

Writing the Lesbian: Literary Culture in Global India

by

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To three extraordinary women
Meena, Sophie, and Srividya, for love, support, and faith

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Chapter I: Introduction

The Lesbian in India: A Genealogy

The Project

This dissertation focuses on lesbian literary representations in India in light of the emergence of the lesbian as a cultural and political subject. The emergence of a political position based on the idea of the lesbian as a distinctive cultural presence occurs in India in the context of the controversy over Indian Canadian filmmaker Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1996),¹ the first publicly released lesbian-themed film in India. Right-wing Hindu nationalists, irked at the seeming 'alternative' to heterosexuality that women were presented, damned the film as evidence of the 'corruption' of 'Indian' culture by the west, an argument based on Mehta's diasporic status and the film's funding by western sources. They declared lesbianism 'western' and merely an 'upper-class' phenomenon in India, claiming that lesbians "do not exist in India" and that the lesbian can only represent an 'inauthentic' Indian.² These rhetorical moves were also accompanied by actual physical violence in which theaters screening the films were destroyed and death threats made against the director and the actresses. The nationalists also filed a charge of obscenity against Mehta. A group of feminist activists responded to these attacks by coining the

¹ Deepa Mehta, dir., *Fire* (Delhi: Kaleidoscope Entertainment, 1996).

² Almost every critic who has written about the controversy discusses these comments by the nationalists. See Geeta Patel, "On Fire: Sexuality and Its Incitements," *Queering India: Same-Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society*, ed. Ruth Vanita (New York, London: Routledge) 221-33; Ratna Kapur, "Too Hot to Handle: The Cultural Politics of 'Fire.'" *Feminist Review* 64 (Spring 2000): 53-64; Madhu Kishwar, "Naïve Outpourings of a Self-Hating Indian," *Manushi* 109 (Nov.-Dec. 1998): 3-14; Gayathri Gopinath, "On Fire," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 4:4 (Fall 1998): 631-636; Sujata Moorti, "Inflamed Passions: *Fire*, the Woman Question, and the Policing of Cultural Borders," *Genders* (2000) <http://www.genders.org/g32/g32_moorti.html>.

phrase “Indian and lesbian” and starting an activist campaign that was premised on the idea that as Indians, women who were in same-sex relationships or desired them ought to have legal rights, including the right to protection against violence should they decide to go public with their relationships. The activists’ strategies countered the nationalists’ charge of cultural inauthenticity by claiming Indian identity, a claim that writings by women complicated.

The entrance of the lesbian into Indian culture also intervenes in a changing public culture in which ‘sex’ is marked differently from the previous decades. The rising consumer class of the 1980s and 1990s and the economic liberalization of the 1990s saw a shift in attitudes to sexuality. Scholars theorize that the ‘new woman’ who emerged during the period, signified by and celebrated for her sexual overtness, marks a departure from the previous decades in which she is known and praised for sexual conservativeness. Ironically, however, she continues to be policed and disciplined by the dictates of heterosexual marriage and motherhood during this period, something that various aspects of cultural production encourage. The lesbian’s sexuality re-defines the very idea of the ‘new woman’. Her sexuality, even when not overt, suggests a disengagement from heterosexuality, even when marriage and motherhood still occur. The stakes in confining women’s sexuality to heterosexuality is clear when we examine the language of the nationalist attacks. The *Mahila Aghadi*, the women’s wing of the right-wing nationalist group *Shiv Sena* that first attacked the film, saw a particularly interesting threat in lesbianism. They argued in a petition seeking to ban the film filed in the state of Maharashtra (the *Sena*’s home base) that if “women’s physical needs get fulfilled through lesbian acts, the institution of marriage will collapse” and the “reproduction of human

beings will stop.”³ Although nowhere is it clear that lesbian desire prevents reproduction, it is the ideological anxieties behind this statement that are worth addressing. For, the real anxiety and fear is that lesbian desire and lesbian relationships would remove patriarchal control and seek greater gender parity in the nation, both in terms of women’s access to the paid public sphere and the threat to the primacy of male desire.

In the decades prior to 1998, when the lesbian was not visible in Indian culture, works representing her came from women writers canonized within postcolonial Indian literary studies under the category ‘feminist writers’ or ‘women writers’. The most important examples of these are Urdu writer Ismat Chughtai (1911-1991), whose short story “The Quilt” (1941)⁴ is a test-case for the stakes in regulating female same-sex desire, something that the attacks against *Fire*, too, illustrated. “The Quilt” became the subject of obscenity charges brought against Chughtai by the colonial British government in power at the time, for its representation of lesbian desire. The story is the account of a young girl who witnesses the lesbian encounter between a rich Begum⁵ and the Begum’s servant woman. The story’s ending, different in different translated versions, has been read by feminist scholars as Chughtai’s quintessential *feminist* move because it refuses to specularize lesbian desire, as one scholar argues.⁶ The story manifests this refusal through the girl narrator’s refusal to tell us what exactly she sees under the lifted quilt of the Begum although she has already told us about the sounds she hears of food being eaten. We are in no doubt about what goes on under the quilt, but we are never actually told about it

³ Praveen Sami, “Furore over a Film,” *Frontline* 15.26, 19 Dec. 1998 – 01 Jan. 1999. 10 Jan., 2008 <<http://www.hinduonnet.com/fline/fl1526/15260430.htm>>.

⁴ Ismat Chughtai, “The Quilt,” 1941, *Ismat Chughtai: The Quilt and Other Stories*, ed. and transl. Tahira Naqvi and Syeda S. Hameed (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1996) 5-12.

⁵ Begum is a formal title used to address women of upper-class Muslim families.

⁶ Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2005) 131-60.

directly. This indirect representation became central in Chughtai's defense at the trial. Chughtai argued that the story, deemed to corrupt innocent readers, could not possibly be understood by those with no prior knowledge of lesbianism.⁷ Such knowledge, of course, would imply that there was no cause to assume the story was a 'corrupting' influence. The story has since become a landmark in postcolonial literary studies. The colonial genesis of the control of female same-sex sexuality was invoked by activists and scholars in the context of *Fire*, where similar arguments were made by women's nationalist groups like the *Mahila Aghadi*.

The recently deceased Malayalam writer Kamala Das (1934-2009) is the other famous author who represents lesbian desire in her autobiography, *My Story* (1976), and short story "The Sandal Trees" (1988).⁸ Though Das does not always make it to the postcolonial canon, these works are often included in its sub-category 'women's writing' as examples of literary discussions of lesbian desire at a time before lesbianism became publicly discussed in India. In the autobiography, Das discusses accounts of female same-sex desire that she witnessed as a girl in a boarding school as well as her own attraction to her female teachers. She also includes a discussion of the intense physical closeness she feels for a female doctor who treated her during an episode of life-threatening illness, an episode that is clearly the basis for her short story years later. For, "The Sandal Trees" is premised on the visit of an unmarried doctor with a married woman, during which both reminisce about their girlhood affair and the doctor attempts to re-ignite it without success. Rosemary George reads Das' contradictory accounts of the verity of the autobiography as

⁷ Geeta Patel, "Homely Housewives Run Amok: Lesbians in Marital Fixes," *Public Culture* 16.1 (Winter 2004): 131-57; Gopinath 131-60.

⁸ Kamala Das, *My Story* (Jullundur: Sterling, 1976); Kamala Das, "The Sandal Trees," 1988, *The Sandal Trees and Other Stories*, transl. V. C. Harris and C. K. Mohamed Ummer (Hyderabad: Dish, 1995) 1-26.

the classic evidence of its 'queer' politics for the very instability of the genre suggests, according to George, the instability of heterosexual desire.⁹ Ruth Vanita reads the premise of "The Sandal Trees" as establishing the pattern of girlhood affairs that end with the marriage of one or both protagonists in Indian fiction about lesbian desire.¹⁰

The works of canonized writers like Chughtai and Das indicate a preoccupation with autobiographical fiction or fictionalized autobiography among writers in representing lesbian desire. They also do not name the lesbian. These works are available either directly in English or through English translations. Chughtai and Das and have become part of the postcolonial canon as a result of feminist scholarly attention that reads these writers' representations of lesbian desire as critiques of nation, which is fundamentally a colonial patriarchal construct.¹¹ If there are other writers during this period, they have certainly gone missing as postcolonial studies went through its historical excavations of literary approaches, genres, and writers. Beyond the heterosexism and homophobia that determined the course of these excavations during its formative decades in the 1980s and 1990s, such elisions also record the limited approaches the field takes in making judgments about genre and questions of authorship. This dissertation addresses centrally the latter problem in reading lesbian representations.

Since 1998, a variety of women writers bearing different relationships to the category 'lesbian' started publishing works about lesbian desire. These works took the form

⁹ Rosemary Marangoly George, "Calling Kamala Das Queer: Rereading *My Story*," *Feminist Studies* 26.3 (2000): 731-63.

¹⁰ Ruth Vanita, *Gandhi's Tiger and Sita's Smile: Essays on Gender, Sexuality and Culture* (New Delhi: Yoda P, 2006) 192.

¹¹ In addition to George, Gopinath, and Patel, Priyamvada Gopal, in *Literary Radicalism in India: Gender, Nation and the Transition to Independence* (London: Routledge, 2005), reads instances of lesbian representation in Chughtai's autobiographical novel, *The Crooked Line*, 1945, transl. Tahira Naqvi (Oxford, U.K.: Heinemann, 1995), as inscribing an alternate modernity of nation, one that approaches both through the lens of gender.

not only of the novel, the genre most familiar within Indian English literature and the one most theorized by the field of postcolonial studies, but also less popular and under-theorized ones such as autobiography and anthology. Although the current writers engage in more overt discussions of lesbian identity and desire, their works are marked by a deferral rather than naming of the lesbian. Any surprise at the seeming continuity with the previous decades where lesbian desire is represented but the lesbian is not named must, however, be forestalled in light of the political commentary that such a gesture makes.

In one set of works, this deferral takes the form of centering the lower-caste Hindu, the working-class woman, and the Muslim in favor of the lesbian. These are all groups that have been treated as second-order to the upper-caste middle-class Hindu male who is the dominant subject of/in the Indian nation. These works thus put into a different perspective the notion of “Indian and lesbian” by challenging the association of belonging suggested by the phrase. Rather than adopting the activist stance that lesbians need rights *because* they are citizens, these works interrogate the very idea of citizenship in their attention to its many elisions. This strategy responds to the right-wing nationalists who deemed the lesbian un-Indian by showing that their exclusion of the lesbian from the realm of culture only extends the longstanding exclusion of many other social groups from the purview of ‘Indian’ identity. These works foreground the violence against these disenfranchised groups to illustrate that being ‘Indian’ has not meant access to ‘rights’ for many groups. The refusal to center the lesbian ultimately shows that the project of sexual liberation demands an all-inclusive critique of notions of authentic cultural identity rather than a mere quest for the rights of a disenfranchised subject.

In another set of works, lesbian deferral occurs by invoking the very instability of gender itself. Through narratives that complicate lesbian identity, these writings unseat the very category 'woman'. These narratives take the shape of desire between transgender men or transgender women and biological women, which complicates questions of who exactly the lesbian is. Is she always a woman who desires women? If 'lesbian' means someone who may be biologically male or someone who lives her life out as socially male even if biologically female, the very meanings of the categories of 'women' and 'men' become complicated. This complication of gender intervenes in nationalism, which works by naturalizing biological difference to posit 'woman' as nation, framed in the rhetoric of "Mother India," and men as the 'protectors'/'sons' of the mother nation. In this formulation, women's sexuality is deployed in the services of reproducing the nation, both biologically and ideologically, while ostensibly celebrating women as the very epitome of culture. The latter becomes clear when we note that motherhood comes attached to wifehood and women's sexuality exclusively within monogamous heterosexuality. That men are under no such pressure becomes clear in the cultural condoning of polygamy and, interestingly enough, of extra-marital homosexuality.¹² Women find no such exceptions. In this context, narratives about women who are mothers but who desire other women in lesbian literary works show a radical reconfiguration of the notion of motherhood and women's sexuality as tied irrevocably to heterosexuality.

¹² See Sheena Asthana and Robert Oostvogels, "The Social Construction of Male 'Homosexuality' in India: Implications for HIV Transmission and Prevention," *Social Science and Medicine* 52.5 (2001): 707-21; and Shivananda Khan, "Cultural Contexts of Sexual Behaviors and Identities and Their Impact on HIV Prevention Models: An Overview of South Asian Men Who Have Sex with Men," *Indian Journal of Social Work* LV.4 (1994): 633-46 for discussions on cultural attitudes to male homosexuality as 'normal' and 'inevitable' and condoned so long as men marry women and reproduce despite being in homosexual relationships.

The different relationships these writers bear to the category 'lesbian', reflected most clearly in generic and formal choices, shows that everyone, irrespective of purported sexual preference, must participate in such a project. The wide constituency of lesbian critique focuses on the centrality of the feminist vision behind projects seeking sexual liberation, a vision that is often forgotten or marginalized or ignored when lesbianism is imagined as a separate field of critical inquiry. Such a reading implicitly and explicitly addresses the gaps in the theoretical engagements with cultural identity and sexuality of the fields described by postcolonial studies and Indian sexuality studies.

The Intervention

Postcolonial Studies

Far from producing or making an argument for an alternate or minority canon within postcolonial Indian literature, my argument about lesbian literature's expansive critique argues against this logic of segregation. Canonicity within the field has led to a very limited view of what text constitutes a representative critique of 'postcolonial' concerns and is therefore worthy of critical attention, both in theorizing and in teaching. This takes one of two forms. The first relegates works about gender and sexuality to sub-categories like 'women's postcolonial writing' or 'feminist postcolonial writing' rather than treating them as central in the general category 'postcolonial Indian literature'. This has the effect of parsing out women's or feminist concerns as 'minority', 'factional', or 'special interest' rather than as central to questions of the nation, which remains (and rightfully perhaps) the primary and predominant focus of postcolonial studies.

Occasionally, some works within this sub-category are picked as representing true postcolonial concerns and have the luxury of being included in both the ‘main’ and ‘sub’ canons. But a closer look at works and writers picked shows the workings of the global marketplace. A classic example is Arundhati Roy, who has authored only one novel to date but whose international success came with the Booker-winning *The God of Small Things* (1996),¹³ her novel about gender and caste in a very specific context within India, which was marketed and sold as a unique and profound take on postcolonial India. The novel tells the semi-autobiographical story of a woman, Rahel, whose incestuous relationship with her twin brother closes the novel. Rahel’s relationship, violating all cultural and social norms in many contexts, can be reasoned as a radical critique of some aspect of culture and society even if the specifics of the particular culture and society the novel discusses are unfamiliar to readers. In any event, the context Roy discusses is that of a community called the Syrian Christians in the state of Kerala, a southern state in India known for its communist government over the post-independent decades and within which caste and religion should be treated as anomalies, antithetical as they are to Marxist thinking. Roy’s critique is thus well-founded. However, Kerala cannot be extrapolated to India. Although the novel is intensely ‘local’ insofar as it describes a part of India that is not ‘globally’ known as cities like Bombay and New Delhi or even Bangalore and Hyderabad are, its institutionalization as ‘postcolonial’ critique follows an interesting trajectory. The extrapolation of the particular context Roy engages to a ‘postcolonial’ one stems from the general logic by which globally marketed authors are read—their use of Indian English. In Roy’s case, her status as ‘woman writer’ in tandem with her role as social activist with incredible cultural capital in India, having worked in publishing and advertising, her connections to media

¹³ Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things* (New York: Random House, 1997).

figures through her family, and her vast intellectual network enables global marketing. Roy stands in, as it were, as the new (and sexy) face of the global Indian woman writer, powerful because she is accessible globally, a theory that obfuscates the fact that it is because she is marketed globally that she is accessible. For, *The God of Small Things* is a difficult read for anyone not familiar with the Kerala context or with the particular idiosyncrasies of Indian English.

Roy's novel proves how the global marketplace can determine the canon. Similar arguments can be made about diasporic authors like Bharati Mukherjee and Chitra Divakaruni Bannerjee, whose novels are frequently included as central to the category 'postcolonial.' Critics have commented on the partial vision of the category formulated by these novelists' writings—cosmopolitan middle-class, English-speaking, and western diasporic located.¹⁴ The canon, thus weighted by such selective concerns of class, language, and geographical location, becomes severely limited. The presence of these several women writers also, damagingly, produces the effect of women being adequately represented while in reality being extremely selectively so. The writers I read are not all globally marketable in the same way. A huge part of why that is so is because of the genres they pick to write in. In a field known for its attention to the novel, genres like anthology and autobiography disappear as less relevant. Even where the novelists I include are globally marketed, it is the familiarity of their themes—feminist rebellion of middle-class women circumscribed nevertheless within heterosexual desire—that is alluded to. The novels about lesbian desire simply vanish from discussions on global forums such as reader web logs, publishers' publicity forums, or booksellers' advertising or are subsumed under statements that they

¹⁴ Inderpal Grewal, *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2005) 35-79.

are about ‘female sexuality’. The lack of specificity in the latter phrase affords worldwide marketing without risking loss of readership via people’s homophobic ignoring or homophobic prevention of works from reaching readers. After all, publishers are under pressure to generate revenue, not become poster-children for social change in the global capitalist market. Writing, it seems, is no less subject to market regimes than any other corporate enterprise, and unfortunately, canon formation indicates a strong alignment to marketing.¹⁵

My intention is not to eviscerate canons’ ties to the market, for fields of inquiry certainly have to focus on availability, especially in a situation of the mass marketing of education itself. Rather, I suggest that even with a capitalist order, greater intentionality on the part of academic fields in producing canons can push markets to follow social justice agendas rather than profiteering. Readily available and widely marketed texts offer the quickest way to move through students quickly and in huge numbers at a time in times of low economic support for academics and the university. Constituting a canon to respond to the demands of time and numbers thus often takes recourse to availability and global familiarity rather than investment in researching critical concerns that texts raise and their representative status as postcolonial critiques. Changing this demands hermeneutic practices on the part of research scholars, teachers, and students that push against the received canon, something that those in the field have long advocated¹⁶ but that is often

¹⁵ See Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 2001); and Luke Strongman, *The Booker Prize and the Legacy of Empire* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002) for arguments about the link between capitalist publishing markets, literary awards, and the postcolonial canon.

¹⁶ For example, Harveen Mann, in “U.S. Multiculturalism, Post-Colonialism, and Indo-Anglian Literature: Some Issues of Critical Pedagogy and Theory,” *Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 27.1 (Spring 1994): 94-108, discusses how the postcolonial Indian literary canon is often constituted by the vagaries of US multiculturalism rather than always the accurate historicizing of postcoloniality. Salah Dean Assaf Hassan, in “Canons after ‘Postcolonial Studies,’” *Pedagogy* 1.2 (Spring 2001): 297-304, argues that

treated as naïve or too simplistic a research question if the continued reliance on the conventional canon is any indication.

The second form canonicity takes in postcolonial Indian literary studies has to do with the kinds of works and kinds of writers who are taken as representatives of the tradition. Without doubt, the novel has been central to postcolonial literary exploration. As a result, the genre has been theorized to the point that other equally viable genres more accessible by and apposite to certain groups have remained under-theorized. Theorizations of the novel have also produced (an understandable) focus on those who have contributed toward its development. My focus on lesbian literature not only brings to light two genres relatively under-theorized or unknown in the canon—autobiography and anthology—but also raises the question of how we determine and ordain the status of (literary) ‘writer’ upon those who write and whose voices we read. Writings that do not belong to the canon help re-frame our ideas of writers/authors as entities rooted in material conditions such as social location rather than abstractions such as ‘literary greatness’, and expand our notion of what genres make for critical representations of ‘postcolonial’ concerns. Sustained attention to writers of various stripes—first-time, relatively new, and established ones with considerable oeuvres—who use the anthology, a genre that accommodates multiple voices, writing styles, and political positions, shows how different groups write in response to their positions in the hierarchies of a given social order. That these writers’ voices find a chance to be heard in a public forum like writing also shows, however, that historical conditions *generate* writers. These voices have been facilitated by the feminist activism of the 1990s. The feminist efforts to politicize sexuality, which has been in practice over several decades,

inclusion of literary works by formerly marginalized groups has led to the domestication of what were once considered counter-canonical works and robbed them of their subversive power.

achieved strongest support in the transnational connectivities enabled by the changes in culture brought by economic liberalization during this period. The mobility of feminist scholars and activists between India and the west especially gave rise to new modes of theorizing, campaigning, and conversing about sexuality. The rise of lesbian politics is a clear indication of this, for in the prior decades, even as feminist activism engaged with female sexuality, same-sex desire remained absent within feminism.¹⁷

If the anthology acts as a democratic space through its multiple voices, the autobiography, that genre most associated with individualism,¹⁸ finds an entirely different approach in lesbian literature. A relatively under-theorized genre in the field of postcolonial Indian literature, the autobiography has long been associated with the works of public figures like political leaders and royal women when it is read critically at all in the field.¹⁹ The most famous form of autobiography that the field has theorized has been autobiographical fiction, which was central to lesbian representation in the decades prior to 1998, as the cases of Chughtai and Das show. The autobiography holds a unique place in lesbian representation, for it is the preferred genre of India's only out lesbian writer, Suniti Namjoshi, who lives and writes in England. Namjoshi's turn to autobiography must be read in light of her solitary status as India's only writer who writes consistently about lesbianism

¹⁷ Maya Sharma, "Introduction," *Loving Women: Being Lesbian in Underprivileged India* (New Delhi: Yoda P, 2006) 21-27.

¹⁸ See Sidonie Smith, *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987) 3-43, where Smith historicizes the genre's genesis and development within the humanism associated with the Renaissance period, which starts roughly in the fourteenth century.

¹⁹ The most famous of Indian autobiographies remain those of male political figures, starting with that of Mahatma Gandhi, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (Boston: Beacon P, 1927) and independent India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru's *Toward Freedom* (New York: John Day, 1942). Recently, feminist scholar Tanika Sarkar, in *Words to Win: The Making of Amar Jiban, a Modern Autobiography* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1999), introducing and translating the Bengali autobiography of a nineteenth-century housewife, Rassundari Devi, argues that the autobiography is the result of Devi's self-education at home, which indicates women's resistance to the gendered formulations of early anti-colonial nationalism that deemed education and professionalization the purview of males.

and, importantly, has done so well before 1998. The autobiographical has inflected the considerable number of novels, poetry, and short fiction Namjoshi has authored since 1981. The genre's relative marginalization in postcolonial Indian literary studies has, however, meant that Namjoshi has been bypassed entirely. What has been lost as a result is not merely the possibility of having situated a long time ago heterosexuality as far from 'normal' or the only sexuality of the 'Indian' through a woman who publicly talks about lesbian desire and identifies as lesbian, but also the very complexity of the genre itself. For, along with heterosexuality and heteronormativity, Namjoshi de-centers the autobiography itself, wrenching it away from masculine and western control, the genesis of the genre, in writing about herself. She also deploys it in the services of critiquing the contemporary multicultural order of the west, where she lives, and the west's relationship to India via the diasporic who returns only to find that 'home' is eternally marked in the elsewhere. Far from any project of individualism, for Namjoshi, the autobiography becomes a space to engage with questions of feminist solidarity in the face of patriarchal and (neo)colonial control.

The consideration of genres marginal to the postcolonial Indian literary tradition and a re-defined sense of the category 'writers' expands our ability to see, read, and teach the political possibilities of writing itself. For, then we can begin to see how literature—writing, words, and language—is available to and accessed differently by groups in the service of engaging with disenfranchisement, and how the literary is not merely the purview of a few voices schooled in the 'arts'. Such an approach re-frames conventional notions of literature as an inherently partial, elitist enterprise available to few on the one hand, and as an archaic cultural artifact in the age of technology on the other.

Importantly, my argument about re-shaping the postcolonial Indian literary canon re-frames critical considerations of gender within the field. In addition to the anthological and autobiographical voices, the novelistic voice is key to doing so. In novels, middle-class women writers challenge the very framings of the category ‘woman’. In many a nationalist context, ‘woman’ signifies the nurturing wife and mother, monogamous, heterosexual, and heteronormative, who gives material form to abstract ideas like culture and nation.²⁰ Such signification, emerging in the Indian context within the exigencies of anti-colonial nationalism, during which gender was deployed to construct the idea of a uniquely ‘Indian’ culture different from the colonizer’s, inevitably takes shape at the expense of the differences among women. In constructing woman as the emblem of culture, nationalism elides the fact that what it does is homogenize the category even as it selects which women get to represent culture. The lesbian’s banishment as an inauthentic cultural subject by nationalists certainly illustrates this. Scholars have theorized that the woman chosen to represent ‘India’ and ‘Indian-ness’ is the upper-caste middle-class educated woman who is seen as essential to nurturing and raising the future citizens.²¹ Thus, the role of women is relegated to the domestic sphere, which is also the reproductive sphere—biological and ideological. An education is *de rigueur* in this formulation and the domestic role of women is elevated as “scientific homemaking”²² in case women object to the limiting of their educational skills to the home while men get to exercise it at the workplace.

In the twenty-first-century novel by women, middle-class girls and married women are shown engaged in lesbian relationships amidst the cultural socialization to embody the

²⁰ See Nira Yuval Davis and Floya Anthias, ed. *Woman, Nation, State* (Basingstoke: Macmillan P, 1989).

²¹ See Kumkum Sangari and Suresh Vaid, ed. *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*, 1989 (New York: Routledge, 1999).

²² Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1993.

cultural/nationalist image of 'woman'. Lesbian relationships do not merely function as a site of pleasure but also, crucially, as a site of critique of, resistance to, and disengagement from the very premises of the category 'woman'. Relationships with other women offer a way for protagonists to deconstruct their own status as those who rely on male financial protection, which brings with it relegation to the home, and instead demand the right to work and participation in the public sphere. The realization that, as women together, either both are responsible for the financial/public realm or one of them will be undermines the idea of women as signified by domesticity/the private realm. Middle-class women's entry into the public as equal participants in 'making a living' or girls' preparedness for doing so upon realizing that where there are two female partners, one must inevitably 'put food on the table' re-signifies the very category 'woman.' Far from saying that 'working women' are not women, I am arguing that when women work outside the home, culturally-framed ideas that housework is 'women's work' and paid work is 'men's work' shift (whether in actuality men actually perform housework or not). Instead, it puts into question how 'women' and 'men' are at least in part *created* by divisions such as the private/non-income generating and the public/income generating realm. This reframing of gender as a theoretical concept forces in turn the reframing of the canon. Once the category 'woman' has been dismantled, no longer is it tenable to parse literature into categories like 'women's writing,' which has long produced the effect of marginalizing the critical concerns of gender rather than making it a central part of the postcolonial.

Indian Sexuality Studies

The attention to outsider-ness by the writers under consideration in this dissertation formulates a politics of lesbianism that directly addresses and reformulates the concerns of lesbian studies and lesbian politics. Even as these writings re-frame what constitutes ‘postcolonial’ concerns by showing sexuality’s centrality to definitions of cultural identity and nation, they also show that any engagement with sexual desire and/or sexual identity must account for their located-ness in a matrix of other modes of cultural and social being. In this, they re-frame the concerns of lesbianism in India against the western models that clearly serve as inspiration but which can never adequately capture the specificity of the Indian experience. Scholarship of the twenty-first century, which emerged after lesbian activism in India, indicates a focus on ‘recovering’ the indigenous lesbian subject. This may be seen as a response to nationalist claims that the lesbian is inherently ‘western’ and that lesbians do not exist in India. This scholarship is rooted in the academic work of transnationally-based scholars, who live between western locations and India. It has also been generated in India by the presence of activists who work on various aspects of sexuality—HIV/AIDS activism, campaigns against criminalizing sexuality, changing attitudes to sexuality, and helplines and support groups for those for whom sexuality remains an important mode of organizing everyday life.

While sexuality studies incorporates a wide range of approaches that are not reducible to ‘queer’ or ‘lesbian’ work, a significant arena has recently emerged that allows the conflation of sexuality and queer. This is largely because of the vocabulary and ideological positioning of this area of scholarship. Works such as *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History* (2000), Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai’s edited volume of essays that discuss same-sex desire from ancient, medieval, and contemporary

India, and Vanita's edited volume *Queering India: Same-Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society* (2002) are examples of such a project. While these projects are important correctives to nationalist homophobia which argues that same-sex desire is 'western', they have the unfortunate effect of institutionalizing studies of non-heterosexual and non-heteronormative desire as a separate field of inquiry. Although Vanita has argued elsewhere that lesbian feminist ideals should not be separate from feminist ideals in general,²³ her first two volumes have since spawned a number of works that address sexuality as a separate sphere.²⁴ The theoretical parameters of these works, based in recovery and visibility for the named queer subject, have had the unfortunate effect of creating a field of 'sexuality studies' separate from feminist studies.

The focus on vocabularies drawn from recovering and naming the queer subject—importantly, of identity and rights—has the effect of disengaging the field of sexuality from indigenous feminism, which it claims to belong to. Feminist skepticism about western models of engagement with queer desire, expressed in scholarship by indigenous feminists, only adds to the sense of the separation wrought between what is perceived as 'sexuality' studies and 'feminist' studies. Within western feminism, this separation has been critiqued as divisive and undesirable in many contexts, but scholarship and pedagogy that carved out a separate sphere of 'lesbian studies' ultimately brought to naught such feminist concerns. This is evident in 'fields' such as 'queer'/LGBTQI studies separate from 'women's studies' and in research on sexuality that fails to theorize adequately other social identities and

²³ Ruth Vanita, "Thinking Beyond Gender in India," *Feminism in India: Issues in Contemporary Indian Feminism*, ed. Maitrayee Chaudhuri (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2006) 69-78.

²⁴ Works like Geetanjali Misra and Radhika Chandiramani, ed. *Sexuality, Gender and Rights: Exploring Theory and Practice in South and Southeast Asia* (New Delhi: Sage, 2005); and Arvind Narrain and Gautam Bhan, ed. *Because I Have a Voice: Queer Politics in India* (New Delhi: Yoda P, 2006) indicate this trend in adopting western models to discuss indigenous forms of sexuality.

realities central to western societies such as race and class. These latter elisions became the subject of critique against white lesbian feminism in the 1980s, after which ‘queer of color’ emerged as a field in its own right.

But Indian sexuality studies has also generated a number of important and influential models for scholarship in sexuality that remain rooted in feminism. My project enters this arena. Its most obvious influence is Gayatri Gopinath’s book on queer culture and the diaspora, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (2005), which it extends as well as departs from in important ways. Gopinath argues that the figure of the lesbian remains “impossible” in the context of patriarchal nationalism which refuses to see female same-sex desire even when it is present. Such nationalism marks woman as inherently heterosexual. It confines women to the home and to the company of each other because each space is considered safe from any form of desire but heterosexuality. By reading a wide range of texts, Gopinath argues that it is precisely in these spaces, however, that female desire clearly exceeds patriarchal expectations. Gopinath’s uses a range of cultural texts to argue that their representations of subversive gender performances indicate that queer female desire inflects the spaces of diaspora and nation which patriarchy is unable to see.

Gopinath’s project is to read cultural representations in which queer female desire is marked indirectly and whose reading requires a different critical mode. As such, Gopinath confines herself to representations that are not always overtly about the lesbian. Her project addresses the pre-history of *Fire* as a way of addressing the nationalist logic that followed *Fire*, which cast lesbianism as un-Indian. She uses this pre-history to undo lesbianism as a western epistemological issue and focuses on its rootedness in the Indian context.

My project takes as its point of departure Gopinath's argument and asks what happens when literature confronts the 'impossible' subject of culture. How does representation deal with realizing the subject marginalized by cultural discourse? What does such representation tell us about the relationship of cultural text to cultural context? The answers to these questions lie in the deployment of genre itself. For one, it is clear that genres marginal within Indian literature serve important functions in bringing to light such a subject. The anthology offers one possibility by being the most 'open' genre. Its ability to contain multiple voices and multiple subject positions enables prolific discussions of lesbian life in the nation. The autobiography offers India's only out writer a space from which to talk about something nobody acknowledges. Having no tradition she can call on, having no predecessors or contemporaries, she can only turn to her own story to counter the overwhelming heteronormativity of both literary and everyday culture. It is not surprising that the novel, the most represented genre in Indian literature, offers a space for imagining the lesbian. The *Bildungsroman* and domestic novel become forums through which to re-write the story of female sexuality away from the heteronormativity associated with the forms.

The works I read draw attention not only to the prolific presence of female same-sex desire within culture but also the complex ways in which the local and the global interact with and inflect each other with regard to ways of understanding sexuality. Overwhelmingly, they focus on the terms by which lesbian desire is negotiated in the nation even as its politicization is informed by spaces outside the nation. For Gopinath, the diaspora serves as an important space from which challenges are mounted to heteronormative nationalism, including that within the nation. I focus on the nation itself as

the space of that resistance, as embodied by literary endeavors. Where Gopinath unearths queer female desire within the seemingly homosocial female spaces of cultural texts, the texts I read posit lesbian desire explicitly. Gopinath's project is rooted much more in evocations of queer female desire as ever-present even while illegible. My focus on the lesbian argues, on the other hand, that even while legible, the lesbian stands in for and intersects with other forms of marginalization, which must be addressed if the lesbian is to achieve a measure of safety in the nation. Legibility still means that visibility is to be negotiated carefully for women who desire women in India.

