

I

*Anklets on the Pyal:
Women Present Women's Stories
from South India*

LEELA PRASAD

Ululuuluulu-a, hāyi
Effortlessly
May you overcome troubles
Ululuuluulu-a, hāyi

A girl is born, a swan is born
A boy is born, a pearl is born
Ululuuluulu-a, hāyi

Do not weep, do not weep, my silly little girl
If you weep, your eyes will flow with tears
Ululuuluulu-a, hāyi

Do not weep, do not weep, my silly little girl
I cannot bear to see tears flow from your eyes
Ululuuluulu-a, hāyi

Let it be milk instead that flows from your golden eyes
Ululuuluulu-a, hāyi

Bogeyman, come here, weaving your baskets
Give us the little girl in your basket and go
Ululuuluulu-a, hāyi

I am grateful to Ruth Bottigheimer and Pika Ghosh for help in fine-tuning this introductory chapter. Any discordant notes that remain are mine.

Hāyamma, Bāyamma, sisters
 Īgamma, Dōamma, co-sisters
 Ululuuluulu-a, hāyi

Cinnārī, Ponnārī, come little Srī Lakṣmī
 Come Ādi Lakṣmī, come and play with mother

Sri Rama, victorious Rama, beautiful Rama
 Tell me, who is Rāma? Sita of the Rāghavas!
 Ululuuluulu-a, hāyi

Has the little girl out at play come back?
 I hear anklets on the pyal
 Ululuuluulu-a, hāyi

This Telugu cradle song¹ that I have heard and sung many times comes to mind as I write the introductory chapter of this volume. Perhaps because it is a woman's song, perhaps because it is sung by women, or perhaps because it addresses a girl child. Or perhaps simply because it links me to my mother, to my grandmother before her, to my daughters after me—and calls up the remarkable crisscrossing ways in which women in India assimilate “women's experiences” and arrive at self-understandings that are deeply shared despite their divergences and fluidity. This volume, one might say, is about divergences and fluidity that, in the main, take South Indian locales: in Andhra Pradesh, the Eastern Godavari district, Hyderabad city, and the village of Chavambakam in Chittoor district; in Tamilnadu, Uttumalai in Tirunelveli district and Madurai city; and various parts of Karnataka, Konkan, Pondicherry, and Kerala.² These essays on women-centered narratives draw on stories and songs heard and narrated, of literatures remembered, of practices observed and absorbed, and of distances traveled and felt, to explore connections between the social and the imagined worlds of women in India. Thus gender converses with other aspects of identity: men and women are also Shi'a Muslims, or from the Golla [cowherd] community, or urban-dwelling, or university educated.

The emotional power of the cradle song comes not only from its alliterative melody, but also from its unselfconscious empathy with women's worlds and its female-oriented poetic. The mother, singing the song, asks

for divine protection as she celebrates the birth of a child. The child, girl or boy, is as precious, rare, and pure as a swan or a pearl, both things of great beauty, one connoting gracefulness and the other, wealth. The mother empathizes with her baby daughter—sorrow for a daughter is sorrow for a mother—but like the many women narrators in this volume, she is aware of women’s predicaments beyond her own when she seeks “the girl in the basket” of the bogeyman [būcivāḍa]. Is this girl in the basket abandoned, is she unwanted, or is she just a plaything? Whichever she may be, she is wanted, to be included with “us.” The mother points her daughter toward worlds peopled by womenfolk: in the natal home are Hāyamma and Bāyamma, her sisters, and in the conjugal home, Īgamma and Dōmamma will be her cosisters, or wives of her brothers-in-law. Tellingly, while the names Hāyamma and Bāyamma are comforting (one of the meanings of *hāyi* is comfort), *īgā*, the word for housefly, and *dōma*, the word for mosquito, suggest that female company in the conjugal home may not be congenial, in fact, even annoying.

The child (endearingly called “cinnāri, ponnāri”) is addressed as Lakṣmī, using an affectionate form of address commonly reserved for little girls who are considered bringers of prosperity. While extolling Rāma, the prince-god of the epic of the Rāmāyaṇa, in traditional praise-language as victorious and beautiful, the mother teasingly asks Sītā of the Rāghavas (Rāma’s dynasty) who Rāma is. Or does the mother also remind us gently that Rāma can be recalled by turning to Sītā? Female presences are strong, and, as Narayana Rao shows, women’s Rāmāyaṇa songs from coastal Andhra Pradesh tell us a “Rāmāyaṇa of their own.”³ Prominent in brahman women’s songs are not the heroic martial adventures of the Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa, but the day-to-day events in the lives of the women of the Rāmāyaṇa. “Non-brahman songs,” evincing even less interest in Rāma when compared to Rāvaṇa, also similarly sympathize with Sītā, although their critique targets men of the upper caste in whose fields they work (Narayana Rao 1991).

This chapter’s title is inspired by the final lines of the song and suggests how this volume has been imagined. The mother in the song hears anklets on the pyal, the sound reminding her of a daughter out at play who is perhaps returning home. In older homes in South India, the pyal is a raised platform made of stone or wood that runs alongside the main door. Either enclosed or opening into a courtyard or a street, the pyal is used for activities such as casual socializing and leisure, for summertime resting, for children’s play, and for bargaining with itinerant vendors. Culturally, the pyal is a rich metaphor

for multipurpose space that is at once inner and outer, at once *akam* (inner) and *puṛam* (outer), and claimed by men, women, and children alike.⁵

