Kamala Visweṣwaran

Fictions of Feminist Ethnography

University of Minnesota Press

Minneapolis • London

3

Betrayal: An Analysis in Three Acts

Instead of interrogating a category, we will interrogate a woman. It will at least be more agreeable.[1]

In this essay, I attempt to confront some of the dilemmas within recent contemporary feminist theorizing of difference. by reading a series of specific social relations ("betrayals") as allegory for the practice of feminist ethnography.

Such a theme is poignantly suggested by Judith Stacey's (1988) article "Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?" Here Stacey argues that "feminist researchers are apt to suffer the delusion of alliance more than the delusion of separateness,"[2] and that such a delusion may lead to what she calls "the feminist ethnographer's dilemma," in which the ethnographer inevitably betrays (or, I might. add, is betrayed by) a feminist principle. Stacey concludes by asserting that there can be no fully feminist ethnography.

In Stacey's narrative, the paired terms *betrayal* and *innocence* metonymically recall one another. Feminist innocence is betrayed by relations of power; betrayal signals the loss of innocence. The terms recur as place markers for the loss of an earlier moment in feminist thinking that theorized a sisterhood without attending to the divides that separated women. Donna Haraway has recently noted that the costs for feminist theory of maintaining such moments of innocence are great,[3] especially in the questioning of what is meant by feminism. If, for example, one exchanged Stacey's definition of feminism based on assumed affinity and identity for a contested field of meanings around issues of specificity and difference, how would a feminist ethnography be reconstituted?

I suggest that "betrayal," rather than signaling the impossibility of a feminist ethnography, can more appropriately be read as allegory

for its practice at a moment when feminist theory is repositioning itself along the lines of difference.[4] Allegory, as James Clifford has reminded us, "draws special attention to the narrative character of cultural representations, to the stories built into the representational process itself."[5] It generates multiple levels of meanings, and further allows us to say that "this is a story about that."

If this is a story about "betrayal," then the central, unspoken betrayal here is of course my own assumption of a universal sisterhood between women. At crucial junctures, this assumption both informs and is interrupted by the analysis that follows, forestalling, I hope, any reading of this piece as redemptive allegory. There are places where this analysis is deliberately uneven, points at which I stray from definitive reportage, moments when I undercut my own authority, moments when readers will inevitably challenge my authority. The response of many a disciplinary practitioner confronted with questions of authority posed by experimental ethnography has been to attempt a more authoritative account. My response has been the contrary, to offer a decidedly less authoritative account so that readers continually question it as ethnography.

This analysis takes a dramaturgical form. Allegorical in the Shakespearean sense, it opens with a betrayal and ends with a death.[6] As such it is a story about loss and transgression, violation and disappointment. The three acts outlined here are themselves social performances, which, as Turner has argued, "enact powerful stories providing social process with a rhetoric and mode of emplotment and meaning." This analysis is framed as theater, not only to emphasize agency as performance, but also to underscore the constructedness and staging of identity.[7] Identities are constituted by context and are themselves asserted as partial accounts.

Agreeing with Marilyn Strathern's analysis of the differences between feminist anthropology and experimental ethnography,[8] Stacey herself posits a certain rapprochement between feminist ethnography and experimental ethnography on the notion of "partial accounts." In this essay, however, there is a deliberate concatenation of the partial account with the partial(ly revealed) identity. For this reason, I attempt a move from the history of the fragment (or partial account) to its epistemology.

Let me then indicate the shape of this analysis in three acts. The key characters are two women, Janaki and Uma, who met when they were imprisoned together in the days of the Indian nationalist movement for committing acts of individual satyagraha. The first act of analysis attempts an "accountable positioning," an effort to situ-

a series of "betrayals" within an organization of knowledge in
er to recuperate it within the parameters of a feminist epistemol-
 that describes the production of knowledge as situated and
ational.

Act 2 attempts to work this feminist epistemology into a feminist
nography by stressing temporality, silence, and the multiple
ntities set into play by silence. Here my reading shifts to a read-
of betrayal as symptomatic of an inequality and power differential
tween women, as also a marker for women's agency. I examine
w Janaki's identity in particular is partial, contradictory, and strate-
: how her silences can be read as both resistance and capitulation.
Act 3 of the analysis situates this emergent feminist ethnography
the specific ideological context of its production. It traces the
fluence of the master narrative of Indian nationalism upon indi-
dual narratives as an attempt to locate other sources of ideological
bject positioning. I emphasize the importance of Janaki's and
na's silences, their refusals to speak, by situating them in a larger
ena of nationalist silence: the family. Finally, I demonstrate the
otential of women's agency to defy the containments of Indian
tionalist discourse.

Act 1, Scene 1

rst Interview with Uma

: At what age were you married?
: At age sixteen.
: That's late for those days?
: Yes, but my mother married young and she was determined I
ould marry later.

econd Interview with Uma

: What are your ideas about child marriage and widow
emarriage?
: There should be no child marriages. My mother's mother was
arried when she was one. My mother's sister was married when
he was five. That is wrong. At that age what do they know about
arriage? These people would act as if marriage was doll's play.
hen after ten or twelve years, they would make the marriage legal.
fter marriage they would put the couple together. This is wrong. It
an't be done like that. So a law brought the age of marriage to

fourteen. But that was also wrong, so a new law brought the age of marriage to eighteen.
Q: Have you seen any widow remarriages?
A: I have seen. It was very good, but we should not force them. We can do it only if it's their choice. It's a good thing.

Act 1, Scene 2

A few days later I met Janaki. A friend of Uma's from her jail days, Janaki and I had first met in Uma's home. This time I was meeting Janaki in the cramped quarters of the CPI-M (Communist Party of India-Marxist) office in Washermanpet, a congested area of North Madras, several miles from the orthodox Triplicane neighborhood where Uma lived.

It was now the end of a long (three-hour) interview. I had run out of tape and was getting ready to leave.

"By the way," asked Janaki with a twinkle in her eye, "did Uma tell you she was a child widow?"

I was stunned and shook my head in confusion. At first I thought I'd misheard her. Janaki gave me a triumphant grin. "Yes, that Subramanian is her second husband, the one she married when she was sixteen."

"No," I said slowly, "she didn't tell me that. I always assumed Subramanian was her first husband."

"Well, she was married when she was five or six, then that man died. This Subramanian was very progressive—a Congressman—he didn't mind marrying a child widow. That's why he married Uma."

"Don't tell her I told you so," warned Janaki as she sent me out the door. I could only nod my head in mute agreement.

Act 2, Scene 1

First Interview with Janaki

Q: When you were selling khadi in Madras, did people say anything about your being unmarried?
A: I left that work when the Congress Socialist party came; no one knew I was unmarried. At first there was talk. There were problems when I stayed with my brother and his family. He had three girls. He used to ask, "Why are these girls still unmarried?"
Q: Did your family ask you to leave for the sake of the three girls' marriages?
A: Nobody said anything. I left the house on my own.

ıaki speaking:

> Didn't they think that all women who lived in the city were prostitutes? Even if there is a party, there are obstacles to joining politics. We changed that today. The reason is I myself have stood for election. I told my sister that after making a chain I am going to wear it. Seeing it, people thought it was the "tali" (marriage necklace), and I stood for election.