While some of this careful negotiation is because of the dangers of violence, part of it is equally because women prefer to remain unknown, as the many anonymous voices in the anthology prove. In some accounts, lesbian desire does not disturb or intervene in patriarchy at all, located as it is in the economy of pleasure alone. Similarly, in the autobiography, Namjoshi is careful to situate her own politicization as lesbian and the historical location of the vocabulary of lesbianism in the west, where she lives and writes, instead of claiming it *tout court*. Her 'return' to India as lesbian is most possible in the space of literature, and has been almost impossible outside it. And finally, the novels show that visibility may not always be possible or desirable in a context where lesbian desire is the only space marked free of the heteronormative gaze. Even as this is a problematic formulation, the novels' representation of lesbian desire as ultimately failing as long as it remains within India occasions pause for thought about who exactly gets to live and love as lesbian publicly and how a politics of lesbianism as a public challenge to patriarchy may be realized. The novels' attention to the class contours and social circumstances of middle-class life in India inflects critically the rhetoric "we're here, we're queer" which is audible

in the slogan “Indian and lesbian.” For, the novels show that the militant streak of that rhetoric is possible only within the context of community and the conditions for sustaining lives lived differently. Ultimately, it is this community that the works I read advocate and seek in their approach to lesbianism.

I am not suggesting that visibility is a bad thing and certainly not arguing that lesbianism is best served closeted. When we consider that what these literary works are doing is, in effect, publicizing lesbian desire, such an argument is clearly moot. Rather, I am arguing against the parsing out of ‘lesbian’ concerns in terms of visibility and rights that has already been ‘globalized’ via western influences. What the works I read do is to make a case for a culturally-specific and practical mode of thinking through the possibilities for lesbian life and how best to engage in a political position based on female same-sex desire that does not merely repeat western formulations, providing fodder in the bargain for the claim that lesbianism is ‘western’. The works I read, in their relentless attention to the social and cultural circumstances against which lesbian desire must be positioned and read, take us back to the old feminist commitments of thinking through ‘local’ differences²⁵ and paying attention to the nexus of social locations that go into composing ‘Indian’ life, each one of which is central to creating and sustaining the other and none of which we can afford to ignore for it would result in insufficient hermeneutic practice.²⁶

²⁵ The seminal work in this regard is Chandra Mohanty’s essay, “‘Under Western Eyes’: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” *Feminist Review* 30 (August 1988): 61-88, in which Mohanty argues that the dangers of western feminist theorizing about gender lie precisely in their lack of attention to how local specificities shape meanings of gender differently.

²⁶ See Susie Tharu, “The Impossible Subject: Caste and the Gendered Body,” 1996, *Gender and Caste*, ed. Anupama Rao (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2003) 261-75, for Tharu’s argument that the elision of caste within Indian feminism has resulted in her inability to read and theorize the resistant figure of the lower-caste woman in literature. I draw inspiration from Tharu’s feminist point about learning from our elisions in practicing feminist scholarship.

My argument about the genealogy of lesbian literature and the different history it writes about gender and nation is elaborated in three chapters. Each chapter situates the conditions of production of particular genres, focusing especially on geographical and ideological locations of the writers. The chapters also pay attention to how genre works in the services of author's particular political concerns in representing the lesbian. This focus on author and genre in the services of lesbian representation makes a case for the re-framing of postcolonial Indian literary studies via a re-configuration of the canon. The deferral of the lesbian each work shows seeks to expand the theoretical and political commitments of lesbian studies.

Chapter II reads the political premise of *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing from India* (1999),²⁷ published a few months after the *Fire* controversy. As the first and only anthology to date that calls itself "lesbian writing from India," it nevertheless complicates the category 'lesbian' through the voices of multiple contributors, each of whom approaches the definition of lesbian desire and identity differently. With its diverse voices of transgender women and men, women for whom lesbian sex occurs exclusively as an aside to heterosexual marriage, those for whom lesbianism is a political choice, the anthology nuances and refines our ideas both about what forms of desire are signified by the term 'lesbian.' In refusing to show us what Indian lesbians look like through the structuring device of anonymity, the anthology complicates cultural understandings of what lesbians look like. Anonymity also shifts the notion of visibility as the criterion for lesbian

²⁷ Ashwini Sukthankar, ed., *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing from India* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1999).

politics, showing instead that lesbian politics demands a more deep-seated critique of patriarchal assumptions about female sexuality, which is evident in the nationalist claim that in India, there are no lesbians. The anthology functions also as a critical space for the illustration of the feminist commitment of de-centering the representative power of the solitary voice of the writer, which is often treated as a stand-in for that of the community. By reading it against the cultural climate that led up to the *Fire* controversy and feminist political interventions, I show how writings and writers generated by historical events that may not always illustrate conventional notions of ‘literature’ or ‘author’ nevertheless respond critically to their times. The writings, existing across genres that complicate any easy sense of what “lesbian writing” itself looks like, provides the impetus for the next chapter, in which postmodernism does the same thing for the autobiography.

Chapter III situates India’s only out lesbian writer Suniti Namjoshi in the context of postcolonial Indian literary canons. Namjoshi’s official autobiography, *Goja: An Autobiographical Myth* (2000),²⁸ is written as a ‘coming out’ story, but one made to two dead women, her grandmother and her childhood servant, Goja, to whom the title and bulk of the autobiography are devoted. In the autobiography, she tells us that her long exile in the west is the direct result of familial and cultural homophobia. But her focus on Goja rather than herself formulates a different kind of lesbian politics. Lesbianism becomes for Namjoshi a way to process the hierarchies established by patriarchal nationalism in India. Postmodernism offers her a way to do so without resorting to a limited vision of what constitutes ‘lesbian’ concerns. Namjoshi’s approach to telling the story of her lesbianism, I argue, offers a powerful feminist mode of critique of the many elisions of cultural nationalism. Her absence from the postcolonial literary canon despite such nuanced

²⁸ Suniti Namjoshi, *Goja: An Autobiographical Myth* (Melbourne: Spinifex, 2000).

understandings of cultural identity and the salience of gender and class to it therefore certainly provokes further thinking for the field, which I centralize in my reading.

Chapter IV reads the disruptive power of lesbian desire in nationalist framings of ‘woman’ in two realist historical novels by middle-class women writers. *Babyji* (2005), a *Bildungsroman* by U.S.-based Indian writer Abha Dawesar, and *A Married Woman* (2002), a domestic novel by India-based writer Manju Kapur, both use the city of New Delhi to examine lesbian desire as the route to the feminist development of their protagonists.²⁹ Unlike the previous chapter, in which counter-realism functions as central to processing a lesbian political vision, here literary realism offers these authors a way to focus on the presence of lesbian desire as a routine part of ‘Indian’ life. Against the backdrop of caste and religious violence which marked the beginning of the 1990s, lesbian desire functions to educate upper-caste middle-class girls and women of the elisions that constitute ‘Indian’ identity. Dawesar’s girl protagonist is in a relationship with a lower-caste woman; Kapur’s married protagonist is in a relationship with the widow of a Muslim activist killed by Hindu fundamentalists. Their desires re-formulate the very terrain of gender because ultimately, even though the relationships end, the girl and the woman step outside the domestic sphere through higher education in the U.S. and a career as painter, respectively. The political premise of lesbianism is not so much a separate sphere of resistance in these novels, but one that raises questions about what exactly it would take to sustain alternatives to heterosexuality. Neither the young girl nor the married woman find that community, but they also do not go back to the confines of domesticity which is destined for them through relentless socializing by family and culture. Ultimately, this offers a compelling alternative

²⁹ Abha Dawesar, *Babyji* (New York: Anchor, 2005); Manju Kapur, *A Married Woman*, 2002 (London: Faber and Faber, 2003).

for women whose lives are circumscribed by the pressures of domesticity as the ‘true sign’ of womanhood itself.

Chapter V concludes the dissertation by raising questions about the value of lesbian deferral in literary culture in global India. By locating this deferral in the context of globalization, public culture, and sexuality, I answer the question of how literature avoids the problem of fictionalizing lesbian life in its turn. I engage in particular with the literature’s relationship to culture. Two questions emerge here: one, how does literature become a space of critique of cultural discourses that seek to normalize certain ways of being as representative of culture itself; and two, how does representation subvert the capitalist state’s ability to fold in acts of resistance within its own modernizing project?

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Chapter II

“A Record of Our Lives”: ‘India’ and Anonymity in the Lesbian Anthology

1. Introduction

In late November 1998, both the English and Hindi versions of Deepa Mehta’s *Fire* were screened at movie theaters in various cities across India. This followed several weeks of scrutiny by the Indian Censor Board, the arbitrator of ratings for all films, which subsequently passed the film with a “U” (unrestricted public exhibition) rating¹ and without any major excisions. The first few days of screening went by without incident until December 1, when the *Shiv Sena*,² a militant right-wing Hindu political party from Maharashtra, attacked theaters showing the film in Bombay.³ This was followed by attacks in Patiala and subsequently New Delhi and Calcutta. In cities like Bangalore and Madras, the film was removed from theaters after these riots. The central focus of the

¹ The Censor Board’s other ratings are U/A (unrestricted viewing with adult supervision) and A (adults only).

² *Shiv Sena* literally means “The Army of Shivaji,” the seventeenth-century king whose political ambition was to expand the Maratha (a warrior caste from the region now constituted by the state of Maharashtra) Empire. A very capable military leader, Shivaji was directly responsible for thwarting British naval conquest of western India. As a result, he was frequently referred to in the anti-colonial struggle of the late nineteenth century. In contemporary India, he is often invoked in the services of militant right-wing Hindu nationalism, as Shivaji was a deeply devout Hindu whose political struggles were against the other major ruling community of the Indic region—the Mughals, who were Muslims. However, Shivaji himself is said to have retained a great deal of respect for other faiths. Many contemporary Marathas are mobilized by right-wing groups like the *Sena* and more generally culturally as direct descendants of Shivaji. See Randolph G.S. Cooper, *The Anglo-Maratha Campaigns and the Contest for India: the Struggle for Control of the South Asian Military Economy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2003).

³ Bombay (or Mumbai as it is now called) is the capital of Maharashtra. I have retained the old names for all cities. The current wave of re-naming/Indianizing city names follows the theory that the older, Anglicized ones reflect coloniality. While being anti-colonialist myself, I remain wary of such efforts to “Indianize,” which have emerged in conjunction with (or perhaps entirely within) right-wing nationalist sentiment. Moreover, the Indianizing of city names could propagate a kind of historical amnesia in the long run, with younger generations likely to forget the colonial legacies that constitute ‘global’ India.

attacks was anger at Mehta's overt (and, as critics point out, rather simplified⁴) criticism of religion-based patriarchy, which nationalist groups like the *Sena* considered an offense against Hinduism itself.⁵ Enmeshed in this was yet another site of attack—Mehta's diasporic and feminist status, which was interpreted as evidence of her 'western' (and therefore inauthentic Indian) identity. This led to the rhetoric that, as an inauthentic cultural subject, Mehta could only portray inauthentic cultural subjectivity (the Indian lesbian or even the feminist Indian).⁶

Sometime in March 1999, a few months after the attacks and amidst the waning tide of protests and newspaper and television commentaries, *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing from India* was published by Penguin India.⁷ Its ninety-nine narratives exist, as editor Ashwini Sukthankar points out, "in the free confluence of fiction, essay, poetry, and memoir."⁸ The narratives are by everyday women as well as established writers whose identities are disguised. Through their writing, these women engage differently the term lesbian, lesbian desire, and lesbian politics. The collection provides, in Sukthankar's words, "a tribute to writing as a record of our lives"⁹ at a time when lesbianism and lesbians (whether named or not) were directly under attack in India. She makes clear that

⁴ See Madhu Kishwar, "Naïve Outpourings of a Self-Hating Indian," *Manushi* 109 (Nov.-Dec. 1998): 3-14; Allison Donnell, "Feel Good? Look Again!: Feel Good Movies and the Vanishing Points of Liberation in Deepa Mehta's *Fire* and Gurinder Chadha's *Bend It Like Beckham*," *Journal of Creative Communications* 2.1-2 (2007): 43-55; Gayathri Gopinath, "On Fire," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 4:4 (Fall 1998): 631-636.

⁵ Every critic who has written about the film addresses this quite centrally. In addition to the references in footnote 4 above, see Geeta Patel, "On Fire: Sexuality and its Incitements," *Queering India: Same-Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society*, ed. Ruth Vanita (New York, London: Routledge) 221-33; Sibaji Bandyopadhyay, "Approaching the Present, the Pre-Text: The *Fire* Controversy," *The Phobic and the Erotic: The Politics of Sexualities in Contemporary India*, ed. Brinda Bose and Subhabrata Bhattacharyya (Calcutta: Seagull, 2007) 17-90.

⁶ See footnotes 4 and 5 above.

⁷ Ashwini Sukthankar, ed., *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing from India* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1999).

⁸ Ashwini Sukthankar, "Introduction," *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing from India*, ed. Ashwini Sukthankar (New Delhi: Penguin, 1999) xxi.

⁹ Sukthankar, "Introduction" xxxix.

this record was produced “to start claiming public spaces, with the explicit hazards that accompany them”¹⁰ so that “one less woman might have to experience ... isolation.”¹¹ Though the making of Mehta’s film and the publication of the anthology are unrelated ventures,¹² in an editor’s note appended before the introduction, Sukthankar states, “[t]he reaction to our living presence has been painful to witness, a further reminder that the ‘culture of tolerance’ in which we live is fictitious. But it reinforces our belief in this book, which reflects and represents our reality today. We will not be shamed into pretending that we do not exist.”¹³ This highlights the need some women felt for bringing to the fore same-sex desire as a valid mode of organizing socio-cultural life in a culture in which sexual desire—same- or cross-gender—was rarely articulated publicly before the globalizing decade of the 1990s.

Less than a decade later, *Loving Women: Being Lesbian in Underprivileged India* (2006), an ethnography of working-class and rural women who live with women, was released by a relatively new publishing venture, Yoda Press in New Delhi.¹⁴ *Loving Women* was, in some sense, anticipated by *Facing*. Sukthankar tells us in the latter that the relative paucity of working-class, rural, and non-English speaking voices attests to the difficulty of approaching women in a large and very diverse context like India’s.¹⁵ She further explains that she had approached Maya Sharma, the editor-ethnographer of *Loving Women*, about a separate venture to do justice to the complexity of understanding

¹⁰ Sukthankar, “Introduction” xv.

¹¹ Sukthankar, “Introduction” xvii.

¹² Personal communication with Ashwini Sukthankar.

¹³ Sukthankar, “Introduction” xi.

¹⁴ Maya Sharma, ed. *Loving Women: Being Lesbian in Underprivileged India* (New Delhi: Yoda P, 2006).

¹⁵ Sukthankar, “Introduction” xxvii.

lesbianism outside the political language of identity and rights, which is also the language of English.¹⁶

Interestingly, while *Fire* found immediate and devastating retaliation, *Facing* and *Loving Women* were largely missed events in the public imaginary. Where reviewed in the popular press, *Facing* is largely damned with faint praise or accused of being vague and difficult to read.¹⁷ They have simply not caused the controversy that *Fire* did, especially in an India where acts of violence against public instances of sexuality have increased in the last decade, as evidenced by continued attacks on public displays of sexuality, whether of affection or of women's bodies.¹⁸ For the most part, the anthologies simply disappeared from—or perhaps never appeared on—the national scene, despite the fact that both use the word 'lesbian' more directly than *Fire* does. *Fire*'s only nod to the word is the comment one character makes to the other after lovemaking: "There is no word in our language for what we are, what we feel for each other." The film does not explicitly invoke the term even in this context, which became central in Mehta's defense of it as being "not about lesbians" in the wake of the attacks.¹⁹ *Facing*, on the other hand, announces itself as "lesbian writing from India," and *Loving Women* as a book about "being lesbian in underprivileged India," claiming "lesbian" and "lesbian as Indian," two central terms in the marches and protests in the wake of the attacks on *Fire*. Thus, the

¹⁶ Sukthankar, "Introduction" xxvii.

¹⁷ Singular examples include Kuldip Dhiman's extended review "The Other Side of Woman's Desire" (*The Tribune* 21 March 1999, 14 Jan 2009 <<http://www.tribuneindia.com/1999/99mar21/book.htm>>) and Kala Krishnan Ramesh's short review under "Print Pick" (*The Hindu* 25 May 2004, 14 Jan 2009 <<http://www.hindu.com/mp/2004/05/25/stories/2004052500860300.htm>>).

¹⁸ See "Hard-line Hindus Protest Valentine's Day," *MSNBC Online* 13 Feb. 2008, 21 Mar. 2008 <<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/23147336/>> and Jeremy Page, "Hindu Zealots Attack Women in Raid on Bar Party," *The Times* 28 Jan. 2009, 31 Jan. 2009 <<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article5600715.ece>> for news reports on separate attacks by right-wing nationalists on Valentine's Day celebrations and of women in bars and clubs.

¹⁹ See Ratna Kapur, "Too Hot to Handle: The Cultural Politics of 'Fire,'" *Feminist Review* 64 (Spring, 2000): 53-64.

anthologies put in writing, for all to see, a term that is only *suggested* as the descriptor of desire between women in *Fire*.

This chapter reads the different kinds of visibility film and literary text produce for the lesbian, relating this production to genre and form as determining factors in audience perception. It argues that both *Facing* and *Loving Women* hold a particular kind of power to *cloak* what is public, particularly because of the form they each take—part theoretical and part creative writing, but also through anonymity as a structuring device for their narratives. This stands in contrast to *Fire*—a film—in which lesbianism, no matter how mediated, is inevitably *there* for assaillment. Rather than being concerned with a critique of *Fire*'s shortcomings or the relevance of one medium over another, I use the visual and literary texts to make an argument about cultural production and audience, specifically about how the literary anthology helps forge a politics of sexuality based on anti-essentialism and anti-individualism, thus responding to 'global' transfers of sexual politics while retaining critiques of 'local' nationalisms.

Both *Facing* and *Loving Women* indicate complex engagements with the lesbian. *Facing* has minimal editorial intervention and the contributors represent themselves directly. The anthology thus retains the often fragmented, de-contextualized voices of the contributors. *Loving Women*, on the other hand, primarily reflects the voice of the ethnographer, giving us a reconstructed account of the lives of the sixteen women she interviewed. Their voices thus find a formal coherence that *Facing* lacks. However, in both cases, lesbian as an identity category is called into question and re-defined as often as it is affirmed and accepted as a descriptor. Under the overarching defining framework of the label, which

the editors endorse as politically valuable, each anthology captures the differences in approach to the term in the everyday lives of women who desire women. *Facing* is organized into six sections with the following themes: “Passages,” “Home,” “Worlds,” “Differences,” “Connection,” and “Love.” Each section comprises entries of varying lengths and in different genres. Fiction jostles with first-person narrative and letters. Poetry stands alongside one-act plays. Conference papers that contextualize the genesis of the lesbian feminist movement co-exist with interpretations of ancient and medieval Indian philosophical and medical treatises. *Loving Women* is organized as sixteen separate narratives, some about couples and others about individual women. Each bears the pseudonymous title of its protagonist/s. In each, Sharma gives us the context for her meeting with the women: how she came to know about them, their meeting, their discussions, the reaction of those around, especially family members and the police who get involved as a result of family complaints against one or both partners. Each story centralizes the paradox of rural and working-class lesbian life. On the one hand, rural and working-class status seems to offer genuine measures of freedom from marital norms, something Ruth Vanita theorizes in her book on same-sex marriage in India, which spans class groups.²⁰ On the other hand, such arrangements are rendered invisible within the general erasure of working-class and rural life in invocations of India and Indian life, particularly within the logic of global modernity.

In reading the anthologies, I am particularly interested in reinstating the genre of the anthology as a valid object of inquiry within literary studies. The anthology remains an under-theorized genre in literary studies in general, both in the context of India and

²⁰ Ruth Vanita, *Love's Rite: Same-Sex Marriage in India and the West* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

other locations. The downright paucity of monographs or critical essay collections on the anthology testifies to the difficulty of theorizing a literary work that vexes ideas of authorship, political message, and genre. Often, anthologies contain a wide selection of writings in different genres by a number of writers. This multiplicity of genres and authors shows often contradictory approaches to the ostensibly unified theme they are collectively brought under. This is certainly the case with *Facing*, which, announced as “lesbian writing from India,” shows a great deal of disagreement of the very categories ‘lesbian,’ ‘writing,’ and ‘India.’ The same is true of *Loving Women*, which, through its ethnographic narrative and its constant attention to the difficulty of translation, complicates the very meaning of ‘being lesbian’ that its title invokes. In *Facing*, some writers accept the label lesbian completely, some provisionally, and yet others contest it entirely. Although the pieces are all solicited from women who are known to be living with women or exploring their same-sex attractions, as Sukthankar tells us,²¹ some choose to write their ostensible real-life experiences as fiction, others as poetry, some as memoirs, and yet others as academic papers. This renders difficult any easy theorizing of ‘lesbian writing’ as an identifiable category separable from any other familiar genre in literature. Yet, the anthology makes clear that despite such inseparability, lesbian writing has clearly needed a space of its own, especially one cloaked by anonymity, to be introduced into culture. Of course, *Facing*’s recourse to anonymity complicates its political motive. If it is meant to contest cultural homophobia, is anonymity sending the contributors back into the closet or is it working fundamentally against the closet?

In treating *Facing* and *Loving Women* as anthologies, I agree with Jeffrey Di Leo, who argues that the anthology and collection may be treated interchangeably outside of

²¹ Sukthankar xxiv.

publishing contexts, where questions of design and marketing warrant distinctions between the two, with the former being treated as reprints of previously published writing and the latter as comprising original material.²² *Facing* involves a mix of previously published works, some reprinted and others excerpted, as well as original material. My categorization of it as an anthology is merely meant as a convenience and my argument about the genre is intended to include those works that bring together exclusively original material. *Loving Women* is an entirely new collection of stories translated in the ethnographic voice.

I also wish to intervene in the overwhelming impulse in literary studies to treat the anthology as a second-order literary genre, something almost all theorists of the anthology agree upon. Leah Price, focusing on British literature of the nineteenth and current centuries, argues that anthologies are often treated with suspicion and disregard by literary critics and writers for their tendency to “cut out of context” via their re-printing of selected aspects of authors or their extracting of longer pieces.²³ However, she argues, the anthology’s place in inducing mass market success of literary works, as well as its ability to shape different notions of authorship and readership and of what counts as worthy of public attention indicates its importance in literary history and therefore warrants its status as the object of study of that history and a genre in its own right.²⁴ The anthology is frequently used in literary studies in the service of curricular obligations within compressed time frames, where it is often treated as an introductory ‘reader’ imparting information about entirely new material to beginners. Or, it is perceived as

²² Jeffrey R. Di Leo, “Analyzing Anthologies,” *On Anthologies: Politics and Pedagogy*, ed. Jeffrey R. Di Leo (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2004) 3-4.

²³ Leah Price, *The Anthology and the Rise of the Novel: From Richardson to George Eliot* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000) 1-2.

²⁴ Price 3.

offering out-of-context slices of authors' larger works and therefore entirely ignored as a work unworthy of serious critical attention. In the latter case, it is often absent from studies of genre, form, or political intervention. In this chapter, I make a case for the importance of the anthology—via a reading of *Facing* and *Loving Women*—arguing that it helps develop a hermeneutic of subjectivity that stands in contrast to the individualism of the current neo-liberal (global) age and the essentialism provoked in social justice movements by the neo-liberal state with its reliance on the law as the final arbitrator of human life.

2. *Fire*: Sex, Popular Culture, and Sexual Identity in 'Global' India

The emergence of the 'lesbian' as a cultural subject in India must be located within the context of a changing cultural landscape. Central to this change was the rise of a consumer class in India, as Carol Breckenridge points out.²⁵ The literature exploring the link between cultural production, consumer culture, and the liberalization of the economy has argued compellingly that gender is a crucial site for the re-fashioning of the postcolonial nation in its 'global' avatar and that such a re-fashioning has inevitably led to a greater policing of female and non-heteronormative sexuality.²⁶ Globalization (as economic liberalization is often termed) increased the influence of western cultural forms and consumption patterns in neo-liberal India, which underwent processes of hybridization similar to the ones Homi Bhabha describes in the context of the reception

²⁵ Carol A. Breckenridge, "Preface," *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World*, ed. Carol A. Breckenridge (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1995) vii.

²⁶ See, for example, Purnima Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood, and Nation in Postcolonial India* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1999); Shoma Munshi, ed. *Images of the 'Modern Woman' in Asia: Global Media, Local Meanings* (Richmond: Curzon P, 2001); Suparna Bhaskaran, *Made in India: Decolonizations, Queer Sexualities, Trans/National Projects* (New York: Macmillan, 2004); Rupal Oza, *The Making of Neoliberal India: Nationalism, Gender, and the Paradoxes of Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

of colonial culture by the colonized.²⁷ Thus, to draw attention to a small but noticeable example, cultural artifacts like fast-food restaurants, chain stores, and shopping malls, central to new consumers whose spending patterns shifted considerably with the new economy, entered India but underwent mutations to suit cultural norms and attitudes. Importantly, public culture generated changes in sexuality that marked a radical departure from a previous era in which gender segregation, female seclusion, and sexual conservatism ruled. It is fair to say that in India, alongside the patterns of consumption I cite above, the most significant public shift was in attitudes to sexuality. Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge argue that the liberalization of the economy through the 1990s produced public culture as a “site of contestation between old and new forms of economic, political, and socio-cultural organization” and that definitions of modernity were being re-framed through this process.²⁸

It is by now a truism that ‘sex’ drives consumer culture, and in India sex took (a very public) center stage as never before. *Fire* illustrated this. But the film, as feminist scholars point out, was only one of many events that did so. The rise of public sex—ranging from women’s overt sexuality to public displays of affection to discussions of sexuality, sexual desire, and sexual orientation—in the India of the 1990s has been well documented by several theorists. Purnima Mankekar, for example, argues that representations of the erotic “are deeply imbricated with the feverish commodity consumption precipitated by the expansion of mass culture, the liberalization of the Indian economy, and the introduction of globalized capital” and that “the production, circulation, and consumption of these representations occur in a transnational, intertextual

²⁷ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1995).

²⁸ Arjun Appadurai and Carol A. Breckenridge, “Public Modernity in India,” *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World*, ed. Carol A Breckenridge (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1995) 1-20.

field.”²⁹ Mankekar is not alone in locating commodity culture or the transnational or intertextual fields as central to how the erotic is imagined.³⁰ It is clear from this scholarship that transnational cultural processes gave rise to new ways of thinking about, inhabiting, and responding to sex and how a consumer market drove these three. This is a distinct departure from the era of the 1970s and 1980s, when the nation was still under the socialist capitalist culture of the post-independent decades of Nehruvian socialism—the 1950s-1980s.³¹ The emphasis on fiscal responsibility on the part of state and citizens during this era was matched by that on sexual responsibility. Both were seen as markers of the image of India as a postcolonial state par exemplar. State-led campaigns against child marriage, birth control, and the emphasis on sex exclusively in the context of reproduction and marriage went hand-in-hand with centralized control of industry and finance. Late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century anti-colonial nationalism’s emphasis

²⁹ Purnima Mankekar, “Dangerous Desires: Television and Erotics in Late Twentieth-Century India,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 63.2 (May 2004): 408.

³⁰ Another key work on the issue is William Mazzarella, *Shoveling Smoke: Advertising and Globalization in Contemporary India* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2003), an ethnography on advertising culture and the rise of sex. Mazzarella argues that the new consumer culture deploys eroticism as a counter to the state’s rhetoric of ‘development,’ seeking to reinstate the erotic as a core ‘Indian’ value that the state had long-since (in truly colonial fashion) eviscerated from national culture. For an extensive bibliography on the link between sex and consumer culture, see Mankekar, “Dangerous Desires.”

³¹ This is particularly evident in the schemes Jawaharlal Nehru (independent India’s first Prime Minister) laid out—the five-year plans, the emphasis on local production and consumption, restricted import and export centralized control of financial institutions, and importantly, secularism. For incisive arguments about the pitfalls of Nehruvian socialism, see Jagdish Bhagwati, *India: Planning for Industrialization: Industrialization and Trade Policies Since 1951* (Oxford, UK: Oxford UP, 1970); and Shashi Tharoor, *India: From Midnight to the Millennium* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998). Discussions of the impact of and resistance to Nehruvian socialism also appear in Tom Brass, “The Politics of Gender, Nature, and Nation in the Discourse of the New Farmers’ Movements,” *New Farmers’ Movements in India*, ed. Tom Brass (Essex, England: Frank Cass, 1995) 27-71; and Robert W. Stern, *Changing India*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003) (see especially chapter 6, “The Indian Union in a Changing India,” 171-216). For a discussion of the import of Nehruvian socialism and Indian modernity, see Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1999).

on sexual conservatism for women and men, especially of the upper-caste middle classes, retained great purchase in this period.³²

The 1990s saw a shift in the fiscal and sexual bases of nation building. Consumer culture and transnational connectivities fashioned new sexual subjectivities and sexual attitudes. India's entry into a global economy was accompanied by shifts in culture generated by the transnational flows of capital, labor, and people. Appadurai and Breckenridge argue that these changes created public culture as a "zone of cultural debate" in India and that the "contestatory character" of public culture "has much to do with the tensions and contradictions between national sites and transnational cultural processes."³³ These processes of production and consumption mark public culture and modernity as sites where new forms of subjectivity and agency are enabled even as public culture is equally the site of resistance to those very forms and flows.³⁴ Per their argument, lesbian subjecthood and female sexual agency are inevitable in a context where there is great interaction between global and local forms of cultural production and consumption. Or, as Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan put it, "[i]n modernity, identities invariably become global."³⁵

³² For an argument about the gendered premises of anti-colonial nationalism, the shaping of nation-as-mother ("Mother India"), and the duties of women and men, see Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1993), where he argues that the idea of an Indian nation came to be defined via the middle-class upper-caste Hindu woman. See also Chatterjee, "The Nationalist Resolution of the Woman Question," *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Suresh Vaid (1989; New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1999) 233-253, for the idea of the Indian nation as defined via the middle-class upper-caste Hindu woman. See other essays in Sangari and Vaid for the question of how caste became central in articulations of woman-as-nation. See Mrinalini Sinha, "Gender in the Critiques of Colonialism and Nationalism: Locating the 'Indian Woman'," *Women and Social Reform in Modern India: A Reader*, ed. Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2008) 452-72.

³³ Appadurai and Breckenridge 5.

³⁴ Appadurai and Breckenridge 5, 15.

³⁵ Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, "Global Identities: Theorizing Transnational Studies of Sexuality," *GLQ: Gay and Lesbian Quarterly* 7.4 (2001): 663.

Essential to this public culture at the time was the ‘sexy’ ‘new woman’, who indexed an overt and public sexuality. She was distinctly ‘westernized’, often clad in clothing that is more identifiably ‘western’, such as bikinis and gowns. She was defined by the women who became the most visible index of ‘India’ on the global stage: beauty contestants, fashion models, and Bollywood actresses. The crowning of Indian contestants in international beauty pageants—Miss Universe and Miss World—from 1996-2000 solidified the arrival of this ‘new woman’ who soon began being deployed by the state and a rising consumerist, and often transnational, middle-class as evidence of a new/modern nation ready for global competitiveness. In Bollywood film, no longer was the figure of the heroine opposed to that of the vamp, a regular feature of the previous era. Rather, she now did ‘double duty’ as vamp and girlfriend.³⁶ This doubling was emblematic of the shift in definitions of Indian womanhood as it indexed culture and nation.

Bolstering Bollywood and the fashion industry in its celebration of the new woman—the sexy woman—was the advertising industry, which helped circulate the image of the ‘modern’ Indian woman via advertisements that co-existed alongside the more traditional woman. Advertising of the kind that targeted the upwardly-mobile (transnational) consumer class relied on sex and sexiness as bywords of any product.³⁷ Similarly, women’s magazines like *Femina*, which sponsors in part the Miss India

³⁶ A number of popular and scholarly articles exist on the theme. See Anupama Chopra, “Bollywood’s Good Girls Learn to Be Bad,” *The New York Times* 24 July 2005, 22 Jan 2009 <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/24/movies/24chop.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=Bollywood%27s%20Good%20Girls%20Learn%20to%20Be%20Bad&st=cse>; Nivedita Menon, “Introduction,” *Sexualities*, ed. Nivedita Menon (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2007) xxxi; Bhaskaran, *Made in India*, 2004; Oza, *The Makind of Neoliberal India*, 2006.

³⁷ Mazzarella, “Citizens Have Sex, Consumers Make Love: KamaSutra I,” 59-98, and “The Aesthetic Politics of Aspiration: Kamasutra II,” 99-146, in *Shoveling Smoke: Advertising and Globalization in Contemporary India* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2003).

contests, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Eve's Weekly* promulgated the idea of a sexy new woman through covers, advertising, news articles, and advice columns.³⁸ In the latter, the magazines shifted their focus from how to be the traditionally 'modern' wife to how to become a decidedly non-traditional one but, equally, to being a single woman (albeit with the end-result of marriage, à la the beauty queens). Scholars have argued that this marked a departure from the sexually conservative woman of anti-colonial and postcolonial nationalism who was also marketed as the 'new woman' of a 'modern' nation ready to achieve independence.³⁹ Since the 1990s, the sexually overt woman marked the nation as 'modern' in the state's rhetoric, particularly as politicians and state officials fete beauty queens at public events and newspapers celebrate their crowning as bringing "honor and recognition to the individual and the nation."⁴⁰ Simply put, the 'new woman' became the anchor of India's new—global—modernity just as she once anchored its 'first' modernity during the anti-colonial revolution.

Accompanying the rise of the 'new woman' were shifting attitudes to sexuality among the cosmopolitan—and sometimes new⁴¹—middle classes. Middle-class urban women also began being co-opted by consumer culture as epitomizing—when they disciplined their bodies per its standards—a transnational/global Indian culture. The

³⁸ See Meenakshi Thapan, "Embodiment and Identity in Contemporary Society: *Femina* and the 'New' Indian Woman," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 38.3 (2004): 411-444; Rupal Oza, "The New Liberal Indian Woman and Globalization," *The Making of Neoliberal India: Nationalism, Gender, and the Paradoxes of Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2006) 21-44.