One of the first gifts a girl child in South India receives is a pair of silver anklets (*andālū* or *paṭṭālū* in Telugu). The anklet indexes female ownership, is integral to the aesthetic of everyday or ceremonial adornment, accentuating femininity, and is an intimate and necessary detail in performative arts like dance. Simultaneously, however, the anklet implies subtle and looming differences in class, social status, and symbolic value, differences that have been evocatively treated in poetic imagination. In Iḷanko Aṭikaḷ's extraordinary Tamil epic of the fifth century C.E., *Cilappatikāram*, the "epic of an anklet," a gem-filled anklet becomes an instrument of truth. R. Parthasarathy, in the introduction to his translation of the epic, reflects on the symbolism of the anklet as it appears in different places in the epic and with different owners. If at times it connotes female beauty and chastity, or seductiveness, at other times, it evokes loss or widowhood that culminates in rage, vengeance, and sexual energy. Kaṇṇaki, the heroine, gives her anklet to her husband, Kōvalan, who takes it to the market to exchange for money. Cheated by a greedy goldsmith, he is wrongfully accused of having stolen the queen's anklet and is executed by the king. Distraught by the news, Kaṇṇaki proves to the shamed king that Kōvalan was innocent: her anklet is filled with gems, while the queen's is filled with pearls. The enraged Kaṇṇaki, who becomes a fiery goddess, tears off her breast and flings it at the city of Madurai, and Madurai is consumed in the flames of her curse. At one point before Kōvalan's execution is a poignant and ironic scene in which the remorse-stricken Kōvalan, who has abandoned Kaṇṇaki for a courtesan, returns. Mistakenly thinking he needs more jewelry to pamper the courtesan, Kaṇṇaki spontaneously offers, "My anklets. Here! Take them" (Parthasarathy 1993: 92). The anklet is transformed constantly in the epic but it also transforms the epic, and the same can be said of folktales that tell this story.⁶

The anklets evoke overlapping worlds of memory, femininity, and play, worlds that the narratives in this volume explore and interrogate. In these narrative settings, female roles, and role-playing itself, are open to scrutiny as they are enacted, enjoyed, suffered, reversed, or negotiated by characters in the stories or by narrators themselves. Cultural types like the son-in-law are laughed at, bawdy body lore is enjoyed, and overt misogynist narratives are interrupted, endorsed, or reworked. The narratives are exuberant in their sense of play. As studies of play demonstrate, play can in fact marginalize players when it cloaks unequal power relations and

makes frames fuzzy and the playing-field unclear (Lindquist 2001). But play also indicates creativity, freedom to become, and a place where critique is possible (Bateson 1972; Sutton-Smith 1997).

The four following essays recount and analyze stories that are unified by A. K. Ramanujan's understanding that women-centered narrative is one that is narrated by women, is shared among women, is about women, or is a varying combination of these (1991). This, however, does not exclude men's voices and men's presence in the storytelling and conversational settings that the essays discuss. Ramanujan uses a Kannada story about a woman told by women to suggest the following characteristics of women-centered tales: (1) heroines are either already married or marry early, and with marriage begin trials; (2) symbols that may appear in animal- or in male-centered tales take on different meanings in women-centered tales countering "constructs and stereotypes"; (3) the stories typically illustrate female creativity and agency that reflect women's ability to tell and make heard, an observation Ramanujan draws from Ruth Bottigheimer's study of the Grimms' household tales (1987).

A PRELUDE FROM HASSAN, KARNATAKA

The label on my audiocassette reads: *Lalitāmba, Singer from Hassan, Karnataka. 14 April 1995. Sringeri*. It would have remained a casual entry among the many I made during my fieldwork for another project, if it did not unstring the memory of the itinerant woman singer in her midtwenties walking down the street with her baby in a sling, a small harmonium on her side, singing for her livelihood. Her vibrant, clear voice ignored the cacophony of the traffic of Sringeri, a small but busy pilgrimage town of southwestern Karnataka, as she sang "*tavaru mane*" songs (songs of a woman's natal home). The dismal realism of her songs and the resonant pathos of her rendering have remained with me over the years. One song was a plea to a bangle seller: *Please go to my natal home, bangle seller / Come back and tell me about the happenings there / But when you go, don't tell them that my life is being wrung out here. / Instead show them these symbols [bangles] of my sumāngali status.*⁷ Another song's refrain was, *As long as mother was alive / the natal home was ours. / After her death / God alone is our succor*. I impulsively recorded a handful of her songs, of which I translate one fully here. Her repertoire of that afternoon is directly in conversation with the essays of this volume whose words and worlds eddy out into many

homes and lives across India. I reproduce this song also to finally acknowledge our fleeting—and probably our only—encounter, deep for me, but in all likelihood nothing for her. And perhaps too because the song and its singer iconize that powerful itinerant process by which narratives by and about women are told, half-told, or remain untold, are heard, half-heard, overheard, or even not heard in Indian society. Itinerant narratives—as all narratives at some point become as they discover newer and newer contexts—nevertheless leave profound, manifold impressions that shape perceptions of the gendered universe.

Lalitāmba—from the brief conversation we had before she moved on to the next house—was from Hassan in central Karnataka, and made a living from street-singing in different parts of neighboring Chikmagalur district in Karnataka (where Sringeri is located). She knew about twenty songs at that time, and was unsure about where she had learned them. Most of these songs were about dilemmas of women caught between natal and conjugal affinities. My neighbor, a young mother of two boys who listened to these songs along with me (we had been chatting when Lalitāmba entered our street) asked her why she sang only “*tavaru mane hādugaḷu*” [natal-home songs]. Lalitāmba replied, “It’s mostly women who listen to my songs, and they ask for such songs” (April 1995).