Act 2, Scene 2

vas sitting in the Egmore Archives looking at Janaki's jail file. Getıg the record itself had been quite an achievement. Files were ten misplaced, or the harried and overworked staff often simply id that the file didn't exist. That was what they had told me the st time I requisitioned the file. The second time I requested it, I ceived it along with nine other files. So now I was looking rough it and trying to make sense of the information it held. ıere was the report from the Inspector of Police, Intelligence Secɔn, on the occasion of Janaki's sentencing on January 1, 1941. It id:

> Mrs. P. R. Janaki is the wife of a Brahmin priest but has not been living with him.

ıt the text of the judgment given a day earlier read:

> Accused is Mrs. P. R. Janaki, wife of one Mr. Ramachandran Iyer, who is reported to be employed in a film company at Calcutta and who is a four anna Congress member.

To confuse matters more, there was an appeal to the Chief Secrery of the Government of Madras from one T. N. Ramachandran, ılaywright and film director," protesting the sentencing of his wife R. Janaki to C class, the lowest designation in the British prison assification scheme.

The final document in the file was a letter addressed to a T. N. ımachandran Pillai from the General Secretary of the Madras All dia Hindu Mahasabha stating his inability to make inquiries into naki's sentencing.

I was left to wonder, Who was the Brahmin priest? Could it have een the Ramachandran Iyer referred to in the judgment? But two ɔcuments said that Ramachandran Iyer was involved in films—a range occupation for a priest if that was really what he was. Or

perhaps the British officials had just confused the [illegible] occupation (a common enough occurrence). "Iyer" was a Brahmin name and Brahmins were the priestly caste.

But then the letter from the Hindu Mahasabha addressed Janaki's husband as "Pillai," a different caste altogether, and a non-Brahmin one at that. There was something disturbing about the way the records almost, but not quite, meshed.

Then I remembered that Janaki had not told me she was married at all.

Act 3, Scene 1

The next time I met Janaki was in Tangam's house. Tangam was a friend who also worked in the women's wing of the CPI-M and who knew Janaki well. In fact, Janaki frequently came over to play with Tangam's two children (they called Janaki "patti," or grandmother). Tangam said she often grew impatient with Janaki's stories, but Tangam's husband liked to listen to her, and so she would seek him out in particular.

I had told Tangam about the record I'd discovered in the archives. Tangam knew the whole story. "We'll ask her about it," she said. "But I don't know if she'll be frank with you."

"That's all right," I said. "If she doesn't want to talk about it, I have to respect her decision."

Act 3, Scene 2

Tangam nudged me. "So tell her about the record you found." Already uncomfortable about the interview, I hesitated before I began.

"Janaki, I found a record at the archives that said 'Mrs. P. R. Janaki. . . .' What does that mean? Why does it say Mrs.?"

"Oh," said Janaki blithely, "we often told the jail authorities we were married so that they would give us more respect and not harass us."

I should have stopped there. But I didn't and I couldn't. "The record says you were married to a Brahmin priest—who was it?"

"No one."

Tangam looked at Janaki. "Why don't you tell her about it?"

Janaki tried another tack. "Oh, yes, as a child I was married to an old man, but we were poor and my family could not pay the groom's family the dowry we promised. As I myself was against getting married, we left it."

"Really?" I asked.

Tangam said to me in English, "She is not going to be frank. I don't know why, but she is not telling you the truth."

"Leave it," I said. But Tangam had grown impatient with the old lady. "Tell her about Ramachandran," she insisted.

Betrayal flickered in Janaki's eyes; they seemed to plead with Tangam not to expose her. Instead, Tangam turned to me and said, "Tell her about the letters Ramachandran wrote."

Janaki's eyes sparked and then her face deflated. Her secret was out.

*

Some things, of course, were clearer, but a high price had been paid for that clarity. The Brahmin priest referred to in the records was Janaki's first husband-to-be. As an arranged marriage it would have been an in-caste affair. Ramachandran, on the other hand, had been the partner of her choice and was not necessarily a Brahmin. As one document suggested, he could have been a Pillai (a prominent non-Brahmin regional caste).

I had wanted to stop, but now I could only see what I had started to its painful conclusion. I did not know the exact nature of Janaki's relationship to Ramachandran, whether they had actually been married or not. I knew only from Tangam that at a certain point Janaki left him to live alone again. Yet it was possible that Janaki had never known of Ramachandran's efforts to get her status reclassified in jail, and perhaps that knowledge would be of some small consolation.

"Did you know," I began, "that someone named Ramachandran had been very concerned about you when you were in jail in 1941? He wrote a lot of letters to people trying to get you into B class."

"No," said Janaki, sulking. But I noticed her face had brightened a little. Then she abruptly turned to Tangam and asked, "Why does she want to know these things?"

Tangam told her: "Only if she knows what it was like for women of that time can she write about it accurately. What were the problems women faced? What were their difficulties? Kamala is very sympathetic; she is not going to blame you. She only wants to understand."

Janaki stared briefly at the wall, then changed the subject.

*

I thought of the foreword to Le Roy Laudurie's book *Montaillou: From Inquisition to Ethnography*. Was I, to use his terms, "ethnographe et policier"? "A kind of obsessive and compulsive Maigret"?[9]

What kind of knowledge was I policing, anyway? And what kind of confession did I hope to produce?

In playing detective, I searched for hidden facts, hoping to fit together different pieces of a puzzle. Then followed the interrogation in which I sought confirmation of facts uncovered. "Facts," as we know, are compelling. And facts were compelling me. A will to knowledge had been set into play, but whose will was it? It was a will that was at once alien to me, and one in which, with some shock, I felt myself sentient.

I could not help wondering, Had I been "simply" a cultural anthropologist, would I have gone to the archives to detect the record that gave me conflicting information about Janaki? And had I been "only" a historian, would I have imagined that the women I encountered in the archives might choose to tell me a story at odds with documented "facts"?

Of course, these were ruminations as confused as they were reductive. Anthropologists have been struggling with the interpretation of history, as well as social life, for many years. And oral historians, in particular, have had to address issues of the construction of evidence and narrative veracity from the beginning. No, what happened was not the result of an unforeseen confluence of the methods of history and anthropology, of reading narratives and hearing them.

An inquisition had been set in motion, and I was its naive if unwilling architect. The questions were not merely "Why did Janaki betray Uma, and Tangam betray Janaki?" or even "Why was Tangam's help enlisted in confronting Janaki?" for would anyone have betrayed anyone else had the anthropologist not provided the opportunity? For a year or longer I was paralyzed by this set of incidents. The horror of my trespass lingered. I did not know how I could, or should, write about it. Indeed, I thought more that I could not, and should not.

I recognize that the issue extends beyond my own agency and culpability; it has to do with the very organization of knowledge and structure of inquiry. Still, I want to imply neither a kind of complete, self-willed agency (I only am responsible) nor a kind of total overdetermined agency (what happened was solely the product of my training). The answer, I think, lies somewhere between the two extremes. I had witnessed one betrayal and staged another, but it was equally clear that I was a secondary character in a drama that existed before my arrival, and that would continue after my departure.

