



Remembering Motherhood Through My Daughter's Wardrobe

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When my daughter was born, my mother passed down her precious, curated collection of clothes when I was a baby and along with it, the stories associated with each piece. Even though I was familiar with the stories, dressing my daughter in clothes that once belonged to me and retracing the stories was a curious as well as an affective experience for me. I also receive one or two boxes of hand-me-downs via post from a dear friend every year—completely filled with clothes that her own daughter has outgrown. I have not met my friend in person for 8 years now, but her presence is strongly felt in the textures and smells of the clothes that she passes on.

Through its materiality, clothes simultaneously emit and absorb the many and varied features of the individual body and its environment. In effect, it subjects itself not only to material, utilitarian and symbolic value, but also to relational and affective bonds, weaving felt experiences. In this hybrid-autoethnographic piece, I attempt to read the theories of affect and material memories and my own experience of motherhood through my daughter's clothes. I attempt to outline the relationship between these materials (in this case, baby clothes) and the sensory memories they evoke and how it has helped and shaped my experience of becoming a first-time mother during the pandemic.



I Introduction: A COVID Kid and a 90s Aesthetic

My daughter E is 4.5 years old. Our house in the UK is imprinted with her personality. There is not a room that does not declare her presence: her dollies in mismatched outfits live under her highchair, a stuffed gorilla with sparkly hairclips hangs upside down in our bedroom, her play-kitchen in our kitchen gleams in a corner with brightly coloured character stickers. Magna-tiles and plastic figurines and toy cars compete to have a spot on the windowsill. Her story books have conquered every room. Even in the garden, she has made a corner for herself and her mud-cakes that sometimes transform into tea or soup or an elaborate feast as she fancies. She gets too excited for role-play; solid script floats in her tiny head (she will give you notes on your performance), tea-towels and rain-jackets and my scarves become costumes! A friend of mine comments that she has a “90s aesthetic” and asks if I might have imposed it. “I don’t think I play with her enough for that,” I reply. I realise that the toys and objects surrounding my daughter are as much about her world as they are about my own mothering. The aesthetic she inhabits/inherits—brightly coloured character stickers, mismatched doll outfits, plastic figurines, and the improvisational flair of tea-towels-as-costumes—echoes the sensibilities of a nineties childhood. This aesthetic, marked by improvisation, excess, and emotional texture is not merely incidental. It reflects a deeper entanglement between objects and relationships, between material presence and affective meaning. In *The Comfort of Things*, Daniel Miller explores this very entwinement, arguing that people and objects are inseparable, and that material forms often speak more eloquently to the nature of relationships than words themselves.¹

This perspective finds resonance in the work of consumption historian Daniel Thomas Cook, who insists that mothers and children must be studied in tandem, as they “necessarily speak to each other in reciprocal definition.”² Carla Pascoe Leahy extends this view, suggesting that mothers and material culture co-constitute one another, and that the interrelationship between motherhood and childhood is constructed through objects.³ While mnemonic associations can be found in a range of items—heirloom jewellery, family photographs, cherished mementos, this article intentionally focuses on baby clothes to maintain a feasible scope.

In this hybrid-autoethnographic piece, I draw on theories of affect and material memory to situate my own experience of motherhood through the textures, colours, and

¹ Miller, Daniel, *The Comfort of Things* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008).

² Cook, Daniel Thomas, ‘Introduction: Specifying Mothers/Motherhoods’, *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 13.2 (2013), 75–78 <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540513482035>.

³ Pascoe Leahy, Carla, ‘Maternal Heritage: Remembering Mothering and Motherhood through Material Culture’, *Journal of Family History*, 44.1 (2019), 40–59 <https://doi.org/10.1177/0363199018808013>.

stories embedded in my daughter's wardrobe. By tracing the circulation of baby clothes preserved by my mother, gifted by a close friend, or newly acquired, I explore how garments function as mnemonic devices, mediating relationships across generations, geographies, and maternal identities. The article weaves together personal narrative, theoretical reflection, and cultural critique to examine how clothing materialises care, memory, and belonging, especially within diasporic contexts.

I reflect on the ways in which mothering abroad intensifies the emotional resonance of material objects. Through intimate exchanges with my mother in Kerala and a dear friend in Germany, I consider how baby clothes become vessels of maternal heritage, affective kinship, and embodied knowledge. These garments are not merely practical or aesthetic; they are tactile archives that hold stories of migration, tradition, and the quiet labour of remembering.