After sending me away from my natal home⁸
don’t forget me, annaiyya [elder brother]

Never having seen a mother or father
We are orphans, o annaiyya

Annaiyya
don’t forget me, annaiyya

Who can I call “mother,” annaiyya?
Mother, father, kith and kin, in this life, you are all to me

Who can I call “mother,” annaiyya?
Mother, father, kith and kin, in this life, you are all to me

In this life, don’t weep on my account, annaiyya
In this life, don’t weep on my account, annaiyya

Being a *muttaida*⁹—in this life, that is enough for me

Annaiyya
don't forget me, annaiyya

After sending me away from my natal home
don't forget me, annaiyya
Never having seen a mother or father
We are orphans, o annaiyya
Annaiyya
don't forget me, annaiyya

When I was a baby, you rocked me in the cradle
When I could speak and walk, you begged for alms and raised me

Getting me married to a blind man
you showed me the path to a town I had never seen

Annaiyya
don't forget me, annaiyya

After sending me away from my natal home
don't forget me, annaiyya
Never having seen a mother or father
Orphan, that is me

The husband who tied my *thāli*,¹⁰ he is god, annaiyya
Being a *muttaide*—in this life, that is enough for me

The money we scrape together is enough for us to eat and sleep
The road to my natal home is thorn-ridden, annaiyya

Annaiyya—
don't forget me, annaiyya

What can I give you in this life, annaiyya?
In the next birth, become my father, annaiyya
I will be born your son and repay my debt to you
I will be born your son and repay my debt to you

Annaiyya—
don't forget me, annaiyya

Annaiyya—
don't forget me, annaiyya

Lalitāmba's song highlights the emphases of the essays in this volume, which address South Indian kin worlds, women's anguish amid a patriarchal normative, and a multivocal ironic subjectivity that inverts but also seeks continuities with the priorities of a male-centered world. The song plays out the familiar push and pull between the natal home that a married woman longs for and the conjugal one to which she is bound. The marked absence of other women in the song emphasizes the isolation felt by the female protagonist in the song. In this case, the brother, the *annaiyya*, is the natal home, and signifies *all* natal connections. From this comes the desperation: "Don't forget me, Annaiyye." If metonymically the brother is the natal family, he then bears the obligation of getting his sister married and helping her achieve the auspicious status of a *muttaide* (married woman), an obligation that could potentially mark the closure of his responsibility. But she reminds him that he must not forget that he is also a brother, one who conventionally bridges natal and conjugal homes for a sister. The brother, we learn, has brought her up through self-sacrifice and hardship, but has married her to a blind man, ironically showing her "the path to a strange town."

The female protagonist is constrained by a system of patriarchal transactions and is dogged by material hardship, but clearly she is not rendered voiceless. She articulates, through the use of irony, a sad critique of the brother she loves. Her brother's sense of inevitable duty has sacrificed the only possession she has tangibly held: her sense of belonging. The rites of marriage have initiated her into a second orphanhood, making her a twice-born orphan. In a subtle, swift change in a line in the refrain ("Orphan, that is me" from "We are orphans"), she notes that they no longer share a common predicament. The recurring line "in this life [*bāḷinalli*]" is double-edged. It emphasizes a culturally rich inheritance she has received in this life—the status of *muttaide*—but an inheritance that has become burdensome. The narrator uses the word "*sākaiyya*," which I translate as "enough for me" but the word also connotes being "fed up."¹¹ Dispossessed even of her natal home, the path to which is now thorn-ridden, she asks her brother, "What can I give you in this life?" The answer suggests that she also inherits also something she must carry over into the next life: a debt. And it is a debt that cannot be repaid—unless she is born a man, and unless her brother is reborn as her father. The debt can then be repaid through the father-son relationship, considered by Hindu scriptures a legitimate route for the dispensation of debt (*pitr rna*). Why is this debt incurred at all when the brother has after all performed his duty? Perhaps the answer to this question is partly in the earlier observation that roles

played out in life create moral meanings and transformations. The brother, by performing the duty *of a father*, has created an additional constellation of relationships with his sister. These relationships draw her into a different orbit of affections and obligations. All kinds of shifts are necessary for the debt to be repaid, it seems, and once again a very fine line is drawn between bonding and bondage. These shifts are implied in the semantic polyphony of the word *ṛṇa*. And although the sister acknowledges the magnitude of the brother's stepping beyond his role, her critique is perhaps enhanced by what she does not say. Why does she not say that she will be born as his mother in the next birth? Does she feel that the brother has done his duty perfunctorily, even callously, by committing her to a "blind" man? Or does she feel that a life of reciprocated relationships is a privilege available only to males, and hence were she able to choose her next birth, she would choose the life of a son (but with a memory that can retrieve the affections and mortgages of a previous female birth)?

Gloria Raheja and Ann Gold, presenting a rich selection of women's stories and songs from Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh (1994), also note that frequently, what one encounters in women's oral traditions is an ironic commentary on the discourse of patriliney which demonstrates a "critical awareness of [patriliney's] contradictions. The irony in these songs does not seek to displace that discourse entirely but to question its claim to exclusive moral authority" (Raheja 1994: 105). Raheja and Gold similarly find that morally and emotionally laden brother-sister ties are enacted in oral narratives, and that these ties could also have considerable economic implications as in elaborate gift-giving. Peter Claus observes that even in the matrilineal society of Tulunad, in Karnataka, the brother-sister bond is salient and the brother has a "strong moral obligation" to ensure the welfare of his sister and her children (1991: 141). Indeed, brother-sister obligations carry over even to the children of the brother and the children of the sister. In one *pāḍḍana* (women's ritual narrative-songs sung in the fields), the brother uses his moral bond with his sister to send her back to her husband (Claus 1991).

While women-centered narratives cherish brotherly love, heroism, and chivalry (celebrated in festivals like *nagapanchami* in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh and *rakshabandhan* in north India), they are all too aware of the fragility of sibling ties. Thus, in this volume, in the essays by Kanaka Durga (in "The Tale of the Sister's Sacrifice" or "The Tale of Dēvanamma") and Lakshmi Narasamamba (in the brother-and-sister tale), brother-sister relationships take dangerous turns into competitive, incestuous, or exploitative territories.