³⁹ The irony of a pre-nation that cast itself in the rhetoric of nation has been remarked upon by many scholars. Gender was central to imagining this nation even before it took shape. See for example, Partha Chatterjee's seminal *The Nation and Its Fragments*, especially chapter 6, "The Nation and Its Women," for an analysis of how the nation came to be constituted through the casting of nation in the image of the sexually chaste upper-caste Hindu woman who is wife and mother and purveyor of the private realm, the home.

⁴⁰ Huma Ahmed-Ghosh, "Writing the Nation on the Beauty Queen's Body: Implications for a Hindu Nation," *Meridians* 4.1 (2003): 205-6.

⁴¹ See Leela Fernandes, *India's New Middle Class: Democratic Politics in an Era of Economic Reform* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2006) for an analysis of the development of a new middle class through liberalization.

opening up of indigenous fashion chains such as Fab India, the arrival of international brands in the free market economy, and the international success of fashion designers like Rohit Bal, Ritu Beri, Ritu Kumar, and Hemant Trivedi, whose designs adapt both traditional Indian and western clothing, forged a particularly close relationship between sexuality, consumer culture, and the idea of a 'new' India. Public displays of affection definitely increased in the 1990s, which marked a decided shift from the previous decades in which affection between women and men was invariably private. Public sites such as bars, clubs, and restaurants increased astronomically during this new era. Dating couples were visible in a way they simply had not been before in a culture in which marriage was considered the only relationship within which women and men appeared together in public. Women's sense of dress underwent a radical shift, with more and more middle-class urban women appearing in distinctly *outré* clothing, which was limited to the elite classes, fashion models, and actresses previously. These changes were reflected by or generated through (depending on one's perspective) the shift in representations of women's sexuality in film and television mentioned above.

If sexual liberation in its various forms was celebrated by those who consider themselves 'nationalists'—the state and the cosmopolitan middle-classes—then other groups that also consider themselves nationalists ironically stood at the opposite end of these very configurations. Indian nationalism, always Hindu-based and -dominated, acquired a particularly right-wing flavor in the 1990s, aided in no small part by a state-supported culture industry.⁴² Arvind Rajagopal traces the rise of Hindu nationalism through the impact of two television programs that ran from the late 1980s to the early

⁴² Appadurai and Breckenridge 9-13.

1990s and were based on two ancient Hindu epics, the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*.⁴³ He argues that the two shows, sponsored by the state and private enterprise, mobilized a Hindu public both in the nation and the diaspora toward a more overt religious nationalism, the latter always already positioned against religious minorities—Muslims in particular, but also Christians and Sikhs.⁴⁴ Both Rajagopal and Mankekar, in separate contexts, see the shows as also foregrounding a justification of gender scripts as based in a timeless cultural ethos, marked by/as religion.⁴⁵ Central to this was the notion of the self-sacrificing wife embodied by the goddess Sita in the *Ramayana*, and the wife as lover and worshipper embodied by Radha in the *Mahabharat*.

Both these figures appear in *Fire*, which centers around two characters of the same names, Radha and Sita, who are married to two brothers in a household headed by a paralytic mother-in-law. The women, neglected by their respective husbands and controlled by the mute mother-in-law, fall in love and begin an affair. They are eventually found out and threatened by the family. The film ends on a triumphant note with the women leaving their home and planning to make a life together elsewhere. As their meeting point is a Muslim shrine, the religious significance of the story became an important point of controversy. In the film, ‘Radha’ takes the place of the goddess Sita. She is childless, which is one cause of concern for her husband and mother-in-law. Her husband’s turn to celibacy and religious service is a stand-in for Gandhi, another bone of contention for nationalists, as Gandhi is the most prominent exponent of male celibacy.

⁴³ Arvind Rajagopal, “Primetime Television,” *Politics After Television: Religious Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Indian Public* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001) 72-120.

⁴⁴ Rajagopal, “Hindu Nationalism and the Cultural Form of Indian Politics,” 30-71, and “Hindutva Goes Global,” 237-270, in *Politics After Television: Religious Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Indian Public* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001).

⁴⁵ Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics*, 1999. See also Shoma Munshi, “Marvellous Me: The Beauty Industry and the Construction of the ‘Modern’ Indian Woman,” *Images of the ‘Modern Woman’ in Asia: Global Media, Local Meanings*, ed. Shoma Munshi (Richmond: Curzon, 2001) 78-93.

The film mocks the two women Gandhi always had by his side via Radha's husband, who asks her to lay beside him to help him develop control over his sexual desires. When he finds out through their male servant that Radha and Sita have been having an affair, he asks Radha to repent and in a rush of rage attacks her in the kitchen, where her sari catches fire. This is symbolic of the trial that the goddess Sita is made to undergo in the epic to prove her chastity after being kidnapped by a demon king. But it refers equally to dowry murders in India, in which women were often burned to death by husbands and in-laws for not bringing in enough dowry.

The nationalists who attacked *Fire* are defined by right-wing Hindu orientation, which argues for the 'right' of all Hindus to the Indian nation. They consider themselves to be more 'authentic' nationalists, seeking to preserve an 'authentic' culture and seeing it as one in which traditional gender roles and sexual conservatism are maintained. This view is evident in nationalist attacks not only against *Fire*, but also against forums where sexuality is on display—Valentine's Day celebrations, women at bars and clubs, public displays of affection, and the like. What is especially troubling about this brand of nationalism is its co-optation of the women's movement in recent decades—a phenomenon the popular press and academic scholarship have termed the "saffronization" of the women's movement.⁴⁶ Increasingly, women across classes and castes have been co-opted into Hindu nationalism in the services of the rhetoric of preserving 'tradition' and 'culture.' This rhetoric works, of course, through policing

⁴⁶ See Deepti Priya Mehrotra, "Peacing the Subcontinent," *Boloji.com* 5 April 2004, 20 Dec. 2008 <<http://www.boloji.com/wfs2/wfs237.htm>>; Atreyee Sen, "Reflecting on Resistance," *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 13.1 (2006): 1-35; Paola Bacchetta, "Hindu Nationalist Women Imagine Spatialities/Imagine Themselves: Reflections on Gender-Supplemental-Agency," *Right-wing Women: From Conservatives to Extremists around the World*, ed. Paola Bacchetta and Margaret Power (New York: Routledge, 2002) 43-56.

gender/sexuality in a fundamental way that women nationalists also seem to accept, or are interpellated by. The attacks on beauty contests and public displays of affection, as well as the policing of female sexuality have *enabled* rather than challenged patriarchal nationalist forces and are a classic illustration of this saffronization. The women's wing of the *Shiv Sena*, the *Mahila Aghadi*, illustrated this crucially in the context of their attack on *Fire*, which they deemed a threat to 'Indian' culture. In their petition to the state of Maharashtra to ban the film, they argued that if "women's physical needs get fulfilled through lesbian acts, the institution of marriage will collapse" and the "reproduction of human beings will stop."⁴⁷ Seen in light of the common right-wing Hindu sentiment about Muslim sexual excess and fecundity in the face of Hindu sexual and reproductive restraint, the *Aghadi's* claim testifies to the centrality of the fear of Hindu dissolution as much as it does to any exclusive homophobia.

Thus far, I have laid out how consumer culture within a shifting economy helped shape new attitudes to sex and sexuality within the cultural landscape and how sexuality crystallized itself on the body of the new woman. I have also shown how the new woman was deployed as the insignia of a new nation and argued that this celebration of sexuality offered various right-wing nationalist movements easy targets for their anger at a variety of issues, including but not limited to the one-sidedness of globalization. This 'cultural revolution' and nationalist backlash exist, however, in tandem with feminist complications of sexuality. Feminist interest in sexuality shifted "from violence to desire," as Nivedita Menon phrases it, from the 1980s to the 1990s.⁴⁸ She argues that the focus during the 1980s on rendering visible violence against women shifted to that of

⁴⁷ Praveen Sami, "Furore over a Film," *Frontline* 15.26, 19 Dec. 1998 – 01 Jan. 1999. 10 January, 2008 <<http://www.hinduonnet.com/fline/fl1526/15260430.htm>>.

⁴⁸ Menon xiii.

visibility around issues of desire, agency, and new forms of subjectivity that contest heteronormative gender/sexual boundaries.⁴⁹ Yet, feminists have remained skeptical of the rise of public sex, arguing that rather than suggesting a progressive move, it has, in fact, led to problematic framings of women's sexuality as well as a refusal to dismantle the male-centric and male-controlled nature of desire itself. Apart from the nationalist backlash like that which accompanied *Fire*, the rise of public sex correlated with the rise of heteronormativity. Suparna Bhaskaran argues, for example, that “‘the new woman of the 1990s’ or ‘the millennium woman’ is almost the same old ‘new woman’ (of early twentieth nationalist discourse)—essentially and respectably heterosexual, or more specifically and aggressively and much narrowly heteronormative.”⁵⁰ Here, Bhaskaran signals the problematic rise of heteronormativity that accompanied the overt sexuality of the 1990s. She argues that the new woman also espoused a troubling *anti*-feminist position evident in the disavowal of feminist politics by many beauty queens who were interviewed in the popular press and preferred to cast themselves as ‘liberated women’ who have ‘overcome’ the struggles associated with the movement.⁵¹

Unlike the state's and culture's engagements with sexuality to promulgate the theory of a ‘liberated’ global nation, feminist engagements with sexuality have focused on troubling gendered nationalism, gender prescriptions and proscriptions, and the especially powerful hold of heteronormativity. In this sense, feminists face a particularly difficult task in India. When the *Shiv Sena* attacked *Fire*, feminists immediately rallied in

⁴⁹ Menon xiii-lx.

⁵⁰ Bhaskaran 57.

⁵¹ Bhaskaran 57. Today, Aishwarya Rai is the most evident example of this stance. Rai, the most celebrated of Miss World winners in India and a very popular film actress, frequently espouses the ‘traditional’ role of ‘Indian women’ in television and other public appearances globally. The irony of a woman who far from signals any such ‘tradition’—given her successful career and her public presentation in distinctly ‘western’ attire—is not lost on many sections of the Indian public.

support of politicizing same-sex desire, even drawing on identity politics as a result despite skepticism over this strategy. When another group of right-wing nationalists attacked the Miss World Pageant in Bangalore in 1996, feminists were at the forefront of countering the religious nationalism that saw in beauty contests the ‘corruption’ of Indian culture. Similarly, feminists have protested right-wing attacks on innocuous, critical, or unmindful displays of sexuality, arguing for the liberation, particularly of women, from the codes of patriarchal nationalist logic. Recently, they have mobilized against renewed right-wing attacks on women in public spaces such as bars, clubs, and coffee shops where there is a great intermingling of genders and overt displays of sexuality.⁵² However, this is not to say that feminists have not been disconcerted by the celebrations of overt sexuality as evidence of India’s new modernity, as Bhaskaran and others demonstrate in their scholarship.⁵³

This is the immediate background to the launching of *Fire* and *Facing*. By the time *Loving Women* came around, India had already witnessed over seven years of activism around sexuality, including queer rights, the politicization of *hijras* (men who choose to live as women and who may or may not undergo ritual castration), as well as a more general ‘sexual revolution.’ In the following section, I track the history of the anthology as a literary genre and relate it to *Facing* and *Loving Women*.

⁵² For example, feminists in major cities organized the “Pink Chaddi Campaign,” protesting right-wing group attacks against unmarried couples who celebrated Valentine’s Day, women who went to bars and clubs, etc. The Campaign was initiated anonymously and included sending pink women’s panties to right-wing organizations and elected government officials in protest against such attacks.

⁵³ In this context, it is worth mentioning that Madhu Kishwar, in “Naïve Outpourings of a Self-Hating Indian,” *Manushi: A Journal About Women and Society* 109 (Nov.-Dec. 1998): 1-14, has argued against Mehta’s representations of Indian culture in *Fire* as an imperialist gesture by a diasporic filmmaker making films for western audiences while validating same-sex desire.

3. Historicizing the Anthology

I have argued that *Fire* entered an India in which ‘sex’ came to be marked paradoxically as both inimical to notions of Indian cultural authenticity and an index of Indian cultural plurality and, by extension, ‘globality.’ I have also shown that popular culture, particularly transnationally-marketed television and film, fashion and advertising, and magazines from India were central actors in creating and marketing India as a global nation, and that a significant portion of this was played out in the realm of ‘sex.’ In this section, I argue that literary production did not lag far behind, creating its own brand of ‘sex’ and the subject of ‘sex.’ *Facing* is a ‘popular’ rather than ‘high’ literary work, and yet its political engagement clearly marks it as different from these other venues that sell sex. This section contextualizes the emergence of the anthology devoted to the ‘lesbian’—no matter how complexly the term is deployed—in India and reads it against the political concerns of the genre as it emerged within feminist activism in the west.

As an intervention surfacing in a very specific historical moment when global flows shape public culture, *Facing* (and years later, other queer anthologies like *Because I Have a Voice: Queer Politics in India*⁵⁴ and *Loving Women*) attests to the rise of new forms of publishing as well as the desire to re-shape notions of what counts as literary text, political message, authorship and audience—all situated within a public culture in which sex, albeit *heterosex*, was suddenly public. Although published by the Indian branch of Penguin, a leading international publisher, *Facing* was enabled by changes in feminist activism in India. The famous two-volume collection *Women Writing in India*

⁵⁴ Arvind Narrain and Gautam Bhan, ed. *Because I Have a Voice: Queer Politics in India* (New Delhi: Yoda P, 2006).

(1991), edited by Susie Tharu and K. Lalita and published by CUNY's Feminist Press,⁵⁵ is a classic example of feminist work toward bringing together in *teachable* form—and for a general readership as much as an academic one—the cross-historical, -linguistic, -regional, and -thematic body of writing by women. Other volumes that have emerged in the decades that followed include volumes oriented toward other identities—Dalit, regional, and sexual—and similarly serve as useful pedagogical material as well as intervene in the silences and elisions of what has been constituted as 'national culture.'⁵⁶ The political sentiments expressed by these publications, including *Facing*, lay bare and critique the various manifestations of patriarchy quite directly.

The emergence of feminist publishing and presses devoted to gender/sexuality-related work through the 1980s and 1990s has given such work a big boost. Feminist scholars from India, often with transnational connections wrought by their academic and/or professional training in the west, initiated and established gender studies as an important discipline of academic inquiry. Central to these endeavors was the establishing of research centers, publishing houses, and curricular reforms at universities. Urvashi Butalia and Ritu Menon established India's first feminist publishing company, Kali for Women, in New Delhi in 1984. The publishing house subsequently split into two, Zubaan headed by Butalia and Women Unlimited managed by Menon. These two have been crucial to the publication of the enormous body of feminist scholarship in India. Similarly, a group of academics established Yoda Press in New Delhi in the late 1990s,⁵⁷ devoted to publishing several works under the rubric "sexuality." Unlike older, major

⁵⁵ Susi Tharu and K. Lalita, *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present* (New York: City U of New York P, 1991).

⁵⁶ While Dalit, regional, and sexuality-related writings were certainly published before the 1990s, they have become visible under the aegis of feminist and other 'minority' scholarship in the decades since.

⁵⁷ Personal communication with Arpita Das, founder of and editor at Yoda Press.

ventures like Oxford University Press, Macmillan, and Writers Workshop (which published Suniti Namjoshi's first collections of poetry in the late 1960s), which feature no explicit category called "gender" or "sexuality," the feminist ones do so almost invariably, as they are products of a particular kind of academic/critical orientation which takes gender/sexuality as central to understanding social systems.

Academic and non-academic publishing with this critical orientation meant a rise in publishing that crossed the boundaries of what is conventionally regarded as 'literature,' which was the publishing norm in the prior era. Feminist scholars in particular inaugurated newer responses to author and text by troubling conventional notions of whose story is worth telling (famous or ordinary folk) and how stories should be told (conventional literary genre and form or newer and more socially, culturally, and politically context-specific engagements with them). Volumes like *Facing* are evidence of this. Further, the audience for these new works, whether theoretical or creative, was not limited to academics and independent scholars. An increasingly transnational upper- and middle-class audience with an interest in public discourses about sexuality warranted this newer kind of publishing. Within the economies of pleasure—circulated most visibly by advertising, film, and print media—sexual desire has come to be seen in highly individualistic ways among the upper and middle classes. Rather than centering on reproduction and family, since the early 1990s, sexual desire has come to be focused inordinately on the right of individuals—men *and* women—to engage in and experience pleasure. While this is certainly directed at romanticizing heterosexuality, it has also given rise equally to framings of sexual desire in ways that have people reach out to consume artifacts of pleasure—and books have constituted a large part of that

consumption for these classes.⁵⁸ Yet, this shift in publishing, audience, and the conditions that enabled them continues to exist, of course, within the larger context of patriarchal culture underpinned by nationalist sentiment, a distinct trend toward scientific rather than humanist orientation in education (exacerbated by class differences that promote the scientific as the route toward economic stability), and finally, a context in which being literate, and being literate in English, is the exception rather than the norm.

Within this context, the Indian lesbian anthology's genesis is decidedly 'western'. It is directly influenced in scope and form by the seminal volume *A Lotus of Another Color: the South Asian Gay and Lesbian Experience* (1993), published in the U.S.⁵⁹ *Lotus* contains memoirs in varied genres by those who explore their queer identities against meanings of "home" between diaspora and nation and against the isolation of the racial Other within white queer movements. The anthology aims to "increase ... visibility in both South Asian and the [western] lesbian and gay communities," as editor Rakesh Ratti notes in his introduction.⁶⁰ The anthology relies on memoirs—direct accounts of and by queers—to make its political point that queers are not a "Western import" and exist in the very diverse cultures of India.⁶¹ *A Lotus*, like many of its western predecessors, believes in the notion of margin and center, and in the need for the voice of the margins to be heard. Moreover, it adopts unquestioningly categories like the 'closet',

⁵⁸ See Jyoti Puri, "Reading Romance Novels in India," *Gender and Society* 11.4 (1997): 434-52, for an ethnographic analysis of how young women's expectations of marriage and gender roles are shaped by their consumption of western romance novels. Puri finds that young women re-interpret western codes of romance from their own cultural vantage point. She argues that global forms of culture thus generate contested meanings, but that gender and class help popularize certain forms of culture (such as romance novels) transnationally.

⁵⁹ Rakesh Ratti, ed. *A Lotus of Another Color: An Unfolding of the South Asian Gay and Lesbian Experience* (Boston, MA: Alyson, 1993).

⁶⁰ Rakesh Ratti, "Introduction," *A Lotus of Another Color: An Unfolding of the South Asian Gay and Lesbian Experience*, ed. Rakesh Ratti (Boston, MA: Alyson, 1993) 15.

⁶¹ Ratti, "Introduction" 13.

‘coming out’, and ‘lesbian’, ‘gay’, and ‘queer’, which come from white western queer movements.

Keeping in mind that the anthology is often considered a source of excerpts or reprints of previously published material, its history as a literary genre devoted to the voices of the marginal arose within specific identity-based social movements. This can be traced to the 1970s and 1980s in the U.S., Canada, and the U.K. under the aegis of the ‘second-wave’ feminist movement.⁶² The anthology, with its capacity to hold multiple voices, anonymously if necessary, became a space of safety as well as a space of voicing protest against various hegemonies—with gender/sexual, racial/ethnic, class, and ability being among the earliest ones to find voice within the feminist movement. The various identity-based movements of this period generated such rubrics as ‘women’, ‘women of color’, ‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’, ‘diaspora’, and eventually ‘queer’, ‘queer of color’, and ‘diasporic queer’, each of which became a potent category under which to publish. Key examples include Cherrié Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa’s edited collection, *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981), which was the first major work to deploy the genre of the anthology in the services of anti-racist and anti-homophobic feminist critique.⁶³ Through the 1980s and 1990s, the anthology became a salient form for complicating familiar notions about gender/sexuality, race and ethnicity, class, and so on. Many identity-based movements energized people to write about their experiences, making the anthology, quite crucially, the space of the memoir. Through personal stories, the anthologies

⁶² Other canonical examples from the U.S. include Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Making Face, Making Soul = Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Women of Color*; Rita B. Dandridge’s *Black Women’s Blues: A Literary Anthology, 1934-1988*; Shirley Geok-Lin Lim and Mayumi Tsukatawa’s *The Forbidden Stitch: An Asian-American Women’s Anthology*; Joan Nestle’s *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader*; and Joan Nestle and Naomi Holoch’s three volumes of *Women on Women: An Anthology of American Lesbian Short Fiction*.

⁶³ Cherrié Moraga, and Gloria Anzaldúa, ed. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Watertown, MA: Persephone P, 1981).

publicized hidden histories of struggles against and challenges to colonial patriarchy. These stories also made public the reasons thus far for the silence and invisibility of these voices, which was largely due to fear of violence—against women, against those who practice non-heterosexual sex, against non-whites.

These anthologies were also published by non-mainstream presses that emerged out of feminist activism. Radical presses, as they were called, became a feature of publishing and arose in several U.S. cities where the availability of resources matched the record of activism. In this, they illustrate amply what John D’Emilio argues about the rise of gay identity within capitalism, for the increasing availability of resources not only supports these ventures but also buttresses them through the sense of self, identity, and rights that resources fashion for individuals.⁶⁴ Some university presses, such as the Feminist Press at City University of New York, joined hands. Mostly maintained by donations, personal resources, and sales, some non-profit ventures like Aunt Lute Books in San Francisco and Sister Vision in Toronto are now leading publishing houses. But as many die out each year due to lack of infrastructure or sustained funding.

In India, the rise of the anthology can be correlated directly to the feminist movement and more so the feminist movement as it has been energized by transnational connections and the changes in attitudes to notions of selfhood wrought by globalized consumer culture. The influx of specifically queer-related publishing is effected by activists and academics influenced by critical considerations of gender/sexuality as it is by ‘global’ Indian consumers who now have public avenues to explore hitherto secretive sexual practices and desires. Anthologies like *Facing* and *Loving Women* are testimonies

⁶⁴ John D’Emilio, “Capitalism and Gay Identity,” *Families in the U.S.: Kinship and Domestic Politics*, ed. Karen V. Hansen and Anita Iltis Garey (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1998) 131-41.

to the commitment to render visible what has been fictionalized by patriarchal culture with a right-wing religious orientation. In the final section of this chapter, I argue that *Facing* and *Loving Women* offer compelling evidence of a politics of sexuality that is cognizant of debates about a reductive ‘global’ approach to sexuality while still challenging nationalist causes that seek to write lesbian desire out of culture.

4. The ‘Lesbian’ in *Facing the Mirror* and *Loving Women*

Contrary to the sense one might get that anthologies are devoted to voicing individual identities, a look at any of the major anthologies (Indian and western) shows that there is a constant critical approach to understanding oppression and marginality that does not always reduce them to sexual identity politics. In fact, what has never been explored in feminist criticism is the way in which the anthology has often become a space to complicate the (strategic) simplification of on-the-ground politics, even when the latter may be seen as initiating the former. A cursory look at the various entries in any of the anthologies I mention in the previous section indicates the wide range of approaches to the seemingly unified categories they are published under. *This Bridge*, for example, includes entries on biraciality that complicate easy definitions of race. *The Persistent Desire* contains various entries on how relationships with trans-men change definitions of one’s sexuality and sexual orientation. Similarly, *Facing* and *Loving Women* complicate ideas of what constitutes ‘lesbian’ even as they are both published under the category. The word exists in a complex space between, inside, and outside a literary category and a social identity in both works, and I argue that the genre of the anthology, even when

seeming to affirm an identity-based politics, works to foster a more complex anti-essentialist feminist politics.

Given the rise of radical publishing, which stems from social movements, it is important to note how exactly this type of publishing relates to the movements it is generated by. In other words, how do anthologies like *Facing* and *Loving Women*, stemming directly from lesbian feminist activism that takes the category 'lesbian' to be a meaningful and important mode of social organizing, respond to a politics organized around identity as a seemingly immutable category? Claire Squires, in her monograph on the marketing of literature in contemporary Britain, quotes Paul Delany's theorizing of the shift in marketing literature from "'product differentiation' to 'market segmentation' and the cultural niche," which entails "'a move from a vertical structure (a scale from highbrow literature to trash) towards a horizontal one by genres appealing to differentiated but formally equal groups of readers. Buyers [are] now ... classified by their interests, gender, or life-styles, rather than their social rank'."⁶⁵ Both anthologies illustrate Delany's point, emerging as they do within the contexts of lesbian activism and feminist publishing. Sukthankar states quite clearly that *Facing* is published to alleviate the isolation experienced by lesbians in India. But each of the two books goes beyond the identity constituencies they emerge within and appeal to. In fact, both *Facing*, a collection that comprises everyday women's voices alongside established (but anonymous) writers, and *Loving Women*, a collection compiled by an ethnographer, not only appeal to lesbians and those constituencies interested in exploring sexuality beyond the norms of heterosexuality, but also offer a provocative and important political

⁶⁵ Claire Squires, *Marketing Literature: The Making of Contemporary Writing in Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) 41.

education that goes beyond identity *politicking* in an era when identity constituencies are in danger of being co-opted within the realm of global capitalist markets.

Facing's self-proclamation as "lesbian writing from India" and *Loving Women's* as "being lesbian in underprivileged India" may well be seen as a simultaneous attempt to situate the works within a global(ized) discourse of lesbian sexuality as well as to mark themselves off from it. The emphasis on "lesbian" in both cases situates the works and their politics in a global(ized) context of sexual identity politics while that on "India" emphasizes a specific *local* context that does not merely repeat or draw from global ones. The feminist movement in India has long struggled to situate itself outside the discursive frameworks of western feminist movements. This is especially important in the context of arguments that feminism is a western discourse with no relevance to India or Indians. Even as feminism in the form of the 'women's movement' has achieved state and cultural sanction for its suggestions of 'development' and 'rights' as 'citizens,' more radical arguments about gender have met with considerable resistance. The attack against lesbianism offers undeniable evidence of this resistance. *Facing* and *Loving Women* emerge under a feminist movement that has been described broadly as "autonomous" in contrast to the "traditional" or "state-led" or "development-oriented" feminist movements.⁶⁶ Both Sukthankar's and Sharma's editorial voices attest to the different politics of lesbian feminists that aim for use of the term 'lesbian' precisely because it sets up a confrontation with mainstream feminisms as well as society in general. Sukthankar says, "we want to claim it [in *Facing*] particularly because [the term] is so

⁶⁶ Iliana Sen, "Women's Politics in India," *Feminism in India: Issues in Contemporary Indian Feminism*, ed., Maitrayee Chaudhuri (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2006), 187-210.

uncompromising.”⁶⁷ Sharma charges the use of the word to political ends, claiming that though her subjects did not use it to refer to themselves, the editor and publishers made the decision to do so “to build a politicized identity integral to the rhetoric of gay rights and human rights, since we consider our work to be political and consider lesbians to be valid political subjects, even though we live out the political/legal absurdity of having no status in the eyes of Indian law.”⁶⁸ Through the provisions of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, which criminalizes sodomy but makes no mention of lesbianism, Indian law has been read as constituting a curious case of providing freedom to lesbians.⁶⁹ In the following section, I turn to the anthologies’ varied engagements with lesbianism, which succeed in challenging cultural framings of lesbianism while yet avoiding the pitfalls of identity politics. I end with showing how these engagements indicate the importance of the anthology as a literary space in which some of the most fraught questions about gendered subjectivity continue to be worked out in different contexts across the globe today.

i. Challenging Cultural Framings

Visibility is the undeniable goal of both anthologies, especially in the face of four discourses that act as pillars of nationalism, each of which is subverted by the various accounts in both anthologies through three major discourses: the law, the media, and discourses of cultural authenticity. The first of these discourses is the law, which circulates the idea that same-sex desire and behavior are ‘unnatural’ and therefore punishable. Referring to the irony of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, which

⁶⁷ Sukthankar xx.

⁶⁸ Sharma, *Loving Women* 5.

⁶⁹ Sukthankar xiv; Bhaskaran 106-7.

criminalizes sodomy, Sukthankar says that the law's elision of lesbianism harks back to the colonial belief that desire between women was simply "improbable."⁷⁰ The accounts presented in *Facing* and those transcribed and translated in *Loving Women* prove beyond doubt the consequences for lesbians: the law's framing allows women's same-sex relationships to exist away from legal scrutiny but at the same time renders their lives fictional in the context of rights associated with marriage, inheritance, and death.⁷¹ But perhaps a third response is possible, one which subverts the power of the law entirely.

This is evident in the story-within-a-story by Kokum, a journalist who parodies her profession through her short story. "A Lesbian Crime Reporter Takes a Day Off"⁷² is written as a newspaper article with the title "Socialite Scoundrel 'Nimi' Captured in Bar Drama."⁷³ The story successfully subverts the legal apparatus as anti-gay through its premise: it features a female inspector with a male second-in-command, both of whom have affairs with the people they are investigating. Moreover, the consensual and emotional nature of their relationships works against the oft-repeated stories of police brutality, especially police violence against those apprehended under Section 377. In a similar manner, Giti Thadani's short essay, "Silence and Invisibility,"⁷⁴ works against the "myth of lesbian invisibility"⁷⁵ propagated by the law. Thadani argues that laws like Section 377 were designed to exclude lesbianism because including it would be

⁷⁰ Sukthankar xiv.

⁷¹ Bhaskaran 106-7.

⁷² Kokum, "A Lesbian Crime Reporter Takes a Day Off," *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing from India*, ed. Ashwini Sukthankar (New Delhi: Penguin, 1999) 162-4.

⁷³ Kokum 162.

⁷⁴ Giti Thadani, "Silence and Invisibility," *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing from India*, ed. Ashwini Sukthankar (New Delhi: Penguin, 1999) 149-52.

⁷⁵ Thadani 149.

“tantamount to acknowledging it and thereby going against the other punitive strategy of silence and invisibility.”⁷⁶

At the same time, when lesbians have gained visibility, the consequences have been fraught. This brings us to the second discourse that the anthologies write against: the media, with its sensationalism and pathologization of same-sex behavior. Overwhelmingly, newspaper and magazine stories have portrayed runaway lesbian lovers, lesbian marriages, or lesbian suicides in lurid terms. Women in love with women are shown in terms of pop psychoanalysis—as too narcissistic or inadequately socialized and/or developed.⁷⁷ Or they are framed by anti-feminist discourse as symbols of “feminist independence” whose sole motive is “to defy patriarchal tradition, to be fashionable, or to spite philandering husbands.”⁷⁸ Some stories challenge such pathologization, such as Sangeeta’s “A Hot Movie and More,”⁷⁹ an account of a housewife who meets with her female friend every afternoon for sex while their husbands are away. Neither woman indicates any intention of politicizing their desire or understanding their actions as particularly ‘feminist,’ and for them, sex with each other remains purely in the realm of pleasure.

Other accounts of romance between schoolgirls or college-going women attest to the plurality of desire and the ease with which such desire finds place amidst the overwhelming heteronormativity of Indian society. Love between women is shown to be free of any pathology in many of these accounts. Women talk about being most comfortable with women in a culture of male violence and prurience, as in Preeti’s

⁷⁶ Thadani 151.

⁷⁷ Sukthankar xxii.

⁷⁸ Sukthankar xxii.

⁷⁹ Sangeeta, “A Hot Movie and More,” *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing from India*, ed. Ashwini Sukthankar (New Delhi: Penguin, 1999) 361-2.

“Coming to Women,”⁸⁰ an account of how she came to view her desire as “normal.” Similarly, V.S.’s poem, “How Does it Feel to Be a ‘Problem’?,” turns the question of normality upside down.⁸¹ Structured as a series of questions asking how it feels to be criminalized, pathologized, and rendered abnormal, the poem valorizes lesbian desire in its final line, “And yes, how does it feel to go to sleep at night in a/ heterosexual household and wake up each morning thanking/ God that you are gay?”⁸²

The third discourse is that of ‘cultural authenticity’, which takes two forms. Either lesbianism is considered ‘western’, or it is considered the purview and practice of English-speaking upper- and middle-class women. In *Facing*, Mina Kumar’s short essay “Lesbians in Indian Texts and Contexts,”⁸³ debunks the former through a reading of how lesbian desire was received in Brahminical and non-Brahminical ancient, medieval, and modern philosophical, medical, and legal treatises from the Indian region. Kumar argues that Brahminical texts in general vilified lesbian desire and the British colonizers, adopting and canonizing Brahminical literature, propagated this further. However, explains Kumar, non-Brahminical traditions “generated positive images of lesbianism” and “[t]antrism’s valorization of women and sexuality [further] provided a religiously sanctioned role for lesbianism.”⁸⁴

In addition to excavating historical texts as contrarian evidence to the nationalist/traditionalist theory about lesbianism’s alien-ness to Indian culture, both *Facing* and *Loving Women* defiantly announce the ‘Indian-ness’ of lesbianism in their

⁸⁰ Preeti, “Coming to Women,” *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing from India*, ed. Ashwini Sukthankar (New Delhi: Penguin, 1999) 36-42.

⁸¹ V.S., “How Does it Feel to Be a ‘Problem’?,” *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing from India*, ed. Ashwini Sukthankar (New Delhi: Penguin, 1999) 147-8.

⁸² V.S. 148.

⁸³ Mina Kumar, “Lesbians in Indian Texts and Contexts,” *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing from India*, ed. Ashwini Sukthankar (New Delhi: Penguin, 1999) 217-32.

⁸⁴ Kumar 217.

very titles. Supriya's story in *Facing*, "Tired of the Broom,"⁸⁵ directly contradicts the assertion that only upper- and middle-class practice or know about lesbianism, for it is the account of a working-class servant. Transcribed and translated by Sukthankar, the story is about love between two wives of a working-class man.⁸⁶ Against the narratives of oppression and jealousy that structure the lives of wives in polygamous marriages, Supriya's account emphasizes genuine caring between two women equally trapped by patriarchy. Similarly, all the narratives in *Loving Women* are of women who have no access to English or the language of lesbian politics. Located in rural and working-class communities, these women provide economic and emotional succor to one another, never once discussing the erotic components of their relationship. It is almost as though the women Sharma interviews for the book wish to keep their relationship private from the prying eyes of the researcher and the reader.