*

The three ethnographic acts I have described—Janaki's revelation of Uma's secret and Janaki's story about pretending to be married; my consequent discovery of Janaki's marriage in the archives; and my confrontation of Janaki with Tangam—converge to produce a questioning of the interlocutor. Yet I narrate these events of "betrayal" not with the aim of producing a more vivid confessional ethnography nor with the object of rehearsing the timeworn ethnographic formula that it is only after talking to our informants over a period of time that we eventually learn the "truth." My concern is rather one of epistemology. How do we arrive at what we call the "truth"? And conversely, what is the truth produced by a specific kind of epistemology?

This analysis of betrayal is not a philosophical point about the perversity of information retrieval, nor is it intended as a fable about my loss of innocence as a feminist researcher.[10] It is an attempt to locate myself in a field of power (the West) and in the production of a particular knowledge (about the East). It is an effort at "accountable positioning" (to use Donna Haraway's term), an endeavor to be answerable for what I have learned to see, and for what I have learned to do. Here I want to advance the case for a critical feminist epistemology that finds its stakes, as with other interested and subversive epistemologies, in limited location and, as Haraway puts it, "situated knowledge." This feminist way of knowing sees the process of positioning itself as an epistemological act.

Situated accounts by definition exclude some analytic elements from their purview while focusing intensely on others. Acts of omission are as important to read as the acts of commission constructing the analysis. A partial account also locates one of the ideological processes of subject positioning within the production of knowledge itself: both for the "I" who investigates and the "I" who is investigated. It assumes that the relationship of knower to known is constituted by the process of knowing.[11] Conversely, the process of knowing is itself determined by the relationship of knower to known. Such a focus leads us to ask how the terms of our current discussion, betrayer and betrayed, are implicated in the relationship between some women's refusal to be subject(ed) and my own subject position. Indeed, this essay is perhaps more about the proliferation of a certain kind of subject position that enables me to write than it is about the subject positions of the Tamil women about whom I write.

And what of this subject position, my own location, intellectually and otherwise? It has become almost commonplace to rehearse

inventories that begin with middle-class and end with Western or Western-educated.[12] Nor can I better specify the peculiarities of my own positioning (more "second generation" than "postcolonial") by characterizing the contours of my audience. Although the questioning shifts from "who speaks" to "who listens,"[13] such a maneuver has become increasingly sterile, for it is clear that I write for an audience narrowly constituted by the academy, be they feminists, anthropologists, or postmodern critics.

Then there are the expectations and demands of this Western, if not largely American, audience, its hunger for news of the "Third World Woman," which, as Trinh Minh-ha has noted, "came to listen to that voice of difference." Gayatri Spivak has likewise dubbed this the (Third World) "information retrieval system."[14] My admittedly limited strategy as a member of this system is to resist at the junctures I am able, even as I knowingly (if not always willingly) perpetuate it.

Although one of my identities was that of anthropologist, such a term had no currency among the people with whom I spoke. Janaki perceived me as historian, and as such a writer of "official history"—an official history of which she was aware, and in which she wanted to be included. As I argue later, her choice to stage for me only certain aspects of her life has as much to do with the censoring power of official history and nationalist ideology as with her "own reasons." Perhaps along with the situated knowledges Donna Haraway advocates, we can also speak of "situational knowledges"—knowledges produced both in and for a specific context. That is, these acts of "betrayal" can also be read as a series of moments of self-staging and fashioning: Uma's, Janaki's, and my own. Thus I am not concerned with whether Janaki lied to me; I want more to understand why she told me what she did. For Janaki tells me not about being married, but about *pretending* to be married, and it is this staging I want to apprehend.

It is important to recognize that confronted with facts at odds with her story, Janaki does not "confess." For her the secret closest to her heart was not that she was married, but that she was married to Ramachandran. She reveals the facts about her marriage strategically, and in the end when she sees I know of Ramachandran, refuses to either confirm or deny that knowledge. It is also significant that what I learned about Janaki outside of what she herself told me in no way altered the substance of her self-representation as a courageous and independent woman. If anything it deepened and enriched it.

In the end I can only speculate on certain aspects of Janaki's life. That moment of shock when I saw myself reflected in the panopticon has become the space in which Janaki has reclaimed the integrity of her secrets. She is no longer a puzzle for me to solve, but a woman with her reasons, not so unlike me. Finally there is a complicity between different kinds of refusals: Janaki's in refusing to tell me what I wanted to know, and my own as ethnographer, in refusing to tell my audience all it wants to know about Janaki. This strategized complicity between unequal subjects in power unfolds into a peculiar form of knowing, one in which the confounding yet tactical junction of disclosure and exposure is dramatized. In interrupting a Western (sometime feminist) project of subject retrieval, recognition of the partially understood is not simply strategy but accountability to my subjects; partial knowledge is not so much choice as necessity.

*

My first act of analysis has been to suggest that a set of betrayals is emblematic of the unequal power relations involved in the production of ethnographic knowledge. Now let me shift gears and move to another level of analysis. Consider the question: What are the tactics a feminist epistemology can deploy to develop a different kind of ethnography? I want to claim shifting identities, temporality, and silence as tools of a feminist ethnography.

First, a feminist ethnography can consider how identities are multiple, contradictory, partial, and strategic. The underlying assumption is, of course, that the subject herself represents a constellation of conflicting social, linguistic, and political forces.[15] Individual narratives can be seen as both expressive and ideological in nature. However, the category "experience" is utilized not to pin down the truth of any individual subject, but as a means of reading ideological contradictions.[16] It could gauge the processes of subject constitution in the articulation of individual with master narratives.

Experimental ethnography has argued that we play with voicing, but let me suggest that we look not only at language, or how things are said, but also at when and where things are said. The partiality of identity is seen to be inextricable from the contingency of speech. In locating the temporality of speech, we gain another lens on the constitution of subjectivity. Further, understanding gender as a temporal construction underscores what it means to be "at times a woman."[17]

But who said what to whom is equally important, for knowledge is also relational. Here the "truth" is refracted through a series of

unequal relationships of power: that between me and Uma, me and Janaki; between Uma and Janaki, Janaki and Tangam. Janaki's reluctance to speak is framed by Tangam's betrayal of her and her own betrayal of Uma. Interpretation was now seriated through a chain of relationships, although one of those relationships—that between Janaki and Tangam—remains outside the purview of this analysis.

In the previous essay, I indicated some of the difficulties of merging feminist theorizing too quickly with strategies of experimental voicing. I suggested that polyphony and multiple voicings are not a solution to the vexed problems of power and authority, and that we should be attentive to silence as a marker of women's agency. I argued that a feminist ethnography cannot assume the willingness of women to talk and maintained that "one avenue open to it is to investigate when and why women do talk; to assess the strictures placed on their speech; the avenues of creativity they have appropriated; the degrees of freedom they possess."[18] Perhaps then, a feminist ethnography can take the silences among women as the central site for the analysis of power between them. We can begin to shape a notion of agency that, while it privileges speaking, is not reducible to it. My aim is to theorize a kind of agency in which resistance can be framed by silence, a refusal to speak.[19] In this my task is partly, as one critic has suggested, one of "measuring silences."[20]

Often our theorization is limited in its formulation of resistance as speech. Bourdieu's notion of heterodoxic discourse is a good example:

> Private experiences undergo nothing less than a change of state when they recognize themselves in the public objectivity of an already constituted discourse, the objective sign of recognition of their right to be spoken and spoken publicly. . . . This is true not only of establishment language, but also of the heretical discourses.[21]

But Bourdieu has failed to theorize the third term between the "what goes without saying" and the "what cannot be said." This is the "refusal to say," that which is willfully not spoken. Indeed, it is this third term that interests me the most.

