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# Transgressive territories: queer space in Indian fiction and film

Sucheta Mallick Choudhuri  
*University of Iowa*

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TRANSGRESSIVE TERRITORIES:  
QUEER SPACE IN INDIAN FICTION AND FILM

by

Sucheta Mallick Choudhuri

An Abstract

Of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree  
in English in  
the Graduate College of  
The University of Iowa

December 2009

Thesis Supervisors: Professor Kevin Kopelson  
Associate Professor Priya Kumar

## ABSTRACT

This dissertation argues that the representation of queer space in colonial and postcolonial Indian fiction and film counters the marginalization of the sexual dissidents, both in the Indian nation-state and the Indian diaspora. The spatial reclamation in these texts, I contend, also interrogates the received notion of queer empowerment by shifting the emphasis from visibility and inclusion to alternative agential modes such as secrecy and camouflage. This departure from liberal Eurocentric discourses defines the essence of my project. The main body of my dissertation consists of analysis of texts by Anglophone, regional and diasporic Indian writers and filmmakers: Rabindranath Tagore's short stories (c.1890), Ismat Chughtai's "Lihaaf" (1941), Shani Mootoo's "Out on Main Street" (1993), Nisha Ganatra's *Chutney Popcorn* (1999), Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* (2001), Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman* (2002), and R.Raj Rao's *The Boyfriend* (2003). I examine the different ways in which these texts represent queer space and how they imagine an alternate cartography for the disenfranchised sexual citizens. In order to contextualize the process of this dispossession, I examine the relationship between colonialism, nationalism and alternative sexualities by focusing on the contemporary historical and theoretical debates around the issues. My theoretical framework combines two emergent discourses in contemporary academia: cultural geography and postcolonial rethinking of the constructions of gender and sexuality. In the texts that I examine, queer space emerges as a site of contestation with an underlying consciousness of conflicts, not as utopian loci of disconnection with reality.

Abstract Approved: \_\_\_\_\_

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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PH.D. THESIS

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This is to certify that the Ph.D. thesis of

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has been approved by the Examining Committee  
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## INTRODUCTION: QUEER SPACE IN INDIAN FICTION AND FILM

My dissertation argues that the representation of queer spaces in Indian literary and cinematic texts counters the disempowerment of the queer community in postcolonial India. Simultaneously marginalized by the nation-state and mainstream cultural discourse, the figure of the dissident sexual citizen in India has been, by and large, written out of history and visibility. This fact of this erasure has been addressed in the recent years by queer activism and queer historiography, as well as by literary, cinematic and artistic works that have attempted to capture the uniqueness of queer experience in India. By “uniqueness,” I wish to indicate a dilemma specific to the Indian queer subject, whose desire to be acknowledged in the narrative of the nation is complicated by an anticipation of overt or insidious homophobia, whose language of self-definition has been confounded by the violence of colonization and the inadequacy of terminology borrowed from the West. The process of queer spatial reclamation, of the return from the periphery to the center, then, must also be strategized and articulated in unique terms, with a sensitivity to the historical, cultural and social position of the queer subject in postcolonial India. In my project, I examine texts in which the representations of queer space depart from— and indeed question— the uniform celebration of visibility that is central to Western coming-out narratives. They simultaneously challenge the heteropatriarchal spatial deployment found in mainstream narratives and dominant cultural practices in India. I analyze a selection of literary and filmic texts—novels, short stories and a film—from colonial and postcolonial India and the Indian diaspora to demonstrate how queer space is constituted and configured within the context of this “unique” ambivalence, which results in a distinct kind of territorial reclamation. Before I elaborate

on the theoretical, historical, and structural aspects of my dissertation, I wish to share some personal impressions (“snapshots”) that have helped me solidify the key questions for this project and helped shape the trajectory of my critical inquiry. I call them “snapshots” primarily because they are visual impressions of what I came to define as queer space and spatial reclamation and used to look for similar instances in literary and filmic narratives to examine in my project. The four snapshots are set in different loci (spaces), a difference which further brings out the contrast in “space-making,” a contrast central to my project.

