticide and suicide bombers might appear stretched, there is a common problematic issue of how we define agency when women participate in violence scripted by structures of patriarchy.

12. Serematakis (1991) in her evocative writing about women's lament performances notes, "The personal communication of pain, synthesizing emotional force and body symbolism, can vividly dramatize the dissonance between self and society (p. 5).

13. Feldman (1995) writes,

In the zone of sensory subtraction or fragmentation, the ethnographer can be literally incorporated as a witness and organ donor. The ethnographer's vision, audition, tactility, and speech may be asked to complete the incomplete bodies and selves of the dead, the missing and their survivors. (p. 248)

14. This refers to the various rituals practiced by some communities and associated with raising a daughter including the buying of jewelry, gifts, clothing at each developmental stage, including the greatest financial burden of dowry at the time of the daughter's wedding.

15. For example, see Halsey and Honey (2005); Khan (2005); Mauthner, Birch, Jessop, and Miller (2002); Spivak (1999).

16. On this point, see Chow (1993, p. 38).

17. Monolithic representations of oppression and third world women have been the subject of extensive feminist scholarly critique especially in the nineties. For example, see Behar and Gordon (1995); Lazreg (1994); Mohanty (1991); Narayan (1997). More recently, related themes are being addressed in the literature on globalization and gender (see special issue of *Signs*, Volume 26, Issue 41, 2001.)

18. See Fabian (1983).

19. See Shih (2002).

20. Borrow this idea of the "limits of intelligibility" from Butler (2004).

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