As tangible and affective objects, clothes become important memory traces and offer a point of connection with the past. In the case of baby clothes, the affective power of textiles is particularly pronounced. Baby clothes are often preserved as keepsakes, serving as tangible reminders of a child's early years. These garments carry a deep emotional significance, symbolising the bond between parent and child and the fleeting nature of childhood. The act of preserving baby clothes is not merely a practical decision but an affective one, driven by the desire to hold onto memories and emotions associated with a specific time in life. Drawing on personal memories and reflective insight, this article explores the emotional resonance of baby clothes. It attempts to highlight the sensory associations these garments carry—the textures, scents, and visual cues and how such elements have both consciously and unconsciously shaped my experience of becoming a mother for the first time during the pandemic.

The next section includes a reflection on my mother, whom I call Amma, who kindly passed down her precious, curated collection of clothes worn when I was a baby—specifically my baptism outfit—and, along with it, her ethics of care and other ideals of motherhood, which I may have unconsciously inherited.

II Amma

April 2020. The world goes into its first lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The doctor confirms that I am in fact pregnant. “11 weeks!” There was no time to panic, only plan—I had missed almost a trimester without the knowledge that I was pregnant! There were things to decide:

“Should we move from this small flat?”

“Is it even possible to do that now?”

“Can we really afford a baby now?”

“What happens to the PhD?”

“Can Amma travel?”

“You’re only due in October, of course she will be able to by then”.

Decisions were paused and plans were altered as we came to the realisation that we would have to do this by ourselves. No family were coming from India.

Amma called every day; we switched from normal calls to video calls. With my changing and growing body, Amma remembered her own pregnancy journey, asked about my cravings and started to make a list of things to send over.

“Won’t it be too cold for *kettudupp* in October there?”⁴

“Yes, but still please get them for me? I’ll dress her in layers.”

“OK. Do you get quick-dry sheets there? Or plastic mats? I’ll get some anyway, you’ll never have enough.”

During a conversation with Ssa, a friend from my hometown in Kerala, India, she promptly asked,

“*Koche*, shall I send some of my babies’ clothes? When the baby comes out, you’re supposed to dress them in a used item of clothing. I guess it’s because it would be softer on their skin.”⁵

In October 2020, a box weighing nearly ten kilograms arrived at my doorstep. Inside were carefully packed parcels, each labelled with the sender’s name, a quiet display of care and solidarity. A baby carrier came from a friend; front-open nightgowns, towels, and wrap-blankets from her mother. Amma had included baby sheets and flannels, their corners adorned with hand-embroidered animals and imperfect patterns (“It’s not perfect,” she had said), along with a generous supply of baby essentials—everything on the list, and more. But what caught me off guard, stirring joy and grief in equal measure, was a small zip-lock bag tucked among the bundles. Inside was my baptism outfit: tiny booties, mittens, a bonnet. Alongside it lay another baby dress from my

⁴ *Kettudupp*” literally translates to a “tie-knot” dress, a traditional baby garment or cloth often made of soft cotton and worn by newborns. *Kettudupps* are known for being easy to maintain and dry quickly, making them a practical choice for baby clothes.

⁵ The Malayalam word *Koche* is an affectionate term often used to refer to a young girl or little one, similar to saying “darling”, “sweetheart”, or “child” in English. It carries a tone of endearment and care, typically used by elders when addressing younger girls.

infancy: a gift from my late aunt. The overseas courier seemed to bridge two lifetimes, binding my first moments to my daughter's in quiet continuity.

Amma has always been the keeper of mine and my sister's childhood relics: favourite dresses, toys, a kitchen set, Lego bricks. But one particular outfit—preserved for over three decades—felt different. It was my baptism outfit, now passed on after years of safekeeping, it arrived not just as fabric and thread, but as memory made tangible. I had seen it before, captured in photographs, unearthed during deep cleaning sessions and heard its story retold countless times. Yet the thought of my child wearing it, inhabiting the same textures I once did, was both uncanny and deeply moving. Marianne Hirsch's notion of *postmemory* helps illuminate this moment: the baptism outfit, long held by Amma, becomes a vessel of inherited memory, transmitted so affectively and vividly that it feels like my own recollection, even when mediated through stories and images.⁶