Calcutta, 1998: A landmark in the representation of queer South Asia, Deepa Mehta’s *Fire* provoked unprecedented conflict when it opened in the theaters of Indian cities in November 1998. Right-wing Hindu organizations condemned the film, claiming that it was an assault on “Indian” culture and sensibilities on multiple levels: by its depiction of a lesbian relationship between the daughters-in-law of a traditional household, by its choice of the name of India’s beloved epic heroine Sita for one of the characters, by its consistent use of the trope of the Hindu epic Ramayana for a filmic narrative that valorized female same-sex desire.<sup>1</sup> There was an unambiguous conflation of “Hindu” and “Indian” in these expressions of moral and ideological outrage, which ranged from fiery rhetoric in the media and public gatherings to vandalizing the theaters that were showing the film between December 1998 and January 1999. Even before these outbursts had begun, there was an atmosphere of anticipatory titillation among the potential audience unused to subject-matter such as this in mainstream or art house

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<sup>1</sup> Shiv Sena, an extreme right-wing offshoot of the Bharatiya Janta Party, was chief among the groups that were vociferous against Mehta’s film. Shiv Sena’s attempts to disrupt the screenings were compounded by similar right-wing organizations in different parts of India.

cinema, sensation that was spreading by word of mouth in schools, colleges, universities, clubs, soirees, public meeting places (“Have you seen that *lesbian* film by what’s-her-name, the NRI director?”).<sup>2</sup> Foreseeing trouble, some theatres in the metropolises scheduled gender-segregated screenings.<sup>3</sup> I happened to attend one such women-only screening at the Chaplin Theater in Calcutta, sometime in December 1998. My academic interest in the film at that point was little or none. But it was definitely not just another afternoon at the theater: there was curiosity, and a degree of disgust at the ugly face of bigotry that the controversy had unveiled. After the noisy winter afternoon outside, where street vendors were peddling their wares raucously on the sidewalks of Lindsay Street, the calm inside the dark theater was palpable. Not a dead calm, though: it was as if the emotion was in a state suspended animation. Women sat in groups of twos and threes, scattered throughout the moderately populated theater but seemingly connected by an invisible bond of comradeship with the strangers they shared the space with. More than anything else, the connection seemed to be based on a sense of overwhelming relief— at being released from personae that they are forced to inhabit daily, at the possibility of emoting in response to the “taboo” desire represented on screen and of being themselves without being judged. Part of this perception may have been a projection on my part; I have no empirical data to prove otherwise. But I did sense a difference in the dynamic of the audience at that screening: a general perception of a “safe space” removed from the surveillance of the social panopticon and from the inflexible mandates of normalcy,

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<sup>2</sup>NRI, a popular Indian abbreviation for non-resident Indian, a label widely used to indicate the status of the Canada-based Mehta.

<sup>3</sup>In an article on the reception of *Fire*, Jigna Desai suggests that the gender-segregated screenings were organized mainly based on the anticipation of lewd and sexually explicit comments from “working-class males.”

sealed off from the controversy and rumors outside. The theater felt like reclaimed—“queered”?—space where destabilizing norms seemed acceptable. This spatial reclamation seemed removed from the vocal protests of activists who demanded freedom of artistic expression and rights for marginalized sexualities.<sup>4</sup> It seemed intimate and invisible and strangely potent at the same time, and it is this image of the darkened theater that I turned to when I began my attempts to understand the representations of queer space in Indian fiction and film.

Iowa City, 2002: My first semester at the University of Iowa. The intellectual excitement was almost cancelled out at times by bouts of homesickness and feelings of isolation and loss, expected but overwhelming nonetheless. In one of the early meetings of a course that I was taking in the Women’s Studies department (an all-women class, again), we got into an informal discussion of what “home” meant for each of us. It was a sensitive topic that I did not feel inclined to talk about at the time, although our conversation made me realize that each of us was experiencing her own sense of isolation, that it was not my individual lot as an Indian diasporic graduate student. One definition of home stood out in my mind; it still does, in fact. A classmate told us that she realized what home was when at the end of a particularly stressful day, harassed, heckled and humiliated in her interactions with the world, she emerged from a public building to see her partner waiting for her— and that was home for her, right there. It was this conflation of desire and spatiality, of intimacy and the definition of domestic space that

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<sup>4</sup> In chapter four of my dissertation, I examine representations of spaces very similar to this one, an all-woman railway compartment in Anita Nair’s *Ladies Coupe* and an LGBT film screening in Manju Kapur’s *A Married Woman*. In Nair’s novel, ironically, the central character feels alienated from both the representations of Euro-American queer expression and activism.

appealed to me then and continues to do so— at that time as an emotional concept, now as a scholarly inquiry. It resurfaced when I read Zadie Smith’s *On Beauty*, where a moment of homoemotive bonding is expressed by a line from a Nick Laird poem: “There is such shelter in each other.”<sup>5</sup> Both my classmate’s narrative and the moment from Smith’s novel alter the valence of a spatial mode (home/shelter) to accommodate the idea of a connection (erotic/emotive) to suggest that an actual person may double as a place of comfort. My dissertation is an attempt to understand the implication of this substitution through my readings of Indian texts that inscribe queer space. This involves looking at actual space and how it accommodates or marginalizes desire, and at metaphorical “spaces” of desire imagined in the texts.