NARRATOR-WORLDS

Ethnographically situated folktale collections began to emerge as a distinct genre in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century in India, and it is pertinent to note that many of these collections considered women to be repositories of folk narrative. In 1868, an extraordinary collection of folktales called *Old Deccan Days, or Hindoo Fairy Legends, Current in Southern India*, was published by Mary Frere. Traveling in Southwestern India with her father, Bartle Frere, then governor of Bombay Presidency, Mary Frere collected stories from her ayah and traveling companion, Anna Liberata de Souza, a Calicut-born Goan Christian who had settled in Pune. The twenty-four tales in *Old Deccan Days* are preceded by several layers of authorial narrative of which the longest is an autobiographical reflection in English by Anna de Souza that Mary Frere tells us she transcribed. In this section titled “The Narrator’s Narrative,” Anna tells us about events and choices in her life and about her relationships with her mother, her grandmother, and her children. Although scores of folktale collections followed *Old Deccan Days* in colonial India, unfortunately none emulated Frere’s sensitive ethnographic methodology. Nevertheless, many collectors acknowledged narration and narrative as a women’s expressive domain, and collections like Alice E. Dracott’s *Simla Folk Tales, or, Folktales from the Himalayas*, which comprised stories narrated by a wide range of “village women belonging to the agricultural class of Hindus in the Simla district” (1906: x) were published. But there were others that claimed for their source single woman-tellers. L. B. Day, in the Preface to his *Folktales of Bengal* writes that when R. C. Temple urged him to collect and publish “unwritten” stories, Day “readily caught up the idea and cast about for materials. But where was an old story-telling woman to be got? I had myself, when a little boy, heard hundreds—it would be no exaggeration to say thousands—of fairy tales from that same old woman, Sambhu’s mother . . .” (1883: viii). Eventually collecting twenty-two stories from a variety of narrators who include a Bengali Christian woman (ten stories), two old brahman men (nine stories), an old barber (three stories), and his old servant (two stories), he concludes that he has “. . . reason to believe that the stories given in this book are a genuine sample of the old old stories told by old Bengali women from age to age through a hundred generations” (1883: ix). In *Indian Fairy Tales* (1880), a noteworthy successor to Mary Frere’s *Old Deccan Days*, a teenager, Maive Stokes, presents stories narrated to her “by two Ayahs, Dunkni and

Muniya, and by Karim, a Khidmatgar [servant, orderly]" (Stokes 1880: v). Muniya, we later learn is a "very white-haired old woman," and Dunkni, a younger woman who had heard the stories from her husband. Mary Stokes, Maive Stokes's mother, occasionally includes the narrators' views in the "Notes" to the collection. Pandit S. M. Natesa Sastri's four-volume *Folklore of Southern India* (1884) names its sources as his grandmother and his stepmother. And yet, with the exception of Mary Frere's collection, the woman narrator appears in the folktale collection only to depart as soon as the stories begin to unfold. This elusive depiction of the narrator, while noting her as an inveterate storyteller, did not celebrate her lived life as a woman. But one could argue that these folktale collections were not concerned with the day-to-day materiality of the storyteller's life, and consequently they caulked the interactive spaces and moments in which narrations happen, making invisible the storyteller's verbal inventiveness.

The preference for narrative over narrator (and the symbiotic relationship between the two) becomes problematic in collections that explicitly claim stories as straightforward transcripts of cultural practice—a position that overrules the world and work of imagination. Collections of folktales published in recent decades (Beck et al. 1986; Ramanujan 1993; 1997), which also owe a debt to unnamed grandmothers, are, however, more reserved about eliciting cultural "truths" from the tales, and seek instead a robust appreciation of the tales as they engage with each other and with other literatures and cultural sites. Illustrating this is Ramanujan's observation: "A folktale is a poetic text that carries some of its cultural context within it; it is also a traveling metaphor that finds a new meaning with each new telling. . . . one should bear in mind that these tales are meant to be read for pleasure first, to be experienced as aesthetic objects" (Preface, Ramanujan 1993).

Although the essays in this volume do not consciously align themselves with the bittersweet history of the characterization of female narrators, they nevertheless speak to it. They reveal instead that rather than silently departing from collections of narratives that claim female sources, women narrators are present everywhere in the narrative experience (whose beginnings and closures are incredibly elastic) and that gender is forefronted (not backgrounded) in the making of cultural meaning. Further, the essays in this volume written in 1995,¹² share with recent works in life history and narrative the insight that the intersections between a narrator's life and the stories she tells are not predictable or simplistically mappable, but that intersections do exist and can be dialogically explored by

researcher and narrator (Marriott 1989; Grima 1992; Mines 1994; Gold 1994; Narayan 1997). Moreover, “meanings” ascribed to stories by narrators could change with the passage of time and with the gathering of further life experiences. Other recent collections of essays on South Asian expressive forms persuasively demonstrate the inexhaustible relevance of the study of gender in everyday life (kinship, foodways, dress, communicative practices), sacred landscape, ritual, and performance traditions (see, e.g., Blackburn and Ramanujan 1986; Claus, Handoo, and Patanayak 1987; Appadurai, Korom, and Mills 1991; Kumar 1994; Raheja and Gold 1994; Feldhaus 1995; Busby 2000).¹³ This pervasiveness of gender in quotidian economic and ceremonial life is treated with excellent, reflexive contextualization by Leela Dube in her work in the Lakshadweep Islands and in Central India (2001). Lively debates on the politics of ethnographic practice, and postcolonial critiques of knowledge-making have helped scholars articulate a praxis that is historically situated and socially sensitized (Marcus and Clifford 1986; Breckenridge and Van der Veer 1993). But to “new” turns in ethnographic practice, feminist critiques have proved time and again that gender-blind cultural maps are often simply products of optical illusion, if not cultivated blindness (for elaborations, see Visweswaran 1988; Gordon and Behar 1995; John 1996; Dube 2001). And as Margaret Mills notes, “Too often in critical-historical reviews, post-modern or not, ‘I didn’t see it’ is allowed to imply ‘It wasn’t there’” (1993: 184). Fine-grained literature on feminist ethnography and narrative reminds us that the speaking voices of women narrators belong to living bodies of women, so that their narrating universe is thoroughly in conversation, back and forth, with self-perceptions, with other persons, and with broader aspects of social life (Abu-Lughod 1993; Jordan and Kalcik 1985; Dwyer 1978; Gluck and Patai 1991; Kumar 1994; Narayan 1997; for example). The essays in this volume show that women narrators not only exist alongside male narrators but that the alongside-position is both vigorously competitive and cooperative.

