Chapter Four

An Ordinary Life Performed

Studying an individual’s life as a means to understand historical phase of which he or she cuts a representative figure or forms an important part serves as a useful tool to underscore the characteristic features of that particular time period. The emergent interest in life-writing material over the previous decade goes beyond this historical understanding and assumes that there are certain aspects of historical enquiry that are most usefully carried out through a study of the lives of individuals. A closer inspection will reveal that several other domains of life at the level of practices, may not have as explicit a relationship to the corporeal as is thought of, or maybe at significant variance from the principles articulated in texts of doctrine. In fact the very lives of such texts may be traced by exploring the ways in which individuals and groups devise life practices which actualize these doctrines even as they transform them. Such theoretical investigations on the technologies of the self, the possibilities of counter-history and practices of everyday life, allow an understanding of the intricate ways in which the social informs the constitution of individual lives. The objective behind conducting a close reading of Devaki Nilayamgode’s *Antharjanam: Memoirs of a Namboodiri Woman* is to unravel the recondite possibilities by which the social and subjective are connected. This in turn should be able to provide the Malayalee and non-Malayalee reader a sense of the evolution of female self in modern Kerala. The life-narrative will be subjected to a contrapuntal reading with major focus on the following areas: cultural politics of self-representation, writing/performing the self, archives of the self, double-voiced autobiographies and the process of mediation in life-writing. It is hoped that by decoding
the hermeneutics of the self in these texts in a politically and socially informed manner would help in accruing information about the various forces at work in the Malayalee public sphere that shapes the female self and the resultant product as well.

Devaki Nilayamgode’s oeuvre comprises entirely of life-writing material; her first publication was *Nashtabodhangalillathe* (which literally means ‘with no sense of loss or regret’). It was published in 2003 right after her seventy fifth birthday. This book shares with the readers the memories of growing up in a traditionally rigid and loveless household in central Kerala. The narrative chiefly centers on the time period 1930-1950, when the Namboodiri community was facing, and most often than not, resisting the winds of change. Her second publication *Yaatra: Kaattilum Naattilum* (‘a journey through lands and forests’) which came out in 2006, in the author’s own words, reaches “deeper and further back into my own social and personal history” (Nilayamgode vii). The Oxford India Paperbacks edition of *Antharjanam: Memoirs of a Namboodiri Woman* published in 2011 is a collection of Nilayamgode’s various life-narratives in Malayalam published as books and some articles published at random in different Malayalam periodicals. *Nashtabodhangalillathe* was translated from Malayalam into English by Radhika P. Menon and the rest of the narratives, including *Yaatra* and other stand-alone articles, have been translated by Indira Menon.

What distinguishes Nilayamgode is that her stature as a public figure is entirely due to her oeuvre of life-narratives rather than the other way around. So even though the life-narrative will be treated as a pre-scripted performance, the theoretical investigations on the female/feminist self will not focus on why or how the scripted self has been mediated to correspond with the public persona. The chapter will ask questions as to how
Nilayamgode’s scripted feminist subject has been framed by the ritualized performance of gender and sexuality in her everyday life. The main criteria for such a ‘framing’ process would be Devaki Nilayamgode’s identity as a woman and a member of the upper class and caste in Kerala.

While it has been noted that, as opposed to Khote’s status as a public figure because of her career in the film industry, Nilayamgode’s claim to fame as a public personality, comes from the publication of her memoirs. Indira Menon, one of the translators of these works, makes an observation which draws out the similarity between these two autobiographers:

Even though she chronicles a life of deprivation, lived with great hardship, Nilayamgode has chosen not to be judgmental about the people and events in her life. There is no discernible anger at the unfairness of the treatment of women, and of herself in particular. If there are questions, then they are stated quietly and not with virulence or vituperation. Her demands are also made gently and not with any stridency. But underneath the calm surface there is lurking whirlpool ready to suck her in if she allows it. (ix)

It is common theory on autobiographical documentation, especially by women, that the writing serves as a medium which facilitates the writer to come to terms with her difficult life. In fact, this is one of the primary differences between male and female autobiographers in the late twentieth century in India. While the male charts out the glorious course of his struggles and ascend in the public sphere, the female is recounting the resistance of the private sphere. Then the question as to how resistance can be
documented without defining the ‘other’ which dominates and therefore need to be resisted. The tone and content of Devaki Nilayamgode’s memoirs rarely pick out and point fingers at this ‘other’. Sometimes, it leads one to wonder as to why she is documenting the hardships of Namboodiri women including herself. Behind this veil of a placid and calm manner, there is a surge of resistance which can be translated into choreography of performance. Even though the text does not address any kind of struggles openly, a close study of the semiotics of language, both in the original and the translated versions reveal a depth of resistance which will be lost to an apolitical reader.