Acts 1 and 2 reveal decisive silences in Uma and Janaki's narratives of their marriages. I have dramatized these silences, but this does not mean that listening is not a part of the process of speaking. If we do not know how to "hear" silence, we cannot apprehend what is being spoken, how speech is framed.

It is possible that both Uma and Janaki did not experience their child marriages as something "real" and therefore do not remember

hem. In this sense, Uma's words, "At that age, what do they know of marriage?" can be taken to be somewhat self-referential. But we annot rule out the force of social opinion and nationalist ideology—the former, which regarded child widows as objects of fear nd disgust, and the latter, which depicted child brides as objects of ity and reform. Uma's and Janaki's refusals to speak of their child narriages reflect the stigmatized nature of this category, and, perlaps, considerable affective distress.

In speaking of her grandmother's child marriage, Uma avoids peaking of her own. Just as in "betraying" Uma's child marriage, anaki avoids speaking of her own. Here women's silences about heir early marriages are bordered by their descriptions of other hild marriages. It is almost as if they are unable to think of the fate o narrowly escaped, and this kind of nonremembrance is coupled vith a sublated reference to specific women—child widows—with vhom they disavow any identification. This disavowed identification, however, is also the means through which they are able to rticulate some agency. For a child widow is not in control of her wn destiny. She is incapable of acting to change her fate. Indeed, he very source of her widowhood is the sin she has committed in nother lifetime, for which she is now paying with the death of her usband. Janaki, for example, talked scornfully of her older sister, vidowed at age eleven, who refused to try to change her fate by oing to the widow's home:

> She was shaved. After she was shaved, she was given a white sari to wear and could not eat in the evening. She must only sleep on a grass mat, she could not eat hot food. Like this, everything was so strict then.
>
> The family was very orthodox. I ignored the old ways. I joined the women's organization. And my sister, I also opposed her. Always the hypocrisy, if you touched like that she would wash, so orthodox. So I joined. I wanted to do something besides sitting in the house like her.

Of course, Uma avoids the fate of the child widow only because he is remarried to a man who is willing to marry a widow. Janaki, n the other hand, avoids her fate first because of her family's overty, and second because of her own insistence that the mariage not be finalized. This is the factor that I think triggers Janaki's betrayal" of Uma.

Yet was Janaki's betrayal of her friend Uma really a betrayal? It

was no accident, I think, that the tape recorder was off, or that I was on my way out the door before Janaki made her revelations. In a sense, Janaki had preserved her friend's secret in the moment of its utterance. Was Janaki not, after all, playing by the rules of official history? The tape recorder was off, and the notebook was closed. Therefore, what she told me could not be recorded as "fact." And, as I was on my way out the door, I had no further opportunities to question her about what she had told me.

I read Janaki's exposure of her friend, then, as a partial exposition of her own agency. It is in laying bare the aspects of Uma's life to which I did not have access that the contrast to Janaki's own life is heightened.

During the course of the second interview, Janaki parodies married women like her friend Uma. In asking her about the difficulties married women encountered in jail, Janaki had replied, "Once the husband was arrested, he became so concerned about his wife's chastity that he sent her to jail too so he didn't have to worry that she would run off with another man!" Weeks earlier I'd asked the same question of Uma and she'd commented that "husbands and wives both used to go to jail so they didn't have any problems." Thus Janaki's response to this question reveals a critical deconstruction of nationalist ideology even as Uma's recapitulates it. Gandhi, for example, always emphasized the importance of women securing permission from their father or husband before going to jail. Janaki's betrayal of Uma, then, is a way of emphasizing her own agency at the same time she undercuts Uma's, who, she insinuates, went to jail because her husband sent her there.

In this way, Janaki again constructs her own agency through the projected nonagency of another woman, her friend Uma. In Janaki's eyes, Uma was what she was because of her husband. Had Subramanian not married Uma, Janaki implies, Uma would have lived the rest of her life as a child widow and would not have joined the nationalist movement. Janaki, on the other hand, is presented as a woman of her own self-fashioning.

[Is my audience disturbed at the claim that a woman's agency is constructed in reference to other women, but at the same time resists that reference? Uneasy that I see a contrast not between active men and inactive women but between active women and inactive women? Concerned that a woman's own volition could be contrasted with the lesser, or lack of, volition of other women?]

What I describe now is a specific relationship of power between ro women that hinges in part on class difference. For although ma and Janaki are friends, and both are Brahmin women, their iendship is not immune to the effects of class that radically alter eir life experiences. Both women begin their lives as the subjects child marriages and end their lives alone, though it is not clear hether Janaki can exactly be called a widow. But there the similar-y ends. Uma has lived a life of comfort, in a nice house, surround-d by family. Janaki, however, has lived much of her life as an ctivist alone, in a shifting hand-to-mouth existence. Her narratives e scattered with references to hunger.

The class-differentiated nature of these women's experiences is iggested by Janaki's account of her first political demonstration:

> I was on a march with Ambujammal, Manjubashini, and others that happened to pass by my street. I felt very proud to be marching with them. Then I saw my brother and tears on his face. He was crying, "If women start participating in the Freedom Struggle, where will the country go?" When I saw the tears on his face, I thought the reverse—that they were tears of happiness. But when I came home, he threw me inside a room and slammed the door. He shouted, "Pavi! [Sinner!] We are only poor Brahmins. They are all rich people educated abroad. What does it matter if they are arrested—they will get A class. You will get a warrant in your name and you'll get C class along with the prostitutes." So saying he bolted the door.

In the prison classification scheme of that time, A class was re-erved strictly for the nationalist elite, those who could prove they ad great wealth or status. B class was more subject to negotiation.)ne had to have some means, but often one's status was enough to e granted B class, particularly if one was English-educated. Class C ras for those with neither means nor status, and it included the cat-gory "common criminal." Much energy was expended by national-its on getting the British to accept the category "political prisoner" 1 order to be granted minimum B class status. Thus when Uma goes o jail, she has both class and gender privilege. The first because he receives B class, and the second because she is a married espectable woman who has her husband's support. It is this differ-ntial that is underscored by Janaki's narrative.

For Uma, marriage is a proudly acknowledged aspect of her dentity. But marriage for Janaki is something that she is continually laying with, repudiating one moment and appropriating the next. t times she is the married woman when she is not: as when she uys a gold chain she knows will be taken for a tali while cam-

paigning for election. She is the city woman who is bold enough (and here again the reference to prostitutes) to run for election. Yet she gains respect while campaigning by wearing a gold chain that implies she is married. At other times she is married, but keeps this a secret, possibly because of Ramachandran's occupation, acting, which was not then considered respectable.