Houston, 2006: I was trying to understand a new city, conservative by repute. My first encounters with people were tentative and guarded. The geography of this automobile-infested city was still unknown to me when I heard of Montrose, the designated gay neighborhood of Houston. The target of homophobic sniggers (“*Where else in town would a gay guy live?*”) in some circles, it first impressed me as some kind of a gay ghetto. Not when I came to know it, though. Home to the Houston Pride, a hub of eclectic cuisine and off-beat merchandise, Montrose is the alternative face of conservative Houston. The neighborhood is more diverse than other parts of the city, more pedestrian-friendly, and boasts of beautiful homes with the kind of old-style architecture that is fast disappearing elsewhere in the city, replaced by upstart

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<sup>5</sup> I refer to a moment of connection, not necessarily erotic but more intense than a non-erotic friendship, between Kiki Belsey and Carlene Kipps, whose husbands’ ideological positions and personal animosity force them apart. The line is from “Pedigree” by Nick Laird, a poet, novelist, lawyer and critic from Northern Ireland, who is married to the writer Zadie Smith.

townhomes. In the 1970s, the area became well-known for the prominent presence of gay and lesbian communities, and is home to several gay bars and nightclubs. Scarcely a ghetto, the neighborhood continues to impact the rest of the city culturally, drawing the mainstream into its orbit while maintaining its own distinct identity. It has altered the geography of sexual segregation by destabilizing the notion of marginality. The American Planning Association, which has recently named Montrose one of the ten great neighborhoods in America, describes Montrose in glowing words:

One of Houston's original streetcar suburbs, Montrose has a sliver of everything. Eclectic and urbane, the neighborhood is a fusion of architectural styles, land uses and people (former residents include President Lyndon Johnson and billionaire Howard Hughes). The neighborhood has a thriving art, museum and cultural scene, and local businesses. It has been the center of Houston's gay and lesbian community since the 1970s. The neighborhood retains much of its early 20<sup>th</sup> century character: one third of the city's historic districts are here.<sup>6</sup>

The real-estate-brochure feel of this 2009 APA report underscores the current commercial appeal of Montrose: the sniggers are now complemented with a desire of possession. In my perception, this is spatial reclamation at its best: the breakdown of the traditional divide of the center and the periphery and the hierarchy implicit in the notion. In my dissertation, I investigate whether such an instance of territorial reclamation is possible in the Indian context, and if it might be a viable strategy for Indian queer subjects.

Chennai 2009: July 2, 2009 is a milestone in the history of queer activism in India. A historic decision of the Delhi High Court decriminalized homosexuality and thus overturned the colonial law that had defined same-sex relationships and activity as an “unnatural offence.” In this decision, an aspect of the infamous Section 377 of the Indian

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<sup>6</sup> Description found in the website of the American Planning Association, listed in the 2009 catalogue of “Great Places in America: Neighborhoods.”

Penal Code instituted by the British in 1860 was nullified on the grounds that the criminalization of consensual sexual acts in private infringed the fundamental rights guaranteed to the individual under the Constitution of India. Consensus is key in this judgment: non-consensual non-vaginal sexual acts continue to be considered a criminal offence. The decision is an outcome of a legal initiative taken by the Naz Foundation, a non-governmental organization, in the interest of the public. A few days before this (June 29), LGBT activists and supporters organized a Pride parade in Chennai.<sup>7</sup> Given the relatively conservative temperament of city when compared to other Indian metropolises, this was indeed a watershed event, a public declaration of the participants either identifying with or supporting the LGBT position. People swarmed the streets of the city demanding the repeal of section 377 of the IPC as a measure to protect human rights. What was significant in this particular parade was the number of protestors wearing masks. Masks were a defining element of the parade, to the extent that a mask designer was engaged to create them. A weblog on the parade reports:

Noted mask-designer, Paul, had specially designed face wear for himself and his friends. The masks featured beautifully hand-carved and hand painted motifs, and were bordered by bright pink feathers. When asked where he came up with the idea for the design, he said “I happened on an old and disused pink feather duster at the bottom of my mother’s cleaning cabinet.” Needless to say, the realization (that it wasn’t just the idea that came from that duster, but the materials too) swept everyone away.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> I use the term LGBT advisedly here. In spite of the majority of the queer community not identifying themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender (or using vernacular approximations of the terms), the terms are typically used in the language of activism. In her discussion of queer self-definition in India, Ruth Vanita comments on the efficacy of these “empowering” terms, both in the context of queer activism and queer self-definition.