A politically nuanced study of the performance of identity in *Antharjanam* calls for an understanding of the social conditions of the time, especially the plight of the Namboodiri women. Radhika Menon, the second translator, sums up this history in a succinct manner in *Translator’s Notes:*

‘*Antharjanams*’ have always been a source of great fascination in popular imagination in Kerala. To an outsider’s eyes, they were living exotica. Cocooned in luxury, shielded from public view, always escorted by an entourage of obsequious attendants and endlessly enjoying a hedonistic life full of festivals and elaborate feasts, these upper caste women appeared to lead a charmed existence. However, what most people never realized was that the *antharjanams*’ awe-inspiring exclusivity concealed the cruellest form of patriarchal oppression that robbed them not only of independence and education but even the simplest and most innocent of joys. (xii)
Devaki Nilayamgode’s intention seems to be to provide an uncontested testimony to the cultural practices and rituals within the Namboodiri community that rendered life within that exclusive and closed system a living hell for the women. No matter the acquiescent tone of the narrative or the conciliatory choice of words, her memoirs cannot be denied as giving voice to the many voiceless women of the Namboodiri households before the winds of reformation made life a little tolerable for them. Nilayamgode’s memoirs are not exactly in chronological order, it is more like a haphazard stash of memories. However, any kind of informed reading or interpretation of the life writing material involves an understanding of the history which is the continuum on which the personal narrative is built.

Eminent scholars of Kerala history use the term ‘theocratic feudalism’ to encapsulate the various nuances of Namboodiri hegemony in the Malayalee public sphere in the early twentieth century. This hegemony was not something that happened overnight but was the product of decades of political and cultural authority. While the deeply entrenched caste system accorded them the status of being the religious elite, the fact that they owned a large chunk of the land in the state ensured their privileged status. Religion and resources were at their beck and call. As far as the Namboodiris were concerned, there were two categories of land grants – Brahmaswam and Devaswam. The first were the lands granted to Brahmins/Namboodiris and the latter were the grants to the temples. The temples were exclusively run by the religious elite, i.e. the Namboodiri community in the case of the Malayalee public sphere. J. Devika, in her Introduction to Nilayamgode’s memoirs, notes:
Their influence was greatest in the fertile river-valley zones, to which they are believed to have migrated between the third and eighth centuries. Origin myths such as in the Keralolppatti and Keralamahatmyam claim that the warrior-sage Parashurama settled them as masters of the land in sixty-four Brahmin villages in Tulunad and Kerala as Bhudevas, earthly gods who were to be served by all others. (xix)

Just like this narrative of the origin myth helped the upper caste Namboodiris to consolidate their position as the religious and cultural elite, they used similar hegemonic narratives to enforce gender roles as well. For instance, Devika refers to the origin of the practice of sambandham where the Namboodiris constructed a narrative where the women from the Sudra caste were the descendants on earth of the heavenly apsaras, who were bound by duty to pleasure the Bhudevas, or in this case the upper-caste Namboodiris. Every social rite and ritual was a step towards reinforcing this social superiority of the Brahmin male. Most of these observances were referred to under the umbrella term – Anaacharams, the social arrangements and rituals sanctioned by the Sankarasmriti to Malayalee Brahmins which set them apart from Brahmins elsewhere.

In order to understand the sociological significance of Anaacharams, J. Devika’s Introduction gives some good pointers:

…[I]n the illams that housed large Malayala patrilineal joint families, everyday life was inconceivable without the services of the Nair adiyar (the servant-class) as ayahs, sweepers, maid-cum companions, managers, male domestic helpers, guards and so on. Strict rules, however, were laid down which
regulated interaction between family members and other Brahmin visitors or guests with the Nair servant class. As for the castes lower down, inflexible and complicated rules of untouchability and unapproachability preserved the exclusivity of Malayala Brahmans. Lower caste people who breached the rules of unapproachability could be killed without a trial ... (xix)

The focus of this thesis is on the ritualized enforcement of gender roles within the Nair community. Devaki Nilayamgode’s memoirs are filled with performance of such rituals that actualizes the femininity of the Namboodiri woman while at the same time effacing her sexuality. In addition to Antharjanam: The Memoirs of a Namboodiri Woman, evidence to this ‘framing’ can be found in various other writing materials, autobiographical as well as fictional, from men and women of the Namboodiri caste in Kerala.

One of the most striking reminiscences in Nilayamgode’s life-narrative is that of her childhood and the memories of her mother. When the Indian nationalist movement reinvented Indian femininity with the agenda of safeguarding Indian culture, one of the main roles envisaged for the Indian woman was that of a nurturer. Ever since then, the glorification of motherhood and the idea that a woman does not become complete unless and until she becomes a mother, is something popular culture has celebrated with an emotional ferocity. Nilayamgode’s narrative throws light on a ‘counter’ culture which did not allow the women of the Namboodiri household to frivolously waste their time on bringing up children. The Namboodiri women would be fully engaged in other household duties and rituals that the task of looking after the babies was entrusted to the irikkanammas, who were Sudra women. Nilayamgode recounts:
... [T]here were separate groups of women to look after the children of each antharjanam. One member of each group was considered its leader and the rest took orders from her... The servants did everything for the babies, except feeding and suckling them. Being Shudra women, they were not supposed to breastfeed us. Sometimes, antharjanams from other places were brought to Pakaravoor to serve as wet-nurses. This arrangement was made if the mother became pregnant within a year of childbirth and the one-year-old baby was a boy. When the wet nurses came to stay, they brought their children with them. These antharjanams usually went prosperous illams when life in their own became intolerable due to poverty, neglect, or harassment from co-wives. But as nurses, they were given preferential treatment. (13-14)