In disavowing her status as wife, however, Janaki forfeits the only identity available to her through nationalist ideology. If it is true that the multidimensional nature of Janaki's subjectivity is clearer seen in relief to that of other women, it is equally true that Janaki is ineligible for many of the identities claimed by women that are posited by nationalist ideology: that of mother, daughter, and sister. Janaki has no children, so she is denied the status of mother. She loses both of her parents in early childhood, so she is not the "dutiful daughter." She loses contact with her three brothers after the oldest one disowns her for moving too freely in nationalist circles, so she is no more a sister.

Although Gandhi attempted to open up the subject position of "wife" by arguing that the terms of the marriage contract be changed and women allowed to choose their own husbands, such a move can still be seen as a strategy of containment, an attempt to keep women within defined roles. Janaki's rejection of the only remaining term in this gendered sign-chain—that of "wife"—is perhaps her attempt to forge a different identity for herself as a single woman outside of known familial relationships; thus her appropriation of "unmarried" status through a kind of silence or refusal to speak about her marriage(s).

Nationalist ideology, of course, translates the status of "unmarried woman" into "spinster" or "widow"—both of which are defined by their failure at marriage: the former through a failure to achieve it, and the latter through a failure to maintain it. Janaki avoids both of these identifications, even though Gandhi himself tried to carve out a space for the spinster as celibate, unmarried woman. But in Janaki's self-representation she has never desired marriage and therefore cannot be called a spinster. She has never been married and therefore cannot be called a widow. Janaki, then, resists with her silences and refusals to speak the negative subject positions nationalist ideology would slot her into, widow or spinster, even as she plays with the only positive subject position accorded to her, that of wife. Janaki's experimentation with the role of wife reveals the strategic construction of her subjectivity and the partiality of her identity.

Yet Janaki's resistance is not unproblematic. At times she is ›ped by the oppositional subject position she occupies. Uma has ›d her life with all the privileges and security of a married man. Uma's chastity was never in doubt. By virtue of this recog- ed status she earned the title "chaste woman." The status con- red on Janaki as an unmarried woman is quite different. She iggles to achieve recognition as a chaste woman; her narratives marked by references to prostitutes and threats to her sexual egrity. Class and status are collapsed in Janaki's narratives to ntify her as a lower-class, unmarried woman. Consider, for ex- ple, the end of Janaki's second interview:

Q: Is there any memorable incident in your life during the freedom struggle?
A: There are so many. I can't say which one in particular . . . Well, in Congress there was one Baliah. He was from Trichy. He would come to my house often. But since I was alone he thought he could do whatever with me. I would do stitching. When he came he would give fives and tens (rupee notes). From 1935 to '36 I did needlework. Afterward, when party work came I left it. I am not worried about money. He would come at night to talk about politics. He was a Congress MLA [Member of the Legislative Assembly]. He thought I should go with him when he went to meetings. One day as soon as I saw him, I knew there was something strange. "Sir, please go to my brother's house," I said just like that. They called me to a meeting in Rajapalayam. He insisted I must not go. I gave him the keys and sent him outside.

At my brother's house they had gone to a movie. "I'll stay here," he said. "I am stubborn." "You are a pervert," I said, and locked the door and left. When I returned from the cinema he asked why I was not coming to my room. "I am going to my brother's house; I'll stay there only," I said. "I'll come along," he said. I saw the broom and gave him a lot of whacks. An MLA, but then how awful he should be! It happened then, when I was seventeen or eighteen years old. When I lived on Govinda Naickka Street.

It is quite significant that Janaki narrates this episode at the end the interview. Janaki's response to a question about the memo- ›le incident in her life during the Freedom Struggle is unusual. ›st respond with a description of their first meeting with Gandhi of various other freedom fighters encountered. The fact that Janaki ›ses this narrative with an episode that marks her vulnerability as ›oung woman is particularly striking.

The silences irrupted by the betrayals I have described tell us

[much about the ...] these two women. The "betrayals" themselves define the parameters of women's agency and identity. They reveal how women who fell outside the sign chain of possible nationalist subject positions could be compelled to construct themselves as lone individuals, even in relationship to their friends. I have discussed the exposition of Janaki's agency in relation to Uma, as well as the relationship of Janaki's agency to the gendered ideological subject positions of nationalism. For the third act of analysis, I will examine in more detail how women's narratives are produced both through and against the master narrative of Indian nationalism. Here I will move from an analysis of women's silences to a discussion, however limited, of their speech.

*

One of Gandhi's interventions in nationalist discourse was to gender it by inscribing the rule of the family into politics; the family is written again as metaphor for the nation. He says, for example, that the "doctrine of satyagraha is not new: it is merely an extension of the rule of domestic life to the political."[22] Yet with "family" now metaphor for the nation, the term becomes discursively fixed, leaving relations within the family pointedly undiscussed.

Even such a schematic understanding allows us to reply more clearly to the historians of India who are puzzled by why the family does not appear to change under nationalism. They are concerned with "the absence in every phase of any significant struggle by women themselves to change relations within or outside the family."[23] Yet the family does not appear to change, because, seen discursively, it is the point of nationalist silence. As Partha Chatterjee has suggested, it cannot change precisely because the Home is the realm of nationalist victory over colonialism when the World has been lost to the West.

But there is no simple reproduction of the family and nation through marriage. Ideological discourses can be interrupted, if only briefly, by individual agency. For marriage is a term negotiated by women in different ways. It is by being married *differently* that women displace the family-nation metonymy and assert their own agency.

This, then, is the ideological context for understanding Uma's and Janaki's agency. Their refusal to speak of their marriages must be measured against this larger silence. Uma, for example is eclipsed in its shadow; she capitulates. She reproduces the national-

t silence on the "woman question" (read: the family) when she is uestioned about whether she was able to take up issues of widow :marriage while doing District Congress Committee work:

> There was no time to take them up. Then in our Congress Committee, we discussed what we would do and how we would act after freedom came. In that time, how to get freedom, how to send the Raj out.of the country; how to win rule of our country. For us this was the main point. Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy, Subbalakshmi, women like this only did these things. In the party there was no time to think of this. Then it was, "In which village should we have a meeting? What to say, what to do? In which village should we make propaganda?" Those kinds of things we were doing.

'hereas issues concerning women and the family disappear in ma's account, Janaki's foregrounds and questions the nature of the ımily. Here, Janaki's speech confronts discursive hegemony. She escribes her sentencing by the district magistrate upon her first rrest:

> Then the question of my caste arose. I said I couldn't say. "Well then, what is your parents' caste?" they asked. I said my mother is of the woman caste and my father of the man caste. "No, no. A family has to have a caste," they insisted. "Is that so?" I said. "In my family there are two castes: a man caste and a woman caste. Nothing else." I was sentenced to three more months in prison because I would not tell my caste. They said they would give me A class just for telling them. If I refused I would get C class. "You can put me in a class even lower than C class," I said. "I am here for my country's freedom, and not for my personal convenience."

Janaki's account is radical. Yet even as it breaks boundaries it is t the same time constrained by them. She questions the caste sys-em by insisting on her gendered status, appropriating a popular aying of the Tamil woman saint Avvaiyar,[24] itself instructive. Avvai-ar, known for her teachings emphasizing wifely duty, was herself nable to square a wifely role with that of the wandering teacher, nd failed to reconcile devotion to a cause with service to the hus-and.[25] Janaki, however, uses Avvaiyar to problematize the family y marking it as a site of power. While families contain both men nd women, it is the male that rules the family. Thus gender is like aste, which exists in a state of relational inequality. (Indeed, even he counterhegemonic moments in Gandhi's own thinking often ollapsed the status of women with that of the most deprived caste, Iarijans, in order to show the baseness of their oppression.) On the

other hand, as Janaki's own brother implies, she was likely to get C class along with the prostitutes in any case. But Janaki's refusal to reveal her caste is still a way to assert her agency, even if it is to choose what would necessarily be given to her. There can be no total resistance, but neither is there total capitulation.