<sup>8</sup> The recorded moments from the Chennai Pride parade can be found on a weblog by Foreskinpress. The article included snippets from the interviews of the participants and photographs of the parade.

The masks were not just ordinary masks; both the use of the color pink and the feather duster— traditionally associated with femininity and related household chores— indicated a subversion of received notions of gendered and sexual practices, a key philosophy in queer activism. However, despite this added signification, the masks continued to be what they primarily are: a device to obscure identity, an unwillingness to “come out” to the public. Does the mask then serve as a replication of the closet, and signify ambivalence about revelation of queer identities? Seemingly antithetical to both the spirit and the manifest purpose of queer activism as such and the Pride parade in particular, the masks and what they apparently signify underscore the paradox inherent in the socio-cultural positioning of the Indian queer subject. Even with the decriminalization of homosexuality, what remains to be changed is the cultural perception of the queer subject as deviant, marginal, pathological or even demonic. The marginalism implicit in the colonial legal and cultural discourse continues in the present-day mainstream culture of the postcolonial locus. The cultural perception complicates the idea of coming out for the queer subject in India, who wants to reclaim his/her rights but is ambivalent about the idea of queer visibility. This duality, I argue, is replicated in the parade of masks that we witness in Chennai. The reclamation of public space— the streets of a city conservative by repute— and a bid for political visibility is accompanied by the simultaneous, paradoxical move to persist in a state of invisibility. The politics of the closet is, then, differently accented in this locus, just as the spatial metaphor of the closet is differentially constructed. The masked parade’s attempt at territorial reclamation, for me, is an allegorical representation of the paradoxical politics of queer India, and in my readings of literary and filmic texts, I examine representations of queer space that balance the



expressing of a distinct gay and lesbian identity with a need for preserving a state of invisibility.

These, then, are the questions that I was left with from revisiting the “snapshots” in the course of developing my dissertation: what space(s)— physical, architectural and metaphorical— can be claimed or reclaimed by the queer subject, and how?<sup>9</sup> How does this process of reclamation acquire special significance in the context of postcolonial India? In what ways is this process of queer reterritorialization similar to and different from the recorded history of spatial reclamation, primarily in the West? Finally (and most importantly), how are queer spaces reclaimed in the literary and filmic texts of India? I argue that these representations counter the marginalization of the queer community. I also claim that the literary and cinematic reclamation of queer spaces enables us to interrogate the heteronormative configuration of space. In their depiction of queer space, the texts underscore its erotic dynamics, its potential for engaging with “mainstream” spaces and its simultaneous liminality and the distinct cadence of its language. With this in mind, I attempt to trace the narrative of queerness in India in the first part of this chapter, a narrative that leads us back to the question of queer reclamation of space.

*The Accent of Postcoloniality: History, Theory and Practice*

In this section, I underscore the need for a distinctive theoretical framework for understanding and writing about queer experience and its literary/filmic representations in India. I believe what necessitates this framework is the coexistence of several distinct

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<sup>9</sup> In the section on queer spatial reclamation in this chapter, I elaborate on the distinctive nature of each of these spaces and how they fit into the context of queer reterritorialization.

yet convergent attitudes to homoeroticism in postcolonial India: the residual homophobia from the colonial period that articulates itself both through legal discourse and cultural response, the simultaneous unspoken tolerance of queer subculture, and the different modes of individual and collective resistance to homophobia. I began this investigation of the positioning of same-sex desire in India with reference to space: the metaphor of territorial reclamation is perhaps more apt when used in a postcolonial context, where the gay, lesbian and bisexual/transgendered communities experience a form of marginalization that can be equated with political disenfranchisement. This process of disenfranchisement is inextricably linked with a nation's colonial legacy. In colonial India, the minoritization of "queer" sexualities—sexualities positioned outside the heteronormative binary pattern—was an implicit part of the political agenda of the colonizer. Homosexuality was discursively constructed as a specifically oriental "vice" that validated colonial intervention and control. Anti-colonial nationalism replicated this oppression through its attempt to reinvent/redeem the nation as a locus purged of these alleged vices: procreative heterosexuality became an obligatory qualification for sexual citizenship in decolonized India. Historians of homoeroticism in the Indian subcontinent—Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai among them—rightly point out that while same-sex desire was not uniformly valorized or celebrated in pre-colonial India, homosexuality rarely called for punitive measures before the British instituted the anti-sodomy law in 1861.<sup>10</sup> A pre-colonial text that contains an approximation of a code