The two anthologies' cover illustrations afford interesting readings of the cultural authenticity of lesbianism. *Facing* has four panels of reflecting mirror-images that depict lesbian erotic art in the vein of the *Kama Sutra* illustrations. The artwork is designed to remind readers of one of the most sustained campaigns to promote 'Indian' heritage as a rich, varied, plural, and progressive one—the constant reference to the ancient text in a wide range of forums in conjunction with the word 'India.' While certainly selling to a western market that often resorts to such exoticization, the illustrations also suggest to an Indian audience a trans-historicity to the idea that women engage in sexual pleasure with

⁸⁵ Supriya, "Tired of the Broom," transl. Ashwini Sukthankar, *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing from India*, ed. Ashwini Sukthankar (New Delhi: Penguin, 1999) 121-4.

⁸⁶ See Ruth Vanita, "Born of Two Vaginas: Love and Reproduction Between Co-Wives in Some Medieval Indian Texts," *GLQ: Gay and Lesbian Quarterly* 7.4 (2005): 547-77, in which she traces lesbian love between co-wives as common practice in ancient India when polygamy was a mode of social organizing based in economic protection for women. See also her *Love's Rite: Same Sex Marriage in India and the West* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) for ethnographic accounts of lesbian relationships among co-wives in working-class India.

each other. Such trans-historicity normalizes and localizes lesbian desire to a great extent. Similarly, the cover illustration of *Loving Women* is a painting of two seated sari-clad, partially veiled women facing each other under a crescent moon. The image brings to mind rural women almost immediately due to the fact that the figures are seated on the ground and their saris—clearly cotton—are draped over their heads. The utter normality of the scene as symbolic of a decidedly non-western India is aimed at establishing the Indian-ness of the desire the book discusses.

Through their work against legal, medical, and cultural framings of lesbianism, the anthologies challenge cultural nationalism, which claims the ‘natural’ heterosexuality of ‘Indian’ women. Qamar Roshanabadi’s poem, “Vande Mataram,”⁸⁷ which ends *Facing*, subverts nationalism’s patriarchal rhetoric through a particularly ingenious ploy. It uses Vatsyayana’s *Kama Sutra* to dismantle the idea of Mother India as essentially heterosexual. “Vande Mataram”—literally, greetings to thee Mother—is the national song of India. Composed by the famous Bengali poet and littérateur Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay in the late nineteenth century, it was written in retaliation to the colonial edict that “God Save the Queen” be sung by Indians. To date, it represents a passionate nationalism and is frequently sung in schools and on all major national holidays, including during Independence Day celebrations across India. If the song indexes masculine nationalism at its best—with the invocation to India as Mother India—Roshanabadi’s re-writing of the Mother as desiring other women is no doubt radical. She moves female same-sex desire to the heart of the nation rather than its peripheries through the invocation of the title. Her celebration of the “motherland” as the “home of

⁸⁷ Qamar Roshanabadi, “Vande Mataram,” *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing from India*, ed. Ashwini Sukhthankar (New Delhi: Penguin, 1999) 408-9.

the most beautiful women/ on this stubbornly spinning globe” recasts masculine desire for nation and woman (often conflated) in terms of women’s desire for each other. This appropriation of masculinist nationalist rhetoric casts lesbianism as Indian in no uncertain terms. It finds its apotheosis in the neat argument about lesbianism as an important part of Indian history:

we have been acquitted
by none other
than the great
Vatsyayana himself,
for in his *Kama Sutra*
he has inscribed
and the world has read
what our bodies and minds
have always known:

*The calf’s mouth is pure when it drinks milk;
the dog’s mouth is pure when it seizes game;
as also the bird’s beak when it makes fruit fall;
and the mouth of a woman in the act of love.*⁸⁸

In turning to the *Kama Sutra*, the most quoted evidence of India’s sexual plurality, Roshanabadi contests the notion that lesbianism is un-Indian. She suggests that there is historical evidence for what has been known by women all along—that the love of women is never unnatural or impure. That this love is left open-ended is the poem’s political ploy, for it suggests that another woman could be the recipient of this love. The fact that the poem ends the collection suggests strongly *Facing’s* intent to lay to rest quite finally the question of the lesbian as un-Indian. What could be more “Indian” than celebrating the nation through women and what could be more Indian than the love between women as it is recorded in a text canonized as exemplar of Indian culture? In re-writing the national song and deploying the author of the *Kama Sutra* as her ally, Roshanabadi writes against the heteronormalization of the text as well as nationalist

⁸⁸ Roshanabadi, “Vande Mataram” 408-9

rhetoric that strips pleasure from women's sex lives in favor of the physical and emotional labor of reproduction.

ii. Avoiding the Identity Trap

It is clear from the samples I discuss above that both anthologies aim for a more complex view of lesbianism than mere visibility alone. *Facing*, in particular, because it encompasses greater diversity of class than *Loving Women*, indicates a strong sense of the multiple ways in which female same-sex desire is organized. Trans-narratives jostle alongside those of bisexuality and sadomasochism. Lesbian political positions are challenged by stories rooted in pleasure as the end-result of desire. In an important sense, *Facing* does not set up lesbianism as a solitary structure, isolated from society either as political premise or social practice. Roshanabadi's "The Collected Works of Someshwar P. Balendu"⁸⁹ revolves around a trans-protagonist, the young woman Poornima who yearns to become and finally transforms into the man Balendu. Balendu's gender identity complicates questions of identity even as it gives free play to desire in all its complexity. He lives as a sex-worker amidst a group of *hijras*—men who live as women and who are often ostracized by society. His clients are all rich women, and he makes love to women but as a 'man.' Does that make his clients lesbian? Does it make him one? Are the *hijras* he lives with gay? Similarly, Miss Kokilaben's (name as given) story, "Born in a Man's Body," tells of the author's personal struggles to become a trans-woman and live with women.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Qamar Roshanabadi, "The Collected Works of Someshwar P. Balendu," *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing from India*, ed. Ashwini Sukthankar (New Delhi: Penguin, 1999) 267-86.

⁹⁰ Miss Kokilaben, "Born in a Man's Body," *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing from India*, ed. Ashwini Sukthankar (New Delhi: Penguin, 1999) 264-7.

Sangeeta, the housewife who sleeps with her friend, understands herself as lesbian only in relation to their sexual relationship. Neither she nor her friend consider themselves lesbian in the same sense that Seema, who writes “Toward a Lesbian World,”⁹¹ a veritable manifesto, does. For Seema, who, Sukthankar tells us, lived a “very restricted life in the Middle East” and who “attempted suicide and was in a coma”⁹² at the time of *Facing*’s publication, lesbianism is very much a question of who she feels she really is. Unlike Naseem, whose conference paper “Reflections of an Indian Lesbian,” argues that lesbianism is “a form of resistance to patriarchy and male oppression, not just a sexual preference,”⁹³ Seema argues for an all-out conversion of all women so that together, as lesbians, women can “dominate society.”⁹⁴

Loving Women indicates a degree of homogeneity about women’s lack of awareness of lesbian as a term and of lesbian identity politics. The anthology lends itself to theorizations of butch-femme identities, for invariably in these stories, one partner takes on a more ‘masculine’ appearance and provides income while the other is ‘feminine’ in appearance and often takes care of the home and any children from their previous relationships. However, any such discussion of gender performance must also be seen in the context of working-class and rural life in which women’s ability to work at traditionally low-paying and masculine jobs demands a degree of gender performance associated with masculinity. Their butch-femme performances lie entirely outside any knowledge of such configurations in the west given the women’s social location. Thus,

⁹¹ Seema, “Toward a Lesbian World,” *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing from India*, ed. Ashwini Sukthankar (New Delhi: Penguin, 1999) 344-6.

⁹² Sukthankar xxxix.

⁹³ Naseem, “Reflections of an Indian Lesbian,” *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing from India*, ed. Ashwini Sukthankar (New Delhi: Penguin, 1999) 331-4.

⁹⁴ Seema 345.

the anthology clearly undermines the notion that lesbianism is ‘western’ and that gender performances and same-sex desires are available only to ‘westernized’ (upper- and middle-class English-speaking) women in India.

Most significantly, the anthologies refuse to mark off lesbianism as its own territory. The multiple narratives show that lesbian desire is utterly routine in India, existing across class, religion, and region. Where the English language of lesbianism is not available, women continue to use other terms, especially those of friendship and companionship such as “saheli”⁹⁵ (literally, female friend), but equally of partnership and marriage in other languages, as indicated by words like “miya-bibi-jodi” (literally, husband-wife pair or couple).⁹⁶ While the use of terminology associated with friendship has the ability to render lesbian desire ‘invisible’ in the sense of protective, that of terminology associated with marriage normalizes lesbian relationships.

iii. Deploying Anonymity

The overarching structure of both anthologies is anonymity. In *Facing*, anonymity includes in its sweep all the categories Robert Griffin assigns to it: “works that are simply unsigned, all forms of pseudonymity and fictitious authorship in publications that do not give clues to the empirical author ... works signed with initials.”⁹⁷ In *Loving Women*, it includes mere first names, which are virtually unidentifiable in a country where billions share them. In *Facing* “[n]o editorial device distinguishes the real names from the pseudonyms” of the contributors.⁹⁸ Sukthankar explains that “the primary motive of the

⁹⁵ Sharma, “Manjula and Meeta,” *Loving Women: Being Lesbian in Underprivileged India*, ed Maya Sharma (New Delhi: Yoda P, 2006) 34.

⁹⁶ Sharma 34, 104.

⁹⁷ Robert J. Griffin, “Anonymity and Authorship,” *New Literary History* 30.4 (Autumn 1999): 880.

⁹⁸ Sukthankar xxvi.

pseudonym is safety, a shield to deflect the light.”⁹⁹ Emphasizing this fact, Griffin argues in another context that anonymity must be lauded for its ability to afford “protection from retaliation” in an age “when the body is in plain sight.”¹⁰⁰ His comment is especially relevant in an age when the body is in sight as never before given the effects of proliferating media, critical discourses of race, gender/sexuality, and ability, and the political mobilization of “minority” constituencies, each of which puts different bodies at the front and center of everyday culture. Such a context makes the anthology and anonymity salient for it works against the logic of self, identity, and rights that emerges within such a ‘global’ cultural configuration as I argue throughout this chapter. For Sharon O’Dair, anonymity is to be celebrated for its ability to “question whether individuality is at odds [with] the social structuring that enables ... creative anonymity [and therefore] the social structuring we call community.”¹⁰¹ This, as I show, is a central feature of both anthologies and at the heart of their political message.

Sukthankar says about the use of anonymity in *Facing* that the contributors found this “inevitability of pseudonyms ... a kind of ironic freedom,” which “delineate[s] an absolutely private space in which to explore and enjoy their hidden selves.”¹⁰² Besides, as one contributor who goes by the initials V.S. points out, “‘What is my ‘true’ name anyway, when it functions as the label for a walking lie? I live between a mask and a face. You could seal that distance with a hair.’”¹⁰³ It is thus apparent that balanced against the need for speech is the need for complexity, and balanced against the need for

⁹⁹ Sukthankar xxvi.

¹⁰⁰ Robert J. Griffin, “Anonymity and the Public Sphere,” Anonymity, MLA Convention, Hilton, San Francisco, 29 Dec. 2008.

¹⁰¹ Sharon O’Dair, “Laboring in Anonymity,” Anonymity, MLA Convention, Hilton, San Francisco, 29 Dec. 2008.

¹⁰² Sukthankar xxvi.

¹⁰³ Sukthankar xxvi.

publicity is an awareness of the ongoing and everyday question of safety. Or, as Sukthankar puts it, “the question is not whether to relinquish the safety of silence, but how to negotiate an alternative.”¹⁰⁴ Her point that anonymity is a tool for safety is beyond dispute. But anonymity works beyond suggesting a response to a uniquely Indian homophobia that may then be contrasted with more ‘liberal’ regimes. In *Facing*, it functions as a tool through which sexuality is marked as the site of unknowability, which directly contradicts the premise of ‘coming out’ that the anthology makes in its self-announcement as “lesbian writing.” In fact, anonymity works also to “reject the notion of a hierarchy which valorizes the ability or desire of individual women to be ‘out’.”¹⁰⁵ What it does is allow engagement with a wide range of sexual ideological positionings. This does two things: first, it unseats the patriarchal heteronormative gaze by refusing to show us where exactly lesbians are located—they could be located anywhere, amidst friendships, erotic encounters, committed long-term relationships, sex work, or feminist politics; and second, it re-deploys visibility for political means without placing bodies in the line of fire. Anonymity’s political power is not to be underestimated by minority discourses that seek recognition. For, we can make ourselves heard and seen without always having to put our bodies on the line. In fact, the neo-liberal state relies on bodies in plain sight and the funneling of complex desires into knowable types so that the state can be seen as the space of liberal pluralism within a global marketplace. In such a scenario, it may be better *not* to become bodies in the public, lest we be co-opted to buttress regimes of power like the state that further their own cause. Anonymity forestalls that project and allows movement of people along desires rather than consolidating them

¹⁰⁴ Sukthankar xviii.

¹⁰⁵ Sukthankar xxvi.

by desire. However, despite the shield of anonymity, it is important to emphasize that the titles and cover pages of both anthologies make their content and political stance very clear to the observer. Therefore it is apposite to end with the comment that anonymity is *not* the closet, opening up and freeing lesbian desire as it does into a society that attempted to fictionalize it.

5. The Politics of the Anthology

Writing about British literature, Price argues via Barbara Benedict that “the liberatory potential of the combinatory structure ... allows anthologies ... to ‘pull language out of legal frameworks and decentralize literary culture ... by their subversive deferral of a central authority.’”¹⁰⁶ That the sheer variedness of the anthology constitutes its political promise is more than amply illustrated by *Facing* and *Loving Women*. The range of positionalities in *Facing*, in particular, challenges any easy fixing of lesbianism. Instead, it forces recognition of the inherent performativity of gender, which is most easily elaborated through sexual desire.¹⁰⁷ Because of this, it offers a critical bridge between on-the-ground social movements based on essentializing identity categories and academic theorizing about identity’s limitedness. Due to the nature of their contents—everyday narratives, stories, poems, memoirs of fairly short lengths—the anthologies are marketable to a very broad audience, even though limited to an English-speaking one. However, their unapologetic use of the word ‘lesbian’, staring out from their covers at observers, signals the investment in rendering visible the political project of lesbianism. In a country where there exists a culture of reading in public—on trains and buses, in

¹⁰⁶ Price 3.

¹⁰⁷ This is Judith Butler’s polemical argument in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

coffee shops, bookstores, libraries, school, college, and university spaces—the anthologies issue a potent challenge for the everyday reader. Any reader seen with either anthology serves to challenge the heteronormativity that marks public spaces. Equally, the anthologies in the hands of everyday readers challenge the new culture of conservatism mandated and enforced by nationalist groups.

While other narratives such as film, music, the novel, memoir, and so on have all been situated critically within the project of a specifically queer studies project in India, the anthology has been absent. This absence suggests the general disregard for the genre within academic theorizing.¹⁰⁸ Similarly, the lesbian anthology's absence stands in contrast to the salience of genre in bringing to visibility and importance the stories of various Others. *Women Writing in India* revolutionized female literary history. *Our Feet Walk the Sky: Women of the South Asian Diaspora* (1993),¹⁰⁹ which was published in the diaspora, lent a voice to the female diasporic experience. Similarly, anthologies such as *Mirrorwork: 50 Years of Indian Writing, 1947-1997* (1997) collected the cosmopolitan Indian experience. The absence of an anthology devoted to lesbianism has much to do with what Cris Mazza notes as the particular difficulty of bringing to light the voices of those who rebel against normative constructions of sexuality.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ The essays in Di Leo, ed. *On Anthologies: Politics and Pedagogy* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2004) are devoted to this theme.

¹⁰⁹ South Asian Descent Collective, ed. *Our Feet Walk the Sky: Women of the South Asian Diaspora* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1993).

¹¹⁰ Salman Rushdie and Elizabeth West, ed. *Mirrorwork: 50 Years of Indian Writing, 1947-1997* (New York: Holt, 1997).

The anthology, as Di Leo argues, becomes more salient in the context of the shifting concerns of the academy itself as it moves from “a solipsistic model of research value to a model based more strongly on pragmatic ideals.”¹¹¹ He goes on to argue:

The solipsistic model maintains that a book written on a narrow topic for a specific professional audience maintains a higher value. The pragmatic model of research bases a book’s value on its potential usefulness to the academic community as a whole.¹¹²

Whether Di Leo is correct about this or not remains open to interrogation. But it is clear that the anthology’s pedagogical value remains central and warrants greater attention by literary critics. In fact, its emergence as an important genre within feminist activism warrants the attention of feminist literary critics who could well bring collections of seemingly fragmented and contradictory pieces of writing into the classroom whereby theories of identity can be successfully taught in all complexity. Anthologies like *Facing* and *Loving Women* help illustrate the point behind much academic theorizing about identity—its partial, fragmentary, contradictory, and strategic (rather than essential) nature. Especially important is the power of the anthology’s pedagogical value, which lies in being able to ‘reach and teach’ audiences beyond an academic one. Both anthologies offer glimpses into the ‘real’ lives of everyday women in India, women who have remained invisible to the larger public even as they have lived amidst them. More saliently, their narrative forms—between fiction, poetry, memoir, plays, interviews, manifestos, interviews—offer a fascinating array of choices for the everyday reader who might not pick up a full-length theoretical monograph on sexuality.

Perhaps most significantly of all, the confluence of anthology and anonymity enables a powerful anti-individualism that throws into disarray the project of the neo-

¹¹¹ Di Leo, “Analyzing Anthologies” *On Anthologies: Politics and Pedagogy*, ed. Jeffrey R. Di Leo (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2004) 10.

¹¹² Di Leo, “Analyzing Anthologies” 10.

liberal capitalist state, which creates and sustains an ‘imagined community’ of (global) queer subjects. The premise of community sustained by anonymity, as O’Dair argues, gives the anthological voice real power to do this. Moreover, this anti-individualism affords a critique of a resurgent nationalism, which has fictionalized many a life lived on the margins, and threatened these lives when that fictionalization has been contested. In this lies its *theoretical* value for those of us who are invested in transformative politics through academic engagements.

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Chapter III

“India’s Radclyffe Hall”: Suniti Namjoshi’s Postmodern Lesbian Autobiography

Introduction

This account is autobiographical in that my experience is all I have. It’s fictional since any version manipulates facts. And it’s mythical, because it’s by making patterns that I make sense of all I have.¹

*Where one is is a word. Who one is is a word—Indian, lesbian, poet, Hindu, donkey, monkey, dying animal... And much of one’s life is just a matter of exploring words to see which ones fit comfortably, and in which forest of words one might live and breathe.*²

Written as part first-person narrative and part fable, Indian diasporic lesbian writer Suniti Namjoshi’s autobiography, *Goja: An Autobiographical Myth* (2000), illustrates the writer’s longstanding concern with genre and form as central to “giving an account of oneself,”³ a project Judith Butler recently theorizes as necessitating great attention to the subject’s situatedness in a web of relations with other people. In Namjoshi’s case, this is especially crucial because the self she writes about is lesbian, one situated as an ‘outsider’ to Indian cultural discourse. Namjoshi’s literary career started in India in the 1960s with the publication of three collections of poetry which indicate, as Harveen S. Mann phrases it, “a certain unease with her upper middle-class, Hindu, and normatively heterosexual milieu.”⁴ Though not directly about lesbianism, a few poems in those early collections deal with lesbian desire by manipulating the advantages of the non-gendered

¹ Suniti Namjoshi, *Goja: An Autobiographical Myth* (Melbourne: Spinifex, 2000) ix.

² Namjoshi, *Goja* 83.

³ This is the title of Judith Butler’s recent work on moral philosophy and social theory, *Giving An Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham UP, 2005).

⁴ Harveen S. Mann, “Suniti Namjoshi: Diasporic, Lesbian Feminism and the Textual Politics of Transnationality,” *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 30.1/2 (Spring 1997): 97.

narrator of the lyric poem—particularly the sonnet. Years later, Namjoshi deploys the sonnet in the services of exploring the implications of inter-racial lesbian love and her family’s reception of it in another collection of poetry, *Flesh and Paper*, co-authored with her partner, Australian-British poet Gillian E. Hanscombe.⁵ Since 1981, when her first major work, the collection of short stories *Feminist Fables*,⁶ was published in England, Namjoshi’s career has included three novels, three collections of poetry, one collection of personal essays that provides introductory contexts for select works, one autobiography, and three works that span various genres, making absolute generic identification impossible. Every work since *Feminist Fables* has been, in one form or another, about the lesbian. And every work has been marked, in one form or another, by autobiography. It is evident from Namjoshi’s works that her interest is in re-writing the genre of autobiography from the perspective of someone for whom identity is a fraught question rather than a certainty. She uses autobiography to explore her own split subjectivities—as diasporic Indian, as woman, as lesbian, and as Anglophone postcolonial. The act of writing and language are, for her, central elements in understanding the terrifying chasms between each of these. The critical and representational discourse that best serves her needs is postmodernism, with its deconstructive philosophy and its nod to poststructuralist theories of language. Namjoshi’s autobiographical writing is marked by a postmodernist bent and makes her a key figure in the annals of postcolonial Indian literature, which I use to mean

⁵ Suniti Namjoshi and Gillian E. Hanscombe, *Flesh and Paper* (Seaton, UK: Jezebel, 1986).

⁶ Suniti Namjoshi, *Feminist Fables* (London: Sheba Feminist Publishers, 1981).

Anglophone literature as it has been institutionalized within western academia,⁷ but one who has remained almost entirely absent within its canon.

Namjoshi's centrality in the canon lies in her writing of this particular form of the genre and using it to write about the lesbian, an unspoken subject in Indian culture and one not hitherto rendered by *name* in Indian literature. What makes *Goja* particularly interesting is the combination of its timing and its relative directness with regard to her story. The book follows the controversy over *Fire* and the publication of the anthology *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing from India*, which I discuss in chapter 2. In *Goja*, Namjoshi tells us about leaving India in her mid-twenties to follow "Sahali," her lover, to the U.S. because "[b]y then it was clear that in India it would not be possible for two women, who loved one another, to live honourably together."⁸ Namjoshi calls the autobiography her 'coming out' to an imagined audience of two dead women—her childhood servant, Goja, and her maternal grandmother, Goldie. As a writer who has 'outed' herself many times before, her re-'outing' in *Goja* may be seen as gratuitous. However, Namjoshi argues, the confession in *Goja* is different, for it is made to those to whom she could not come out while they were still alive—her family, as represented by Goja and Goldie. The reason for her long silence in this regard is her family's implicit and explicit homophobia, expressed in various attempts to break up her earliest romances and, later, in the demand that she "be a little discreet."⁹ The devastating consequence of this demand is brought home to the reader when she says, "[f]or a long time while you [Goja and Goldie] were still alive, I tried to keep my books out of India so that you would

⁷ I abbreviate this to Indian literature in the rest of the chapter.

⁸ Namjoshi, *Goja* 66. "Sahali" is a nickname Namjoshi uses. The name is not without a certain delicious irony, for Sahali means "friend" in Sanskrit. I discuss the politics of "friendship" as code for lesbian in chapter 2 in the context of the anthologies' politics of naming.

⁹ Namjoshi, *Goja* 126.

never know, so that there would be no scandal—you would not have to be ashamed and so that I could continue to return year after year without too much difficulty or distress.”¹⁰

As a writer who understands intimately the paradox of living a public life through her writings and yet remained closeted to her family, Namjoshi is uniquely situated to make a case for the lesbian and endorse the campaign of lesbian identity politics in India, claiming an identity that has been vilified, marginalized, and fictionalized. Yet, Namjoshi’s turn to postmodernism as a way to write the autobiography complicates this venture. For the autobiography is as much about her servant Goja, to whom the title and the bulk of the story are devoted. In fact, by the end of the book, it becomes clear that Namjoshi means the autobiography to be a retrospective act of seeking forgiveness from Goja on behalf of her family. But it is a forgiveness whose impossibility Namjoshi recognizes, and thus the autobiography concludes with no real resolution except Namjoshi’s unconditional refusal to exonerate herself (as elite) in light of her own suffering (as lesbian). This chapter asks how Namjoshi’s authoring of the lesbian (subject) authorizes her in a culture in which she has been rendered alien, seeking to understand through this the sophisticated politics of subjectivity she advances. Namjoshi’s particular approach to subjectivity, I argue, follows Paul Ricoeur’s “hermeneutics of suspicion.”¹¹ For her, the written word, the text, act as important spaces to “work out what really mattered and somehow to say it,”¹² particularly as this working out and saying helps understand the ideas of experience and the self as marked by cultural discourses. Like Derridean poststructuralists, Namjoshi understands language as central to this. Like Ricoeur, she anchors subjectivity in the racial and gendered body so

¹⁰ Namjoshi, *Goja* 85.

¹¹ Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1970).

¹² Namjoshi, *Goja* 79.

that the poststructuralist approach to language may not yet erase or write away the materiality of those bodies. For her, the lesbian, the postcolonial, and the diasporic are marked by systemic practices of exclusion, but claiming their right to subjectivity within culture cannot come at the cost of understanding who such a politics of naming would exclude. This relentlessly critical approach to subjectivity marks, I argue, the difficulty of locating Namjoshi within the Indian literary canon for she does not easily fit into categories like ‘women,’ ‘lesbian,’ ‘postcolonial,’ ‘diasporic,’ which have all variously marked the canon of Indian literature. In fact, her inclusion in that canon will show the interlinked nature of these concerns, which have traditionally been parsed out as separate under postcolonial Indian literary studies. Namjoshi remains one of the most interesting of postcolonial writers in the contemporary era precisely because she reminds us of the legacies of postcolonialism, which we are under risk of forgetting in our fascination with a post-postcolonial ‘global’ order.

Namjoshi and the Problems of Categorization

There are different degrees of engagement with the lesbian in Namjoshi’s works. She struggles to articulate it at all in the face of familial censure in early works such as the poetry collections, *The Authentic Lie* (1982) and *From the Bedside Book of Nightmares* (1984).¹³ She interrogates it in the novel *The Conversations of Cow* (1985)¹⁴ via the autobiographical protagonist “Suniti.” She claims it in the collection of poetry *Flesh and Paper* in which she and Hanscombe explore their relationship against the racist and heterosexist exclusions of the west and of an India marked by familial silence. In some

¹³ Suniti Namjoshi, *The Authentic Lie* (Fredericton, New Brunswick: Fiddlehead, 1982); Suniti Namjoshi, *From the Bedside Book of Nightmares* (Fredericton, New Brunswick: Fiddlehead, 1984).

¹⁴ Suniti Namjoshi, *The Conversations of Cow* (London: The Women’s P, 1985).

stories in *Feminist Fables*, she affirms lesbian identity against the ‘fables’ told by patriarchy about women’s desires. Thus, central to her articulations of lesbianism is the autobiography. The autobiographical subject appears, named after herself, in the protagonist Suniti of the novel *The Conversations of Cow* about a transmogrifying cow who teaches Suniti about the pitfalls and limitations of identity. It shadows the protagonist Jahnvi, described as an “Indian lesbian poet,” in the dystopian novel *The Mothers of Maya Diip* (1989)¹⁵ about a community of women who constitute a hierarchy based on motherhood. It is clearly present in the first-person narrator of *Goja*. Her poetry evokes the autobiographical “I” directly in the context of discussing family. In the collection of introductory essays contextualizing select works in *Because of India* (1989), she offers accounts of how she came to write each of the works mentioned above,¹⁶ telling us of her politicization under western lesbian and gay liberation movements and the struggles to articulate women’s oppression that were often rendered moot by her status as elite Indian.

Namjoshi’s interest in the postmodern autobiography locates her in the tradition of those western writers for whom female sexuality—and particularly lesbian sexuality—has offered a particularly powerful location of critique against patriarchy. In England, her adopted home, she follows Angela Carter, a predecessor, and joins Jeanette Winterson, a contemporary. Among U.S. writers, she follows the expatriate Gertrude Stein, the foremother of postmodernist autobiography, and joins Caribbean Americans Michelle Cliff and Audre Lorde. That Namjoshi has not found a place among these writers testifies to the ways in which literary canons are made through the marking off of critical

¹⁵ Suniti Namjoshi, *The Mothers of Maya Diip* (London: The Women’s P, 1989).

¹⁶ Suniti Namjoshi, *Because of India: Selected Poems and Fables* (London: Onlywomen P, 1989).

concerns. While Carter has long been the mainstay of white feminist literary criticism of the 1980s and 1990s, Stein held sway over modernist critics, Winterson has served as the pillar of lesbian feminist criticism, and Lorde and Cliff have been reclaimed from oblivion by Caribbean postcolonial critics. As a diasporic Indian writer ignored by Indian postcolonial studies, Namjoshi falls into oblivion against her contemporaries. Her absence from the canon of postcolonial Indian literature indicates a twofold problem. It is due to both postcolonial Indian literature's own problematic heterosexist elisions and the canon's rootedness in issues intelligible to western audiences. The latter is especially important, for any argument about postcolonial Indian literature must account for its place as a western-originated and -located canon.¹⁷ Locating Namjoshi within the canon of Indian literature acknowledges this fact because her works throw into disarray any easy sense of categorization of 'Indian' or 'western'. At the same time, she manages to explore the specificities of each even as they mark one another irrevocably through the diasporic, the feminist, and the lesbian experience.

Postcolonial Indian literature as it is taught and theorized comprises certain familiar categories, each of which I explore in this section to show the disservice their terminology does to a writer like Namjoshi and her implicit and explicit challenge to that categorization. I want to look at five categories in particular—nationalist writers, Booker winners, 'Indian English' writers, diasporic writers, and women writers. These categories overlap considerably, but writers taught under them are defined as being preoccupied by their central terms. Nationalist writers are often considered to be those early-twentieth-century authors celebrated for the reformist bent of their writing. Mulk Raj Anand's

¹⁷ Edward Said first made this argument in *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978). He argues that the institution of third world literature as a category is the effort of the west's Orientalizing impulse.

novel about the evils of untouchability, *The Untouchable* (1935), and Raja Rao's novel about a small village's participation in the freedom struggle, *Kanthapura* (1938), are two classics in this category.¹⁸ Although his concerns are far less directly reformist, R.K. Narayan, the writer of a series of novels based in the fictional South Indian village of Malgudi, forms the third member in this triumvirate of early Indian English writers.¹⁹ Early twentieth century writers such as Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore and the writers of the Progressive Writers Association are also invoked in this category.

The Booker winners need no introduction. In fact, Graham Huggan argues via Eakin that the prize, despite its conflicted history and reception, "exerts a major influence over the cultural perceptions, as well as reading habits of its consumer public."²⁰ Salman Rushdie leads this category as the first 'Indian' winner of the prize, though he was already a British citizen by 1981 when he won for *Midnight's Children*.²¹ The novel established Rushdie as *the* voice of magic realism and anti-nationalism. Namjoshi's *Feminist Fables*, an attack on patriarchal India through its re-writing of the canonical fairy tale collection, the *Panchtantra*, was also published that year and had a heavy dose of magic realism, but failed to register on audiences who were enamored by Rushdie's win.

Amidst the flurry of Booker winners, Arundhati Roy's is a unique case. Roy, although a single-novel author to date, has been widely received not only because of her

¹⁸ Mulk Raj Anand, *Untouchable* (London: Wishart, 1935); Raja Rao, *Kanthapura* (New Delhi: Orient, 1938).

¹⁹ The most famous of these Malgudi novels are *Swami and Friends* (London: H. Hamilton, 1935); *The Printer of Malgudi* (Michigan State UP, 1957); *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (New York: Viking P, 1961); *The Vendor of Sweets* (New York: Viking P, 1967); *Malgudi Days* (New York: Viking P, 1982); *A Tiger for Malgudi* (New York: Viking P, 1983). The novels were popularized through a televised serial in distinctly South Indian accented Hindi. Called *Malgudi Days*, it screened in 1987 and is currently being revived by India's state-controlled television network, Doordarshan.

²⁰ Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 2001) 108.

²¹ Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (New York: Knopf, 1981).

Booker win but also because of her ongoing and very *public* political commentary, especially as caught by the media.²² Her situation attests to the ways in which a global audience consumes not just writing but writers themselves, a fact that many a writer is now acutely attuned to. Authors publicized through their Booker prize win, such as Kiran Desai and Arvind Adiga, who do not have the careers that Namjoshi has had, receive far greater attention as representatives of Indian literary culture (no matter how reductively and problematically the category is framed) than Namjoshi does even today.²³ Appearances for readings at book clubs, signings at book stores, talks at university campuses, and conferences are now a routine part of the machinery called literary life, and third world writers, in particular, are being courted by the multicultural literary marketplace in the west in this way.

Namjoshi has remained outside much of these sites of visibility, partly because she belongs to a generation of writers, in the era of the 1980s and 1990s, for whom this incessant marketing was not the dominant mode of literary production, but also because she has remained outside the purview of literary prizes and canonization by literary studies. Although Namjoshi's writing engages with questions of nation and cultural belonging via her exploration of cultural sexism and homophobia, hers is not a name invoked in revised syllabi on nationalist writers, which now include contemporary authors along with these early twentieth-century radicals. In addition, Indian English

²² For a commentary on Roy's media-savvy politics, see Hasan Suroor, "U.K. Media Hails Arundhati as 'Political Icon,'" *The Hindu* 8 Mar. 2002, 1 Mar. 2009 <<http://www.hindu.com/thehindu/2002/03/08/stories/2002030802411200.htm>>. For western feminist receptions of Roy, see Madeleine Bunting, "Grassroots Gamine," *The Guardian* 7 Mar. 2002, 1 Mar. 2009 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2002/mar/07/arundhatiroy1>>. For a feminist critique of the complex responses Roy engenders in India, see Saba Naqvi, "Why We Love To Hate Ms Roy," *OutlookIndia.com* 28 Dec.2006 1 Mar. 2009 <<http://www.outlookindia.com/fullprint.asp?choice=1&fodname=20061228&fname=saba&sid=1>>.

²³ Desai is a winner for the second of her two novels, *The Inheritance of Loss* (New York: Grove P, 2006) and Adiga for his first, *The White Tiger* (New York: Free P, 2008).

writers have often been praised for their critiques of the English language. Rushdie and Roy quickly come to mind here, as do other less-publicized but nevertheless canonized ones like Rohinton Mistry, Vikram Chandra, Vikram Seth, and Adiga. Namjoshi's considerable engagement with the English language has gone unnoticed like much else about her work.

Like Roy, who actually lives *in* India, many other writers have achieved international acclaim through the category 'Indian English' literature. Canonical names include those who straddle colonial and postcolonial identities, such as Anglo-Indian novelist Ruskin Bond and poets Henry Derozio and Nissim Ezekiel in the mid-twentieth century. Ezekiel, in particular, is popular as the voice of "Indian English," capturing the syncretic nature of English in India. Namjoshi's concern with English as a postcolonial language has never led to her invocation alongside writers like Ezekiel. Her inclusion in the pantheon of counter-realist Indian English writers in Kanaganayakam's study is perhaps the sole exception to the general exclusion that is the norm in her case.²⁴ But more often than not, due to Namjoshi's diasporic location in the west, she does not come under the purview of Indian English writing, a category assumed for those writers who live in India and write in English rather than the regional languages that many grow up with.

Since the 1980s, diasporic literature from the west and in English has come to mark an over-determining presence in the idea of 'Indian literature.' On the one hand, this has to do with the institutionalization of postcolonial studies in western academia. On the other hand, it is due to the Indian state's investment in diasporic culture, of which

²⁴ See Chelva Kanaganayakam, "Fashioning New Fables: Suniti Namjoshi," *Counterrealism and Indo-Anglian Fiction* (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2002) 121-41.

literature is an especially important one given its presence in Indian nationalist thinking as emblematic of ‘Indian greatness’ on the global stage. For example, last year, Vayalar Ravi, Minister of Overseas Indian Affairs, argued for including diasporic literature as a subject of study at universities.²⁵ Speaking at the conference on diasporic writing at the Indira Gandhi National Open University, one of the leading fully government-funded educational centers in the country, Ravi’s argument was based on the idea that immigrant writing reflects questions of “what to adopt, what to adapt, and what to reject, and what to preserve” rather than what critiques it offers of nation, home, and belonging.²⁶ The University has, in fact, gone on to include a syllabus on diasporic literature, testifying to the ways state interest is influencing the educational curriculum and institutionalizing ideas of literature and nation.

Anannya Dasgupta, reading Namjoshi’s deployment of the fabulous in her works, argues that “Namjoshi’s style, although ingenious, did not dazzle the Indian literary scene and has not collected a band of imitators. Namjoshi seems to occupy a solitary space, neither following from nor followed by recently canonized literary traditions.”²⁷ Chelva Kanaganayakam attempts to correct Namjoshi’s absence in the canon of Indian literature by locating her among Indian English writers for whom counterrealist fiction offers a way of straddling the cultures of west and India.²⁸ She reads Namjoshi’s use of the fable as following in a distinguished line of Indian writers that includes G.V. Desani, Anita

²⁵ “Ravi for Inclusion of Diasporic Literature as Special Subject,” *Indiopia* 21 Feb. 2008, 24 Feb. 2009 <<http://www.indiopia.in/India-usa-uk-news/latest-news/79898/National/1/20/1>>.

²⁶ “Ravi.”

²⁷ Anannya Dasgupta, “‘Do I Remove My Skin?’: Interrogating Identity in Suniti Namjoshi’s Fables,” *Queering India: Same-Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society*, ed. Ruth Vanita (New York: Routledge, 2002) 102.

²⁸ See Chelva Kanaganayakam, “Counterrealism as Alternative Literary History,” *Counterrealism and Indo-Anglian Fiction* (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2002) 1-27.

Desai, and Salman Rushdie.²⁹ Though not explicitly advocating Namjoshi's place in the Indian literary canon, Harveen Mann makes a strong case for her inclusion through her argument that Namjoshi's writing embodies "interrelated, sometimes colliding sociopolitical, racial, psychosexual, and aesthetic strands, to arrive at that unstable, disruptive, liminal, but also ambivalent location of the Third Space."³⁰ Mann's reading emphasizes Namjoshi's commitment to undoing the limits of various categories, which reinstate binary logic even as they aim to counter hegemonic structures. She argues that Namjoshi posits a "racialized, postcolonial space" to contest the racial elisions of western lesbian and gay liberation of the 1970s and 1980s and resists "the (autochthonous) mother country's silencing and erasure of the Western-influenced lesbian-feminist daughter" in her works.³¹

However, as Dasgupta points out, the diasporic writers who are often celebrated as evidence of Indian literary excellence tend to be writers like "Bharati Mukherjee, Rohinton Mistry, and Vikram Seth, whose styles are reminiscent of the nineteenth-century realist novel."³² Arguing this point in her book on globalization and U.S. multicultural discourse, Inderpal Grewal claims that celebrated diasporic writers such as Mukherjee, Chitra Divakaruni, and Amitav Ghosh promulgate through their writing "postcolonial cosmopolitanisms" constituted by "a class-, gender-, and racially specific network of discursive practices circulating within transnational connectivities."³³ Thus, for both Dasgupta and Grewal, it is important to note that Indian diasporic writers often

²⁹ Kanaganayakam, "Counterrealism."

³⁰ Harveen S. Mann, "Suniti Namjoshi: Diasporic, Lesbian Feminism and the Textual Politics of Transnationality," *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 30.1/2 (Spring 1997): 99.

³¹ Mann 100.

³² Dasgupta 101.

³³ Inderpal Grewal, *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2005) 42.

achieve credentials for speaking from the position of being legible as subjects of a global cosmopolitanism either through their allegiance to western literary traditions like the realist novel or through their place as subjects in what Grewal calls a “transnationalized civil society.”³⁴

Nowhere in the category of diasporic writers is Namjoshi’s name invoked. Dasgupta attributes her absence to the uniqueness of her thematic preoccupation—that of *lesbian* Indian—and her formal style—that of counterrealism in a sea of realist diasporic writers. Although authors like Divakaruni have experimented with magic realism, she has certainly not been as consistent as Namjoshi in deploying or exploring the form. The name that emerges most clearly when discussing the form is Rushdie’s, and Namjoshi remains conspicuously absent although she is his closest contemporary. Namjoshi herself has addressed this absence upon being asked, in the context of *Goja*’s publication, if she “identi[fies] with Arundhati Roy, Vikram Seth or even Salman Rushdie as an Indian writer.”³⁵ Namjoshi replies:

Why would I identify with them? I’m nearly 60 for God’s sake. No, no, I haven’t read any of their books; they are younger than me. I am Indian. I lived there until I was 27 years old. India is culturally a very dense society, it’s difficult to grow up there without being “Indianised.” I grew up with the traditional Marathi writers—in Marathi not English. I am influenced, as one is, by the air you breathe, the music you listen to, the architecture, the language, to the culture all around. If you really want to categorise me, my mind happens to be that of a fabulist. I mostly write fables and verse, this book is different because it doesn’t use donkeys and one-eyed monkeys. It could be called magic realism, because of the conversations with dead people, I suppose.³⁶

It is clear in her response that Namjoshi wishes to distance herself from her (more) famous literary peers, significantly through her claim to “Indian” identity. She declares she has not read Roy, Seth, or Rushdie, the three biggest names in Indian literature

³⁴ Grewal 42.

³⁵ Suniti Namjoshi, Interview with Christine Croyden, *Australian Women’s Book Review* 12 (2000), 18 Jan. 2003 <<http://www.emsah.uq.edu.au/awsr/recent/8.html>>.

³⁶ Namjoshi, Interview.

currently. She claims that she is Indian, emphasizing this cultural/national identity as though it would either explain her distance from them or as though, if she must be categorized, then that were the category she would rather belong to. If she is suggesting at all that she is Indian where they are not, it would be a peculiar argument indeed, since Rushdie, like her, lived in India before moving to England, Seth divides his time between England and India, and Roy lives *entirely* in India, although popular internationally for her left-wing political commentary. Namjoshi's final sentiment that she could be called a magic realist accedes to her similarity with Rushdie, although she is not recognized alongside him.

Finally, that Namjoshi is not recognized under the category women's writing constitutes yet another problematic elision. Writing by canonized women writers ranges from representations of women as oppressed yet stoic figures, as in Kamala Markandeya's *Nectar in a Sieve*,³⁷ to the more self-defining 'feminist' subjects of middle-class women's novels. In diasporic writers like Bharati Mukherjee (*Jasmine*) and Anita Desai (*The Clear Light of Day*) or native writer Shashi Deshpande (*The Dark Holds No Terrors*), women figure as self-defining cosmopolitan subjects critical of patriarchal discourses.³⁸ In yet others, they appear as cosmopolitan subjects problematically positioned as uncritical consumers of gender and/or ethnic identity, as in diasporic writers like Anita Badami (*Tamarind Mem*) or Indira Ganesan (*Inheritance*) or Chitra Divakaruni (*Mistress of Spices*).³⁹ Significantly, their political vision is seriously limited by their

³⁷ Kamala Markandeya, *Nectar in a Sieve* (New York, J. Day Co., 1954).

³⁸ Bharati Mukherjee, *Jasmine* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1989); Anita Desai, *The Clear Light of Day* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980); Shashi Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (Sahibabad, Ghaziabad: Vikas, 1980).

³⁹ Anita Rau Badami, *Tamarind Mem* (Toronto: Viking, 1996); Indira Ganesan, *Inheritance* (New York: Knopf, 1998); Chitra Divakaruni, *Mistress of Spices* (New York: Anchor Books, 1997).

implicit and explicit celebrations of the heterosexual romance plot. Even when heteronormativity is dismantled through lesbian love, as in Nair's *Ladies Coupé*, it does not afford a re-making of or challenge to either the literary genre or of the ultimate resolution of the heroine's self-definition in terms of heterosexuality.⁴⁰ The heterosexual plot in women's literature, a literature that has largely been focused on middle-class women writers, pays no attention to the gendered economies of nationalism and nationalist thinking that have resurged since the 1990s in India. Rather, it is based strongly on entrenching heterosexual romance to counter feminist critiques of gendered and right-wing nationalist ideology that draws on this plot to structure family, home, and kinship.

While every selection (including mine, the one I use to illustrate my argument) works by exclusion, it is worth noting that the writers often missing from this category are those who complicate via representation clear and easy definitions of gender itself, such as Maheswata Devi, whose female characters are often positioned in relation to class, or the writers of regional languages whose engagements with literary genre, style, and theme go unnoticed in the focus on Anglophone literature. Devi, of course, has been reinstated by the attention garnered by Gayatri Spivak's famous essay on her short story "The Breast Giver."⁴¹ Regional writers have sporadically found a place in the separate/d canon of women's writing since the late 1980s through edited anthologies, enabled in large part through feminist scholarly attention and the endeavors of feminist presses.⁴²

⁴⁰ Anita Nair, *Ladies Coupé: A Novel in Parts* (London: Penguin, 2001).

⁴¹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "A Literary Representation of the Subaltern: Mahasweta Devi's 'Stanadayini'," *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. Ranajit Guha, vol. 5, (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 1987) 91-134.

⁴² See for example, volumes like Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, ed. *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present, Vol. 1: 600 B.C. to the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: The Feminist P at CUNY, 1991) and Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, ed., *Women Writing in India: the Twentieth Century, Vol. 2: The Twentieth*

But Namjoshi's name has been significantly absent even in these feminist enterprises. She has been picked up in the services of specifically queer theoretical projects such as brief readings of her use of animism in Dasgupta's and Vanita's separate essays.⁴³ I argue, however, that Namjoshi's own literary style, rather than warranting a specifically queer theoretical approach, demands a more inclusive reading, one that does not parse her out under specialized sub-categories, particularly those that rely on gender/sexuality as defining criteria. Namjoshi's decidedly different approach to romance is evident in her formal innovations. For her, romance in the conventional sense of the word, signifying the discourse of erotic love and relationships, is to be challenged for its normative power. But as importantly, romance in the sense of the medieval literary genre affords her the ability to defer endlessly the quest for selfhood, something her postmodern style brings to fruition.

If the genre of the romance underlies Namjoshi's theoretical interest in the deferral of selfhood, then this deferral is achieved in the genre of the autobiography. Namjoshi is one of few Indian writers to use the genre explicitly, as it has not been the choice of most of them. Its history in Indian literature is largely tied to the autobiographies of great political figures such as Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, whose autobiographical narratives, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (1927) and

Century (New York: The Feminist P at CUNY, 1993), the first major attempt to collect regional women's writing transhistorically. See also recent anthologies such as K. Srilatha, ed. and transl. *The Other Half of the Coconut: Women Writing Self-respect History* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2003), which brings together excerpts from twentieth-century Tamil women's writing; Alladi Uma and M. Sridhar, ed. and transl. *Ayoni and Other Stories: A Collection of Telugu Short Stories* (New Delhi: StreeKatha, 2001), which brings together twentieth-century Telugu women's short stories; Paul St. Pierre and Ganeswar Mishra, ed. & transl., *Oriya Women's Writing: Essays, Autobiography, Fiction* (Bhubaneswar: Sateertha Publications, 1997) for transhistorical Oriya women's writing; and Laura Kalpakian, ed., *Truth-tales: Contemporary Writing by Indian Women* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1986).

⁴³ Dasgupta, "'Do I Remove My Skin?"; Ruth Vanita "'I'm an Excellent Animal': Cows, Motherhood, and Love between Women," *A Sea of Stories: The Shaping Power of Narratives in the Lives of Gay Men and Lesbians*, ed. Sonya Jones (New York: Haworth P, 2000) 143-63.

Toward Freedom (1942), respectively, are presented in everyday culture as (didactic) historical accounts of the time of anti-colonialism.⁴⁴ Nirad C. Chadhuri, a controversial public figure, has generated much public debate with his *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (1951) for its seeming endorsement of and desire for colonialism, although Chadhuri himself has denied these claims.⁴⁵ Recently, feminist scholarship has paid attention to early twentieth-century autobiographies of middle-class women as evidence of alternate histories of coloniality and postcoloniality.⁴⁶ Postcolonial writers have rarely used the genre, which has, of course, led to the overwhelming impulse to imagine postcolonial literature in terms of fiction, the most prolific genre in Indian writing. Occasionally, however, autobiographical traces are apparent in some authors and their works. For example, Rahel in Roy's *The God of Small Things*⁴⁷ suggests the author in many important respects ranging from physical descriptions to ethnic identity. Namjoshi's use of autobiography is more direct, from the protagonist of the novel *The Conversations of Cow*, who bears the author's name, Suniti, to the princess figures in *Feminist Fables* and *From the Bedside Book of Nightmares*, who can be traced back to Namjoshi's own royal ancestry. The presence of family members in both works further attests to the autobiography. This interest in the genre may be said to come to fruition in *Goja*, where Namjoshi uses the first-person "I" most directly.

⁴⁴ Mahatma Gandhi, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (Boston: Beacon P, 1927); Jawaharlal Nehru, *Toward Freedom* (New York: John Day, 1942).

⁴⁵ Nirad C. Chadhuri, *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (New York: Macmillan, 1951).

⁴⁶ See Tanika Sarkar, *Words to Win: The Making of Amar Jiban, a Modern Autobiography* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1999), a study of Rassundari Devi, *Amar Jiban*, transl. Enakshi Chatterjee (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1999), the first women's autobiography in Bengali. See also Antoinette Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India* (New York: Oxford UP, 2003), a study of four women's autobiographical writings.

⁴⁷ Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things* (New York: Random House, 1997).

But Namjoshi's turn to postmodernism in writing autobiography troubles notions of the lesbian subject she is supposed to be writing about. This perhaps marks the reason for her absence from postcolonial Indian literature, fixed as the latter has been through certain clear sub-categories. This sub-categorization fails to address the complexity of Namjoshi's literary style. Extending the arguments of scholars like those cited above, I posit that Namjoshi's concerns have never been limited to propagating a separatist canon, one based on identificatory markers like 'women's literature' or 'lesbian literature'. While these are labels she would gladly subscribe to politically, her oeuvre resolutely works against them in the interests of a more polemical feminist position that exposes the multi-layered nature of exclusionary or marginalizing politics. Namjoshi culls from the west and India a wide range of literary sources in her endeavor to inaugurate a tradition of writing that understands the power of sexual desire to elaborate the various Othering processes of culture.

Namjoshi's autobiography is full of references to canonical literature, ranging from Shakespeare, whose characters afford her a chance at postcolonial feminist re-writing, to Lewis Carroll, whose story of Alice offers one of the most compelling metaphors for displacement in *Goja*. From this chapter's epigraph with its invocation that "who one is" can be "donkey, monkey, dying animal," it is evident that Aesop and the *Panchatantra*, the ancient Indian text of animal stories geared toward children, are crucial parts of Namjoshi's feminist re-writing of patriarchal stories. Equally, the Grimms' fairytales afford her further sources through which to write the story of her self.

With all these influences, however, like Virginia Woolf in British (modernist) literature, Namjoshi has had to invent the tradition lacking in postcolonial Indian

literature—that of lesbian feminism or, to represent it more accurately, a feminist tradition that is not heteronormative. Thus, it is not surprising that large parts of the autobiography also refer back to her earlier writing. Many of the themes she has visited in previous works recur here. Her conflict with her mother, which she discusses in the poetry collection *From the Bedside Book of Nightmares*, is rendered as stories from fables. Her politicization under western lesbian and gay liberation movements is invoked in terms of her understanding of the power of language to understand and shape reality. Her status as Caliban, the ultimate symbol of a postcolonial order and a resistant figure in her works that has already constituted an important element of *From the Bedside Book of Nightmares*, appears in the autobiography as well. Similarly, the figures of Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland and William Shakespeare’s Miranda from *The Tempest* figure in the autobiography to suggest Namjoshi’s displacement in the west even as she discovers in it a “new world.” While this “repetition with a difference”⁴⁸ holds important deconstructive potential—undermining colonial and patriarchal narratives with each successive work—it is the politics advanced by the autobiography’s complication of the autobiographical and narrative “I” that is at the heart of this chapter’s critical concern.

Author(iz)ing the Lesbian: Autobiography and Subjectivity

The first part of this section focuses on the effects of Namjoshi’s refusal to inaugurate the lesbian as the sole subject of her autobiography, which complicates the genre of autobiography—particularly that of *lesbian* autobiography. She accomplishes this by

⁴⁸ This is Judith Butler’s famous phrase for how the fixed meanings of gender may be “troubled” in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1989). I use it here to suggest Namjoshi’s postmodern style with each successive text repeating some parts of her previous ones. Such repetition serves to destabilize, each time, heterosexual patriarchal visions of the world.

rendering unconventionally the “I” of the autobiography, a strategy Sidonie Smith identifies as the female autobiographer’s response to a male-originated and male-centric genre.⁴⁹ Central to this in Namjoshi’s autobiography is the displacement of the autobiographical and narrative self. The first is accomplished through bringing in her servant, Goja, as the central figure of the autobiography; the second, through including fables, fairytales, and poetry in the services of telling her story so much so that we are not sure who is talking to us about whom. However, these strategies, rather than suggesting any skepticism of the lesbian herself or any discomfort with claiming lesbian identity for herself, premise a far more polemical argument. In the second part of this section, I turn to Namjoshi’s exploration of the racial, class, and sexual body to argue that she deploys postmodernism in a manner that challenges the charge of the critical discourse’s apolitical basis.

Re-writing Genre

The displacement of the autobiographical “I” is central to Namjoshi’s autobiography. We enter “Once in India,” the first of *Goja’s* three sections, not with Namjoshi’s childhood but with that of Goja, who is born into poverty. Namjoshi evokes the young Goja going to work at age five⁵⁰ at the house of the “Ruler,” Namjoshi’s grandfather, who is royalty but left unnamed in the autobiography as though to challenge the unearned privilege of his stature. Goja’s story illustrates the differences between rich and poor in evocative terms. Goja is considered “very fortunate to be allowed to be a servant in the household

⁴⁹ Sidonie Smith, *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987).

⁵⁰ Namjoshi, *Goja* 4.

of the Ruler.”⁵¹ She sleeps on the floor as a child and her life is given to service. Years later, when she is “very, very old” and still working to “make herself useful,”⁵² a “plump aunt” watching her ascribes Goja’s slight figure to her “active” lifestyle. Nobody in the family knows Goja’s actual age or how she lost one eye, though she has been with them since “age five.”⁵³ But perhaps most crucially, after she is dead, Namjoshi finds out that there is not a single photograph of Goja, reminding her that “the lives of servants go unrecorded” and that they “disappear silently.”⁵⁴

But Namjoshi’s own awareness comes only years later, and the autobiography is testimony to how long it has taken her to understand the tyranny of class. Writing *Goja*, she says in an interview, was very much about understanding that the “moral problem” of poverty was also a “literary and technical problem.”⁵⁵ She goes on to add that learning how to talk about “such indecency decently” was “a problem I could only solve at the end of my writing career.”⁵⁶ In the autobiography, Namjoshi recalls how she came to understanding class oppression in postcolonial India. Living in the west in self-exile, she finds that she is seen by most white westerners as “FOREIGN/ EXOTIC/ THIRD WORLD/ NEEDY—whichever word their mind’s eye was able to read,”⁵⁷ and quickly becomes aware that “any experience [she] had, which might have helped, somehow never applied properly.”⁵⁸ In the second section of the autobiography, “In Cold Canada,” as she explores her self-exile in the west because her family expected her silence and “discretion” with respect to her sexuality, she comes to realize that Goja did not have the

⁵¹ Namjoshi, *Goja* 4.

⁵² Namjoshi, *Goja* 7.

⁵³ Namjoshi, *Goja* 7.

⁵⁴ Namjoshi, *Goja* 7.

⁵⁵ Namjoshi, “Interview”

⁵⁶ Namjoshi, “Interview”

⁵⁷ Namjoshi, *Goja* 71.

⁵⁸ Namjoshi, *Goja* 73. Emphasis original.

ability to escape the tyrannies of her family as she herself had done. As an illiterate woman, as a poor woman, Goja had no choice but to stay with the family and work for them until she died. The racism of the west thus becomes occasion for Namjoshi's investigation into her own elisions as elite Indian. In a significant moment of *mea culpa*, she recalls living in the west and feeling "proud ... for having done 'servant's work' without complaining."⁵⁹ Acknowledging the problematic nature of that sentiment, she says, "*Goja, forgive me, I was young and foolish.*"⁶⁰

A significant portion of the third section, "Later," is devoted to examining this elision in the context of her family's culpability. A chapter called "What Goja Says" begins with a poetic invocation of Goja's (imagined) response to Namjoshi's indictment of herself and her family:

You want me to say my own say, have a tongue
of my own, a personal fire. I have no fire.
What's left is grey rock, an obdurate landscape.⁶¹

The fact that she imagines that all Goja would ever say is that she has "no fire" because she has no energy after a lifetime of what "the powerful always demand of the powerless: service with a smile"⁶² is telling of the class disparities in India that a common background as women or servant and lesbian does not always erase. She imagines Goja adding:

Most of this is about you. Not me. There's a reason for that. You were rich. I was poor. There, it's been said in all its crudeness. What was life like? Hard, difficult. Enmeshed in poverty. I do not recommend it. Not much to be said. But you want to extract something? Very well, in all that morass there was some kinship and some kindness.
I cannot, and may not, say all is forgotten and forgiven. I will not collude.⁶³

⁵⁹ Namjoshi, *Goja* 74.

⁶⁰ Namjoshi, *Goja* 74. Emphasis original.

⁶¹ Namjoshi, *Goja* 149.

⁶² Namjoshi, *Goja* 49.

⁶³ Namjoshi, *Goja* 152.

In granting herself and her family no excuses, no forgiveness via Goja's voice, Namjoshi frames the autobiography as a sincere apology. This apology makes the quest for her own reinstatement that much more credible in terms of her willingness to not "[rank her] oppression," as Cherríe Moraga argues in the context of the multiple realities of naming oppression.⁶⁴ Namjoshi takes to heart Moraga's point that "[w]ithout an emotional, heartfelt grappling with the source of our own oppression, without naming the enemy within ourselves and outside of us, no authentic, nonhierarchical connection among oppressed groups can take place."⁶⁵ In acknowledging Goja's oppression in addition to her own, Namjoshi names the enemy both within and outside and attempts to forge a politics of lesbianism that engages with circumstances that go beyond the immediacy of desire. In this, she responds with great acuity to the critique in India that poverty is a greater social problem than sexuality, a rhetoric that has accompanied the public discourses of same-sex desire.⁶⁶

However, Goldie, Namjoshi's grandmother, is unrepentant for the misery Goja has had to undergo. Ever recalcitrant, Goldie says she sees no need to apologize, either for Goja's penury or Namjoshi's exile when Namjoshi asks her for an apology to both of them. She only says, "In my reign the poor would be happy."⁶⁷ Against Goldie's stubborn conviction of the normalcy of a class order, one that epitomizes her family's and postcolonial India's long history of exploitation, Namjoshi can only step in and make the apology to Goja herself. However, she adds, "[t]o say to Goja, 'Forgive me that I

⁶⁴ Cherríe Moraga, "La Güera," *The Coming Out Stories*, ed. Julia Penelope Stanley and Susan J. Wolfe (Watertown, MA: Persephone P, 1980) 189.

⁶⁵ Moraga 189.

⁶⁶ Maitrayee Chaudhuri, "Introduction," *Feminism in India: Issues in Contemporary Indian Feminism*, ed. Maitrayee Chaudhuri (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2006) xxi; Ruth Vanita, "Thinking Beyond Gender in India," *Feminism in India: Issues in Contemporary Indian Feminism*, ed. Maitrayee Chaudhuri (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2006), 69-78.

⁶⁷ Namjoshi, *Goja* 136.

exploited you, day in and day out, year after year’—that’s travesty. It doesn’t make sense. It’s not easy.”⁶⁸ For, ultimately, as Namjoshi reminds us about Goja’s life, no matter how well intentioned, the autobiography cannot be about Goja, but rather is about Namjoshi. In her writing, the subaltern remains truly so per Spivak’s definition, as one whose voice, by virtue of that status, is never heard.⁶⁹

Namjoshi’s turn to her servant to write the story of her own exile from family serves a deeper purpose than banal comparison. For, in writing her story through that of the servant, Namjoshi grapples with a fundamental moral problem that confronts the wealthy diasporic who returns to India year after year—that of poverty and the labor of servants who make the diasporic’s stay easy. That literature and scholarship has ignored the implication of the returning diasporic’s culpability and focused on the postcolonial diasporic’s struggles against racism speaks volumes about the convenient elisions practiced by the returning diasporic, whether writer, scholar, or other professional.

Writing about Goja’s life helps Namjoshi structure her experiences without making them about sexuality as the sole organizing motif of everyday Indian life. The autobiography gets to Namjoshi’s own story through a signal event in her childhood—the sexual abuse between ages five and ten by a male servant in whose care she was left. The displacement of the autobiographical “I” with which the autobiography begins soon gives way to the displacement of the narrative “I.” For, Namjoshi can only tell this story, as feminist theorists of sexual abuse argue,⁷⁰ through fiction. She processes the incident

⁶⁸ Namjoshi, *Goja* 144.

⁶⁹ Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia UP, 1994) 66-110.

⁷⁰ Janice Haaken, “The Recovery of Memory, Fantasy, and Desire in Women’s Trauma Stories: Feminist Approaches to Sexual Abuse and Psychotherapy,” *Woman, Autobiography, Theory*, ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1998) 352-61.

through re-writing the fable of “Goosegirl” from the Grimm’s fairytale.⁷¹ “In the fairytale,” she tells us, “Falada the mare says to the goosegirl: ‘If your mother knew/ it would break her heart in two.’ But I suspect my mother, and all the mothers, did know or at least guessed, and that it did not break their hearts; they colluded in the disgrace. And this I cannot forgive. This hurts more than anything else.”⁷² It is clear that her mother’s reaction to the abuse necessitates this device, for her mother ignores the incident, refusing to do anything until the servant misbehaves with her, whereupon he is dismissed. Recalling the incident, Namjoshi says, “What I feel about him is straightforward anger. What I feel about the lack of protection is more difficult.”⁷³ But more importantly, this fairytale re-writes the idea of women as princesses to be ‘saved’ by princes, a theme Namjoshi explores to devastating feminist effect in *Feminist Fables*.⁷⁴

Central to this sexual trauma is the trauma of the mother-daughter relationship, which Namjoshi explores fully. She chooses to tell the story of her mother as “a long and impossibly tall story”⁷⁵ in a chapter titled “Fairy Tale.” Her mother is represented as the Queen of Spades⁷⁶ who condemns her to a life of fear, and Namjoshi herself as the Black Piglet,⁷⁷ perhaps in reference to her lesbianism, which would make her the “black sheep” of the family. Her mother’s unwillingness to protect her has a more pernicious legacy.

⁷¹ In the original fairytale, Goosegirl is a princess who is betrayed by her maid-in-waiting and prevented from reaching the prince she is to marry. The maid has Goosegirl’s trusted talking horse, Falada, killed to prevent the betrayal from being made public. However, Goosegirl bribes the killer to mount Falada’s head so that she may see him again. The talking horse-head laments Goosegirl’s betrayal and eventually the prince comes to know about the deception and is reunited with Goosegirl.

⁷² Namjoshi, *Goja* 14.

⁷³ Namjoshi, *Goja* 14.

⁷⁴ See Donald Haase, “Feminist Fairy-Tale Scholarship,” *Fairy Tales and Feminism: New Approaches*, ed. Donald Haase (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2004) 1-36, particularly pp. 10-14, for a review of feminist revisions and critiques of Grimms’ Fairytales.

⁷⁵ Namjoshi, *Goja* 22.

⁷⁶ The Queen of Spades is the key figure of betrayal in Alexander Pushkin’s short story of the same name.

⁷⁷ The Black Piglet is probably a variation on the three piglets of the (anonymous) classic fairytale, “Three Little Piglets.”

For, if her mother did nothing and thus “colluded in the disgrace,” this also stems from her own insecurity and fear. Namjoshi’s poetry collection *From the Bedside Book of Nightmares* evokes her mother’s fearful nature: “when still very little/ I grew up thinking that I was also brave./ But of your fear,/ of how it grew inside you and sat there/ like a mountain, I know nothing at all.”⁷⁸ The Black Piglet looks in a mirror and says, “The Queen of Spades and the Black Piglet are they the same?”⁷⁹ The mirror only shows her “the Queen of Spades reach[ing] out and whisper[ing]: ‘Live as I have lived in the Hall of Mirrors, in the Hall of Swords, and the Hall of Suffering. Reach for suicide and finally achieve it. May you die my death.’”⁸⁰ The hall of mirrors suggests the endless multiplying of womanly fear that her mother has succumbed to and which is the frightening legacy she hands down to her daughter. It also suggests the “cultural hall of mirrors” which indexes “the privilege of power” that, in this context, belongs to patriarchy.⁸¹

Smith, reading Woolf’s use of mirrors in narrating this episode, argues that the mirror serves to portray her brother’s “creation of her as the object of the public gaze, as a woman in the heterosexual economy.”⁸² In *Goja*, the daughter/woman willfully subverts patriarchal power as reflected in the mother’s helpless and self-defeating look into the

⁷⁸ Suniti Namjoshi, *From the Bedside Book of Nightmares* 11.

⁷⁹ Namjoshi, *Goja* 25.

⁸⁰ Namjoshi, *Goja* 24.

⁸¹ Susan Stanford Friedman, “Women’s Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice,” *Woman, Autobiography, Theory*, ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1998) 75. Friedman argues that the cultural hall of mirrors—“the repositories of representation”—reflects the normative subject who is male, white, Christian, and heterosexual (75). She claims that individualism is possible only for the normative subject who has the “privilege of power” and the “luxury of forgetting his skin color and sex” (75).

⁸² Sidonie Smith, “Identity’s Body,” *Autobiography and Postmodernism*, ed. Kathleen Ashley, Leigh Gilmore, and Gerald Peters (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1993) 276.

mirror. She subverts her mother's terrible proclamation, "invent[ing] a different tale"⁸³ instead. Rather than lamenting, "My tail's been cut off," she says that "[t]he rest of my tale ... is that the Queen dons my own flayed skin and is utterly transformed, is no longer Queen. And as for me, I am free'."⁸⁴ Writing/telling her tale allows Namjoshi to escape the self-destruction that she might otherwise have succumbed to through maternal fear.

As the narrative progresses, we learn of the circumstances under which Namjoshi left India. We also learn that moving west, however, did not bring the comfort she had hoped for. In a very Miranda-like sentiment, Namjoshi says that she felt like she had entered "a new world," but any hope of enjoying her freedom was curtailed by her understanding that in the west, she was "both invisible and conspicuous."⁸⁵ She says of her life there that, "as a person of no importance, I was unlikely to cause a scandal. And there was no family there whose glory I could tarnish,"⁸⁶ and goes on to add:

I cared about what *they* [the family] thought. What people about me thought mattered much less. Perhaps that's why eventually it was relatively easy to 'come out' in the West. To relative strangers I could say, "Yes, I'm a lesbian. So what?" But it troubled me that I couldn't say it to the people I loved.... For a long time while you were still alive, I tried to keep my books out of India so that you would never know, so that there would be no scandal—you would not have to be ashamed and so that I could continue to return year after year without too much difficulty or distress.⁸⁷

Not talking/writing is the price her upper-class family demands of her, and Namjoshi has paid a terrible price for this. The first work after her poetry collections of the 1960s that was published in India was Penguin India's re-print of *Feminist Fables* and *St. Suniti and the Dragon* (1993) in a single volume in 1995.⁸⁸ But it is an injunction that she has no

⁸³ Namjoshi, *Goja* 25.

⁸⁴ Namjoshi, *Goja* 25.

⁸⁵ Namjoshi, *Goja* 71.

⁸⁶ Namjoshi, *Goja* 75.

⁸⁷ Namjoshi, *Goja* 85.

⁸⁸ Suniti Namjoshi, *Feminist Fables and St. Suniti and the Dragon* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1995); Suniti Namjoshi, *St. Suniti and the Dragon* (London: Virago, 1994).

doubt refused to obey, for she has long told “fabulous tales to the West.”⁸⁹ Yet, she says that “they’ve all been translations of a sensibility formed by what it was like growing up in India, by growing up with the two of you,”⁹⁰ making it clear that her sexual sensibilities belong ‘at home’ even though she talks about them in the west. It is obvious that writing her autobiography at this juncture in Indian history, after the public attacks on lesbianism and lesbians, is a quest for reinstatement, and she says as much in the autobiography—“I’m now writing ... for you *and* for the West. It’s Janus-faced. I want to bridge my two worlds so that at last there might be the possibility of reconciliation, and if not reconciliation, then at least a degree of straightforwardness.”⁹¹

“Lesbian, Woman, and Brown-skinned”

If the self is displaced from the heart of the story and the idea of autobiography complicated by the presence of other genres, *Goja* is nevertheless focused on the question of Namjoshi as lesbian. The autobiography is shaped by great attention to what naming herself lesbian has meant, particularly as it has been accompanied by silence in India as long as her grandmother and Goja were alive. The body anchors this concern with naming in postcolonial and imperialist western discourse, illustrating Smith’s argument that “the body of the text, the body of the narrator, the body of the narrated I, the cultural body, and the body politic all merge in skins and skeins of meaning.”⁹² For Namjoshi, this entry into the public is a decidedly fraught one, for she is the Other of the culture she enters at two important levels—woman and lesbian—as she points out. But rather than

⁸⁹ Namjoshi, *Goja* 85.

⁹⁰ Namjoshi, *Goja* 85.

⁹¹ Namjoshi, *Goja* 85.

⁹² Smith, “Identity’s Body” 267.

inaugurating a politics of identity based on that Othered body, she turns instead to a powerful examination of the many ways that the body can be deployed in the services of a postmodern deconstruction of the source of its Otherness. The body of the lesbian that appears in *Goja* is not “identity’s body” but rather “subjectivity’s body” or a “provisional” body.⁹³ Through autobiography, Namjoshi finds a place in and through which to author(ize) that subject of culture that has been all but erased.

In *Goja*, Namjoshi uses the lesbian body to oversee her positioning as woman and lesbian, as racial Other, as postcolonial elite. When she tells us about Goja in the opening pages, what we get is the body of the servant, suffering years of abuse. When she talks about the sexual abuse she experienced at the hands of the servant, we get the female body inexorably gendered by social/masculine inscription. The (female) body is most materialized in the context of sexual violence when the uncertainties of gender (one is woman, but one is equally other things, or, one is woman only in language) give way to a violent gendering (one is *made* woman, the second-order human being, disciplined by the power that makes the male the first-order being). When she tells us about her mother and grandmother and their failure to protect her, we get the terrifying silences mandated by culture and borne by female bodies. Even as she comes into her own sexuality, as a desiring body, the violence of cultural expectations is marked clearly. Of her first awakenings, she says she felt “alive and physically well” and “discovered paradise, a sketchy paradise, a schoolgirl’s paradise, but good enough.”⁹⁴ However, at the American boarding school that she is sent to, the other girls—“*maenads*”—attack her physically for not participating in their normalizing moves—to be heterosexual, Christian, and

⁹³ Smith, “Identity’s Body” 270.

⁹⁴ Namjoshi, *Goja* 51.

American.⁹⁵ Her first relationship—with a school friend—ends when her friend decides to marry a white man. The lover she leaves India for finally accuses her of “having ‘made her’ participate in the relationship [and thereby] mutilat[ing] her.”⁹⁶ Namjoshi records the sheer physicality of her response to this accusation, feeling as though “a part of my brain had been torn out of me. There were broken blood vessels, loose connections, and veins and nerve ends that suddenly led nowhere. It took time to heal.”⁹⁷ Later, when another white lover in Canada, “Paramour,” tells her, “My true troubadour, my manly minion, is a pink man ... not you, not you,”⁹⁸ she understands “clearly what [Goja] had suffered, what servants suffered.”⁹⁹

Namjoshi’s engagement with her body furthers a critique of racial politics in the west. She remembers it in the context of the white man who stops her in the streets of a U.S. town asking, “Excuse me, sir, what strange garment is that you’re wearing?,”¹⁰⁰ referring to her sari. She understands then that “[i]n order to be recognized [she] had to look either like a white man or like something appertaining to one: a white woman or a white child.”¹⁰¹ A few years later, in the 1970s in Toronto, another young white man asks her if she has experienced racism, assuring her that “[h]e himself is a liberal [and] would like to help those who are less fortunate than himself.”¹⁰² She recognizes the patronizing tone, but is unable to respond appropriately, denying instead that she has experienced racism at all. In another episode, a white woman takes her out to dinner, watching her eat the whole time and commenting that she must be particularly disadvantaged due to of

⁹⁵ Namjoshi, *Goja* 46.

⁹⁶ Namjoshi, *Goja* 77.

⁹⁷ Namjoshi, *Goja* 77.

⁹⁸ Namjoshi, *Goja* 97.

⁹⁹ Namjoshi, *Goja* 99.

¹⁰⁰ Namjoshi, *Goja* 71.

¹⁰¹ Namjoshi, *Goja* 71.

¹⁰² Namjoshi, *Goja* 108.

being “triply oppressed” on account of being “lesbian, woman, and brown-skinned.”¹⁰³ In yet another incident, a white friend’s father comments that her teeth are “white in contrast to [her] skin.”¹⁰⁴ The relentless “ethnocentric racism”¹⁰⁵ of the west is even more palpable in the response to her language, however. For, despite her confidence that she “knew their language” when she first arrived in North America, she realizes very quickly that she “understood the words, but not the context ... understood the words, but ... understood them differently.”¹⁰⁶ She feels the pain of losing language, her only tongue given that she has been educated in English all her life and can read very little of her mother-tongue, Marathi. She experiences the split between her two lives, in the west and in India, between English and Marathi, “between literature and life” as both “auditory as well as visual.”¹⁰⁷ She sees maple trees upon waking and is momentarily disoriented because she had expected a neem.¹⁰⁸ The auditory is as important as the visual apprehension of her alienation, for she hears Goja and Goldie “heckling” her as she tries to make sense of the new English she hears although an English speaker herself.¹⁰⁹

Writing (about) her body’s intimacies and experiences of violence allows Namjoshi to explore the violence of cultural norms about gender, caste, and class, those interlinked premises of nation. In fact, her body helps her see, through its sexuality, the body of Goja and all the servants whose caste and class are literally written on their bodies. Namjoshi muses that her grandmother, like most upper-caste Hindu women, had

¹⁰³ Namjoshi, *Goja* 16.

¹⁰⁴ Namjoshi, *Goja* 75

¹⁰⁵ Namjoshi, *Goja* 72.

¹⁰⁶ Namjoshi, *Goja* 80.

¹⁰⁷ Namjoshi, *Goja* 84.

¹⁰⁸ Namjoshi, *Goja* 81.

¹⁰⁹ Namjoshi, *Goja* 84.

names of goddesses, but Goja did not, which signifies her unimportance.¹¹⁰ Similarly, where her grandmother smelled of “roses, mogra, cuddles, and comfort,” Goja smelled of “dried fish.”¹¹¹ Where her grandmother’s funeral pyre was made of “sandalwood,” Goja’s was made of the thorny “babul.”¹¹² But her grandmother never had real power. She imagines Goldie saying, “Being the Ranisaheb did not make me invulnerable, invincible, or even immortal.”¹¹³ She is aware that, alongside her own alienated body, the bodies of women in general and those of poor women in particular are equally alienated from the postcolonial nation. Nevertheless, this nation, celebrating the departure of the colonial British is a place where the elite set themselves up as the rulers and the poor were expected merely to serve.¹¹⁴

The displaced “I” in *Goja* marks the radical splits of Namjoshi’s life—as lesbian and Indian, as diasporic and native, as woman and feminist. These are subjectivities and allegiances she cannot disavow. Her family’s question, “Why go abroad and be a third-class citizen?,”¹¹⁵ calls upon her to disengage her life from the west. Her recognition that she “belong[s] to India and to the West”¹¹⁶ only makes her mother’s question, “Go abroad? There you’ll be nothing and no one. A third-class citizen,”¹¹⁷ all the more heartbreaking. As elite woman, she is expected to keep her side of an “implicit bargain,” which is to “serve the family and to conform to society.”¹¹⁸ It is precisely her awareness that to be “Indian” in the sense her family means it, to be “first-class” in other words, is

¹¹⁰ Namjoshi, *Goja* 51.

¹¹¹ Namjoshi, *Goja* 10-11. Mogra is a variety of jasmine.

¹¹² Namjoshi, *Goja* 127. Babul is the thorny acacia plant.

¹¹³ Namjoshi, *Goja* 127.

¹¹⁴ Namjoshi, *Goja* 6-7.

¹¹⁵ Namjoshi, *Goja* 109.

¹¹⁶ Namjoshi, *Goja* 67.

¹¹⁷ Namjoshi, *Goja* 16.

¹¹⁸ Namjoshi, *Goja* 76.

to be elite. For Goja does not inhabit first-class status, a fact she acknowledges when she asks, “If I had stayed at home, would you and I have been truly family?”¹¹⁹ The elisions that constitute Indian identity are further dismantled when she says, “I should like to point out to all the queens and princesses that ever there were that no woman is a first-class human being. She’s second-class. And anyway I was a lesbian so presumably, I would have been a third-class human being in any society, wherever it was in the wide world.”¹²⁰ The question of citizenship that became central in articulations of lesbian identity in India following *Fire* achieves a new dimension in the autobiography of India’s only out lesbian writer. For, she connects the exclusion of the lesbian from Indian citizenship—which was achieved via the rhetoric advocated by nationalist groups that lesbianism is un-Indian—with other kinds of exclusion a homogenized notion of ‘Indian’ culture has perpetrated. Namjoshi’s writing of the lesbian self thus comes to acknowledge the myth of ‘Indian’ identity as one that is constructed by fixing the body politic as heterosexual and patriarchal. In order to sustain this, female sexuality and, indeed, female identity are fixed.

Given the centrality of the excluded body—whether of woman, lesbian, or servant—in Namjoshi’s autobiography, it is not surprising that she refuses to re-fictionalize it. She asks Goldie at one point, “Do you think it required no courage to come out and say explicitly as so many people did: ‘Yes, I’m lesbian, or yes, I’m homosexual,’ and so gradually remove the disgrace from those words?”¹²¹ The suffering lesbian body is thus placed very clearly in the line of readerly sight. The destabilizing effect of this is most evident in the conjunction of the servant’s and women’s bodies that function

¹¹⁹ Namjoshi, *Goja* 109.

¹²⁰ Namjoshi, *Goja* 110.

¹²¹ Namjoshi, *Goja* 111.

alongside the lesbian body in the autobiography. Namjoshi tells Goja and Goldie that patriarchy maintains a “stable hierarchy” in which women, servants, gays and lesbians are “exploit[ed]” and then convinced that “in that very exploitation lies their self-respect.”¹²²

In *Goja*, the suffering body of the lesbian turns to the body of literature to re-write (patriarchal) stories. It is in literature that Namjoshi learns first “how to have [a lesbian] affair.”¹²³ The English poet W.H. Auden teaches her that “only lesbians make true romantic lovers.”¹²⁴ Her nose always in books, Namjoshi takes much from literature, particularly the reality of a non-heterosexual order of things. She learns that “language mediate[s] everything” and that because it “cloaked, altered and even fashioned reality ... it was possible [also] to juxtapose these [realities] so that they resonated and shimmered and multiplied meaning.”¹²⁵ Language and words become for her a way to write the body of the Other back into history so that the myth that lesbians do not exist in India is dismantled. Thus, her autobiography, invoking the flesh in terms of words, effectively re-writes the patriarchal story.

Importantly, literature becomes a space in which to explore the desires of the body without quite specularizing the lesbian body. The lesbian body is never subject to the prurient gaze. When she names herself “lesbian,” Namjoshi invites the reader to understand lesbian subjectivity itself as an attempt to give desire a “shape.”¹²⁶ But this shape is only one of many that language mediates, for she may be thought of as “poet, Hindu, donkey, monkey, dying animal” in the same way she may be thought of as

¹²² Namjoshi, *Goja* 110.

¹²³ Namjoshi, *Goja* 56.

¹²⁴ Namjoshi, *Goja* 54.

¹²⁵ Namjoshi, *Goja* 78-79.

¹²⁶ Namjoshi, *Goja* 95.

“lesbian.”¹²⁷ As diasporic, she is “a word in a foreign language”¹²⁸ to those around her. Ultimately, she recognizes that “no one is someone in their own right. Recognition requires another pair of eyes”¹²⁹ This is the autobiography’s greatest accomplishment, for it refuses the solipsism associated with the genre and turns the quest for subjectivity into a deeply ethical project, one that seeks to understand the self in relation to others. I explore the implications of this in the final section of this chapter.

Namjoshi’s Postmodern “Politics of Possibility” and Postcolonial Indian Literature

As representational and theoretical practice, both postmodernism and autobiography have a “shared interest in theorizing the subject.”¹³⁰ As diasporic, postcolonial, and lesbian, Namjoshi embodies, in a sense, a very postmodern subject position. Her allegiances are not exclusive. After so many years living in the west, she says, “In some ways I have become a part of the West. It was inevitable.”¹³¹ She acknowledges that she “belong[s] to India and to the West.”¹³² As elite postcolonial, she is both the racial Other and the mirror-image of the west. Her English does not come in handy when she moves west on account of the cultural specificities of language use, even though it is English and not Marathi that she is most adept in.¹³³ As lesbian, she both ‘belongs’ and does not belong to the category ‘woman.’ For, despite Wittig’s famous attempt to use the lesbian in the services of de-naturalizing the category ‘woman’ as linked to the heterosexual economy,

¹²⁷ Namjoshi, *Goja* 83.

¹²⁸ Namjoshi, *Goja* 86.

¹²⁹ Namjoshi, *Goja* 64.

¹³⁰ Leigh Gilmore, “The Mark of Autobiography: Postmodernism, Autobiography, and Genre,” *Postmodernism and Autobiography*, ed. Kathleen Ashley, Leigh Gilmore, and Gerald Peters (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1994) 3.

¹³¹ Namjoshi, *Goja* 86.

¹³² Namjoshi, *Goja* 67.

¹³³ Namjoshi, *Goja* 82, 91.

there exists also the homophobic rhetoric that lesbians cannot occupy the category on account of their desire.¹³⁴ Namjoshi understands that her lesbianism divides her from women like Goja and Goldie, with whom she has much in common politically. In *Goja*, she uses her various subjectivities to constitute a vision of an integrated social politics. Such a literary project also constitutes a challenge to critical practices that separate political interests, which are, in reality, struggling against the same hegemonies.

Namjoshi's autobiographical project records and writes female sexual subjectivity while paying attention to the disparities in the constitution of cultural subjectivity. Thus, rather than inaugurating a politics of lesbianism that aligns itself with cultural identity—the rhetoric that to be lesbian is to be Indian—Namjoshi subjects cultural identity to scrutiny, finding in the process its immense elisions. She refuses to name the lesbian as the cultural abject that she would become were she to be seen in light of her sexual exile alone. Instead, what we get is the lesbian as a contingent figure whose privilege allows her to name herself away from home but whose second-order status as woman prevents any such naming at home. She is not alone in this exile, for Goja shares in it, and so does Goldie in some measure. At one point, she tells them, “To be the sole controller of language is to be no one. Nobody! Language requires a Speaker and a Listener. Then something more. The Speaker and Listener must exchange roles, take each other's places and understand somehow what it's like. You are not my audience, you are my auditors. And I have to present my true account. Don't you see!”¹³⁵ The subject of Namjoshi's autobiography accomplishes the responsibility Butler attributes to the speaking subject.¹³⁶ Namjoshi is aware that she exists in relation to others—especially an audience of readers

¹³⁴ Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon P, 1992).

¹³⁵ Namjoshi, *Goja* 114.

¹³⁶ Judith Butler, *Giving An Account of Oneself*

to whom the autobiography is implicitly addressed. Within this discursive context and the structure of address demanded thereby,¹³⁷ Namjoshi's account of herself produces a Butlerian ethical moment. In its contingent "I," Namjoshi proffers a politics that goes well beyond that of exclusive lesbianism alone.

In a provocative interview with Olga Kenyon, Namjoshi responds to the question of whether she is India's "Radclyffe Hall," whose work would be helpful for "Indian lesbians," thus: "Yes and no. If my writing gives them pleasure, fine. But life in India is so different from life here. It's essential to work out things on your own terms and in your own context. To the extent that I am writing out of living conditions that are not the same, the last thing I want to do is say I've got something useful you can learn from."¹³⁸ In the autobiography, it is clear that she holds on to this sense of context when she 'comes out' finally at home to her family. What we get instead of the stable entity 'lesbian' is the radically unstable subject of autobiography—the authorial/narrative I—whose story vacillates between time past and time present and multiple locations around the world. But if there is ever a doubt that Namjoshi disengages the lesbian subject in her use of postmodern deconstruction, her turn to her own life should lay that doubt to rest. As lesbian, as woman, and as diasporic she understands only too well the structures of power. It is precisely because she herself has been marginalized, though, that she understands the nature of power to fix meaning, to establish and naturalize hierarchies, and to normalize oppression. Namjoshi's writing of the lesbian autobiography, rather than attesting to conventional assumptions about the referentiality of the terms 'lesbian' or 'autobiography' to the 'real' subject behind either, produces instead "lesbianism as ...

¹³⁷ These are the two assumptions that accompany the speaking subject, according to Butler.

¹³⁸ Olga Kenyon, "Suniti Namjoshi," *The Writer's Imagination: Interviews with Major International Women Novelists* (Bradford, England: U of Bradford Print Unit, 1992) 114.

something other than a ‘totalizing self-identification’ ... to be located on other than exclusively psychological grounds,” as Bidy Martin argues in the context of autobiographies of American writers Gloria Anzaldua, Cherie Moraga, Minnie Bruce Pratt, and Mab Segrest.¹³⁹ Namjoshi heeds what Francesco Loriggio advances about autobiography’s approach to identity: “However public and conventional and provisional the identity autobiography constructs, it must be believed” in order to acknowledge “the survival, as a body and as a cultural being, that is at stake [in seeking] the secular mightiness of the word.”¹⁴⁰ There is an acceptance of the label ‘lesbian’ in a kind of postmodernist version of Gayatri Spivak’s “strategic essentialism”¹⁴¹ when Namjoshi says that her lesbianism is the consequence “of a sensibility formed by what it was like growing up in India, by growing up with [Goja and Goldie].”¹⁴² In fact, Namjoshi may be seen to be inaugurating what Robyn Wiegman calls “the lesbian postmodern,” a figure who “marks a different kind of encounter, one that necessarily abandons the dream of symmetry and equivalence, moving away from the epistemology of identities, rights, and reason that would guarantee the less than liberatory achievement of (an always bourgeois) cultural legitimacy.”¹⁴³

¹³⁹ Bidy Martin, “Lesbian Identity and Autobiographical Difference(s),” *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1998) 383.

¹⁴⁰ Francesco Loriggio, “Memory, Identity, and Redemption: Notes on the Culture of Autobiography,” *Postmodernism and the Ethical Subject*, ed. Barbara Gabriel and Suzan Ilcan (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s UP, 2004) 352.

¹⁴¹ See Gayatri Spivak, “Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography,” *Selected Subaltern Studies*, ed. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Spivak (Oxford, UK: Oxford UP, 1988) 1-32.

¹⁴² Namjoshi, *Goja* 85.

¹⁴³ Robyn Wiegman, “Introduction: Mapping the Lesbian,” *The Lesbian Postmodern*, ed. Laura Doan (New York: Columbia UP, 1994) 16.

If postmodernism calls into question all, even feminist, categorical thinking, as Judith Butler argues in the context of identity and language,¹⁴⁴ Gilmore reminds us that, in the context of autobiography, it facilitates not only interrogations of “the analytical and experiential category of ‘the self’” but also the “limits of representation.”¹⁴⁵ Postmodernism, thus, helps redefine the genre of autobiography as institutionalized by autobiography studies that focused on western male self-writing.¹⁴⁶ She sees in this lineage “the cultural production of a politics of identity ... that maintains identity hierarchies through its reproduction of class, sexuality, race, and gender as terms of ‘difference’ in a social field of power.”¹⁴⁷ It is precisely this hierarchy that Namjoshi explicitly writes against. Her re-writing establishes postmodernism as a practice leading to a “politics of possibility”¹⁴⁸ rather than one that ends in “both ethical abandon and the total evacuation of history,”¹⁴⁹ as its representational and critical practices have occasionally been denounced.

Writing the postmodern autobiography, Namjoshi thus introduces to Indian literature two salient concerns: on the one hand, the question of subjectivity in a matrix of hegemonic structures that holds up patriarchal power, whether postcolonial or imperial;

¹⁴⁴ See Judith Butler, “Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of ‘Postmodernism,’” *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992) 3-21.

¹⁴⁵ Gilmore 5.

¹⁴⁶ See Sidonie Smith, *A Poetics of Woman’s Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987), especially chapter 1, “Autobiography Criticism and the Problematics of Gender,” for this argument.

¹⁴⁷ Gilmore 5.

¹⁴⁸ This is the title of the collection of interviews with five seminal thinkers, Judith Butler, David Theo Goldberg, Avital Ronell, Homi Bhabha, and Slavoj Žižek. See Gary A. Olson and Lynn Worsham, ed. *The Politics of Possibility: Encountering the Radical Imagination* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2007). Each of the theorists interviewed, as Henry A. Giroux says in the foreword to the collection, “facilitate critical thought and nurture the flexibility it requires ... not [by] provid[ing] totalizing answers as much as they offer better questions” (“Foreword: When the Darkness Comes and Hope is Subversive,” xv)

¹⁴⁹ See Barbara Gabriel, “‘Writing against the Ruins’: Towards a Postmodern Ethics of Memory,” *Postmodernism and the Ethical Subject*, ed. Barbara Gabriel and Suzan Ilcan (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s UP, 2004) 7.

on the other hand, that of literary genre as a space where the writer deploys representation in the services of critique of the hegemonic structure of identity, which, by its nature, reinstates the very structures it seeks to dismantle. In light of this contribution, her absence in the category of ‘Indian literature’ as institutionalized by postcolonial studies is particularly disconcerting.¹⁵⁰ Postcolonial literary studies as they were institutionalized through the 1980s and 1990s, the peak decades of Namjoshi’s productivity, bypassed her entirely. This absence has much to do with the difficulty of her style. As a lesbian writer, she does not write advocating lesbian identity politics. As a diasporic woman writer, she departs from the conventional and all-too-familiar realist tradition and her counter-realist approach complicates her politics of gender. Namjoshi’s refusal to be categorized is consistent with her postmodern politics.

Both postmodernism and postcolonialism describe a terrain of criticism that tangles with notions of progress and development, especially as these two ideas were defined within Eurocentric thought. Yet, both have been treated as theoretically difficult categories that pose the challenge of differentiation from discourses they derive from—modernism and colonialism—as well as of forging an understanding of the world as “second-order meditations [which] seek to distinguish themselves from central positions in their various fields of inquiry.”¹⁵¹ Both discourses are deeply concerned with the body, although postmodernism—emerging as a mode of critical inquiry and cultural practice in the capitalist bourgeois west—has been critiqued as focusing on the “libidinal” rather

¹⁵⁰ She is equally at the heart of institutionalized lesbian studies in the west, although ignored there as well. A new body of scholarship on diasporic queers argues that such elisions are the consequence of white racism that sees in the third world only the ‘backwardness’ of homophobia. See, for example, essays that deal with this theme in Eithne Luibhéid and Lionel Cantu, Jr., ed. *Queer Migrations: Sexuality, U.S. Citizenship, and Border Crossings* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2005) and Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham, N.C.: Duke UP, 2005).

¹⁵¹ Ato Quayson, “Postcolonialism and Postmodernism,” *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, ed. Henry Schwarz and Sangeeta Ray (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000) 89.

than the “laboring” body.¹⁵² Postcolonialism’s interest has always been in the racialized body. Namjoshi’s writing of the autobiography with the body at the center, but a body that is equally traversed by sexuality and class, brings together postmodern with postcolonial critiques in ways that re-define the field of postcolonial literature and criticism while helping understand postmodernism’s political possibilities.

Namjoshi’s critique of imperialism in all its forms in her autobiography shows postmodernism to be a valuable postcolonial tool. This helps dismantle the notion that postmodernism is a product of a particular historical moment in the west, a response to the excesses of capitalist individualism, and hence wholly irrelevant to the postcolonial condition. Namjoshi’s interest in colonialism is not limited to a generalized notion of postcolonial suffering. Rather, the postcolonial elite heteronormative patriarchal powers that established postcolonial rule are shown to be uncannily similar to the colonial powers that left. Namjoshi thus reminds us that one kind of tyranny has merely been replaced by another. In re-describing this postcolonial state from the diaspora, she also attests to the difficulties of speaking from that distance. She is in the diaspora precisely because she is privileged. Yet, the diaspora has not given her—as it has her other contemporaries—a space of voice. In invoking her own split status as “belong[ing] to India and to the West”¹⁵³ and her facility with English rather than Marathi, she emphasizes that postcolonials can no longer deny their “westernization.” Yet, this westernization is not a place of belonging for her. As she explores the legacy of English for the Indian elite, the loss of mother-tongue, it is clear that there is a darker side to this inheritance. For English brings unimaginable alienation from home and family. If her

¹⁵² Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell P, 1996) 71.

¹⁵³ Namjoshi, *Goja* 67.

politicization as lesbian occurs in English, it is the one thing she cannot explain to Goja and Goldie, for Goja speaks no English and Goldie speaks very little. Moreover, the diasporic space that she writes from is one that is not legible to mainstream audiences. For her, diasporic status has meant an enforced exile, an exile not mitigated by the home away from home. In addition to the racism she experiences, it is the certainty that to be lesbian is to be a “third-class human being in any society, wherever it was in the wide world”¹⁵⁴ that marks diasporic existence for her.

If Namjoshi’s complicated approach to sexual subjectivity helps us understand the stakes in expanding postcolonial approaches to questions of the subject, her postcolonial sensibility helps us understand postmodernism’s critical value. For Namjoshi, the racial(ized) body of the immigrant can never be absent from the field of vision any more than the sexual(ized) body of the woman. Putting the body of the third world postcolonial lesbian at the heart of the autobiography alongside that of the servant counters the weight of the postmodernist claim that reality is but a myth constructed by language. Far from any sense that postmodernism is a nihilistic vision, flattening experience within its theory of the real, this centering of the body re-situates postmodernism as critical practice invested in understanding the ways power—imperial, patriarchal, and heteronormative—is consolidated along material bodies.

The dissolution of identity that Namjoshi practices may be seen as central to both postmodernism and postcolonialism. Ato Quayson argues that postmodernism is, in a sense, deeply postcolonial given its investment in representation that works against socio-cultural regimes. The reading “awry” that is central to postmodernism makes for a very useful postcolonial project. Namjoshi’s unmooring of time and space as she brings in two

¹⁵⁴ Namjoshi, *Goja* 110.

dead women to speak for her family, her past, and her movement between her various homes in the U.S., Canada, England, and India offers what Betty Bergland calls the “chronotopic” basis of postmodern autobiography.¹⁵⁵ Bergland alerts us, via Mikhail Bakhtin, that the time-space dimension through which we understand human beings produces the illusion of natural social orders.¹⁵⁶ Our sense of the diasporic and the female emanate from understanding history and space as anterior to the bodies rather than the bodies as produced by conditions such as colonialism and patriarchy. Namjoshi, moving between the west and India, time past and time present, shows such systems to be arbitrary, undermining the power of colonialism to fix the meaning of the non-white immigrant body and that of patriarchy to define the meaning of woman as Other.

In resolutely refusing to limit postcolonial literary exploration to racial subjectivity and actively discussing sexuality and class, Namjoshi already re-frames the very canon through her thematic concerns. But more importantly, in refusing to limit her writing to certain central themes driven by market demand from within the academy, and in publishing for ‘diasporic writers’, ‘postcolonial writers’, or ‘lesbian writers’, Namjoshi challenges us to read and teach differently. Including her in the canon of postcolonial literature radicalizes the category, asking for consideration of what a truly anti-colonial critique involves and complicating the sub-categories of women’s writing, lesbian writing, and diasporic writing within that. Because she is so invested in critiquing those isolated identity categories, Namjoshi’s inclusion helps move literary studies away from the problematic of literary categorization via ‘special interest topics,’ which merely re-

¹⁵⁵ Betty Bergland, “Postmodernism and the Autobiographical Subject: Reconstructing the ‘Other’,” *Autobiography and Postmodernism*, ed. Kathleen Ashley, Leigh Gilmore, and Gerald Peters (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1994) 130-66.

¹⁵⁶ Bergland 135.

marginalize by marginalization. These special interest topics often occlude the critical concerns about identity categories that writers and theorists everywhere have been resolutely fighting against and that interdisciplinary scholarship has long been advocating against.

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Chapter IV

Disruptive Desires: New Delhi in the Lesbian Historical Novel

Introduction

A direct line runs from Anamika Sharma, the sixteen-year-old protagonist of Abha Dawesar's second novel, *Babyji* (2005), to Astha, the married protagonist of Manju Kapur's second novel, *A Married Woman* (2002).¹ Dawesar's *Babyji* is told from Anamika's perspective. It focuses on her final year of high school in 1991, which Indian readers will surely recognize as the year of the riots following the Mandal Commission's Report increasing the reservation in educational and professional establishments for those historically disadvantaged by the caste system. Central to these riots was the notion that the upper-castes would now be disadvantaged by the reservation system, especially prevented from access to the country's engineering and medical schools, which are widely considered the backbone of a highly remunerative future and the consolidation of class status. Anamika herself is *brahmin* and excels in Math and Physics, making her the bearer of these caste tensions. In the novel, the 'Mandal riots', as they came to be known, come to a head as Anamika becomes embroiled in a very one-sided power-play in three same-sex affairs. The caste riots outside and the turmoil in her head are co-terminus, and Anamika comes to a painful understanding of the political structure of India through her relationships. The novel ends with Anamika's rather poignant decision about her future.

¹ Abha Dawesar, *Babyji* (New York: Anchor, 2005); Manju Kapur, *A Married Woman*, 2002 (London: Faber and Faber, 2003).

Kapur's *A Married Woman* is written in the conventions familiar to the domestic novel, with the story told, at different moments, from the perspective of an omniscient narrator, in free indirect discourse, and in the epistolary form. We follow the narrative as the protagonist Astha changes from being a flighty romantic with her head in romance novels into a self-determining political activist campaigning against the religious excesses of Hindu nationalism. The novel begins in the early 1980s and ends in 1992, the year the Babri Masjid² was demolished by right-wing Hindu fundamentalists who argued that the site 'rightfully belonged' to the Hindu god Ram, a central figure in the attacks that followed *Fire*, as I discuss in chapter 2. The narrative starts with Astha's propertyless middle-class parents worrying about her marriage in light of their circumstances. However, Astha does get married to a rising small-scale industrialist and bears two children. As the novel progresses, we see her go through stages of depression and anxiety over the banality of middle-class married life. Eventually she starts an extra-marital affair with another woman, the widow of a Muslim political activist she had previously encountered and was enamored by. The relationship proves crucial in Astha's understanding of the chasm between political beliefs and the business of everyday living in India. However, unlike for Anamika in *Babyji*, lesbian desire is not the central event in Astha's development, which leads to the question of what exactly that desire does for the protagonist's development.

Both novels center on the 'growing up' of their protagonists, with *Babyji* focusing on a single year of her life and *A Married Woman* looking at the period between her early twenties to her late thirties. Although Barbara White has suggested that an account of a

² Masjid is the Urdu word for mosque.

single year in a young person's life is better described as an adolescent novel,³ Dawesar's novel follows closely enough many conventions of the *Bildungsroman* to be characterized as one. Similarly, Linda Wagner's argument that the choice presented the female protagonist between domesticity and professionalization often leads to the conundrum of how to characterize the female novel of development—whether as *Bildungsroman* or domestic novel—applies to Kapur's book.⁴ *A Married Woman* exists somewhere between the two novelistic forms. Its centralization of its protagonist's *Bildung* or development within the context of domesticity is particularly interesting, for it advances a feminist critique and politics of sexuality that is nuanced in terms of its response to the 'real' of middle-class life in India. In *Babyji*, lesbian desire is central to the adolescent Anamika's development from a patriot who spouts values taught in schoolbooks, television, and film to one who questions the very premises on which nation and national identity are built. Astha, on the other hand, arrives at lesbian desire after a period of politicization in which she progressively begins to question the gender disparities that sustain middle-class life, particularly marriage.

The two novels were published within three years of each other, and both follow the entrance of the 'lesbian' into public culture in India. They are retrospective accounts of lesbian desire, discussing it at a time when the lesbian woman was not yet a public figure of identity politics or desire. Both works locate their stories at the start of India's globalizing decade, turning to the two crucial political events that marked that

³ Barbara White, *Growing up Female: Adolescent Girlhood in American Literature* (Westport, CT: Greenwood P, 1985).