I want to emphasize, finally, that Janaki's speech with me, her interlocutor, was as strategic as her silences. She told me the story of her first sentencing on three different occasions, each time with relish and humor. She was disappointed with me the first time, my Tamil was not good enough, I was listening too closely and I missed the punch line. The second time she was impatient with me; I had heard the story before and had laughed without fully appreciating her skill as an orator. But for her third performance I caught all her rhetorical flourishes, the significant pauses, her powerful gestures, and we laughed together for what seemed like a long time.

Close Curtain

Uma died unexpectedly just before I left Madras in September 1988. Unexpectedly because she was a full ten or twelve years younger than Janaki and she had been in good health. Her death was a shock to everyone.

It was the thirteenth day after her death, and this Brahmin family was marking the end of a formal period of mourning by inviting friends to join them for a ritual meal. This was the Subha Sveekaram, the day for the family to push aside sorrow and disbelief with acceptance of the death of their loved one.

Mountains of food were piled on our plantain leaves, and though I did not feel much like eating, I did my best to conform to the idea of the day. Uma's brother was entreating the guests to eat more food, and his wife hovered nearby with an ever-ready platter of rice.

True to the spirit of the occasion, none of Uma's family showed anything but positive emotions, except her young niece, who was openly crying (and later gently reproached for it). The other guests were chatting and sharing pleasantries, except for Janaki, who sat a little way off from the rest.

Janaki watched the others eating, then stared at the food on her leaf. She took a few bites, then pushed the plate away from her in disgust. It was the day of acceptance, but as usual, Janaki was not going to accept anything. "I'm not hungry," she said. And for me those simple words expressed how much she missed her friend.

4

Refusing the Subject

This is the story of a woman who would not talk to me—who refused, in short, to be my subject. It is also the story of how I make her subject refusal itself a subject; of asking what new forms of subject constitution are forced upon her by now inscribing her silence in speech.

"Lies, secrets, and silence" are frequently strategies of resistance. Yet the ethnographer's task is often to break such resistance. Normative ethnographic description itself is rife with the language of conquest: we extort tales and confessions from reluctant informants (or shall I say informers?); we overcome the resistance of recalcitrant subjects when we "master" their language or "subdue" their insistent questioning. The ethnographer finally arrives when she renders a people or person "subject." Even if this text is marked by an absence of trials or triumphant language, does not my puncturing of a carefully maintained silence replicate the same moves of a colonial anthropology? Or does the very shape of this analysis perhaps signal a small victory for the refusing subject? For the story I give you is not exactly about this woman (who even categorically refuses the term);[1] it is rather more about how I negotiate and understand the construction of a silence, how I seek to be accountable to it.

Subjecthood requires a category or name. Yet Denise Riley in asking "Am I That Name?"[2] warns us of the "dangerous intimacy between subjectification and subjection."[3] The naming process itself suggests a juridical or inquisitorial model of history, one that interrogates the subject beginning with the first question, "What is your name?"[4] What, then, if this subject refuses a name, refuses also to be named—as freedom fighter, famous woman, noteworthy newspaper item? What is the relationship between naming and identity, be-

tween not naming and subjectification, between [illegible] not speaking at all? How should I name this woman who wishes to be anonymous? And what identity do I construct for her?

It is at this juncture that I would argue we pay more attention to our own naming practices in anthropology. Naming, even in the choice of a pseudonym, produces authenticity. The pseudonym is a false name that stands for a "real" person. As such it marks a key site between the real and fictitious in anthropological writing. Yet some fictions are expected, indeed required, to figure both ethnography and authority. Is it not, then, the moment to probe further the relationship between authoring and authorizing fiction?

What if I were to call this resisting subject Françoise or Ghislaine? Surely my audience, anticipating the story of an Indian woman, would object, knowing that the anthropological pseudonym connotes place-name if not ethnic identity. What if I were to give her a typically English or American name—Mary or Susan—and then pronounced those names differently to show the cadence of an English appropriated by another land? Or, what if I were simply to call her Revathi? Surely the easiest choice, since it is unmistakably an Indian name.

That, however, would make my readers entirely too comfortable. I have toyed with the idea of calling my subject Jennifer. Yet that name I doubt you would have accepted. A name conjuring up Western images of fresh youth would hardly have done for an old South Asian woman in her eighties.

So instead I have adopted a tactic from the clandestine correspondence of forbidden love affairs (another dangerous intimacy) and the cheap detective novel. I have decided to call her by an initial, "M." As we all know, the use of a first initial signifies an enigma, a mystery to be solved, an identity to be exposed or unmasked; it is the sign of a linear movement from unknown to known via the process of detection, the end result being discovery and denouement. Of course, my use of the first initial departs radically from the trajectory of the typical detective novel, for here M stands for a person who shall not be exposed, an identity that will not be elaborated on. A noninnocent subject is not, after all, guilty. (Here, perhaps, I commit an epistemic trespass? What are the consequences of theorizing what is hidden and unknown into a feminist way of knowing?)

My objective is to move away from a declarative or official historiography founded on transparent "realist" narrative. For, as Catherine Belsey reminds us, the classical realist text is itself constructed around an enigma:

> Information is initially withheld on condition of a "promise" to the reader that it will finally be revealed. The disclosure of this "truth" brings the story to an end. The movement of narrative is thus both towards disclosure—the end of the story—and towards concealment—prolonging itself by delaying the end of the story through a series of reticences ... snares for the reader, partial answers to the questions raised, equivocations.[5]

Belsey suggests that disclosure is a form of closure.[6] To suspend disclosure, then, is also to forestall closure. This analysis thus will shroud itself in a series of delaying tactics, reticences, equivocations: questions posed, left unanswered, hinging on the practices of deferral. In so doing, I hope to construct what Belsey describes as an "interrogative" text, one that emphasizes the subject split into both subject and object, as continually in the process of construction: a "subject in process."[7] This interrogative text discourages identification of the reader with a unified subject of enunciation. "The position of the author inscribed in the text if it can be located at all, is seen as questioning or as literally contradictory."[8] My authority rests not on positing facts; rather, it risks forfeiture by posing more and more questions. In so doing, my role as an unreliable narrator is activated.

Is it possible to produce an interrogative text without interrogating a subject? In selecting an initial for the woman about whom I will speak, I identify the suspect (pardon me, the *subject*) without naming, without having recourse to the pseudonym. The pseudonym, we remember, stands for a "real" person. Yet this subject neither authored nor authorized her own representation. She did not wish to be "real" for people outside her own history and daily life. Therefore I have written her as a fiction, knowing all the while that you will never accept her as such. For you understand that this story was based on "fieldwork," something recognized as "real" experience. Here I will issue no disclaimers: any resemblance of the following to fictional narrative is intended and purely noncoincidental.[9]

Well, on with the story. . . .