It was a white cotton onesie that my father (Appa), bought from Saudi Arabia, where he worked until he retired. What was once bright white was now faded, but everything else about it stayed intact. A smock detail on the yoke, scalloped Peter Pan collar and bird motifs embroidered all over and a pop button feature for convenience. A testament to my mother's careful and meticulous curatorship. As I studied it again, I realised that it had all the elements that I liked about an outfit. It was simple, yet elegant. Not at all loud but had intricacies that one really had to notice to see. And the feel of the textile on the skin. By choosing to preserve certain items of clothing, did Amma instil a sense of aesthetic in me and my sister? My wardrobe and by extension my daughter's wardrobe are reminiscent of this. As Quentin Bell notes, "our clothes are too much a part of us for most of us to be entirely indifferent to their condition: it is as though the fabric were indeed a natural extension of the body, or even of the soul".⁷

Often, I like to declare that I am very different from Amma. We have a differing approach to parenthood and life in general. Yet, like Amma, I chose a simple ivory dress with smock detail for my own daughter's baptism. And like Amma, I washed it by hand and keep it safe in a zip-lock bag along with my baptism outfit. As I show my daughter these outfits, I realise that they represent a maternal heritage that connects three generations. The garment is a direct connection to my now mythologised childhood and the fact that my daughter could experience it (by wearing, touching) is nothing less than magical to me. It connects me to my unremembered past self as a baby and mingles with my present as a mother while connecting my memories to that of my mother. I remember the surge of emotions on seeing my baptism outfit along with

⁶ Marianne Hirsch, 'The Generation of Postmemory', *Poetics Today*, 29.1 (2008), 103–128 (p. 106).

⁷ Quentin Bell, *On Human Finery* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1947), p. 19.

other essentials sent from home that October. It represented a sense of continuity, and a quiet solidarity at a time of utter confusion. On another deeper and broader level, embedded in the clothes that Amma picked and preserved is a nod to a colonial past (smocked yoke and Peter Pan collar) enmeshed in our Indian identity, her own personal ideals of modesty and ethics of care.⁸

Even now, nearly five years after my daughter was born, Amma continues to recreate dresses that my sister and I wore as children—sourcing fabrics and replicating patterns from old family photo albums for her local tailor to sew. Some patterns are slightly modified to adapt to the available fabric or the weather in the UK. When my daughter wears those hand-made clothes she not only repeats and embodies an aesthetic that I truly value, but also symbolically announce Amma's presence in our lives. These garments act as mnemonic anchors, materialising Amma's journey into motherhood and entwining it with mine in a shared lineage of affect, care, and embodied memory. The time Amma spends on making these clothes (searching, sourcing, buying), is perhaps proportional to the time that she does not get with my daughter as a long-distance grandmother. Furthermore, the outfits Amma co-creates with her local tailor speak not only to the intimacy of our relationship but also to a broader cultural practice in Kerala, where clothing is often custom-stitched. These hand-made garments become tactile and visual archives; material traces of a tradition that privileges care, collaboration, and embodied memory. For my daughter, growing up far from her parents' cultural landscape, these clothes carry added significance. The colour palettes, textures, and motifs stitched into these garments become subtle yet potent reminders of my daughter's ethnic heritage and reflections of a time when her own Amma was a child. In this way, the garments operate as affective objects, saturated with personal narratives that shape and reinforce identity across generations. As Emma Peters observes in her thesis, by associating objects with memory-narratives, we enact tangible affirmations of who we are. These outfits do more than clothe—they archive, transmit, and affirm a sense of belonging.⁹

III Ammu

Ammu and I have been friends for almost twenty years. We are both mothering abroad—she in Germany, I in the UK—galaxies away from our immediate families and the cultural scaffolding that once shaped our own childhoods. In this diasporic

⁸ My baptism outfit brought from Saudi Arabia also tells of a cultural/economic shift in Kerala in the 80s and 90s owing to mass migration to the Middle Eastern countries.

⁹ Emma Peters, *Material Memory and Identity Formation* (Unpublished MA thesis, University of Leeds, 2022), p. 47.

context, our friendship has evolved into a form of chosen kinship, one that offers emotional continuity and practical support. Our daughters, too, intuitively sense this closeness; mine refers to Ammu's daughter as her cousin, collapsing geographic and genealogical distance into a felt sense of family. Ammu's presence in this narrative is not incidental—she embodies a parallel maternal archive, one that mirrors, challenges, and complements my own.