The discrimination practised in breastfeeding between a boy and a girl was carried on into their later lives, in a more intense manner. In a deceptively neutral tone, Devaki Nilayamgode remembers how “[g]irls were served lunch only after the Namboodiris, children, young mothers, and menstruating women were given their meals” (16). In fact, in the third chapter of the memoir titled “The Daily Routine”, the author lists out many practices that young girls are required to follow which seem to be directed at a ritualized initiation into gendered roles and strict adherence to them, while simultaneously denying them their body. The young girl in a Namboodiri illam is from a young age trained to be a self-effacing presence. As children they are not given any special care or attendance, moulding them for a rigorous adult life. An adult life where they do not even get the time to eat breakfast because “they had to prepare offerings for the deity and therefore had little spare time” (Nilayamgode, 16).
The life of deprivation led by these women, their hardships and miseries were highlighted in greater contrast when juxtaposed with the way of life of the women of other castes, especially the Nair women. In her life-narrative, Devaki Nilayamgode narrates this contrast vividly with an account of the annual visits of two Nair women to her illam. Subhadra and Bharathi were the daughters of Devaki’s second apphan, Neelakantan Namboodiri, from his sambandham with a Nair woman of the aristocratic Ekkanath Nair family in Palakkad. Unlike the Namboodiri offspring, these children were allowed a lot of freedom including the benefits of education. Subhadra and Bharathi made annual visits to Pakaravoor, Devaki’s homestead, on their way back home from attending literary discussions with their father. These Nair women were not allowed admittance in the illam per se; they were allowed separate quarters referred to as madhom to prevent them from polluting the inner quarters of the Namboodiri illams. Nilayamgode reminisces:

After lunch, Subhadra and Bharathi usually came to the illam and sat in the northern block of rooms, vadakke ara. For us, their very presence was a source of perpetual wonderment. Subhadra was twenty and Bharathi eighteen. They had knee-length hair, wore colourful blouses, and zari-bordered mundus with an upper cloth, plenty of gold ornaments, and perfume as well…It was on seeing Subhadra and Bharathi that we girls suddenly became aware of our own uncouth appearance. My elder sister was almost as old as Bharathi, but how different she looked! Her hair was not properly brushed. She didn’t wear a blouse, had neither a zari-bordered mundu nor jewellery. So she refused to enter the room and stood behind the door, trying to conceal herself as much as she could. Even I, though
only six or seven years then, felt inferior, being conscious of my loincloth and lice-infested hair. (36)

While the tone of the telling is more or less, it is undoubtedly the awareness of a woman, representing generations of women who were conditioned from a young age to efface any trace of sexuality and deprived of agency as a female or even a human. The carefully orchestrated rites and taboos seem to be directed to achieve this end. While the Namboodiri women were forbidden from interacting with the women of other castes for fear of ‘pollution’, the men were free to choose wives from among Nair women in the form of sambandham.

J. Devika, one of the experts in documenting the history of women in the Malayalee public sphere from early modern times, translates the institution of sambandham as Intimacy-In-Distance. She succinctly and briefly explains this arrangement in her Introduction to Devaki Nilayamgode’s Antharjanam. According to her, intimacy-in-distance was put in place through a complex set of rules and arrangements that were aimed at preserving the social and economic power of the Brahmins/Namboodiris in the public domain of Kerala. Devika explains:

The system of primogeniture prevalent among them was such that only the eldest son could marry from his own caste. Younger males were to seek alliances with the women of the matrilineal castes, which included the Kshatriya, the Nair groups, and the temple castes, who often had considerable access to culture, learning and the new currents emerging in early twentieth century Malayalee society. Children of such union were members of their mother’s families, with no
formal claims upon their father’s; interaction between partners was subject to
strict regulation of time (hour, frequency, duration of visits by the man to the
woman’s home and vice-versa), space (either visiting Nair wives at their homes,
or maintaining them in spaces set apart in the illam), exchange and conduct (of
permissible gifts, obligations, dress, demeanour). These alliances were referred to
by the neutral term \textit{sambandham} that meant, simply and literally, ‘alliance’ or
‘connection’. (xx)

While theoretically \textit{sambandham} seems like a harmless social arrangement, a lot of
Namboodiri men exploited \textit{sambandham} as a means of indulging in sexual
licentiousness, laziness and irresponsibility. So when the wave of reformation started
shaking the foundations of the Namboodiri households in the early 1930s, the institution
of \textit{sambandham} was one of the primary targets.