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<sup>10</sup> In the introduction to the final section of *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History* (2001), Vanita and Kidwai examine in detail the colonial impact on the expression of same-sex desire, analyzing how colonial legal discourse rigidified normative patterns of sexual behavior. They also analyze the homophobic tendencies that continue in present-day Indian society, coexisting with more tolerant traditions.

penalizing same-sex desire is the *Manusmriti*, which mandates forms of punishment for homosexual behavior or acts. Manu's mandates, however, are more patriarchal than homophobic; judging by the asymmetrical codes for men and women, it is apparent that the intention of the text is more the safekeeping of the virginity of the women than any obvious rigidification of hegemonic heteronormativity<sup>11</sup>. Colonialism, then, can be reasonably assumed to constitute a moment of rupture in what might have been a continuum in which the definitions of sexualities were unstable and indeterminate, or at least in which sexualities did not get categorized based on the acceptable vs. marginal category. The colonial legal and cultural discourse also set up the binaries of normal and abnormal sexualities, a move that was crucial for the subsequent rigidification of these categories in the nationalist imaginary.

The anti-sodomy law, however, is largely symbolic in the effect that it has on the cultural consciousness of the Indian nation. Even before its repeal this year (in the context of the decriminalization of consensual same-sex activity), it was rarely used for actual convictions, but functioned instead as a tool for legitimizing the marginalization of the queer communities. In a preface to a collection of articles on queer politics in contemporary India, Gautam Bhan and Arvind Narrain point out this aspect of the law:

The law is not simply a space of enforcement, but an active arbiter of social norms and morality...Section 377 expresses a deep societal repugnance towards queer people and provides a fig leaf of legitimacy for the harassment of the queer people by family, friends, the medical establishment and other official institutions...Legal reform is just one part of the process of social change, and a change in the law will have a real impact on the everyday life of queer people only if it is used to challenge

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<sup>11</sup> Manu's text reveals a striking disparity in the punitive measures meted out to men and women for indulgence in same-sex activities. The punishments meant for women, especially virgins, are far more severe than the ones designated for men, which are primarily in the form of monetary penalties. In an article titled "Approaching the Present," Sibaji Bandyopadhyay points out this distinction.

homophobia in the larger society, and the intimate spaces of our families, homes, relationships and workplaces (Bhan and Narrain 8).<sup>12</sup>

The article dates back to 2005, four years before the legal change was actually effected. It remains to be seen if this heretofore unarticulated connection between the now-nonexistent law and the cultural internalization of it could be made in order to alter the lived experience of the queer subject. What makes this task particularly difficult is the elusive nature of homophobia in Indian society. What is here understood as homophobia is a diffuse resentment against the partially formulated category of the “abnormal.” Queer activist Akshay Khanna elaborates on this phenomenon:

My sense is that ‘homophobia’ doesn’t begin to describe the experience of being queer in India. For a collective attitude to be called ‘homophobia’ there needs to be a collective recognition of the ‘homosexual’— a person who could be categorized as a type, othered and hated/feared. My understanding is that the ‘homosexual’ is not a category that may be considered to be collectively recognized, outside of certain middle- to upper-middle-class urban context (Khanna 163).

Khanna’s perception underscores the uneven nature of the reception of non-normative sexualities in Indian culture as compared to the more rigid or more clearly articulated fear/hatred of dissident sexualities in many Western contexts.<sup>13</sup>

What makes a collective or individual resistance to homophobia close to impossible is the absence of a concerted resistance to alternative sexuality (except the movement against the anti-sodomy law, which queer activists have sought to bring to the attention of

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<sup>12</sup> Bhan and Narrain attempt to understand the working of the anti-sodomy law within the framework of the Foucauldian model of the panopticon, a mechanism of legal control internalized by the subject rather than an externally enforceable law.