One day I had been visiting my friend's aunt when I mentioned to her that I'd like to meet a close relative of hers, M, a woman who was one of the well-known leaders of the nationalist movement in Madras. My friend's aunt immediately offered to call M. "She is very busy, you know, even at her age she rises by four in the morning! Can you believe it? She's more than eighty! But if I call her I think she'll agree to see you."

My friend Mala had warned me that her great-aunt M had an acute disdain for journalists and had stubbornly refused to grant even one interview over the last thiry or forty years. So I listened with hesitant hopes as Mala's aunt made the call and arranged for me to see M the following afternoon.

The next day I arrived at M's house promptly at 4 P.M. One of her helpers, a woman of perhaps fifty or sixty, whom I took for another relative, opened the gate and gave me a puzzled glance. "I'm here to see M," I said, hoping to clarify matters.

"Yes, well, she's just gone down for her nap," the old woman told me.

"Oh dear," I exclaimed. "Perhaps there's been some mistake. I thought she'd asked me to come at four o'clock."

"Do come in," said the woman, giving me a warm smile, and quite gratefully I followed her inside.

As I recall, I was given some very good South Indian coffee and the usual biscuits. It was a few minutes before M emerged from another wing of the house. She ignored me at first, moving quickly from one corner of the large room to another, shuffling through neat piles of papers and sending out quick orders to a servant. I think I found her presence slightly intimidating. Finally, her helper, standing anxiously nearby, endeavored to introduce me. "Ma, this is Kamala, Mala's friend from the States."

"Oh yes, how is Mala? In the States, is she? A while since I've seen her," said M. We talked briefly about Mala's brilliant academic career, and then M asked me what I was doing in Madras and where I was staying. I told her that I'd come in part to stay with my grandmother, but also that I planned to do research for my Ph.D. "What kind of research?" asked M. I told her I hoped to interview women from Tamil Nadu who had participated in the Freedom Movement.

It seems to me that M, who was anyway not a woman to sit still for long, shot up from her chair to search again through more papers on a desk nearby. Or perhaps she excused herself and went out of the room for a brief moment, I can't say for sure. In any case, I used that moment, discreetly I thought, to pull out my tape recorder and lay it on the chair next to me.

"I'm sorry," said M, turning back to me. "I haven't any more time to talk to you today. I'm very busy."

"I suppose I've come at a bad time," I stammered. "I thought you had time to talk to me today."

"You said you wanted to *meet* me," said M sharply. "Now you've

me." Stunned by the exactitude with which she interpreted the d *meet,* I suggested that we could talk at another time about her eriences in the nationalist movement.

Yes, yes," she said testily, "but I'm very busy for the next two ks." M then thrust a paper in my hand as I was shown to the r. It was an invitation to a fund-raiser for the orphanage she ran, e held in two weeks or so. "If you want, you can come to this," said.

*

, I myself left for Delhi by train the next day, and was not to rn for another month. Once back in Madras I was immediately ossed in a series of interviews with people who seemingly dn't wait to talk to me. Over time I managed to forget the sting I's forthright rejection.

did, however, try to contact M again some months later. After ing a couple of messages that were unreturned, I once managed et around M's helpers and actually got M herself on the phone. I identified myself, she shouted "Who?!" deafly into the phone, then, "I'm very busy," and hung up.

was after this second rejection that I became determined to talk is cranky and energetic old lady. I resolved again to enlist the of Mala's aunt.

hen I next met Mala's aunt, I explained to her that I thought M simply forgotten who I was after so many months. Could she ibly call M again? I was leaving for the States soon and I felt it imperative to talk with her. In fact, everyone I met in Madras atedly told me to talk to M. Her name was beginning to follow round. The more old newspapers I pored over, the more I ran s her name; the more jail files I looked at, the more M's name ared.

ala's aunt was, I think, a bit surprised at my request, but gener- made the call. Of course, she understood fully what had tran- d. "This time," she said, "you must talk to her about the anage; it's the one thing she really cares about these days. In she continued, "this time you'll have to meet her at the anage—she says that's when she's free during the day."

o days later I took the bus into T-Nagar, and after quite a walk e shimmering heat, I reached the orphanage. It was now st, and the year had changed numbers since I'd first met M mber last of the winter monsoon.

vas ushered into M's office at the orphanage with great cere- and told that "Amma" was expecting me. This time M greeted

me with a sunny smile. "Yes, I remember you, you're Mala's friend. So you've come to see the orphanage, how nice. We need more young people like you. Here, this is Dipti, Mala's cousin. She'll take you around."

For the next hour and a half, I had the full tour of the orphanage. I visited the work station where teenage girls were printing gift cards, the woodshop where the older boys were making furniture and small knickknacks. Then I saw the nursery, the dormitories, the classrooms, and a puja room.

At the end of the tour I was both impressed and fatigued by the display of well-intentioned hegemony in yet one more social welfare institution. Dipti told me that the older children often did not want to leave once they had reached age eighteen, or that they complained about being schooled only for crafts or trades, and not for an education that would prepare them for a white-collar job. I was also quite frankly distressed to learn that one of M's policies was not to adopt children from her orphanage out to Muslim or Christian families. Only Hindu families were eligible. It seemed to me an oddly communal practice for a confirmed Gandhian like M.

But when I returned to the office, there was M, bright as ever. "How did you like my orphanage?" she queried. I managed, I think, a fairly sincere smile. "I'm very impressed with how well ordered and organized things are," I said. "I see that your care really makes the orphanage work." I think I might have also told her that both of my parents were social workers, which pleased her greatly, though it was more an attempt to avoid speaking of my own conflicting feelings about social work.

M beamed at me, and in a most genial manner delivered the Gandhian lecture to which I was now quite accustomed: how it was the task of my generation to return to India to run institutions like these, to carry out the task of social uplift left uncompleted at Independence, to fight against the graft and corruption that characterized modern India. Almost imperceptibly, she began to tell of her life and times during the nationalist movement, to narrate something of the vision of India for which she had fought. Her words were nostalgic and seductive. I must have perked up noticeably, because her eyes then took on a mischievous glint as she rattled off stories and anecdotes about all the marches she and her girlfriends led, their numerous arrests; about the printing press she set up in her friend's attic to print illegal leaflets during the Quit India movement of 1942.

I sat in front of M's desk, willing myself to accept her narrative

on the terms she had set. I tried not to think of my absent tape recorder, or even the lack of pencil and paper to jot down notes. Wasn't M herself all too aware that the tape recorder wasn't there to catch her words? Wasn't that, indeed, part of her play?

I vaguely remember the end of our conversation, but I do recall M reaffirming her Gandhianness by commenting on her avoidance of the journalists. "You see," she said, "this work is not about any one individual or personality. So many people come and want to give this award or that award, but Gandhiji said that the work itself is its own reward."

*

I pondered her words as I rode the bus back to Mylapore. In a sense, M had been saying that what had not been achieved was not worth the telling. I'd met a subject who refused to historicize herself, who repudiated not only the telling of her own history, but that of the nation's as well. I felt again, as I had so often after an interview, the deep anguish of that generation; the form of a question that itself remained unresolved: Had they somehow failed the nation, or had the nation failed them?