It is also important to understand as to how this particular system affected the
women of the \textit{illams}. The norm that only the eldest son of an \textit{illam} was to marry an
\textit{antharjanam} limited the number of bridegrooms. So those girls who were not ‘fortunate’
enough to procure an alliance with an eldest son of a family were doomed to live a life of
misery in their family homes. If the family was financially prosperous, it meant that these
women were at least provided with the basic amenities of life. Even the married
\textit{antharjanams} were for the most part bogged down by the monotony and ritualism of their
everyday lives. The fact that the number of men available for marriage also created a
situation where a Namboodiri husband could send his wife back to her family home, or
sometimes even to her grave, if she was considered to be sloppy in carrying out her
domestic duties. These women who were sent back not only bore with the taint of being
an erring wife but also thrown into a life where even smiling at a passerby would be deemed a grave offence. Though largely fictitious, Lalithambika Antharjanam’s *Praticaradevatha* showcases the plight of one such woman and the consequences thereafter.

*Praticaradevatha*, translated into English as *The Goddess of Revenge* by Gita Krishnankutty, is an imaginative extrapolation of Kuriyedathu Tatri’s early life. Tatri (Savitri), an antharjanam of the Kuriyedathu illam, is a real historical figure who shook the foundations of upper caste life in Kochi and Malabar region. Antharjanams everywhere looked upon the Kuriyedathu Tatri incident as a cautionary tale. To quote from Nilayamgode’s memoirs:

Surely the name that my generation heard most often was that of Kuriyedathu Thaatri. During my childhood, I too heard this name spoken frequently, but always in hushed voices. It was after my wedding, at my husband’s house, that I came to know more about Thaatri whose notorious *smarthavichaaram* or trial took place in 1905, twenty-three years before my birth…The first time I heard Thaatri’s name was in the conversations of antharjanams…They mentioned the name in low, frightened tones. Today when I look back, I wonder: didn’t those poor antharjanams derive a mysterious sense of joy, satisfaction and energy in repeating Thaatri’s story endlessly? In their stories, Thaatri was always to blame. She was the fallen woman who had enticed and insulted great Namboodiris as well as Vedic teachers. But beneath the tone of accusation, I also detected a note of unconscious appreciation of Thaatri. (114)
Subjecting wayward Namboodiri women to trial or *smartavichaaram* did not happen for the first time in 1905. It was another one of those social arrangements that ensured that female sexuality was kept under tight reins. *Smartavichaaram* and the ensuing excommunication of the erring woman were supposed to serve as cautionary tales for other women in the future. The gross injustice of this system was that, while the woman was excommunicated and punished, the male perpetrators went scot-free. Tatri’s trial in 1905 was a landmark event because of her foresight. Devaki Nilayamgode’s knowledge of the *smartavichaaram* is not from a historical document but from the narratives of a great aunt (Paapthi Valiyamma) who had personally known Tatri. Nilayamgode remembers:

…trial destroyed Valiyamma’s good impression about Thaatri. Perhaps this was because her brother Narayana Bhattathiri was one among the sixty-five names that Thaatri mentioned. Narayana Bhattathiri was a famous Vedic scholar. Thaatri, who had slept with prominent Vedic teachers of the community, famous artists, and powerful men, had preserved meticulous record of the date, zodiac sign, and day of her liaison with each of them. It seems she had even jotted down, in palm leaf documents, details about their birthmarks. Had she foreseen that these bits of information would one day come to her rescue and provide valuable evidence? I vividly recall a direct witness to some of the traumas and tragedies that Thaatri’s revelations brought in their wake. (117-118)

The sentiment echoed by Devaki Nilayamgode in her chapter on Kuriyedathu Tatri is more or less similar to what Lalithambika Antharjanam conveys in *The Goddess of Revenge.*
This short story does not dwell on the trial as such; the writer tries to imagine the early life of the remarkable Tatri and the events that would have led her to be the seductress that she later became notorious as. While the incidents narrated in the story are historically true, the details are the product of the author’s imagination. However, given the historical evidence which we now possess in the form of various documents and life-writing material, Antharjanam’s fiction doesn’t seem very far from reality. In fact, in the wake of scrutinizing a life-narrative like Antharjanam: The Memoirs of a Namboodiri Woman, The Goddess of Revenge reads like another life-narrative. Fiction or non-fiction, the plight of the Namboodiri women was the same everywhere.

The factual details gleaned from Nilayamgode’s memoirs concur with Lalithambika Antharjanam’s portrait of Kuriyedathu Tatri. She was born in the Kalpakamcheri Illam and from all accounts she was quite adored for her demure nature; “[g]randmothers advised young girls who had reached puberty to learn from Tatri’s shining example” (Antherjanam, 21). She was considered to be quite fortunate when she received the proposal to be the first wife of a Namboodiri from a prominent illam. In those days, there was such a severe shortage of Namboodiri bridegrooms that it was lucky if a young girl got an alliance even from an old Namboodiri who had married more than once or a widower. However, after the initial happiness, Tatri’s conjugal life saw a sharp decline. Her husband started losing interest in her; Antharjanam’s story imaginatively captures this phase:

After that I never spoke to him again. I never spoke to anyone. The days went by somehow, empty of events, empty of love. If only something would move in this hell of darkness! I went back to the house where I was born, my
heart full of limitless grief, a burden of sorrow that it could hardly bear. I thought I could find comfort and relief at home, but I was wrong. In truth, are not all Namboodiri households a kind of prison? There is little to choose between them. My father was dead, but all his five wives were still alive…Two of my older sisters, both widowed, were living at home. The third one had gone mad because her Namboodiri husband had tortured her…I joined them, going from the frying pan to the fire. (24)

Before dismissing this as a fictional account, it is important to remember that most life-writing material from members of the Namboodiri community, men and women, are sprinkled with such instances, if not of happening to the writers, but to women around them. When the reform movement strengthened in the early 1930s, most of its proponents pointed their fingers at sambandham as the root cause of this evil. Kuriyedathu Tatri, the ‘evil temptress’, was merely a product of the mores of a community which forced its women into a bleak, loveless and rigorously monotonous private sphere which denied them not only agency but sexuality also. While all this was enforced in the name of maintaining the purity of the community, the men continued their licentious affairs, discretely and indiscretely. Lalithambika Antharjanam has written numerous short stories which portrayed the sad plight of once-prosperous illams which went on downward spiral due to the irresponsibility and laziness of the Namboodiris. The destruction of the illams were merely hastened by the reform movements and the emergence of communism; in most cases, the root cause was the indulgent lifestyle of the Namboodiri men who did not lift a finger for the welfare of their homesteads. Devaki Nilayamgode’s
narrative remembers women who managed their homes efficiently whereas no mention of male efficiency is made.

Another anomaly in the idea of the female as conceptualized by the patriarchal hegemony of the Namboodiri household, is that while the female is strictly relegated to the private sphere wiping all traces of her sexuality, is not envisaged as a nurturer or a mother. It can be argued that this was a device contrived by the Namboodiri men to shackle the women to household duties and the carrying out of rituals. Whatever the reason, this particular conception of femininity has deeply influenced the performance of identity and at a more realistic level, tuned the courtyards into loveless households. Nilayamgode remembers her mother as a “very serious woman” (8). Nevertheless, her stature in the Pakaravoor illam was unassailable:

As the efficient wife of the celebrated and powerful Pakaravoor Krishnan Somayajippad, she was respected both within the family and amongst the townspeople. Even Achan’s first wife’s children and other members of the illam could not find fault with Amma’s housekeeping. Despite her husband being much older, her seventeen years with him gave her status much dignity. (9)

It is noteworthy that, consciously or unconsciously, the author is highlighting the fact that her mother’s agency as a woman primarily stemmed from being a respectable and powerful person’s wife and her stature in the family was attributed to her being a good and efficient housekeeper. Despite being a good housekeeper, her stature underwent a change with the demise of her husband. Nilayamgode shrewdly observes:
Those who had treated her with respect till then began to slight her. A widow with her eldest son aged only fifteen and six younger children to care for, she was helpless and insecure. But she displayed extraordinary will power and held herself together. (9)

The situation of widowed mothers with no sons was even worse; they were as good as forgotten within the illams. Moreover, widowhood was not exactly a condition that these women could avoid. Most often than not, young antharjanams were married to old men twice or thrice their age. Fifteen year old girls would be married to sixty year old men to be their fifth or sixth wife. When, as in Tatri’s case, the antharjanam was fortunate enough to marry a younger man and enter his illam as his first wife, she had to live with the constant fear as to whether her husband would discard her for displeasing him in any small manner. And J. Devika raises a very important question in this context: “[d]oes this mean that the antharjanam was meek, suffering, passive, the quintessential victim of patriarchy?” (xxv).

Devika expostulates the presence of “potentially subversive spaces” (xxvi) within the illams;

The antharjanams’ extreme seclusion, the practice of their travelling without husbands escorted by servants, the extreme difficulties, material and otherwise, in conducting Smarthavichaaram, all left spaces in which the rules ordering everyday life could be potentially upturned. (xxvi)

This subversion is illustrated in various parts of Nilayamgode’s life-writing, especially in the chapter where she talks about her and her sisters ‘secret’ studying. Devaki was
initiated into the realm of letters when she turned four years old. An old Brahmin woman came to the *illam* and taught her the Malayalam alphabet. After learning the alphabets, each girl would be taught to read the Ramayana and most often than not, it signaled the end of a girl’s education. Once a girl reached puberty, her life would be taken up the endless religious and domestic rituals as well as other mundane household duties. But the time of menstruation was a blessing because they had to spend three days in isolation without speaking to anyone. Nilayamgode remembers this time:

…it was possible to read uninterruptedly without attracting any attention.