In the essays by Handoo, Narasamamba, and Venugopal one is not likely to find detailed self-reflection on the wheres, whys, and hows of the author’s presence and agenda in her research setting. But perhaps these essays still remind us that co-presence, which is recognized today as existing beyond the bounds of orally articulated discourse (e.g., Mills 1991), also just as certainly exists beyond that which is cataloged, even “genred” by reflexive ethnography. I find myself thinking about how reflexivity is a process of partial and provisional disentanglement as we try to capture

those deep intersecting, overlapping, tumbling, and changing ways in which we experience and understand our personhood. While I leave it to readers to dwell on the shades of reflexivity one encounters in this volume, it is nevertheless important to point out that the authors of this volume draw on their lives in India as women for the interpretations they propose in this volume. Their experiences as Indian women (shaped by their class locations, alma maters, careers, and other forces) mean that they participate in self-conscious and subconscious ways, in whatever degrees of distance or involvement, and in cultural discourses and practices that implicate womanhood in India.

Lurking near these affinities is a term that has been much debated in folklore and anthropology: native. Critics point to the othering and essentializing that underlie the use of this term as belied by colonial deployments of the category “native,” nationalist reappropriations of that same label, and diasporic realities that complicate claims to native land (Appadurai 1988; Malkii 1999; Narayan 1993; Srinivas 1976, 1998). But it remains the case that shared arenas of experience or the perception (mutual or one-sided) of shared experience makes it possible to “be native” contextually and temporarily. As Mills observes, “One thing that gender studies can add to the notion of social groups is the experiential decentering of social membership. Thus group membership for any one person becomes a Venn diagram of intersecting and superimposed circles of interaction, not all of them face-to-face, as we see now, but all involving alternative shared rules systems upon which assumed alternative shared solidarities are played out” (1993: 176). Lalita Handoo’s observations about the cultural salience of the son-in-law figure come from her observations of cultural patterns, her reading of other folktale collections that link her corpus to other regions in India, her participation in women’s gatherings, and in everyday life in different parts of India. Lakshmi Narasamamba tells us that being perceived as a Hindu woman interested in learning about Muslim women’s lives (so that cross-cultural understandings could be built) helped her establish connections in a Muslim community, but there is little in her essay to suggest that the religious identities of researcher and community superseded their gender identities. Thus her conversations with Muslim women are not between “Hindu” and “Muslim” women, but between women who share comparable life-experiences.

Kanaka Durga chooses quite consciously to document the stories and songs of Rājamma, because she found her a “a simple woman, a replica of the folk and of popular culture who carves a domain of her own. . . .”

The temptation to read this assessment as unproblematized othering by a not-simple, not-folk researcher is preempted by Kanaka Durga's complex analysis of Rājamma's repertoire in relation to her lifestory. Even more, one realizes that the anthropological critique of the "Other" is not one that is of central importance to Kanaka Durga or Rājamma, or one that affects their relationship, which is evidently one of mutual respect, affection, and continuity.

The fact that all the authors primarily present summaries of narratives (Kanaka Durga also provides translations of narrative texts in the appendix to her essay) pushes one to think critically about "summary" as an ethnographic genre. While the summary format, hardly new, for reproducing oral narratives may be a response to academic and publishing practicalities, one wonders about how authors insert themselves into summaries of other people's narratives by selecting "luminous" details from what they hear or record and by (re)organizing these details. What cultural continuities and authority do researchers envisage as they summarize narratives they hear, and transcribe moments of participation? What subtexts of personal experience guide these processes of summary, transcription and translation, and what kinds of authorships are implicated? How do prior relationships (between narrator, researcher, audience) affect the production of summaries of oral narratives such as those in this volume?

A central line of inquiry for all the authors revolves around the ways in which narrators, most of whom are women in this volume, create and explore points of dialogue, disagreement, and tension between the narratives they tell and the social realities in which they live. Thus, Lalita Handoo considers the implications of pan-regional "narrating societies" that share stories about the "stupid son-in-law." Underlying Handoo's analysis, based on her fieldwork in Karnataka and Kashmir and on her acquaintance with other regional collections, is the question of what one can learn about women's narrative voices in settings where narrators are multiple and co-present, where they co-construct narratives actively, and where the focus is not so much on a particular female narrator as on the ambience generated by diffused female "authorship." The settings for Handoo's study are mostly "domestic," and the social occasion permits bawdy joviality whose target is the sexually and intellectually inept son-in-law. Conversely, Handoo asks, what does the *tale type* itself, pervasive as it clearly is, say about female communities of narrators and listeners? She speculates, "despite the son-in-law's high social status in the Indian kinship system, the popularity of stupid son-in-law tales in India indicates the

sensitive attitudinal status of both the son-in-law and the narrating society that identifies itself with the girl's family and probably with the female sex as a whole."

Handoo's insight is in keeping with Joyce Flueckiger's work, which rigorously demonstrates connections between women's statuses in actual lives and female images in performed traditions. Flueckiger shows that in Chhattisgarhi genres like *bhojalī*, *ḍālkhāī*, and *suā nāc*, which Chhattisgarhi residents claim to be distinctive to the region, women, either as performers of songs and stories or as heroines of popular narratives, celebrate and enjoy powers and potentialities through dramatic enactment (1996). In earlier work, Flueckiger finds that women consistently appear in leading roles across several Chhattisgarhi genres, and she relates this to the greater freedom, visibility, and status Chhattisgarhi women have when compared to women in Uttar Pradesh. She says, "Freed from the restraints of upholding the traditional ideology of a specific caste and promoting its martial ethos, the epic in Chhattisgarhi . . . is closer to being a model 'of' Chhattisgarhi society than a model 'for' it. The epic is not, however, a mere reflection of Chhattisgarhi society. Rather, it is also an arena in which an alternative social model is exposed, explored, and given voice" (1989: 53).