Ironically, in almost a year of not talking to M I had suddenly, it seemed, learned something of what the young owe the old. I realized that my grandmother's generation looked at our parents' flight from India with something more than alarm. And it was true, the "Quit India Movement," a term used with cynical humor by Delhi intellectuals to refer to colleagues departing west in search of lucrative jobs, did not mean the same thing it had in 1942. Nevertheless, those of us reared in the West, bearers of foreign accents and strange habits, born to a generation exercising and fleeing its own Independence, signaled the hope of a return.

I understood that to M I represented the promise of a new generation that was somehow not implicated in the history of a "failed" nation, a generation that would remold the country from the ashes of a forsaken vision. In visiting the orphanage, I had somehow, if belatedly, paid my respects to that originary dream. It seemed no accident that M would finish out her days dedicated to instilling this vision in caring for the young.

Gandhi had seen social reform as political program, yet when the two were cleaved into distinct, competitive elements by the nationalist movement, many Congress workers followed Gandhi into the villages to continue the "constructive program." Thus M had renounced her considerable stature as a political leader and devoted herself to social work. In so doing, even M the woman disap-

pears into a subject position as readily occupied by men as women, for the true social worker had no gender. In fact, not marking one's gender could be seen as a further sign of great humility. This, too, was quite common among Gandhians.

It seems to me that M, in refusing the subject, enacts a particular critique of the nation. For like many "freedom fighters," she is keenly aware of the uses to which her subjectivity may be put.

First, there is the material gain of a pension awarded by the Indian government to its most dedicated freedom fighters, those who had served time in jail. Of course, M, as an upper-class Brahmin woman, with considerable family resources and prestige, can afford to snub a state-sponsored pension; her refusal, read as a rejection of the nation, underscores her own class privilege. Janaki, the subject of the preceding essay, could not. I first came to know of Janaki, also Brahmin, but lower class, through a local historian who, when compiling the *Who's Who of Freedom Fighters* for the state of Tamil Nadu, had helped to document her claim for a pension by tracking down and certifying her jail records. Thus there are very real material processes at work that allow one subject to avoid the historian, and force another subject to search her out.

Second, there is the fame and glory of continual press coverage when old freedom fighters are honored by being asked to inaugurate or preside over various state functions, perhaps legitimating, in M's eyes, a vision struggled for and not won. For to participate in the nation's newly won status was to confirm that the nation had already arrived and was not still in the process of arrival. It was the means of nationhood, not the end of nation, that was important. If "Hind Swaraj" meant there could be no self-rule without self-respect, then until true self-respect had been won, one could not speak of a real Independence.

I had come to greatly respect and admire this woman who had made, indeed changed, the history of India but who would not, by her own design, make the pages of its history books. M's refusal to participate in the recording of her past problematizes our own assumptions about the relationships between memory, experience, historical record, and written testimony. I want to argue that it is in rethinking such relationships that refusing the subject becomes indeed the ground of a feminist ethnography.

*

How might a feminist ethnography pose the question of memory and identity? The form this question takes is deliberate, for I do not intend this essay to be an exercise in Benedictine "memory ethnog-

hy,"[10] or even the remembered ethnography of M. N. Srinivas. [cut off]
se the issues of memory and historical identity because they have
nsequences for imagining another form of ethnography. How are
identities of self related to the mechanics of memory, and the
evance of the past? Or, more specifically, what are the identity-
ining functions of memory?

Memory, as we know, is not to be relied upon; memory always
lexes a loss.[11] It is not uncommon for the experienced oral histo-
n to caution, "All memories are subject not only to simple, gradual
sion over time, but also to conscious or unconscious repression,
tortion, mistakes, and even to a limited extent, outright lies."[12]
ere are also the assumptions of the historians of popular move-
nts who tell us that "loss of memory is equivalent to the loss of
toriography, of a usable past, indeed of historical agency."[13] No
mory, no history. No history, no agency. The historian, then,
st adjudicate between loss of memory and memory itself as a site
loss; between the failure of memory and failed memory.

Yet memory is what establishes the relationship of the individual
history. "The commonplace elements in self-representations are
en to reveal cultural attitudes, visions of the world and interpre-
ons of history, including the role of the individual in historical
ocess."[14]

That historical process, we know, is inescapably bound up in the
eology of the nation. If we consider that one of the functions of
ionalism is to constitute subjects (citizenship again), then refus-
the subject is implicitly to refuse the nation. As Homi Bhabha
ts it, "People are the historical 'objects' of a nationalist pedagogy,"
ntributing to the authority of nationalist discourse; they can only
the subjects of a process of nationalist signification.[15] Bhabha
ninds us, too, that the telling of an individual story necessitates
whole laborious telling of the collective itself.[16] The work of the
oject is inevitably the work of the collectivity. Notwithstanding an
al of citizenship that founders along lines of gender, there is the
se of certain women being elected to stand for the nation, and a
se of proprietorship: one can speak, for example, of Jeanne
rc being the creation of Michelet, even as the Rani of Jhansi sym-
lizes, for many historians, the Indian "mutiny" of 1857.[17]

Gayatri Spivak has asked the question "Can the Subaltern Speak?"
d answered with an unequivocal no. Speech has, of course, been
en as the privileged catalyst of agency; lack of speech as the
sence of agency. How then might we destabilize the equation of

refusal to speak?

M's subject refusal, deployed in full irony, must be located at the juncture of (at least) two competing processes of identity formation—the feminist one, which would retrieve her voice to fulfill certain subject functions in the West, and the nationalist one. Judith Butler urges us to examine institutional histories of subjection and subjectification, to comprehend the "grammar of the subject."[18] She asks, "Is it not always true that power operates in advance, in the very procedures that establish who will be a subject who speaks in the name of feminism, and to whom? And is it not always clear that a process of subjection is presupposed in the subjugating process that produces before you one speaking subject of feminist debate?"[19]

M's refusing the subject of the feminist historian may look like an all-too-common gendering—an inability to see the value of her own contribution within larger social or historical narratives that would work to deny it. For M's narrative does not take the "I am my own heroine" form much feminist oral historiography uncovers.[20] Rather, M is poised at the edge of history, neither its victim nor its heroine, forcing the feminist historian to hesitate between subject bestowal and subject suspension. Of course, the feminist historian herself is no longer hero of her own story, for she, too, has come to doubt the university rescue missions in search of the voiceless.

If Susan Sontag has written suggestively of "the anthropologist as hero," Pierre Nora has written more resignedly about the losses of the historian. In lamenting that "the historian's is a strange fate; his role and place in society were once simple and clearly defined: to be the spokesman of the past and the herald of the future,"[21] Nora suggests the passing of the time of historian as hero.

When the historian can depict neither past nor future, chronologies are destabilized, and temporality itself is subject to suspension. That is to say that the subject of such a history is itself one in suspension, signaling a suspended temporality, a repudiated nation. The subject speaks betwixt and between time and places.[22] "The subject is graspable only in the passage between telling/told, between 'here' and somewhere else,"[23] delinking memory from place, what Nora has called "les lieux de mémoire."

If history is ultimately the telling of a nation, what, then, are the mnemonics of history? Pierre Nora's recent analysis delineates a fundamental antagonism between memory and history: