

Excerpt from ‘The Life My Mother Lived’ (*working title*)

Dimple Bangalore

“I believe I am writing about my mother because it is my turn to bring her into the world”, wrote Annie Ernaux after the death of her mother.

I am writing about my mother because it is the only way I know to keep her alive, and let her go.

The Arrangement

While sifting through our family archive of photo albums, the day before I met Basavaraj Thaatha — my granduncle — a loose photograph fell out. It evidently was not fitted into the delicate plastic sleeve that protected each photo in these albums amassed over four decades. It was my mother's single, full-length photo, taken in a studio. The background was a sea-green wall, with a pillar painted at the corner. She is standing demurely, without her usual sparky confidence, her shoulders stooped, and a half-smile. Her lips are coloured a bright red — she rarely ever left them bare. She was wearing a seere (sari) that was dark green with white floral print, and a red border. The blouse was a plain green that clung to her neck, ensuring that nothing that should not be visible was concealed. Her luscious curly hair was pulled into a ponytail instead of her usual preference to let it loose.

I was certain this professional shot was taken for her marriage profile. Her demeanour in the photograph seemed to illustrate what I knew about her mental state at the time. This particular not-tucked-in photo was meant to be circulated to people in the Lingayat community (our sect within Hinduism) or the “marriage market” to seek a suitable boy and family that would approve of the woman in the photo as their *sose*, an ideal daughter-in-law.

But who was the woman in the photograph?

In the 2000s, after the death of my grandparents, when it was just my mother and me, it was inevitable that every weekend she would be set on making a trip to what she considered the hippest part of town — Commercial Street. She intended to browse the latest clothes or merchandise available in the city. Commercial Street is in Bangalore's Cantonment area and is named after the British Civil and Military Station it housed. It was established and occupied by British colonists and Anglo-Indians in the 1800s, after they took control of the city following the fall of Tipu Sultan, the Raja of Mysore. They developed Commercial Street to resemble Britain's high streets for their shopping. This area was built separately, and adjacent to the older part of town, Pete, where the natives conducted their businesses and shopped. While the Cantonment area was built with broad streets to accommodate their horses, bungalows and parade grounds for tea parties or entertainment, and churches to express their religious beliefs, Pete had none of that. The old part of the city was developed in the 16th century by Bangalore's founder, Kempegowda. It was built with a fort at the centre and organised in clusters to allow for close-knit communities and bazaars. It had narrow lanes, dense housing, and tiny temples at street corners. In the 150 years that the British colonised Bangalore, unsurprisingly, they never developed the Pete part of the city, even as the density increased. This clear divide was one of the multifarious things that made the natives feel less worthy in their homeland; the grass was indeed greener on the other side. The Cantonment area was looked on as a dream for the majority of the

brown-skinned middle-class Bangalore wanting to escape the poverty that was all around them, after the hurried departure of the white-skinned families post-independence.

My mother was a native who wanted to belong to Commercial Street. She wanted to disregard the divide that was in effect until two decades before her birth. And so, as a child and later a teenager, despite my blatant disinterest in shopping, I accompanied my mom in her quest for the most stylish clothes. My general disregard for shopping did not stop me from being invested in her exploration, though. Initially, it was my sense of duty that drove me to be alongside her on this journey. Later on, as a parentified child, it was my intuitive understanding that this quest brought her happiness in ways that much else did not. Reflecting on this, just a few miles away from London's Oxford Street, while wearing one of her outfits from Bangalore's Commercial Street, it dawns on me that the weekend pilgrimage was not just in search of stylish clothes – it was a steady attempt to belong to the higher class, the better class, the better crowd, and maybe unconsciously the better skin.

This eight-kilometre trek across town that passed through the rest of the Cantonment area, the clothes she would discover, analyse, and choose with the newfound privilege of being able to afford and collect them, made her jubilant. To my dismay, then, she was painstaking in her choices while disregarding time. But her choices were always stylish and timeless, as expressed repeatedly by many and by the wonder-filled eyes of women and men on the street who would simply stare at her clothes and her. So, shopping with her for hours on end, I developed a particular knack for recognising her taste. Looking through her photographs from her younger years only confirmed this knack. Her sunglasses, skirts, dresses, seeres, or chudidars were always a cut above her sisters or friends standing next to her.

This full-length photo in the studio with the sea-green wall was an anomaly, a peculiarity, almost. This seere was most definitely not from Commercial Street. I can almost hear her comments about it: gabbagide – it's rubbish, or gaudiyagide – it's gaudy. It was probably Ajji's (my grandmother's) or one of her sisters'. If it was hers, it must have been chosen by Ajji or one of her sisters. This seere and this photograph eventually denote much more than they did at first glance. It implies to me that she tried. At the cost of her self-confidence, succumbing to familial and societal pressure, she *tried* to fit into the mould of the "perfect" woman as defined by society or the marriage market at the time. By wearing an ordinary seere instead of something extraordinary from her curated collection of clothes, behaving subserviently with hands by her side, and pulling back her feistiness the way she had pulled back her hair to forcefully contain it in a band, she tried to suppress and contain her individuality as the only way to survive as a woman bound to be married off.