If certain contexts make female audiences and women tellers converge for Lalita Handoo, in a sense pluralizing the female narrator, in Saraswathi Venugopal's essay, the narrator—for the audience—is part of a broader landscape in which the depiction of gender in the narrative seems to take precedence over the gender of the narrator. The two small, informal groups of Tamil men and women in the village of Uttumalai (in Tirunelveli district) and the city of Madurai seem to diverge in their responses, not because of their geographical and economic particularities (as Venugopal initially supposed they would), but because of their gender identities. Venugopal wonders whether this holds lessons for other more detailed and extensive studies of audience responses in tale-telling events: Would women listeners elsewhere also cross so-called urban and rural divides to respond similarly to narratives involving women? If they did, would this comment not only on the gendered reception of audience members, but also on the perception of gendered *predicaments*?

Lakshmi Narasamamba takes up the question of what powers can be imagined to be held by oral narrative itself, and how those powers may or may not be extended to, or assumed by, the narrator. She presents narratives told by a number of women who range from a fourteen-year-old girl to a trained *ustādbi* (Muslim religious storyteller) and by two elderly men

in a Muslim community in Eastern Godavari district in Andhra Pradesh. She also includes stories narrated by a Muslim healer-couple in Hyderabad. In her study, women narrators re-architect female doorways and spaces in male-constructed domains, recognizing and restoring through expressive traditions and activities the female agency of this world. In one story about Bībī Fātima, the saint and daughter of Mohammad, the reconstruction is quite literal when Bībī Fātima appears in a devotee's dream urging women to build a women-only dargāh (a Muslim tomb of a saint). Narasamamba learned during fieldwork that trespassers to this shrine are known to have been evicted by swarms of bees! She concludes, "Women who perform and carry on narrative traditions are not just passive bearers, but are custodians, critics, reviewers, makers and remakers of societal structures."

In Kanaka Durga's essay, we see dramatic contiguities, or "convergence," to use her term, between the narrator's day-to-day world, her memories, and her vision of her years to come, and the stylized narratives she performs. Kanaka Durga thus focuses on the storyteller's repertoire. Kirin Narayan, finding similar continuities between narrators and narratives in her study in the Kangra region of Himachal Pradesh, writes,

A repertoire is a choice selection, assembled by chance, by occasions for repeated hearing, by aesthetic predilection, and by themes compelling to the teller. As a selective corpus lodged inside a mind and shared by a sensibility, the tales in a person's repertoire relate to each other; they comment on, disagree with, and extend discussion on interrelated themes. (1997: 212)¹⁴

Candid conversations between Kanaka Durga and Rājamma, a sixty-year-old widow from the *golla* [cowherd] community in Chavarambakam village in Chittoor district, Andhra Pradesh, not only tell us about the rapport they come to share, but illuminate the crisscrossing dialogue between Rājamma's life history and her narrative repertoire. Through metaphors, poetic refrains, proverbs, and motifs, Kanaka Durga traces the sinewy relationships between events Rājamma narrates and the experiences she remembers of her life, and concludes "Narrators and narratives are not separate entities. Narrators live in the narratives they tell. . . ." The tragic death of one of Rājamma's sons and the heartrending disappearance of another relocate themselves as poetic subjects in Rājamma's performed narratives. In so doing, Kanaka Durga comes to the understanding that the transformation into poetic subjects perhaps consoles Rājamma because the tragedies, which she relives day after day, cannot know closure.

TELLING ON SOCIETY

Natal and conjugal homes loom large in women-narrated stories, but often, they are crowded. Or there is no room and yet plenty of space. My own friendships in India and North America have brought home to me that for many Indian women, self-expression and familial identifications are frequently tested, even tortured, at the intersections of conjugal and natal ties. At the same time, for other women, those very crossroads can be empowering. What makes, or mars, such ties, and what makes them ambiguous? As one can ask about the street singer Lalitāmba's song, what transformations are implied with regard to (expected of, enforced on) a woman's subjectivity and her body as she negotiates the sites of multiple familial loyalties? The narratives—or the summaries and retellings of them—presented in this volume speak directly and passionately, with humor and with feeling, to these questions. They ripple out to explore relationships between husbands and wives, between daughters-in-law and the conjugal family, between brothers and sisters, and between parents and children, especially daughters. Complicating this kin world are rites of passage for women, rites whose normative persuasion the narratives interrogate and sometimes simply refuse.

Some of the narratives recounted in Lakshmi Narasamamba's essay most directly do this. In the stories she analyzes, the ultimate destiny of a female heroine—a flourishing tribe in women's narratives—is not always marriage but the acquisition of martial and intellectual prowess, something the heroine demonstrates with gusto. Further, the route to marriage is off the beaten track, and marital relationships are envisaged as egalitarian, as in the story of the *bādshāh's* daughter who successfully overcomes superhuman hurdles and acquires magical powers.¹⁵ On the other hand, in Rājamma's narratives (in Kanaka Durga's essay), which also depict strong women, marriage, whether by choice or by force, is fraught with risks, vulnerabilities, and ambiguities. Episodes of rape and incest in Rājamma's stories provoke one to ask more broadly how acts of violence against women are committed to collective memory and then appear in narrative.

The stories in this volume argue powerfully against one-dimensional readings of systems of social rules. Complex kin relations discourage us from imagining, for example, that the natal home is always a secure haven for a woman. Rājamma narrates a story in which a married woman continues to live in her natal home and is raped by her brother, but she also tells us a story about an unmarried woman who pledges her soul and her body to her lover,

and the couple dies to keep their love. If there is the story in which a brother rewards his talented sister with his kingdom only after he has clandestinely tested her chastity, there is also the tale in which brothers sacrifice their sister but lose their entire clan when she curses them in retaliation.