Even then, there was a small problem. Touching books was taboo during those days and we lacked the courage to break the custom. But here, the servants’ daughters came to our aid. One of them sat in front of us and tuned the pages. Thus, we succeeded in reading books without touching them. (32)

While these minor subversions went unnoticed, there was a hue and cry in the public sphere about Namboodiri women conspiring against the men; J. Devika notes:

To modern observers, the presence of such spaces indicated the ‘decay’ of the community…in the early twentieth century, the *Malayala Manorama*, raised the alarm that the women and the servant-class in the illams were colluding against the men and that breaches of chastity were on the rise among the antharjanams, and pleading that patriarchy among the Malayala Brahmins should be reinstated on more modern, stronger foundations.

These were in step with the notion of the ‘new’ woman mentioned in the previous chapter; the cautionary tales such as that of Kuriyedathu Tatri’s were used as reinforcing
tools for executing this agenda. The Namboodiris had no other option but to succumb to winds of change and reformation within their community especially since many heirs of prominent illams took up this cause. However, it is questionable as to whether the women confined within the illams felt the change immediately. It would take another couple of decades before the antharjanams were allowed any sense of agency.

It is interesting to note that one of the major organizations that played a pivotal part in empowering the antharjanam – the Namboodiri Yoga Kshema Sabha – was formed in 1908 as a result of the controversial smarthavichaaram of Kuriyedathu Tatri in 1905. Superficially the organization was reformist in nature with agendas like “acquisition of necessary skills through modern education” (xxviii). The organization was intended to protect the interests of the Namboodiris, who felt insecure in the wake of the tumultuous social changes that gripped the society. By the end of the 1920s, the youth wing of the Yoga Kshema Sabha (YKS) - the Namboodiri Yuvajana Sangham - started adopting radical stances against practices like sambandham, influenced by the reform movements which were a part of the nationalist struggle for independence. Devika summarizes the radicalism within the YKS:

By the end of the 1920s, the members of the radical youth wing had begun to argue, among other things, for family reform – for the right of younger men to marry from within caste and set up their own families, for female education and dress reform, for State legislation reforming marriage, inheritance, and partition of joint family holdings – and against prevalent practices like polygamy, marriage of young girls to old men and reinforced widowhood…These positions were
articulated in the teeth of opposition from the slower or more orthodox members of the YKS. (xxviii)

Reformers like V. T. Bhattathiripad were looked upon with awe and fear by various members of the Namboodiri community. Even though he was strongly influenced by Gandhi and the Indian National Movement for Independence, Bhattathiripad chose to sow the seeds of change within his own community. While performing his part as a strong opponent of the Anaacharams within the Malayala Brahmin community, his memoirs are imbued with a certain sense of Namboodiri-ness which a discerning reader finds impossible to overlook. This Namboodiri-ness can be traced in the three-volume autobiography of Kanippayyur Sankaran Namboodirippad, as well.

In his essay titled “Autobiography as a Way of Writing History: Personal Narratives from Kerala and the Inhabitation of Modernity”, one of the eminent scholars of Kerala history – Udaya Kumar, conducts a detailed historicized analysis of Kanippayur’s Ente Smaranakal. His chief goal in the essay is to highlight the use of various life-narratives – by Kanippayur, C. Kesavan and Lalithambika Antharjanam – as an alternate history. However, for the purposes of this thesis, Udaya Kumar’s reading of Ente Smaranakal is quite relevant. Kanippayur’s life-narrative is quite similar to the content of Antharjanam: The Memoirs of a Namboodiri Woman. The three-volumes of the autobiography contains descriptions of the various rituals and practices practiced by the Brahmin community in Kerala, the daily routine of the men and women, their jewellery and clothes, the ritual bath, and objects of daily use. It is so detailed that Ente Smaranakal, more so than Antharjanam, can be used as a standard text for reference in discussions about the Namboodiri community in nineteenth-century Kerala. However,
this document is quite different from Nilayamgode’s testimony in terms of the performance of identity. As a renowned figure in the community, Kanippayur modestly claims to be a figure of no historical importance. In fact, he begins his life-narrative by commenting on the absurdity of committing his life to paper:

Mr. Kuttippuzha Krishna Pillai suggested that I write my autobiography I felt like laughing. Would anyone like to read autobiographies, except those by great personages...In my reply to him, I wrote: ‘It is not difficult to write my life history. Bathed in the morning, had breakfast, lunch, a coffee in the afternoon, and dinner at night, slept: now the history of a day is complete. If you change the date, and wrote “ditto”, the history of the following day is done. I am sixty-eight years old. If you write down the dates in all these years and a ditto against each of them. My life history will be complete. However, I do not have the audacity to publish this. If someone is ready to print and circulate it, I will happily give away the copyright for free. ’ (Udaya Kumar, 423)

For a male member of the Namboodiri community, the reluctance to publish his autobiography because he has doubts about his historical significance, is quite different from the hesitance of someone like Lalithambika Antharjanam or Devaki Nilayamgode to put their life into the hands of a reading public. Their uncertainty comes from spending a good part of their early years within the reclusive confines of the Namboodiri illams; for both of them marriage was the stepping stone which released them from these confines. In *Atmakathayku Oru Amukham*, Lalithambika Antharjanam talks about her reluctance to enter the genre of autobiography inspite of being a celebrated novelist of writer of short stories. While examining the personal as the political in the context of early modernity in
Kerala, Udaya Kumar makes observations about her life-narrative which will prove insightful in the understanding of the performance of her identity in the life writing material. Kumar expostulates on the author’s dilemma when she was more or less forced into the public sphere in the later years of her life:

Her sense of self, even her desire for freedom, was forged not in an open, collectively shared space, but in the solitude of inner rooms. She recalls how, when she ‘came of age’, everybody at home cried, moved by the plight that awaited her. Her entry into adolescence signaled, to the external world, her death...Entry into the larger public arena as a new woman put into crisis the very sense of self that desired a wider world. Lalithambika’s way of coping with this new world was to use the protective veil of her imagination, which enabled her to speak without speaking as herself...One could reveal things without revealing oneself...Lalithambika’s response to this problem was to incorporate this difficulty into the very form of her autobiographical enterprise. Instead of an autobiography, she would write only a preface to an autobiography, whereby she adopted a fragmentary form to speak about a difficulty. (441)

A careful study of Nilayamgode life-narrative would show a different mechanism of coping with the same difficulty that Lalithambika faced.

An inventory of the chapters in the memoir would reveal very few personal confessions, except for her Devaki Nilayamgode’s portrait of her mother and her memories about her ‘erratic’ education. The rest of the life-narrative is a documentation of the various rituals and practices, the different quarters in the Pakaravoor illam which
were meant for different purposes, her sketches of other people and the stories handed down to her from elder relatives like that of Kuriyedathu Tatri. The personal trajectory of her recollections does not go beyond her marriage and the social trajectory stops with the social activism of the 1950s. J. Devika, towards the end of her Introduction to this life-writing, makes special note of this end point. She raises a very significant question:

That her autobiography closes here is something that historians of gender may like to ponder upon, because the vibrant debate in the Malayalee public sphere on gender, its social significance, and the issue of women’s attainment of full citizenship began to lose itself in platitudes precisely in the decades in which Nilayamgode chooses to end her story. The limits of ‘women’s liberation’ in elite movements had been reached for Namboodiri women…The new domestic agency enabled by the modern nuclear family, the (social and familial) ‘permission’ to be educated and gainful, ‘respectable’ paid work for family well-being, the access to health care to maintain an efficient laboring and procreative body – all these (clearly ambiguous) gains had been secured by elite women in and through their community movements. (xxx)

In terms of political correctness, Lalithambika Antharjanam seems to make more sense in contemporary discourse; she reminds her readers in a passionate language, that while the concept of being an antharjanam (which literally translates as those who live inside) no longer exist in the modern realm of the Malayalee public sphere, there is still a long way to go for the attainment of agency that is free of any encumbrances. Decades later when Devaki Nilayamgode published her remembrances of a time long gone, this now obsolete idea of the antharjanam, seem to be the pervading presence in her life-narrative.
Her narrative does not read like the memoirs of an empowered woman writing about her un-empowered past; it reads like the carefully orchestrated performance of a woman whose identity was undeniably ‘framed’ by the rituals and practices that she undertook as well as witnessed as a child and young adult.

This uncertainty surrounding female agency and empowerment comes across clearly in Nilayamgode’s chapters on the female social reformers from within the community. By the later 1930s Namboodiri reformers began to understand that unless and until the antharjanams took up the cause themselves, now headway could be made in their agenda of reformation, because most of their reformative projects were centered around transforming the life of the Namboodiri women. It was very clear for those who wanted to see it that the patrilineal and patriarchal norms of the Malayala Brahmin community were most detrimental and suffocating for the women. For instance, the arrangement of intimacy-in-distance would at first glance seem to be derogatory to the Nair women. However, it is quite important to remember that while this system allowed a lot of wiggle-room for the upper caste men because of the fact that the women could not make any claims on the man or attach his family name to the off springs born out of sambandham, the woman also had the agency to deny this intimacy if she was dissatisfied. Even when she executed this agency through a male karanavar of her tharavadu, the fact remains that just like the man the woman also had the freedom to walk away with little or no judgment from the family or other community members. A Namboodiri women had no such avenues open to them were married; the options available were to serve as a dutiful wife and immerse themselves in the religious and
domestic rituals till the husband was alive and to rot within the confines of the illam once she became a widow.

So it was of paramount importance to the cause of the Namboodiri Reformation Movement to rope in female reformers from within the community. It is quite interesting to note how the accounts of these women reformers by a seasoned historian like J. Devika and debut writer like Devaki Nilayamgode are so different in their tone. For instance, Devika summarizes the entrance of the Namboodiri women into the realm of social activism thus:

Women reformers like Arya Pallom (who figures in Nilayamgode’s account), Parvaty nenminimangalam, and Devaki Narikkattiri brought in militancy hitherto alien to Malayala Brahmin reformism….They were feted as heroines by the liberal public: Parvaty Nenminimangalm was hailed as the ‘Joan of Arc of the Namboodiri Empire’ by the women’s magazine The Mahila in 1932. The formation of the Antarjana Samajam, a radical women’s wing led by Nenminimangalam, daring propaganda efforts like the Varikkaseri Varakkattu – a set of reformist pamphlets circulated at the Astami Rohini Varam celebrations at Varikkaseri among the antharjanams who were gathered there and elsewhere…and ‘direct action’ to prevent sambandhams…(xxix)

While the historian churns out a picture of brave women who dared to not only challenge the conventions of a retrogressive community but also to actively change these conventions detrimental to the female members, Devaki Nilayamgode’s remembrances project a different tone altogether.
Nilayamgode’s narrative on social activism takes off in two trajectories: her involvement in the reform movements and the portraits of other women like Pallom and Nenminimangalm who were actively involved in the same. While Devika documents the presence of Antarjana Samajam as a radical women’s organization, Nilayamgode fixes the organization as a part of the Yoga Kshema Sabha. She, in a matter of fact manner, states her involvement with the Samajam after her marriage into the liberal Nilayamgode illam. She in fact functioned as the secretary of the Antarjana Samajam for over a year during its most active phase. She vividly recalls her participation in a public function for the first; under Arya Pallom’s leadership they picketed the marriage ceremony of a seventy year old man who sought to remarry because his son passed away leaving his illam heirless. The son left behind him a fourteen year old widow and the reformers raised protest against the fact that the old man was remarrying while fourteen year old girl rusted away in his own house with no hopes of a future. In an unflatteringly neutral tone, Nilayamgode remembers her first public function to be futile since the marriage ceremony happened in spite of the best efforts of the reformers.

Devaki Nilayamgode’s self-referential writings are not, as noted earlier, the typical autobiography neither contains revelatory secrets about a community which kept its women hidden nor does it contain confessions of a personal nature. The reader circumvents impersonal documentary details and has to take a hard look at the minute details that slip through the narrative. While J. Devika’s account gives a ‘heroic’ status to the female reformers, Nilayamgode’s recollections are merely neutral but very mellowed. This is illustrated in her portraits of both Parvathy Nenminimangalam and Arya Pallom:
Parvathy Nenminimangalam had a rare ability to present these ideas clearly and discretely. Called ‘Chechi’ by all, she was more than twenty years my senior. She was slim and tall and very soft-spoken. She never spoke harshly or unpleasantly to anyone.

Arya Pallom was entirely different from Chechi in both looks and temperament. She spoke long and loud and if occasion demanded even aggressively. Arya Chechi had no inhibitions about speaking plainly even to Namboodiris. She was beautiful, fair-skinned, small built, and wore her hair short…a nightmare to Namboodiris who took pleasure in tugging at and bruising their wives’ elongated earlobes or throwing aavanipalakas at them and breaking their legs. Once, she severely scolded a housewife who spat at antharjanams for discarding their clothes and choosing to wear saris and blouses. Later, whenever that woman saw Arya Chechi, she hid behind her parasol and scampered away.

(150-151)

For a discerning reader, the linguistics of her description speaks for itself. It seems like Nilayamgode is a proponent of the kind of femininity espoused by the former. The way she talked about Arya Pallom is reminiscent of the kind of double-sided rhetoric, terrified and awed at the same time, the older antharjanams adopted when talking about Kuriyedathu Tatri and her infamous trial. In fact this seems to be a popular sentiment about the ‘pathbreakers’ within the Namboodiri community. For instance, in The Goddess of Revenge, Lalithambika Antharjanam responds to Tatri’s ghost in a similar yet more passionate manner:
Fired as you were with the intoxication of revenge, why did you not try to inspire all the other weak and slavish anterjanams? ... In such matters, Sister, individuals cannot triumph. On the other hand, they bring disaster upon themselves. Consider, now, what good did that hurricane you set in motion do to society? ... Tatri sacrificed her very soul, but in the eyes of the world her sacrifice is remembered only as a legal affair involving a prostitute – an affair that certainly created a turmoil, but did not succeed in pointing the way to anything positive, The end cannot justify the means, Sister. Even while I recognize your courage and self-respect, I disagree with you. (29)

But the main difference between the discourses that can be constructed from the oeuvres of Devaki Nilayamgode and Lalithambika Antharjanam is their outlook on the social matrix. Identity formation in both cases were no doubt influenced by the concept of femininity engendered within the private sphere of the Namboodiri illams as well as the public sphere which they were exposed to after their marriage. However, Lalithambika Antharjanam’s writings point out that there still was/is a long way to go in the path of enabling the upper caste women with agency and an identity of their own and this acknowledgement is not present in the writings of Nilayamgode. Framing Nilayamgode’s life-narrative as performance, however, opens up a different kind of agency which comes through in the constitution of identity via the process of putting her life experiences to paper. This ‘new’ agency and its implications in the conceptualization of a new feminist subject will be explored in the next chapter.
Works Cited