April 2020. While Amma made a list of things to be sent over, Ammu made me a list of things I need not get for my child.

“Because, I got it for my daughter, we'll send it over.”

“This is a good brand. Do you have it in the UK?”

“Bibs, you should get bibs. I have some—but they are quite soiled and used.”

“In six months, it is *Vishu*, I'm keeping M's *pattupavada* and blouse from last *Onam*”.¹⁰

Years ago, as roommates, Ammu and I always shared clothes. Sometimes even forgetting to whom certain items originally belonged.

At the end of September 2020, I received a box from Ammu, from Germany. Baby clothes that her own daughter had outgrown. They were a selection of old clothes and new, some berry-stained, some bobbed—fabrics carrying imprints of everyday existence. Such personal and cultural significance ascribes textiles with what Jan Assmann has called ‘mnemonic energy’.¹¹ Other items in the box are presents received for her own daughter but never used. And front-open tops and dresses for me (“Makes your life easier”). Since then, I receive a box (and sometimes two) every year. Now, I have not seen Ammu in person for over eight years. But half the clothes that my daughter wears are the ones that her own daughter has outgrown. Since we constantly stay connected, I also inherit the knowledge and stories and drama if any, associated with each piece. “I didn't want to pass these *Tara* dresses to my cousin's children. They wouldn't understand their value.”¹²

¹⁰ *Vishu* and *Onam* are regional harvest festivals in Kerala. *Vishu* marks the new year in the Malayalam calendar and *Onam* is an important cultural festival of the region.

Regardless of religion, people across Kerala dress in traditional attire and take part in festive rituals, meals, and gatherings. Young girls often wear a *pattupavada* and blouse—a silk skirt paired with a matching top—especially during these celebrations. These garments are often brightly coloured and embellished, evoking both nostalgia and festivity.

¹¹ Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka, ‘Collective Memory and Cultural Identity’, *New German Critique*, 65 (1995), pp. 125–133.

¹² Tara Baby Shop, established in 1980 in Kochi as Kerala's first retail store for young children and mothers, sells hand-embroidered cotton garments made by local women's self-help groups; often priced higher, these pieces are typically reserved for special occasions or meaningful relationships.

Carole Hunt's article, "Worn Clothes and Textiles as Archives of Memory," explores how textiles serve as carriers of memory, both personal and collective.¹³ She argues that textiles can function as archives, preserving historical, cultural, and emotional data. Hunt examines how unplanned encounters with textiles—unlike formal monuments or souvenirs—can evoke memories and stimulate recollection. In her 1969 journal article *L'Objet Biographique*, French sociologist Violette Morin categorises objects based on their intimate relationship with human beings, distinguishing between *l'objet biographique* (the biographical object) and *l'objet protocolaire* (the protocol object). Biographical objects absorb and reflect their owner's personality, individuality, and life experiences, shaping their sense of time, space, and identity. They bear witness to everyday moments, becoming inseparably linked to their human counterpart.¹⁴ As such, they are inherently tied to lived experience and the memories it generates. In contrast, protocol objects—public commodities are interchangeable, widely available, and devoid of personal connection. They resist embedding the traces of their owner's life or, alternatively, are never granted the opportunity to do so.

The sensorial quality of the clothes that Ammu sends (bobbled, stained, loved and washed) thus become tactile representations of her being a mother and her child that I have never met. They represent the stories shared and the solidarities promised. The clothes that she sends become more than 'just clothes'; they become a documentation of human experience, specifically, mothering. They also carry the history of our friendship and shared maternal knowledge. As I fold laundry, I sometimes call Ammu and show her the present state of the outfits she had sent over. I have new anecdotes to share relating to one or other outfits she sent, compliments that were received to be passed on. On top of other conversations, we exchange tips and tricks on maintaining certain outfits, and where to get certain others. There is a certain sense of comfort in knowing that she has a pile of clothes somewhere in her house to be sent over to mine. That even if we do not see each other, we remain present in each other's thoughts, that I know the smell of the detergent she uses, that her daughter whom I have never met, likes strawberries (I deduce it from the stubborn stains). Many of such stories and memories are delicately tucked into the garments she sends.