Authoritarian imperatives, as wielded by “the in-laws,” are doomed in laughter and ridicule in Lalita Handoo’s India-wide collection of narratives about stupid sons-in-law. The genre targets the figure of the son-in-law, who, synecdochically representing the conjugal family, is subjected to periodic checks on his power. The resultant othering implies, Handoo argues, that conjugal authority is in fact critiqued and subverted by those who seem to be its passive recipients (see also, *kes’yā* songs in Raheja and Gold 1994). Further, the bawdy humor that frequently accompanies son-in-law tales punctures constructs of male sexuality by exposing the son-in-law’s sexual ignorance and his fear of female sexuality. In the ludic space created by son-in-law tale narrations, “. . . resistance may be overt, or entertained unconsciously, by inverting the accepted frames of normality, by turning into a laugh what authority considers sacred, or by offering propositions that are a-moral [sic]” (Lindquist 2001: 22). A Kannada song, sung in my mother-in-law’s family, comes to mind for it engages in telling ways with Handoo’s narratives:¹⁶

Our brother-in-law went to Kashi¹⁷
 In a boat made of steel
 To get lots and lots of Ganga
 In a mosquito net

O! At the pleasure of meeting
 her sister, Yamuna devī
 Ganga devī swelled and surged
 And flailed and thrashed the boat.
 Brother-in-law cried bitterly!

Our brother-in-law went to Kashi
 In a boat made of steel
 To get lots and lots of Ganga
 In a mosquito net

O! The boat struck a rock and split open
 The mosquito net fell on brother-in-law
 And the rock struck him on his jaw
 With all dreams of Kashi being dashed

Very grateful to have saved his mustache
Brother-in-law returned home.

Gender-specific roles, as allocated by patriarchal worldviews, are recast, and follow entirely new social scripts, in the process critiquing not just roles but role-making itself. One of Saraswathi Venugopal's narratives exploits the well-known perception that a daughter-in-law brings a particular kind of female competition into the household by reorienting emotional ties, in particular those between mother and son, and brother and sister, so that the narrative ends in the daughter-in-law's dramatic revenge against the mother-in-law who has victimized her. Outside the conjugal frame, women's resistance to patriarchy—itsself a generalized term that calls for contextual analysis—as Veena Oldenburg points out, is “not a part-time or sporadic activity, but a way of life” (1991: 28; see also Caughran 1999). The authors here agree enthusiastically. Handoo writes, “Although . . . women seem to have tacitly accepted their assigned image as the ‘weaker sex,’ the ‘oppressed,’ and bearers of suffering and humiliation in the name of karma (destiny), they also seem to have, from time to time, used humor to break the stereotypes of male wisdom and superiority, and the subversion of these stereotypes is best attempted in the stories about stupid boys and stupid sons-in-law.” Or, in Narasamamba's words, “Women are never silent when it comes to representing themselves in a world which is often perceived as a ‘man's world.’ These narratives indicate that women use their voices to claim and safeguard their own space, which is often invaded and appropriated by their male counterparts.” But the space survives invasion, combats it, and frees it for women's self-expression. In “The story of the Princess in the Golden Cow,” recounted in Narasamamba's essay, a mother prays for and gives birth to a girl child, flouting her husband's mandate against having female children, and is triumphantly supported by her seven sons. Often, the notion of male-only territory is shown to be specious as when women who become saints are worshipped at their own women-only dargāhs, or when women become rulers of kingdoms, or doyennes, not victims, of domestic domains.

Intriguingly, alternative destinies in these narratives do not seem to include caste-ordered worlds. Communities of listeners engage with narratives and narrators, and in audience interactions provide metanarratives that comment on actual experiences of gender in society. Venugopal's essay draws attention to instances during which metanarratives are interactively, spontaneously, and spiritedly composed. While performance analyses have

been cognizant of the tremendous roles played by audiences in shaping the performed “text” or in shaping retellings (Bauman 1984), what Venugopal’s essay does is to explore how one might locate the playing out of gender in audience responses. When a tale is narrated about a victimized Chettiyar, who—caught in the competition between his two wives—ultimately has his legs broken by the two wives, the small, listening audience reacts in different ways. A man remarks, “Only the second wife can be affectionate!” and a woman says, “A man who has two wives deserves this kind of treatment!” During the narration, this same woman cites a Tamil proverb that means “Fighting between co-wives is bound to be terrible!” How do negative—even ostensibly misogynist—remarks that women make about themselves register on narrators and listeners, and how does gender moderate misogynist discourse in oral narrative settings? Or as Margaret Mills asks, perhaps the question ought to be, what does the context of such a remark’s usage tell us about its lived meaning for women? To elaborate, Mills describes how her Afghan woman friend used in conversation what seemed to Mills a misogynistic proverb, “Women are seven steps ahead of the devil.” However, when Mills reflects on the economically stressed and emotionally charged familial circumstances in which the friend had employed the proverb, she concludes that in fact, the friend, rather than seeking to perpetuate negative stereotypes about women, used the proverb to defiantly indicate the potential power that women held (Mills 2000). So, returning to the Tamil proverb cited above, one could explore whether other contexts of the proverb’s use makes it a comment about a women’s competitive protection of conjugal spaces?

In Venugopal’s study, audience responses include differences in interpretation, allusions to personal situations, interjections that demand that narrative details be altered, and comments about the social veracity of narratives heard, as well as laughter, and silence—all of which suggest moments in the lives of listeners, rather than indicate an unchanging collectivity. Nevertheless, these moments are important because they reveal emergent negotiation and dialogue between men and women about gender relations. We are reminded of James Taggart’s finding that oral narrations of folktales in Spanish villages in the Cáceres region display variations that are tailored by the gender of the teller, and by participation from the audience. He says, “The narrators, who hear of gender images in one tale, will modify those same images in another tale as they attempt to illustrate their views of gender relations and influence others. . . . The dialogue, when taken in its entirety, contains many exchanges that mediate the interlocked, and contradictory male and female world-views to facilitate

cooperation and the development of intimacy in courtship and marriage life” (1990: 15). Venugopal’s audience-centered study has implications for those countless storytelling exchanges, lengthy and momentary, that happen seamlessly, noneventfully almost, where interactivity is accentuated.