⁴ Linda W. Wagner, "Plath's the Bell Jar as Female 'Bildungsroman'," *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 12.1-6 (1986): 66. See Patricia P. Chu, *Assimilating Asians: Gendered Strategies of Authorship in Asian America* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2000), especially chapter 3, "Women's Plots: Edith Maude Eaton and Bharati Mukherjee," 90-138, where Chu argues that the distinction is especially troubled in the case of the novels of Asian American writers in which female development occurs *within* the domestic space, the space that immigrant women occupy most saliently in the new country.

beginning—‘Mandal and Masjid’ as they often are termed in popular parlance. Significantly, these novels exist within a long if sporadic tradition of women’s writing about lesbian desire that locates it against the political realm. Urdu writer Ismat Chughtai’s short story “The Quilt” (1941), her autobiographical novel, *The Crooked Line* (1945); Malayalam writer Kamala Das’ autobiography, *My Story* (1976), her short story, “Sandal Trees” (1988); and Ginu Kamani’s short story collection, *Jungle Girl* (1996), all represent lesbian desire.⁵ They do so against the gender, class, and caste politics of nascent, postcolonial, and global India, respectively. These positive representations exist against negative ones. The most famous of them are pulp fiction writer Shoba De’s *Strange Obsession* (1992),⁶ which tells the story of the sexual obsession of a woman connected to Bombay’s underground scene for an aspiring model and actress who is new in the city. Suparna Bhaskaran argues that the novel’s “Mills and Boon like lesbophobi[c] [representation] is an amusing and disturbing gift [that] captured that part of urban Indian reality that was colonized, invisible, and caught in between the ‘millennial [or new] woman’ and the ‘global gay’.”⁷ Now, however, for the first time in this history, these two novels represent lesbian desire more explicitly, engaging overtly in questions of identity; perhaps this is the effect of the times in which Dawesar and Kapur write.

⁵ Ismat Chughtai, “The Quilt” (1941), *Ismat Chughtai: The Quilt and Other Stories*, ed. and transl. Tahira Naqvi and Syeda S. Hameed (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1996) 5-12; Ismat Chughtai, *The Crooked Line* (1945), trans. Tahira Naqvi (Oxford: Heinemann, 1995); Kamala Das, *My Story* (Jullundur: Sterling Publishers, 1976); Kamala Das, “The Sandal Trees” (1988) trans. V. C. Harris and C. K. Mohamed Ummer, *The Sandal Trees and Other Stories* (Hyderabad: Disha Books, 1995) 1-26; Ginu Kamani, *Jungle Girl* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1995).

⁶ Shoba De, *Strange Obsession* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1992).

⁷ Suparna Bhaskaran, *Made in India: Decolonizations, Queer Sexualities, Trans/National Projects* (New York: Macmillan, 2004) 112. See also Ruth Vanita, *Gandhi’s Tiger and Sita’s Smile: Essays on Gender, Sexuality, and Culture* (New Delhi: Yoda P, 2005) 192-5, for an overview of fiction that represents lesbianism negatively.

This chapter is concerned with the novels' different representations of lesbian desire within a shared interest in middle-class urban India, particularly in the city of New Delhi, India's capital. I am interested especially in two aspects of both novels: on the one hand, their theme—how lesbian desire is central to the *Bildung* or development of the protagonist; and on the other hand, their turn to literary realism in realizing lesbian desire retroactively, looking back at the late 1980s/early 1990s from the vantage point of the twenty-first century. Through a focus on the novels' recourse to the structures of literary realism and the *Bildungsroman* (which have both been central to middle-class Indian women's fiction in general) to represent lesbian desire (which has been decidedly less common in this tradition), I argue that the novels expose and re-articulate the relationship between desire, gender, and the political realm. This has critical implications for a politics of sexuality in the current moment, not only because their representation of lesbian desire reconfigures the scope of Indian women's fiction, but also because, critically, they mark sex itself, often unspoken, as central to cultural attitudes to girls and women.

The 'Girl Child' and the 'Indian Woman'

That the structure of nation and nationalism is underlined by gender is by now a much-theorized critical formulation.⁸ In India, the lives of girls are framed by the paradoxical discourses of undesirability and desirability within the overarching structure of

⁸ See Reina Lewis and Sara Mills, ed. *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Andrew Parker, Mary Russo, Doris Sommer, and Patsy Yaeger, ed. *Nationalisms and Sexualities* (New York: Routledge, 1992); and Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias, ed. *Woman, Nation, State* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1989) for essays on the theme. In the Indian context, see Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1993); Kumkum Sangari and Suresh Vaid, ed. *Re-casting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*, 1989 (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1999).

nationalism, which waylays any development of female sexuality outside the framework of wife and mother. If cultural attitudes to girls indicate this paradox clearly, the state's interventions only expose the inefficacies that result from any attempt at fixing what has been broken for a very long time. Discourses of undesirability are evident in practices like female infanticide, dowry murder, sexual and physical abuse, and the backlash against feminism. On the other hand, discourses of desirability are no less problematic, particularly as they take the form of sexuality and labor. These include the availability of girls for sex work, pornography, marriage, and motherhood, but also equally their availability for physical labor both inside and outside the home. Of course, the desirability of girls shifts depending on class, caste, and religious locations. Upper-caste and -class Hindu girls and women, particularly, are framed preemptively by the nationalist discourse of the 'modern' wife and mother upon whom rests the reproduction and care of future citizens.⁹ And yet there is a widespread preference also, irrespective of class location, that these future citizens be male even as those who are responsible for bearing and raising them are female.¹⁰ Upper-caste and -class girls' expectations of labor

⁹ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1993) 132-3, 148-9. See also Nirmala Bannerjee, "Working Women in Colonial Bengal: Modernization and Marginalization," *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Suresh Vaid (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989) 269-30, for her argument on how the Bengali elite at the head of nationalist movements framed Bengali culture selectively along class-based gendered lines.

¹⁰ Though this may be contested on the grounds that it is less of a problem among the class and caste elites, there is enough new evidence that this may not be true. Newspaper reports about sex-selective abortions on the rise in the diaspora as well as feminist documentary work on upper-class women's belief that at least one son is good make this evident. Feminist work on female infanticide has also posited that sometimes working-class families may be less hostile to female children who provide a much-needed source of labor, especially where such labor is gendered, as in agriculture, domestic work, etc. See "Tackling Sex Selective Abortion in India," *BBC World Service Trust.org* 8 Nov. 2006, 18 Dec. 2007 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/trust/researchlearning/story/2006/11/061108_sex_selection_india.shtm> for discussions of how middle-class Indian diaspora in the west frames sex-selective abortion in terms of a way to avoid dowry. Laurette Deschamps's documentary *No Longer Silent* (Chicago: International Film Bureau, 1986) features a clip in which feminist activist Madhu Kishwar interviews a middle-class woman who underwent sex-selective abortion and frames it in terms of the desire for a son after three daughters because sons are necessary to take care of parents in the latter's old age. See also Sabu George, "Female Infanticide in Tamil Nadu, India: From Recognition Back to Denial?," *Reproductive Health*

are also determined by the modernizing agendas that they are considered part of. Thus, a good education and some professional ambition are almost *de rigueur* for these girls. But as Jyoti Puri argues, middle-class girls are “expected [through education and professional ambitions] to embody a ‘modern’ India without jeopardizing [their] ‘traditional’ roles as good mothers, wives, and daughters-in-law.”¹¹

Young girls are often socialized, overtly or subtly, to fit into the model of monogamous heterosexuality whose ultimate aim is motherhood in adulthood.¹² Much of this socialization revolves around sex, and a variety of disciplinary models are deployed to ensure girls’ ‘good’ behavior so that they will be eligible for marriage in the future. Socialization could involve, depending on social and cultural beliefs of individual families, restricting movement or confining it to the private space of the home. Violence against women is often used to justify or enforce these proscriptions. The overwhelming logic is that girls are ‘asking for it’ if they do not watch their own behavior. This logic of blaming the victim ensures girls’ (self-)disciplining by a wide range of others, including immediate family, particularly mothers,¹³ the wider social circles of friends and relatives, and certainly the culture at large. In the larger upper-caste middle-class culture, these proscriptions and prescriptions are often reflected in the idea of ‘good girls,’ which is

Matters 5.10 (Nov. 1997): 124-32, for accounts of how economic development can have the paradoxical effect of wanting to get rid of girls for fear of dowry.

¹¹ Jyoti Puri, *Woman, Body, Desire in Post-Colonial India: Narratives of Gender and Sexuality* (New York: Routledge, 1999) ix.

¹² I am not suggesting that this is a problem only within India, but I do worry that our fear of talking about this given the western feminist and more generally western premise of Indian society’s “inherent” lack of freedom for girls prevents us from raising issues that remain critical to this day. For, even if these things have certainly changed and are changing, it would be impossible to find one Indian who could claim that the majority of women’s lives are not dominated by these discourses to this day. As importantly, this problem is certainly a “global” one in the sense that the focus on girls’ sexuality and gender socialization has only achieved a shot in the arm the greater feminist efforts have been to challenge them. The promotion of abstinence, the romanticization of heterosexual relationships, and the focus on marriage as sacred, normal, and universal in almost every culture is evidence of this.

¹³ For ethnographic accounts of the disciplinary regimes of mothers, see Jyoti Puri, *Woman, Body, Desire in Post-Colonial India: Narratives of Gender and Sexuality* (New York: Routledge, 1999) 66-69.

also framed as being about class and caste discourses as it was made evident by sexual behavior. Thus, ‘good girls’ cannot do ‘bad things’ (that involve anything but heterosexual sex within marriage with the ultimate aim of motherhood) because sexual purity is seen as the marker of middle-class and upper-caste status. Tanika Sarkar’s argument about late-nineteenth-century nationalism provides the historical basis for this construction:

Women’s chastity had become a keyword in the political vocabulary of Hindu nationalism The Hindu woman’s unique steadfastness to the husband in the face of gross double standards, her unconditional, uncompromising monogamy, were celebrated as the sign that markets Hindu claim to nationhood. The chaste body of the Hindu woman was thus made to carry an unusual political weight since she had maintained this difference in the face of foreign rule. The Hindu man, in contrast ... had allowed himself to be colonized and surrendered his autonomy before the assaults of Western power-knowledge.¹⁴

The ‘development’ rhetoric of the state only exacerbates the attitudes to girls and women. The state’s interest in girls post-1980s was framed in terms of its own nationalist project – that of modernizing the socialist-capitalist state. The cultural discourses of undesirability, in particular, became the state’s focus. The state, thus, is read as the true ‘modern democracy’ that is able to overcome the ‘fundamentalisms’ of its citizens. This fits well with the Indian nation’s new image under its globalization agendas, when the west would not hesitate to affiliate with it on account of its more ‘democratic’ policies. This is also positioned explicitly against the seeming lack of democracy, as evident in the condition of women of India’s bitterest political rival in the region, Pakistan. Policies framed on behalf of the ‘girl child’ became the mantra for the state-led protection of girls since the late 1980s, when the United Nations inaugurated the term as part of its developmental agendas for women in the ‘third world.’ The state’s intervention takes the form of state-supported education, health, and welfare programs targeted at girls, which

¹⁴ Tanika Sarkar, *Community, Nation, and Cultural Nationalism* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2001) 91.

came in addition to legal reforms that criminalized many anti-women practices informed by feminist activism against dowry, female infanticide, and violence against women. State-led or -sponsored programs in India have had a long history of trying to redress gender imbalances, but often enough, they have resulted in isolating this concern from the larger culture. This has been rather obvious in the various girl child programs. As Rajeswari Sunder Rajan notes in the context of state interventions into female infanticide in the state of Tamil Nadu, it had the effect of making “girls in India ... children of the state, while boys alone will be the children raised by their families.”¹⁵ The state’s good intentions did not help unseat the more problematic discourses within culture. In fact, legislation that sought to protect girls by law had the effect of shifting the responsibility for the care of girls to the state and families and culture continued to be free of having to change their attitudes toward girl children. Non-state programs such as those by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have also had limited success in the face of widespread poverty that exacerbates cultural beliefs about gender. By the same token, state interventions, often made in terms of poor girl children, fail to account for or ameliorate the vast psychic abuses among the middle classes that are not seen as discriminatory toward girls.

Further, state policies focused on girls and women inevitably fail to address cultural attitudes to sexuality. Prohibitions against child marriage, sati, dowry, sex

¹⁵ Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, *The Scandal of the State: Women, Law, and Citizenship in Postcolonial India* (Durham, N.C.: Duke UP, 2003) 210. Sunder Rajan argues this in the context of the Tamil Nadu government’s “Cradle Baby” and “Girl Child Protection” schemes aimed at preventing female infanticide. Under the former scheme, the state put out cradles in several locations where women could drop off unwanted girl babies rather than killing them at birth, and it would then take responsibility for setting up the girls’ adoption. Under the latter, families that could prove the existence of one female child already would receive a certain sum that would be held in a bank account until the second girl turned twenty-one to help pay for her dowry, often the single biggest reason girl babies were murdered at birth. Neither program was a success. As Sunder Rajan argues, both were predicated on fixing a problem for the moment rather than changing deep-seated beliefs that were intensely sexist and misogynist.

trafficking, or sexual and physical assault have not led to fundamental shifts in attitudes about gender. State interventions, often made in terms of specific development projects, fail to change cultural attitudes to gender/sexuality. But more importantly, as Mary John and Janaki Nair point out, the state's interest in female sexuality that is evident in medical, demographic, and legal discourses illustrates the control over female sexuality as taking on class, caste, and religious contours.¹⁶ They argue that between "the administrative urgency of colonial power to make sense of and thereby govern a baffling array of 'types and classes' and their family systems, and ... the nationalist need to define the dutiful place of the citizen/subjects of the incipient nation," female sexuality came to be described, defined, and legislated.¹⁷ Moreover, as discussed in detail in chapter 2, the rhetoric of the 'Indian woman' that took form under anti-colonial nationalism continues to dominate the national psyche. It is based on gender ideologies instituted by late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century anti-colonial nationalism and continues through in the current era under the guise of the 'new woman'. While the former is rooted in notions of the sanctity of women and the latter in their liberation, both are entrenched in patriarchal control of female sexuality. In the former case, this takes the form of female sexual conservatism, and in the latter, of sexual overttness that nevertheless produces contradictory effects for women. For, this overttness is accompanied by cultural judgment of 'loose women' and the implicit assumption that despite such freedoms, women must marry and reproduce eventually rather than achieve professional success. Thus, the core gender values of the culture have not changed significantly. The state's attempt at

¹⁶ Mary John and Janaki Nair, "A Question of Silence?: An Introduction," *A Question of Silence?: The Sexual Economies of Modern India*, ed. Mary John and Janaki Nair (London: Zed, 1998) 1-57.

¹⁷ John and Nair 18-9.

achieving ‘women’s empowerment’ through various projects has remained as limited as its programs for the girl child.

In such a context of cultural attitudes and state inefficacy, literary interventions have often proved to be rich terrain for contesting gender ideologies. In addition to the fiction in which lesbian desire functions centrally, which I outlined in the previous section, scholars have theorized that this literature constitutes a significant part of the Indian literary canon. Women writers who contested the gender biases of anti-colonialist nationalism range from the late nineteenth century to the present day. Fiction (especially of autobiographical bent) is particularly central in this tradition. Literature that turns specifically to lesbian desire has held pride of place, even if not theoretically engaged within postcolonial studies for the longest time, and has only recently found a space within postcolonial studies after the advent of ‘queer studies’. In the next section, I explore the contributions *Babyji* and *A Married Woman* make within the field of women’s fiction, paying attention to their temporal location in the twenty-first century when a ‘global’ politics of gender/sexuality mediated by indigenous feminist work is at work in India.

Lesbian Desire and Female *Bildung*

The female novel of development is beset, as critics point out, by the conundrum of depicting that figure of culture whose “developmental tasks and goals ... must be realized in a culture pervaded by male norms.”¹⁸ Female development in the context of India occurs within the paradoxical discourse of desirability and undesirability that structures

¹⁸ Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland, “Introduction,” *The Voyage in: Fictions of female development*, ed. Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland (Hanover, NH: UP of New England, 1983) 9.

the lives of girls and women, which I discuss in the previous section. *Babyji* and *A Married Woman* situate their protagonists' stories against a socio-cultural context marked by conventions of class, caste, and religion that complicate patriarchal formulations of female identity. In *Babyji*, Anamika's lesbian relationships, initially constituted to "avenge" herself against middle-class society for its "holier-than-thou [attitude] about [girls] having boyfriends,"¹⁹ however, eventually teach her the vexed issue of caste for women. This vexedness relates directly to the idea of nation and national identity in which Anamika takes pride at the beginning of the novel when we see her as an avowed patriot who says that all she wanted was to do "great things" for her country "using physics,"²⁰ her favorite subject at school. She grows up emotionally once she recognizes the salience of caste privilege for girls, a privilege that in her eyes the Mandal Report's recommendation undermines. This is especially crucial in her decision, at the end of the novel, to leave India and pursue higher studies in the U.S. For, Anamika is aware that as a *girl*, her life is severely restricted, a restriction that is most obvious in the context of female sexuality.

When we first meet Anamika, she is the precocious "Head Prefect"²¹ of an obviously privileged school in New Delhi, where she grows up in a stereotypically middle-class family. Her father is a government bureaucrat whose lack of sophisticated cosmopolitanism is captured by her description of him as a "paper-pusher."²² Her mother is a homemaker who runs home, marriage, and child-rearing with the skill of an educated middle-class woman. Anamika is their only child and her mother's comment, "I'm glad I

¹⁹ Dawesar, *Babyji* 11.

²⁰ Dawesar, *Babyji* 3.

²¹ A common position of student leadership in English schools in India. It is one of many instances of colonial influences on Indian education.

²² Dawesar, *Babyji* 215.

have a daughter,”²³ works against the preference for male children and indicates the pride her parents take in her. Yet, they do not refrain from socializing her into the conventions of middle-class life, especially where marriage is concerned. Her father forces her to attend the engagement ceremony of his friend’s daughter. Watching the bride-to-be, Anamika swears that she “needed to study hard so [she] wouldn’t end up like her,” feeling “a catch in [her] throat that intensified.”²⁴ Her mother berates her for not paying attention to her beauty regimen, causing Anamika to exclaim in exasperation, “Why did my parents want me to be both this and that? Couldn’t they see that it was impossible for me to invest my first twenty-five years in excelling in studies and becoming a nuclear physicist if all I was expected to do for the next fifty was chop vegetables in the kitchen?”²⁵ In this circumscribed middle-class life, Anamika nevertheless finds a paradoxical freedom, for no one suspects that she is engaged in same-sex affairs with two different women. The first of these is Tripta Adhikari, whom her parents see as a benevolent adult who helps her with homework and whom she meets when Tripta comes to Anamika’s school seeking admission for her seven-year-old son. The second is with Rani, their servant, whose name for her—“Babyji” —represents, as Anamika herself says, “such a contradiction in terms, conveying too much respect that the age of a child doesn’t warrant.”²⁶ Anamika herself hates the hierarchy age produces and, when she first meets Tripta, decides to not address her as “aunty,”²⁷ the norm for addressing older women who are not necessarily related to oneself.²⁸ “Baby” is apt as a form of address, as

²³ Dawesar, *Babyji* 141.

²⁴ Dawesar, *Babyji* 103.

²⁵ Dawesar, *Babyji* 32.

²⁶ Dawesar, *Babyji* 13.

²⁷ Dawesar, *Babyji* 4.

²⁸ Later, Anamika is invited to address another adult—her friend’s father—by name, and she revels in the respect and power it affords her (Dawesar, *Babyji* 156).

Anamika is younger than Rani. However, the suffix “ji” is a marker of respect reserved for those older than oneself or those higher up in the caste hierarchy—which, as brahmin, Anamika is relative to Rani, who is *yadav*, one of the caste categories placed under ‘other backward castes’ in the Mandal Report’s Schedule of Castes.

Anamika initiates both sexual relationships through explicit appropriations of masculinity. Both her lovers have been in marriages, which they have left due to domestic abuse. But the age disparity and her lack of sexual experience do not faze Anamika. Tripta feeds Anamika’s adolescent erotic fantasies about cosmopolitan women who, as she catalogs, depilate and wear quality underwear.²⁹ Tripta’s status as a freelance advertising copy writer and a divorced single mother only adds to this aura of cosmopolitanism. Anamika links her coming-of-age directly to her experience of sex, saying that running her hands over Tripta’s backside and “touching [her] round cheeks... made me an adult.”³⁰ In another act of (masculine) adulthood, Anamika casts her relationship with Tripta in terms of her love for her country, going so far as to re-name Tripta “India,” a name she uses throughout. She compares Tripta’s body to the geography of India, once even anthropomorphizing the map of India with Tripta’s curly hair and breasts in a geography class.³¹ She goes on to describe her love for Tripta in terms of her love for her country, going into raptures that capture the rhythms of masculine nationalism perfectly:

[Tripta] felt like India, a mysterious country thousands of years old. Books could be written about her, but under all the written text and the coats of paint, deep inside her womb was something no one had yet grasped. This was why the Moghuls and the English, the Portuguese, the Dutch, the French, Coke and Pepsi, Star TV, everyone came,

²⁹ Dawesar, *Babyji* 6-7.

³⁰ Dawesar, *Babyji* 25.

³¹ Dawesar, *Babyji* 43.

conquered, camped. It wasn't the spices or the Koh-i-Noor or the cheap labor alone but a tantalizing and unreachable quality that you could always glimpse but never grasp.³²

Anamika's rapture mimics male nationalism, especially the importance attached to woman's procreative power and the idea of an 'essence' that is exclusive to womanhood, which is deployed to maintain gender roles under the guise of the 'reverence' accorded women because they are 'maternal'. Her masculinist and masculine nationalist idealization extends to her affair with Rani. Caste, not gender, is at the center of Anamika's relationship with her. Meeting Rani in a neighboring slum for the first time, Anamika is fascinated by the woman's seeming lack of shame. Rani exposes her backside to Anamika, mistaking her for a boy who is staring at her urinating by the side of the road. As with meeting Tripta and fantasizing about her, Anamika's thoughts turn to sex immediately, and she tells us, "[i]mages from Hindu art movies in which the upper caste *brahmin* falls in love with the lower caste servant and has passionate sex with her kept whirring in my head. I wanted to fast forward my life."³³ Fortuitously for Anamika, Rani comes to work at their house, and the two begin an affair. Caste, though clearly foregrounded, remains in the background of their relationship until the riots accompanying Mandal, which comes toward the middle of the novel. The protests against Mandal took the gruesome form of young upper-caste men burning themselves to death before the Parliament House in New Delhi, which the novel discusses.

Shadowing Anamika's affairs is her life at school, where in addition to being a stellar student, she holds a measure of power over her fellow schoolmates. As Head Prefect, Anamika is given the powers to discipline others. She uses this to engage in everyday flirtation with her classmate, Sheela. Sheela flirts with Anamika, fluttering her

³² Dawesar, *Babyji* 252.

³³ Dawesar 12.

eyelashes at her or offering to kiss her to make up for minor infractions at school that Anamika has the right to report. But Sheela is a novice, unaware of how to follow through on any of her promises. It is up to Anamika, who is already in two separate affairs with women, to make the first move. Sheela, too wrapped up in her sense of right and wrong and confused by the desires that Anamika provokes in her, hesitates. Anamika simply takes over, saying, “Look, we’re either going to do it nor not” and Sheela says, “I’m not going to do that. Anyway, two women can’t do it.”³⁴ Anamika eventually gets past Sheela’s resistance, but with violence. She forces herself on Sheela using her finger and thus, in effect, rapes her.

In all three relationships, Anamika appropriates the rhetoric of masculine nationalism even as she appropriates the terms of masculine desire itself. She likens Rani’s movements and “India’s” hair uncoiling to “the sun rising over the Ganges in Benares, which is beautiful and sacred.”³⁵ She likens the country, India, to female bodies, with “her hills, valleys, and rivulets like the breasts of a mother.”³⁶ She casts herself in the image of the novel’s two roués: Adit, the soldier father of her best male friend at school, and Chakra Dev, her classmate, whose advantage as upper-class young male is counterpoised by his caste status as *yadav*. Like Adit, or Humbert Humbert, her other role model, she wants to be a “grown man with a sense of lightness.”³⁷ Yet Adit teaches her most viscerally the violence of male domination. Teetering on the brink of seducing her even as he is her only confidant, he finally exhibits a rather crass version of masculinity when she confesses to raping Sheela. His answer that it is “impossible” is buttressed by

³⁴ Dawesar, *Babyji* 75.

³⁵ Dawesar, *Babyji* 220.

³⁶ Dawesar, *Babyji* 253.

³⁷ Dawesar, *Babyji* 225.

his claim that Anamika need not feel responsible because Sheela “let [Anamika] do this.”³⁸ His response reminds Anamika that he had once said to her that she would outgrow her desire for women because she would “eventually want the real stuff.”³⁹ Her relationship to Dev is more complex, existing between desire and power. As Head Prefect, she has power over him, a power that he sees as the symbolic power she holds as *brahmin*. However, his sexual advances toward her show his power over her by virtue of gender. Dev and Anamika engage in a battle of wills throughout the novel, and Dev spurns Anamika’s attempts to help him out of his troubled interactions at school. At the close of the novel, they arrive at an uneasy peace brought on by Anamika’s guilt-induced and confused attempts to help him because she understands his violent and often insubordinate behavior.

Although she revels in it at times, in her relationships with her women lovers, Anamika comes to learn most clearly the dynamics of gendered power that she experiences with Adit and Dev. She is aware that the only way to escape having to “conform” to social strictures is to “have a lot” of money.⁴⁰ She argues that “[her] society allowed the molestation of young girls in public, but if you had money then people always bowed down to you.”⁴¹ She dreams of making this money and keeping “a harem full of women,”⁴² going so far as to ask Sheela to become her “mistress”⁴³ and visualizing their home together. She is very clear that she wants what men have: the look of women in advertisements who “[throw] their heads back to smile at ... men with one last look.”⁴⁴

³⁸ Dawesar, *Babyji* 213.

³⁹ Dawesar, *Babyji* 199.

⁴⁰ Dawesar, *Babyji* 269, 235.

⁴¹ Dawesar, *Babyji* 81.

⁴² Dawesar, *Babyji* 132.

⁴³ Dawesar, *Babyji* 268.

⁴⁴ Dawesar, *Babyji* 131.

She makes violent love to Rani once after an episode in which she and Sheela are molested on a public bus and she is unable to do much to protect either of them. After a particularly rough bout of sex with Tripta, she says that she “rolled off of her with the sweet exhaustion of a man who has just hunted his dinner animal.”⁴⁵ But Rani’s devotion and Tripta’s love leave her wondering about “how women loved.”⁴⁶ She muses that they did so “like slaves” or “devotees” and rationalizes that this was why “men took them for granted.”⁴⁷ But she is honest enough to admit that “On the one hand [this] outraged me. But on the other I found that being a little prince suited me,”⁴⁸ wondering about the disparities between her lovers and herself.

Nowhere is this disparity more clear than in her relationship with Sheela. After Anamika’s act of violence, the Mandal riots break out. But it is another signal event that Anamika recalls first—the violence against the Sikh community that accompanied the assassination of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards. “Feelings of shame at being a Hindu in 1984 mixed with feelings of shame at having forced myself on Sheela,” she says.⁴⁹ Her father’s advice about the Mandal riots is that she not “look back at blood that has been spilled. India has survived so much violence: Partition, the British, Tamurlane, Ghazni. It will survive this, too. History repeats itself and is full of violence. It is in our nature,”⁵⁰ only leaves her wondering at the easy explanation. The novel abandons its focus on the mechanics of Anamika’s relationships after this and turns toward the middle-class discourse on caste that was in vogue following Mandal and continues to be

⁴⁵ Dawesar, *Babyji* 231.

⁴⁶ Dawesar, *Babyji* 132.

⁴⁷ Dawesar, *Babyji* 132.

⁴⁸ Dawesar, *Babyji*, 132.

⁴⁹ Dawesar, *Babyji*, 217.

⁵⁰ Dawesar, *Babyji* 217.

repeated today. Adit advises his son and Anamika to “[g]o to America or Australia”⁵¹ to escape Mandal’s impact. Anamika herself attacks Mandal at school, arguing that reservations are the wrong way of attempting to redress the historical wrongs committed against lower-castes.

From here, we see Anamika’s slow and confusing ideological shift. She wants to “burn” for her “pure *brahmin* genes, and for India.”⁵² This highly casteist problematic move is buttressed by her turning away from India because she is aware that with the reservation system in place, a large number of upper-castes would be disadvantaged—a fact/realization that interferes with her life as a girl in India. The novel’s focus on the caste question throws into relief these dreams, and Anamika’s own confusions reflect those of a young girl whose future stands threatened. Indian readers will recognize the implications of the novel’s focus on the final year of high school, crucial in the development of every Indian student. It is after this stage that students are tracked into the ‘science’, ‘arts’, and ‘commerce’ streams, with the science stream determining the much-desired future careers in engineering or medicine. Anamika excels in math and physics, but aided by the opinions of the adults around her—Adit, her parents, and Tripta—sees herself as having no chances of entering the remunerative field of science after Mandal. Here, however, the novel takes a curious turn, for Anamika, steeped in ideas about a scientific future, decides to pursue a liberal arts education abroad after she attends a counseling session at the United States Educational Foundation of India (USEFI) office. Her rationale that a liberal arts education would help keep her “options open”⁵³ is suggestive of both her intellectual and her sexual life. The novel closes with Anamika

⁵¹ Dawesar, *Babyji* 126.

⁵² Dawesar, *Babyji* 253.

⁵³ Dawesar, *Babyji* 353.

looking over the brochures of the colleges the USEFI counselor has given her and seeing the word “Veritas” printed on the crest of one of them. Anamika’s final word, “Meritas,”⁵⁴ ends the novel, leaving open the question of how exactly Anamika ends her relationships. In fact, it is only with Rani that she has a conversation about her projected departure from India. Rani, in fact, asks her, “why, *Babyji*? You are a *brahmin*. You have it good here. Why would you like to be less, an equal [in the U.S.]?”⁵⁵ Anamika’s reply consolidates the disadvantages gender poses despite upper-caste status: “I want to be free. I don’t want society telling me what to do all the time.”⁵⁶

Ultimately, lesbian desire, emerging from Anamika’s initial vow of revenge against middle-class morality, becomes a deeply pedagogical act. Her appropriations of masculinity teach her about the gender imbalance of culture that, as a girl, she knows she will continue to face all her life. Although she seems to endorse a casteist position, Anamika’s confused attempts to make a case against Mandal only throw into relief the intersections of gender, caste, and class that produce contradictory effects for women, brought home most intimately to her in the case of Rani. Rani, like Dev, is *yadav*, a fact she brings up when Anamika curses at Dev using a caste expletive. However, unlike Dev, Rani has no measure of power in society, being disadvantaged by gender and class. She herself faces Dev’s violence despite her caste privilege.

⁵⁴ Dawesar, *Babyji* 309. Interestingly, the crest belongs to Harvard University, where Dawesar went the same year as her protagonist to pursue a liberal arts degree.

⁵⁵ Dawesar, *Babyji* 300.

⁵⁶ Dawesar, *Babyji* 300.

Like *Babyji, A Married Woman* represents historically accurate events between the late 1980s and 1992. The development of its protagonist, Astha, is shown against the backdrop of the rising *Hindutva*⁵⁷ movement, which ultimately leads to the destruction of the historic Babri Masjid. However, whereas Anamika's development takes place in large measure within same-sex relationships through which she learns about the contradictions of nationalism, Astha's development occurs before she engages in a relationship with another woman. We meet her as a young woman in the final year of a Master's program in literature. She yearns to experience the love that she reads about in romance novels and eventually starts a relationship with a neighbor. He jilts her fairly quickly, which causes her to experience pangs of remorse and guilt. Her parents arrange a suitable marriage, which they hope will ameliorate the fact that they do not own property, the precondition of being middle-class. Astha is happy enough initially in her marriage, finding that the sex compensates for all her broken romantic dreams. Hemant, her husband, is an only son and a rising businessman who has returned from the U.S. to take care of his old parents. He and Astha live with his parents after their wedding. In typical urban fashion, Hemant is characterized as a cosmopolitan male with liberal-sounding values. He cares about how his wife feels during love-making. He argues that a daughter is as good as a son. His frequent seemingly liberal attitudes are accompanied by frequent comments on the progressive nature of American socio-cultural life. The older women in the novel—Astha's mother and her mother-in-law—are suitably impressed by his progressive attitudes. Astha, too, shares in this sentiment until Hemant's obvious chauvinism comes into play. He prefers that Astha take up teaching so as to not interfere with her wifely and

⁵⁷ *Hindutva* translates loosely to "of Hinduism" or "the idea/ideology of Hinduism." However, it has now come to refer to right-wing Hindu fundamentalism and the fundamentalist ideology that India rightfully 'belongs' to the Hindus.

maternal duties. He wants to “try again” if they do not have a son when Astha is pregnant for the second time.⁵⁸ And finally, and most damagingly, he has no idea what his wife means when she says that their marriage does not seem fulfilling to her the way it is configured.

The novel moves very quickly through these sequences to settle into the question of what Astha does once she finds out that marriage is not everything she had dreamed it would be. Her husband rises in his business of importing television sets, and he is able to build a three-storey house in which they live as a joint family with the luxury of limited contact between the in-laws and the young couple. However, this plays out against serious losses. Astha loses her father, and her mother decides to retire to a religious community run by a holy teacher who extrapolates his lectures from Hindu philosophy. Although her mother is not shown as explicitly engaged in the right-wing Hindutva movement per se, which derives part of its strength from such religious communes, the scenes clearly foreshadow for the Indian reader a turn toward such communalism. This is clarified by Astha’s observation that Hemanth’s television business received a boost from the televising of the Hindu epic, the *Ramayan*. The novel thus sets the stage for discussions of right-wing Hindu politics in the late 1980s, which led to the political conflagration of 1992 when the Babri Masjid was destroyed by right-wing Hindu activists (“kar sevaks,”⁵⁹ as they are called, a term the novel uses too) to make way for a Hindu temple dedicated to Lord Ram.