These seemingly mundane memories deepen our understanding of one another and of our parenting practices. The baby clothes, in particular, have served as quiet mediators—objects that carry, transmit, and facilitate this shared intimacy. What a joy it is to immediately understand what "Taraclotches" mean. In recent times,

¹³ Carole Hunt, 'Worn Clothes and Textiles as Archives of Memory', *Critical Studies in Fashion & Beauty*, 5.2 (2014), 207–232 https://doi.org/10.1386/csfb.5.2.207_1.

¹⁴ Violette Morin, 'The Biographical Object', *Communications*, 13.1 (1969), pp. 131–139.

multiple baby stores (physical as well as online) have popped up across Kerala that do smocking and hand embroidery, but no clothes feel as special as the ones from *Tara*. Could it be because the clothes from the shop smell of nostalgia? The shop holds a quiet tenderness, untouched by the impulse to modernise. One is expected to remove your shoes as you enter the shop, the same fluorescent tube lights from your memory flicker, as if in acknowledgement. The dresses are sorted by size and mostly live in the wooden shelves with glass doors. With chalk marks hiding on bright whites or a stray thread rebelling against the pattern, they remind you of a simpler time when I used to hide behind Amma's *dupatta* to avoid the sweet talk of the salesperson.¹⁵ Ammu confirms that my memory of the shop is still the same. When my daughter asks, "Amma, did you dress like this when you were little?" I am happy to nod yes. I am happy that she acknowledges that I once was little, that I was someone other than a mother. It is also a happy nod to warm nostalgia and to a quaint aesthetic layered with personal memories that Ammu and I feel privileged to have known for so long and now hope to pass on to our daughters.

IV Conclusion

Motherhood generates a form of embodied knowledge—tactile, intuitive, and deeply relational. This knowledge becomes especially poignant when practiced in diaspora, far from the familiar textures of home and the warmth of immediate family. For those of us mothering abroad—like Ammu in Germany and myself in the UK—objects such as baby clothes become more than practical necessities. They transform into carriers of memory, care, and cultural continuity. In this context, friendship evolves into chosen kinship, and the exchange of garments becomes a quiet ritual of maternal solidarity. My daughter's baptism dress, preserved by Amma for over three decades, and the box of clothes received from Ammu, are not merely sentimental keepsakes—they are tactile archives of intergenerational and interpersonal care.

As Daniel Miller notes in the *Introduction to Clothing as Material Culture*, the very form, texture, and sensuality of clothes are inseparable from the symbolic meanings they embody. Clothes are uniquely mobile yet rooted, easily transferred across geographies while remaining connected to specific locations and histories. They are deeply intertwined with memory, serving as tangible reminders of both personal and collective pasts. Unlike other forms of material culture, textiles are intimate by nature—touching the skin, absorbing scents, and evoking the environments from which they came.

¹⁵ A *dupatta* is a long scarf worn usually with Indian tunics.

This paper has offered a personal reflection on baby clothes—those preserved from my own infancy and those received during my early days of mothering amid the COVID-19 pandemic. These garments, once belonging to me and to my friend’s daughter, have become evocative objects that link us to our childhoods, our mothers, and our evolving maternal identities. With their specific patterns, colours, and textures, they function as mnemonic devices, triggering emotions and memories that span generations. The baptism dress has become an heirloom; the box from Ammu, a tradition. Together, they form a visual and tactile record of maternal memorialisation and heritage.

Beyond their aesthetic appeal, clothing serves as a powerful conduit for identity, shaping the relationship between self, body, and the external world. Exploring our wardrobes becomes an act of self-discovery, where memories resurface through familiar fabrics and worn textures. Garments are imbued with layered significance, acting as tangible prompts for recollection. Woven into their fibres are remnants of past experiences, while their seams hold delicate connections to those we have cherished and lost.

The affective power of textiles lies in their ability to bridge the material and the immaterial. As Hunt argues in her study of worn clothes and textiles as archives of memory, textiles can materialise memory, making abstract emotions and experiences tangible. Whether purchased, handcrafted, inherited, or reimagined, garments become vessels of meaning—connecting us to the moments, relationships, and identities that shape our lives. In the diasporic maternal archive, they speak softly but insistently, stitching together stories of care, distance, and belonging.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