So it all seems to argue in the end, that it is somewhat hard to imagine a narrator with no narrative, or narratives that succeed in evicting their narrators (who are also obstinate beings), and—although less difficult to conceive of—an imaginative audience who will not listen to stories. In fact, A. K. Ramanujan tells us a Telugu folktale called “A Story in Search of An Audience” (narrated by K. Katyayani in Hyderabad in 1988, and orally translated by V. Narayana Rao) in which a series of busy people who do not listen to an old woman’s story about the sun-god are punished with ill-fortunes. The old woman’s story, whose telling and hearing are considered auspicious (and mandatory) on a Sunday in the month of Māgha, finally finds an eager audience in the unborn girl child of a pregnant woman. For having heard the story, she is blessed with magical powers and great fortune by Ādinārāyaṇa, the sun-god, who himself comes to revive her dead husband, the king. The story eventually becomes a permanent tradition with tellers and hearers (Ramanujan 1991: 26–29).

IMAGES, COUNTERED AND CONNECTED

Discourse that marshals images of the ideal Indian woman and stipulates everyday behavior for women is significantly differentiated but pervasive. Religious scriptures, ancient epic narrative, nationalist moral tracts, sectarian code-books, colonial abstractions, and diasporic displays of community identity posit “the Indian woman” as the locus of the continuity of tradition as well as of the march of modernity. Much of this discourse centers not on the materiality and specificity of women’s everyday lives but at best on generic imaginations of gendered experience, relying on typifications of “women’s nature.” For a long time, as archival records of essentialist projects of British colonial politics and Indian nationalism highlight, the “woman’s question” was taken up not out of inherent interest in it, but because it was tactical or politically expedient to invoke. For example, the debates of a century ago about the practice of *satī* [immolation of a woman on her deceased husband’s pyre] expose the complex and multiple political agendas of orthodox Hindu male supporters of the practice, of British colonial administrators, and of nationalist reformers of “Hindu tradition,” agendas, most of which were not concerned with the materiality

of the burning bodies of women—and even less with the lived circumstances of their social lives (Mani 1998). In more immediate memory, Tanika Sarkar demonstrates that exclusionary Hindu and Muslim fundamentalist ideologies construct an immoral Otherness to augment political positions and make the treatment of women the essence of moral difference between the two communities (1998). Anand Patwardhan's documentary film, "The Hero Pharmacy" (1995), captures vividly the ways in which parochial political and popular street rhetoric incorporates chauvinistic imagery that accentuates the social privileging of masculinity. At the same time that one confronts such totalizing and sexist discourses in India, it is important to share the caution expressed by feminist scholars that culturally grounded gender inequities and economic asymmetries neither automatically confirm that women in so-called Third World countries are silent suffering subjects of male ideology nor do they automatically allocate representing agency to "Western" feminists (Mohanty, Russo, and Torres 1991).

Against contemporary political resurgence of "Hindu" ideologies that institute a language of exclusive fraternity with starkly defined gender roles, these essays take on added significance, joining other works that hold up textured vignettes of everyday life in South Asia (Srinivas 1976; Khare 1984; Trawick 1990; Kumar 1994; Wadley 1994; Mines and Lamb 2002). Women's songs and stories, persuasive and passionate, powerfully illustrate how authoritarian discourses are vulnerable to interruptions when narrative avenues provide for everyday forms of resistance (Scott 1990). The authors in this volume, in pointing our attention to the wide range of tones and themes evinced by the material they present, caution against "a romance of resistance," to borrow a phrase from Lila Abu-Lughod (1990). To elaborate, Abu-Lughod asks, "How might we develop theories that give these women credit for resisting in a variety of creative ways the power of those who control so much of their lives without either misattributing to them forms of consciousness or politics that are not part of their experience—something like a feminist consciousness or feminist politics—or devaluing their practices as prepolitical, primitive, or even misguided?" She concludes, "Yet it seems to me that we respect everyday resistance not just by arguing for the dignity or heroism of the resisters but by letting their practices teach us about the complex interworkings of historically changing structures of power" (1990: 55). Against this background, the essays in this volume bring together women's narratives from South India that propose normative worldviews that are thoroughly

embedded in the everyday detail of women's material and spiritual lives, lives in which love and fidelity are priorities, loyalties need not be polarized or compromised, injustices wrought can be avenged, and self-expression creates its own avenues against all odds.

Between narrators, narratives, everyday lives, and researchers, is a story of intimacies. Rājamma says to Kanaka Durga, "My girl, I do not know that all my tales are about women. . . . I have sympathy and concern for women and their problems. I myself faced many troubles as a lonely woman. I have to stand by the side of my family as if I were a man. So I have a soft corner for the women who suffer in the world of males. I tell such narratives and songs to the young girls and children in my leisure time or in the agricultural fields or while grazing the cattle to enlighten them about the nature of the world . . . I seek happiness in memorizing and perpetuating them among the womenfolk." Such intimacies are not only those formed out of mirror images, but also out of dreams and other realities. Lakshmi Narasamamba reflects, "I understand their stories as an ongoing rehearsal in their voice world that helps them to take options, and make choices, change social rules, and act according to these new rules within their groups." These reflections link women to other women across regions and histories without eliding their personal locations. I found myself remembering the explanation of Urmilaji, Kirin Narayan's storyteller-friend in the Kangra region: telling stories helped her understand suffering. Closing this introductory chapter, I realize I have consciously drawn on the words and lives of *many* women. I am also oddly drawn to a letter that my father wrote for my birthday many years ago, after I had left India to study in the United States, about how much I strongly resembled in temperament and looks his mother, who had died when he had been three years old. They had both been very ill with a raging fever. I am always tantalized by the "fact" that the anniversary of her death coincides with my birthday in the Hindu calendar. Family lore tells me a story that my father also recalled in his letter to me: ". . . My grandmother used to tell me that my mother prayed that she should go but her son should be spared, much to my grandmother's disgust who apparently said, 'Let the brat go but may you be spared!' 'No, my son should live,' was the desire of my mother and so it happened. So she sacrificed her life for me. So strong was her attachment to me that I daresay she waited to be reborn in my family. . . . Those who had seen my mother and those who are around now still and have seen you have remarked on the strong resemblance. . . . So this is your history. If you stretch your memory, you can recall your grandmother's life. . . ."