Against this almost clichéd middle-class setup, Astha experiences a series of misgivings. At first, she is disturbed by her husband’s need for a son. Later, she is

⁵⁸ Kapur, *A Married Woman* 68.

⁵⁹ A Sanskrit word that refers to any volunteer associated with religious causes, the term has come to connote right-wing Hindu activism after the Babri Masjid incident.

worried that her mother agrees with her husband that Astha devote her life to the caregiving of her children. Astha's mother, a veritable repository of antediluvian gender ideologies and the Indian counterpart of Mrs. Bennett, gives over Astha's potential inheritance to her son-in-law rather than her daughter. Struggling to establish her independence, Astha is aware that she controls nothing consequential about her married life, which leads to a series of arguments with her husband. Significantly, when she writes poetry that takes a dark view of a woman's life, Hemant fears it will be interpreted as being about their marriage and Astha gives up the idea of sending the poems out for publication. She takes to painting instead, but when she demands "more space" so she can "work in peace, spread [her] stuff around," Hemant answers, "[y]ou don't need more, you have all you can use here."⁶⁰ When they take a holiday together, Hemant, who never lets his wife in on their finances, asks that she pay for part of it using the money from her paintings. To these episodes, so telling of her secondary status in their marriage, Astha can only retreat in frustrated silence. Punctuating their lives are Hemant's periodic sexual overtures towards his wife. Astha's engagement with sex, while one of enjoyment, nevertheless begins to worry her for its place in her life as a marker of marriage in the face of her decreased caring and commitment. This is solidified when she meets Aijaz Ahmad Khan, the leader of a political theater group⁶¹ and a history lecturer who comes to conduct theater education at the school Astha teaches in. She is attracted to Khan, who, it is suggested, has had several affairs with politically-minded women. However, he disappears after he meets Hemant at the school play. Subsequently, the novel's omniscient narrator tells us that Khan meets and marries Pipeelikhya Trivedi, or Pipee, the

⁶⁰ Kapur, *A Married Woman* 153.

⁶¹ The character may be modeled on the real-life Safdar Hashmi, founder of the Jana Natya Manch (People's Theater Front), who was murdered by a local politician's people for his political activities.

product of a love marriage between a radical North Indian professor and his young South Indian student. Pipee leads a life far different from Astha's conservative middle-class one. Her marriage to Khan in the face of maternal opposition and social opprobrium represents the apotheosis of her radicalism.

The two women meet a year after Khan's death, who is burnt alive in his van while en route to a play amidst the rising tide of Hindu fundamentalism, as Astha gets more and more involved in various causes associated with anti-fundamentalism and protests against his murder. Her involvement takes the form of producing paintings about the violence, with the money she makes of them initially going to support the anti-Hindutva cause and later becoming a source of the significant earning that she never has as a schoolteacher. At first, Astha is impressed by Pipee's political work and attracted by her beauty. Pipee, too, responds to the woman who represents contradiction itself, for, as Pipee imagines, Astha "clearly had a political sensibility, which made her acquiescence in a domestic set-up even stranger."⁶² Their shared political beliefs give their desire ardor. As the narrator tells us, "there was no aphrodisiac more powerful than talking, no seduction more effective than curiosity."⁶³ Hemant is jealous of his wife's friendship with Pipee because he perceives it as the cause of her increasing political activism. As Astha wryly comments, "an affair with a woman was not an easy thing for a husband to suspect."⁶⁴

Although the narrator's voice emphasizes conversation and curiosity, sex between the two women is described in great physical detail. At their first sexual encounter, all we hear is that Pipee "pressed the tips of Astha's fingers into her mouth, sucking each one

⁶² Kapur, *A Married Woman* 218.

⁶³ Kapur, *A Married Woman* 218.

⁶⁴ Kapur, *A Married Woman* 232.

gently before letting them go.”⁶⁵ But at their second meeting, the description is much more explicit, as Pipee touches “every crevice of [Astha’s] body with her mouth” starting with her “armpits” to the “soft fold of flesh where the arm joined the torso, the hard bony parts behind the ears, the deep crease between her buttocks, the hairiness between her thighs.”⁶⁶ Astha, we are told, finds it “strange, making love to a friend instead of an adversary,” the latter represented by Hemant. She fantasizes about Pipee’s body when they are apart, cataloging body parts and jewelry. She is “in love,”⁶⁷ says the narrator, and she “thanked God again for this love in her life, when she had thought all chance of love was over.”⁶⁸

We get equally explicit discussions of the sex between husband and wife, but that only throws into relief the emotional violence of the marriage for Astha. We see her frustrations in the face of his filibustering about a range of issues in their marriage—from finances to time spent together to her discovery once of a condom in his suitcase although they do not use it during sex. Hemant does not understand his wife’s unhappiness as the cause of her debilitating headaches, and often induces guilt in her by pointing to his hard work in ensuring his family’s financial security. He is indifferent to the reality that he profits from the dangerous rise of Hindutva—after the stress of an employee-strike, his television business booms with the televising of the *Ramayan*. His capitalist streak encompasses explicit anti-Muslim and homophobic stances in addition to the anti-feminist position he often takes with Astha. As Astha gets involved in understanding the struggle over Babri Masjid, Hemant argues, “[t]he government is too bloody soft on these

⁶⁵ Kapur, *A Married Woman* 222.

⁶⁶ Kapur, *A Married Woman* 231.

⁶⁷ Kapur, *A Married Woman* 232.

⁶⁸ Kapur, *A Married Woman* 235.

Muslims, that is the problem.”⁶⁹ Later, in the wake of Khan’s death, he argues callously, “[h]e was a Muslim, he should have kept to the issues within his own religion.”⁷⁰ When Astha attends a lesbian and gay film festival with Pipee and asks Hemant to join her, he, furious with her for not staying home on the weekend, says, “I’m not into homosexuals. And I thought neither were you. But I’m learning something new everyday.”⁷¹ His evident sarcasm is matched, though, by his utter unconcern because he says that women are always “mind-fucking,” leaving Astha “cring[ing]” as she notes that Hemant meant that desire between women is impossible, not “the real thing,” which echoes Adit’s words in *Babyji*.⁷² Hemant also routinely dismisses Astha’s life beyond that of wife and mother, commenting that raising their daughter and son is “woman’s work,”⁷³ that Astha “keep to what [she] knows best, the home, the children, and teaching,”⁷⁴ that her “place as a decent family woman is in the house, not the street,”⁷⁵ and that as his wife, “it is not proper [for her] to run around, abandoning home, leaving the children to the care of servants.”⁷⁶

It would seem that her relationship with Pipee offers Astha a measure of comfort and relief from the relentless psychic and emotional violence of her marriage. However, she struggles with the implications of her relationship with Pipee as she thinks about her children. In a signal moment, Astha is shown wondering about what life her children would have if their mother left to live with another woman. She admits that she may be “deeply conventional” because for her “the business of raising children had a set of

⁶⁹ Kapur, *A Married Woman* 108.

⁷⁰ Kapur, *A Married Woman* 139.

⁷¹ Kapur, *A Married Woman* 236.

⁷² Kapur, *A Married Woman* 218; Dawesar, *Babyji* 199.

⁷³ Kapur 70.

⁷⁴ Kapur 116.

⁷⁵ Kapur 172.

⁷⁶ Kapur 188.

dynamics that were the standard [conventional] ones.”⁷⁷ Astha’s demurrals finally comes between them. Pipee asks that she make up her mind and decides to pursue a doctoral degree in the U.S. Astha is devastated as Pipee goes about preparing her application and taking the GRE exam, and sets off to do preliminary fieldwork amidst the rising tide of anti-Muslim violence by Hindu fundamentalists. The novel moves to the epistolary form to capture an intense three-week trip called Ekta Yatra (Unity March) that Astha and Pipee join. Historically, the Ekta march followed the Rath Yatra (Chariot March) initiated by the Hindu leader L.K. Advani, in which thousands of Hindutva activists marched to the Babri Masjid. The novel depicts both marches through a timeline that is established by Astha’s diary entries. As the Ekta Yatra progresses, so does Astha’s despairing certainty that her relationship with Pipee is going to end. Through the march, she grapples with guilt at leaving her children alone at home. The diary stops when she returns and a long period of illness follows, leaving a gap in her meetings with Pipee. During this time, the Babri Masjid violence escalates until the mosque is demolished by the fundamentalists. Astha is caught between her angst over Hindu violence, Hemant’s callousness toward her political beliefs, and Pipee’s impending departure, which marks the novel’s end. Astha drops her off at the airport and we see her reaction as she returns home and Hemant inquires after Pipee’s departure. Astha, the narrator tells us, “could not reply” and merely says, “I’m tired. I want to sleep.”⁷⁸ The novel’s final line, “[s]he felt stretched thin, thin across the globe,” suggests the price Astha pays for the separation

⁷⁷ Kapur, *A Married Woman* 242.

⁷⁸ Kapur, *A Married Woman* 307.

from Pipee.⁷⁹ Unlike *Babyji*, then, *A Married Woman* does not end with an optimistic future for its protagonist.

Realist Fiction, Retrospective Narration, and Contemporary Politics

Babyji and *A Married Woman* depart significantly from the works of Chughtai, Das, or Kamani who also represent lesbian desire, because unlike their predecessors, these two novels situate the story of lesbian desire against significant historical events. The *Bildungsroman* intersects with the historical novel in both cases, and both works follow closely the conventions of realist fiction. In each, the protagonist is presented in inordinate detail—their environments, relationships, and interior lives are richly described.⁸⁰ The novels' narrators draw us into their world, establishing what Lilian Furst calls "a sound trusting relationship between narrators and readers."⁸¹ Anamika's self-confident yet confused voice, alternating between certainty and despair, shows us adolescent angst at its best. She is supremely confident of her sexual skills, yet aware that in raping Sheela, she has become like the "*cheapads*" on the bus who molested them.⁸² In a moment that captures adolescent frustration, Anamika tells Vidur, her male best friend, that she wishes to find out "[t]he truth about life and about love. The truth about truth itself."⁸³ Although proud of being Indian, she wonders at the violence that goes into making India itself, especially that against caste and religious groups, and women. A

⁷⁹ Kapur 307.

⁸⁰ Ian Watt was among the first to subject the realist novel to critical study. See Ian Watt, *Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1957), for his description of these as typical characteristics of the form.

⁸¹ Lilian R. Furst, *All Is True: The Claims and Strategies of Realist Fiction* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1995) ix.

⁸² Dawesar, *Babyji* 211. *Cheapad* is an instance of Indianizing English words. It literally means one who is "cheap," as in, badly behaved. The suffix "-ad" derives from Hindi, where many descriptive words end with that sound.

⁸³ Dawesar, *Babyji* 151.

Married Woman alternates between various narrative styles and perspectives. An omniscient narrator acts as an overseeing eye that describes for us the middle-class circumstances that Astha is entrenched in. The novel's free indirect discourse,⁸⁴ the strategy used to convey the inner thoughts of characters as though they were happening as the action is being described by the omniscient narrator, and the epistolary form, draw us into Astha's innermost thoughts. Both novels use the variety of English spoken among the English-speaking middle-classes, using miscegenetic words that combine English and Hindi (or 'Hinglish' words, in popular parlance).

Centrally, both *Babyji* and *A Married Woman* achieve their 'reality effect' through a reliance on the unfolding of the Mandal and Babri Masjid violence from the perspective of those located in the city of New Delhi, India's capital and the nucleus of its image in the international arena. Furst identifies this intersection of time and space as central to the 'real' that the realist novel purports to represent against the essential fictiveness/artifice of the genre itself.⁸⁵ Through the protagonists' eyes, New Delhi is established as being deeply transgressive as it is conservative. Anamika tells us that it "is a city where things happen undercover."⁸⁶ In it, "[m]arried women fell in love with pubescent girls, boys climbed up sewage pipes to consort with their neighbors' wives, and students went down on their science teachers in the lab."⁸⁷ But the important thing is

⁸⁴ For a compelling analysis of the strategy whereby the narrative voice slides into the voice of the character's, see Roy Pascal, *The Dual Voice: Free Indirect Speech and its Functioning in the Nineteenth-century European Novel* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1977).

⁸⁵ Furst 95-115; 73-94. For excellent discussions on the role of the city in the realist novels of canonical European writers, see Efraim Sicher, *Rereading the City, Rereading Dickens: Representation, the Novel, and Urban Realism* (New York: AMS P, 2003); and Robert Alter, *Imagined Cities: Urban Experience and the Language of the Novel* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2005).

⁸⁶ Dawesar, *Babyji* 3.

⁸⁷ Dawesar, *Babyji* 3.

that “no one ever talked about it.”⁸⁸ Thus, the city becomes the space for the protagonist’s development, a feature of the *Bildungsroman*.⁸⁹ But more significantly for the female protagonist, the city is also a space of danger. As *Babyji* progresses through Anamika’s relationships with Tripta and Rani, Anamika realizes that Delhi is also a city where “[t]hings happen in the dark.”⁹⁰ But this dark city is unlike the “undercover” one in which transgressive sex occurs joyously. Rather, it is a space where “[m]en are killed. Their cries of anguish go unheard. Women are raped in the parking lots of movie theaters, often by many men in one night. They gather their torn *dupattas* and go home to avoid public scandal.”⁹¹ This paradoxical city is also home to the anxieties of the middle-classes, captured aptly by Astha’s parents’ attitudes to money. Her parents “counted their pennies carefully,” the narrator says.⁹² Their every encounter with the city is based on their worry about Astha’s father, a government employee, not securing a plot of land in an upscale area under the housing scheme of the government. Unlike Hemant’s father, who manages a plot in a developing area of Delhi—Vasant Vihar, easily recognizable to most Indians familiar with the city—Astha’s father is allotted a plot “across the [river] Jamuna,” which bisects the city. His bitter complaint that it is an area with “no water, no electricity, no markets, no bus services, no amenities, no proper roads even”⁹³ eventually proves immaterial because he dies of a heart attack before they can build a house there. However, this city, home to middle-class aspirations and middle-class conservatism,

⁸⁸ Dawesar, *Babyji* 3.

⁸⁹ Jerome Buckley, *Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1974) 17.

⁹⁰ Dawesar, *Babyji* 50.

⁹¹ Dawesar, *Babyji* 50. Dupatta is the scarf some women use to cover their heads or as a scarf around the neck; it is often worn with the salwaar kameez, the traditional dress of parts of North India but now adopted by women all over India (and true to the globalization of ‘culture’, by women in the west).

⁹² Kapur, *A Married Woman* 4.

⁹³ Kapur, *A Married Woman* 16.

offers its own transgressive spaces. Before her marriage, Astha's sexual escapades—confined to kissing—with a young man from their neighborhood occur in a parked car, “next to a Minister's house in the Lutyens part of New Delhi.”⁹⁴ The area is notorious as the real-life site of many such escapades among unmarried couples with no privacy or space to retreat to. In India, this is typical of most major cities, where parked cars in public spaces often offer the only space in which young couples can engage in any form of intimacy. The police are often around to arrest cavorting couples for “acts of public indecency and obscenity,” acts that feminist and other progressive groups have protested over the years.⁹⁵

When Anamika and Astha conduct their relationships with women within this structure, it is with the awareness that female bonding would not be looked at askance, a key factor in lesbian invisibility.⁹⁶ Thus, when her mother once gets suspicious at her locked bedroom door, Anamika says that she is more likely to imagine her daughter smoking than having sex with Rani. Similarly, Hemant is utterly unconcerned at Astha's spending time with Pipee, whereas her minimal contact with Khan arouses his jealousy. The frequent discussions of the political background, each developing as the protagonists' relationships achieve increasing measures of intensity, locate the novels'

⁹⁴ Kapur, *A Married Woman* 23.

⁹⁵ Newspapers in India and the internet are rife with articles on the topic. See, for example, Felix Fernandes, “Moral Police Nab Six Couples for ‘Indecent’ Acts,” *The Times of Navi Mumbai* 27 Mar. 2009, 1 Apr. 2009 <<http://www.mumbaipluses.com/newbombayplus/index.aspx?page=article§id=1&contentid=2009032720090327160127842245d6368§xslt=&comments=true>>; “Chennai Police Not to Disturb ‘Decent’ Couples,” *ExpressIndia* 21 Sep. 2007, 13 Nov. 2007 <<http://www.expressindia.com/latest-news/Chennai-police-not-to-disturb-decent-couples/219494/>>.

⁹⁶ For literary theorizations of the trope of ‘female friendship’ in relation to lesbianism, see Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: Morrow, 1981); Elizabeth Susan Wahl, *Invisible Relations: Representations of Female Intimacy in the Age of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999); Valerie Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2002); Martha Vicinus, *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778-1928* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2004).

lesbian scenes against seemingly unconnected political events. This strategy serves to draw the connection that is often missed when discussing sexuality—the argument that sex is private and has and should have nothing to do with politics. In *Babyji*, lesbian desire serves to expose the imbalance of power between women and men, which Anamika replicates unconsciously in her appropriations of masculinity. In *A Married Woman*, Astha and Pipee talk constantly about how the expectations in relationships between women are no different from those between women and men. Pipee points out that both need to be based in a willingness to commit long-term, raising children together, forging a family. Between them, *Babyji* and *A Married Woman* normalize lesbian desire and relationships insofar as they refuse to carve out a ‘separate’ domain of idealized or different love. Anamika realizes that female same-sex relationships are marked by power imbalances just like cross-sex ones are; Astha realizes that lesbian relationships are no different from heterosexual ones, demanding the same commitments.

Both novels are retrospective accounts of lesbian desire. Their recourse to literary realism offers, as Geeta Patel has argued in the context of Chughtai’s “The Quilt,”⁹⁷ a mode through which to query the gendered premises of nationalist thinking that is especially based in middle-class female identity. But unlike Chughtai’s story, which has no overt historical marker identifying its time period, Dawesar’s and Kapur’s novels look back from the vantage point of the twenty-first century at the late 1980s and early 1990s, a time of significant changes in India wrought by globalization but marred by rising unrest over issues of caste and gender, which accompanied the always politically-charged

⁹⁷ Geeta Patel, “Homely Housewives: Lesbians in Marital Fixes,” *Public Culture* 16.1 (2004): 145-6.

issue of religion.⁹⁸ As retrospective accounts, both novels offer some interesting questions of representation that must be accounted for in any reading of the politics of fiction itself. Dawesar was noticed primarily for *Babyji*, though her first novel, *Miniplanner* (2000),⁹⁹ was praised by reviewers for its ability to inhabit the voice of a white gay man from whose perspective the story is told. Kapur, on the other hand, is best known for her first book, *Difficult Daughters* (1998),¹⁰⁰ to an international audience that reads contemporary Indian novels. That novel is described by its publisher as “the story of a young woman torn between the desire for education and the lure of illicit love.” It garnered Kapur a significant amount of international acclaim, and the book jacket prints the following review by Maggie Gee in the *Sunday Times*: “This is a skilful, enticing first novel by an Indian writer who prefers reality to magic realism.” Both authors have published subsequent novels that are not lesbian-themed.

Dawesar and Kapur enter and occupy a long tradition of middle-class women writers for whom sexuality, the home, and nation have been important questions. Like Chughtai, Das, and Kamani before her, Dawesar writes about girls’ desire. However, unlike them, her heroine “achieves an impressive balance between moral inquiry and decadent pleasure, pleasing the intellect and the senses,” as *Publishers Weekly*, quoted in the novel’s blurb, puts it. The book has been praised by western reviewers—reprinted on the inside pages—for its “excellent job of capturing Anamika’s rapid swings from puffed-up maturity to deflated adolescence and back again” (*San Francisco* magazine), as “a cunning lithe defiant sexy tiger’s roar of a book” (author Ali Smith), and its heroine as

⁹⁸ Religion has remained the most contentious of internal issues in India given that the end of colonialism was marked by the violent partition of the region into India and Pakistan.

⁹⁹ Abha Dawesar, *Miniplanner* (San Francisco: Cleis P, 2000).

¹⁰⁰ Manju Kapur, *Difficult Daughters* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998).

“[i]rreverent yet tender, compassionate yet hard-headed, precociously wise and undeniably sexy, Dawesar’s Anamika channels a wonderful new Indian reality. More power to her” (filmmaker Mira Nair). The “new Indian reality” that both novels represent is worth reading in light of the debates about same-sex sexuality in India. Dawesar writes from the diaspora but does not want to be cast as a diasporic writer. All her novels to date are about queer and female sexuality, which give her politics the sheen of radicalism. Unlike Dawesar, Kapur writes in India. Judging from her teaching position at the prestigious Miranda House, the all-girls liberal arts college in New Delhi, her feminist politics can be assumed to be progressive. Both Dawesar and Kapur are middle-class women writers and their invocations of Delhi are intimately familiar to readers of the milieu—in particular, the proscriptions against female sexual excess associated with middle-class status.

However, with her familiarity of middle-class life in Delhi, Dawesar offers what can only be cast as anachronistic descriptions of lesbianism in *Babyji*. For instance, at a sex-education class, Anamika boldly asks the doctor for explanations about homosexuality and lesbianism and the doctor is shown explaining it in terms that draw directly from the non-judgmental sex-education models in the west. This is highly unlikely to have occurred in the India of the time the novel describes. Sex education was and remains a very rudimentary affair at most urban schools, with little or no frank and non-judgmental discussion of sex or sexuality. Often, a cursory explanation of reproduction is offered. Abstinence was almost never discussed during the 1980s and 1990s because there was no expectation that unmarried Indians—and especially

adolescents—had sex. Anamika once asks Tripta whether the latter is “gay,”¹⁰¹ not likely a term associated at the time with women who have sex with women. What is very likely, on the other hand, is her encounter with two white gay men and their child as she sits at Bread Box, an upscale coffee shop in Lutyens (the same area that Astha and her lover park in when they kiss) with Tripta and an older male friend, Deepak (who has returned from the U.S. to live and work in India like Hemant has in *A Married Woman*). Lutyens is a famed hangout for western tourists in Delhi, and Anamika’s observation of the two men may well serve to remind her that other models exist for relationships and sexuality. Similarly, even if they seem unlikely, Anamika’s discussions of same-sex sexuality with Adit and his non-judgmental response are plausible because Adit is shown to be cosmopolitan, and their encounters are rendered possible by her precociousness and his attraction.

A Married Woman takes a different approach to discussing lesbian desire. Astha finds herself unable to relate to the lesbian and gay festival that Pipee takes her to. She “brood[s] about her own sexual nature, but her desire for Pipee was so linked to the particular person, that she failed to draw any general conclusions.”¹⁰² She remains confused about the implications of this, wondering if this makes her lesbian or if she is merely in love with one particular person who shares her worldview and happens to be a woman.¹⁰³ This could mean one of two things: either that another woman who shares her political commitments is as likely a partner or that she is attracted to Pipee *despite* the latter’s gender. Unlike Anamika, Astha has never been interested in breaking the mold of heterosexuality, influenced as she is by the romance novels she reads as a young adult.

¹⁰¹ Dawesar, *Babyji* 134.

¹⁰² Kapur, *A Married Woman* 232.

¹⁰³ Kapur, *A Married Woman* 232.

Yet, she finally steps outside the conventions of her middle-class life and her internalized gender training by starting an affair with Pipee. Unable to see the affair through because her internalization of motherhood intervenes, she is finally shown to be devastated. The novel's darker ending—unlike the possibilities suggested by *Babyji*—perhaps offers the realistic constraints of an older woman's life, especially one who has children, in the face of a heteronormative society in which there is no support whatsoever for women who want to live with women.

Conclusion

Babyji and *A Married Woman* re-articulate the relationship between desire, gender, and the political realm through their lesbian representations. In fact, *Babyji* renders the impossibility of understanding adequately the effects that the intersection of gender and caste produces through the confused voice of an adolescent girl. This confusion is best exemplified in her sexual explorations, which comprise a mix of bravado, laudable self-confidence, and much confusion. The novel's brand of anti-nationalism is not borne out of a holistic or nuanced understanding of that intersection. Rather, Anamika's turn away from India repeats the solipsism of upper-caste middle-class Indians. *A Married Woman* suggests that lesbian desire cannot exist in the domain of a culture in which the ideology of the heterosexual family has a stranglehold. In particular, it movingly exposes the trauma of women transmitting self-abnegation through generations. Astha's mother idolizes her son-in-law at the expense of her daughter. She herself teaches her daughter to diminish her work.

Neither novel offers the lesbian as a figure of identity politics, and neither uses the term 'lesbian' to refer to their protagonists even once. Yet, same-sex desire is crucial to their investigations of the gendered politics of the Hindu middle-class social order. Through their representations of lesbian desire as ultimately about the routine nature of female same-sex desire, which is under wraps only because of the patriarchal structure of society, one run by men and acceded to by women, the two novels may be seen as fighting for the rights of women who love and want to live with women in different ways. More importantly, by making lesbian desire part of their protagonists' development within their protagonists' growing unease with the excesses of caste and religious violence, the novels situate female desire against the other problematic pillars of nationalism. Together, the novels illustrate the slippages within Hindu nationalism, its inconsistency in vacillating between violence against its own members and that against those outside. This slippage is mirrored in the insouciance with which female relationships and the female-relegated private realm are viewed even as female sexuality and female access to the public realm is controlled. For the babyjis and the married women of India, these novels could not have come at a better time than when our very sexuality is held to ransom and the horrors of caste and religion are being renewed under the guise of a lost/hijacked 'tradition' and 'culture' within 'westernized' India.

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Chapter V: Conclusion Writing Deferral

In reading the deferral of the lesbian in literature, this project has argued that women's literary culture in global India takes on the task of responding in culturally-specific ways to the question of female same-sex desire in a culture in which all female desire is marked as deviant. The anthology clearly hides the lesbian through anonymity. This anonymity, no matter how powerful a political ploy, does raise the question of who the contributors really are. The editor, Sukthankar, in fact shares in her introduction that upon hearing about the anthology, several men wrote expressing interest in the work because they assumed that it was a venue for erotic literature.¹ The final product, a collection of voices that seek to lend a lie to the nationalist claim that there are no lesbians in India and that lesbianism is western, may seem insufficient not only because of the anonymity of the voices but also because of their disagreements on the question of lesbian identity politics. Similarly, Namjoshi, India's only out lesbian, displaces the autobiographical lesbian subject in favor of discussions of her dead servant. Goja's life and circumstances are as central to the autobiography and Namjoshi's own exile as lesbian is overlaid with her moral culpability as upper-class Indian who lives in the diaspora. Writing her autobiography could have been Namjoshi's own form of engaging in lesbian identity politics, but she does not do that. Even as she admits her own positionality as lesbian, she draws attention to its rootedness in western gay and lesbian liberation movements of the

¹ Ashwini Sukthankar, "Introduction," *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing from India*, ed. Ashwini Sukthankar (New Delhi: Penguin, 1999) xxvi-xxvii.

1970s which emphasized identity politics. The novel turns to other histories of nation even as it addresses lesbianism. The *Bildungsroman* uses lesbian desire to process the disadvantages of gender for upper-caste middle-class girls. Similarly, the domestic novel uses lesbian desire to process the deep-seated inequities of heterosexual marriage for middle-class women.

The dissertation has also argued that literature becomes a space for negotiating in the nation the transnationally-located political and cultural contours of lesbianism. In looking at literary culture in late twentieth-century India, this project has suggested that globalization has effected cultural changes, which enabled the production of the lesbian as a political and cultural subject. The production of an anthology owes much to the transnational connectivities of scholars, activists, and the publishing industry. The autobiography emerges in the diaspora, where India's only out lesbian writer has lived for over three decades now. The novel circulates globally as the preeminent form of Indian literature.

There is no doubt that economic liberalization of the 1990s, with the rise of a consumer class and greater western entrants into India, produced enormous changes in culture. A significant part of this involved sexuality. But the limits of new attitudes and approaches to sexuality became apparent in the context of lesbianism when nationalists attacked it as un-Indian. However, nationalist attack against lesbianism is in line with conservative approaches to all sexuality in the nationalist schema. What is more thought-provoking are general cultural attitudes to female same-sex desire even as attitudes to sexuality begin to change among the consumer classes. As reflected by literary deferral, it raises in particular the question of what acts of deferral say about literature's role in

responding to culture. How does deferral in literary representations avoid the problem of re-fictionalizing lesbian life that nationalism has already put into place?

I have suggested throughout this dissertation that literary representation does not, in fact, fictionalize the lesbian as may be assumed from their deferral of that figure. Rather, the deferral of the lesbian serves as a mode for engaging in the various other marginalizations through which culture takes shape. The lesbian may, in fact, serve as a proxy figure for such discussions by women. I want to explore briefly here a further implication of this deferral, especially as it relates to globalization, consumer culture, and sexuality. There is something very powerful about the refusal to represent that writers adopt in talking about the lesbian. Globalization has wrought in a variety of contexts a veritable homogenizing of responses to a wide range of cultural issues. In the field of sexuality, this has taken shape in the embracing by third-world cultures of identity movements and forms of cultural being that emanate from western consumer cultures.² The refusal to do the same by these writers certainly attests to a resistance to the easy transfer that theorists believe occurs.

But more importantly, globalization has forced nation-states to ‘modernize,’ and this modernization is measured in part by attitudes to sexuality. The index of this modernity, however, is not always rooted in making holistic changes in attitudes toward gender/sexuality. Rather, it is rooted in claims about tolerance and diversity, which are arrived at by parsing groups in terms of special interest. Thus the queer lobby works to

² A number of influential works exist on the theme of the “globalization of sexuality.” See for example, Dennis Altman, *Global Sex* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2001) for an overview of how the global economy homogenizes responses to sexuality. See Martin Manalansan, *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2003) for arguments on how Filipino gay men navigate their sexualities against queer white American and racialized Filipino identities. See also William L. Leap and Tom Boellstorff, ed., *Speaking in Queer Tongues: Globalization and Gay Language* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2004) for essays on global navigations of western queer paradigms.

the benefit of state and cultural agendas that seek a space on the global stage. The relationship between economics and culture is most palpable in the commodification of various aspects of life. Such commodification includes the embracing of resistance movements. The state's ability to fold forms of sexual life and resistance within a larger consumerist model has been addressed by scholars.³ From a culture known for its conservative attitudes toward women's sexuality, India has now moved to trading in the very exoticism of the 'native' woman that was a significant basis of colonialism. The self-Orientalizing gesture of the state and culture is palpable in the marketing of the 'new Indian woman' via beauty queens, Bollywood stars, fashion models, and everyday women who are more overt in their sexuality. Despite protests against lesbianism by cultural nationalists, the lesbian herself becomes an object of bourgeois consumerism, folded into the capitalist project.⁴

In such a context, literary representations that refuse to confer legibility for the lesbian may be seen as countering such practices. Her presence is everywhere—in middle-class marriage, among friends, in female-only spaces, amidst feminist political spaces, in relationships between women and men whose gender performances are unconventional. The anthology and the novel make this clear. She exists as the effect of cultural discourses that mandate heterosexuality and male-ness as 'natural' as the autobiography shows. The demands of a consumer capitalist state and culture that its

³ See for example, David Bell and Jon Binnie, *The Sexual Citizen: Queer Politics and Beyond* (Cambridge: Polity P, 2000) and Brenda Cossman, *Sexual Citizens: The Legal and Cultural Regulation of Sex and Belonging* (Palo Alto: Stanford UP, 2007).

⁴ See especially, John D'Emilio, "Capitalism and Gay Identity," *Families in the U.S.: Kinship and Domestic Politics*, ed. Karen V. Hansen and Anita Iltis Garey (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1998) 131-41; Danae Clarke, "Commodity Lesbianism," *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Michele Aina Barale Henry Abelove, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993) 186-201; Robyn Wiegman, "Introduction: Mapping the Lesbian Postmodern," *The Lesbian Postmodern*, ed. Laura Doan (New York: Columbia UP, 1994) 1-20.

subjects appear as legible entities who can be deployed in the services of its own claim to 'global' status is thus resolutely thwarted by these projects. Neither the state nor culture can hold up the figure of female same-sex desire as an icon of modernity. These works force re-examination of some basic questions about culture. If lesbianism is indeed prolific within the nation, what happens to definitions of culture that are framed on the ideal of the heterosexual woman? When representation refuses to idealize and typecast the lesbian, what happens to the state's and culture's claims to modernity and through that, to being entitled to global resources such as investment and mobility?

The texts that I read, which remain un-canonized, refuse to accede to the demands by which that culture too is commodified. Many writers of/in global India are only too happy to portray versions of India consistent with Orientalist notions of Indian culture or overdetermined visions of the sexism of Indian culture. The works I read refrain from representing the lesbian as a disadvantaged member of culture by focusing on how class, caste, and religious privileges enable a wide range of sexual experiences for women. They also focus on lesbianism's prolific presence in the nation. What we get is the lesbian not as a recognizable type that can be accommodated in the services of modernity but rather as a figure who exceeds the boundaries drawn for the citizen-subject. She is clearly a non-juridical subject not criminalized under the law. She is the political subject of feminism who provides a locus of critique for the construction and stabilization of various hierarchies including, but not limited to, gender. She is not fictional even if she is represented via fiction, whether in the novel or the autobiography. What we get in literature is a critique of overarching discourses of cultural authenticity that tend to hide the differences the nation is inherently structured by. What this literature does is to write

a genealogy of culture and nation which contests official history. In particular, literature contests the folding in of acts of resistance that that history has implied. And ultimately, that is where the political power of literary culture resides.

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