<sup>13</sup> Khanna also mentions the existence and tolerance of non-normative sexual practices in Indian society. He points out that cultural and religious practices in India sometimes have a homosexual “idiom”: like the “masti” (flirtation and sexual play) between young boys and the religious practice of *aravani*, a festival in Tamil Nadu that attracts people from all over South Asia, which commemorates a myth celebrating same-sex practice by actual sexual encounters between men participating in the festival. Citing instances of similar practices and rituals, Khanna points out that these are rarely perceived as expressions of homosexual desire.

the public and the government and which has now been overturned). I believe what further complicates the process of isolating either what is understood as “homophobia” or specifically “homosexual” activity or behavior is the centrality of homosociality. Forms of male and female homosociality sanctioned by Indian culture make homoeroticism visually and spatially difficult to isolate. All-male or all-female spaces, public and private, may well conceal same-sex erotic connections. The instances cited by Khanna are examples of such homosocially charged eroticism, which have cultural and religious sanction. Rituals like the *aravani* are residual practices from pre-colonial Indian tradition, similar to the Vaishnava practices in Bengal that involve the adoration of a male deity by a male devotee.<sup>14</sup> Religious-cultural practices that depart from normative heterosexuality were thus tolerated and encouraged in precolonial India, and despite being vilified by the British have survived after decolonization. The transgender community of Hijras in India embodies another quasi-religious manifestation of alternative sexuality. Hijras are castrated men who have not had a vagina constructed, and live by means of prostitution, extortion and other forms of social parasitism. Hijras are positioned outside the margins of the mainstream culture, and have yet been “normalized” in its perception. The liminality implicit in the Hijras’ social position is counterbalanced by their mythic association with Bahuchara Mata, one of the many incarnations of the Mother Goddess

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<sup>14</sup> Vaisnavism emerged in 14<sup>th</sup> Century Bengal as a regional expression of the pan-Indian Bhakti Movement. A distinctive offshoot of traditional Hinduism, the cult focuses on the worship of the god Vishnu and his manifestations (Rama, Krishna). The underlying belief is that a union with God may be achieved through a blend of love and devotion; this necessitates the devotee to vicariously go through the stages of a romantic yearning for God. It is in this mode that “queer,” gender-bending practices come into play: a male devotee imaginatively identifies with the lovelorn beloved who pines for her lover. Rabindranath Tagore uses this trope in his short story “The Divide.” In the story, the Vaishnavite trope is introduced as a discernibly homoerotic subtext in a narrative of friendship between two men which otherwise would have passed as homosocial bonding. I analyze this story in detail in the second chapter of my dissertation.

worshipped across India. This association implicitly sanctions their existence and position in society, connecting them with the tropes of androgyny and gender-bending practices in extant religious traditions.<sup>15</sup>

What complicates the impression of this sexually “tolerant” locus that I have built up in the last few paragraphs is the fact that religious and cultural acceptance of homoeroticism notwithstanding, the idea of the nation continues to be defined in heteronormative terms. As a result, the “tolerance” remains confined either to subcultural formations or as unarticulated tolerance of “masked” homoeroticism. Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code was a reality until very recently, a potent symbol of the marginalization and an actual threat to the existence of alternative sexualities. An identical colonial law existing in the penal codes of Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka limits the rights of citizenship of queer subjects. The fact of Islam being the state religion in Pakistan and Bangladesh further complicates the question of the reception of sexual minorities, while the Buddhist majority of Sri Lanka sets the conservative tone in this issue. Another symbolic force that orders the apparently private domain of sexuality is nationalism. The rigidification of sexual norms in nationalistic thought that had taken place in response to the colonial vilification of indigenous sexual behavior as “depraved” and “abnormal” continues to manifest itself, either in the symbolic idea of the nation upheld by procreative sexuality or in the more concrete vocal equations of national identity with heteronormativity in the rhetoric of right-wing political parties like the Bharatiya Janata Party in India. The theorization of the nexus between nationalism and

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<sup>15</sup> In *Effeminism: The Economy of Colonial Desire*, Revathy Krishnaswamy examines how androgyny, or more specifically “femininity-in-masculinity” was a valued construct in the Hindu religious traditions, but later eroded under the prescriptive modes of gendered behavior constructed by colonial discourse. I would complicate Revathy’s claim to a degree: the construct of androgyny, marginalized in mainstream culture, have survived in postcolonial India in religious subcultures.

sexuality is crucial to my project, which seeks to investigate the modes of expression of queer identities in post/colonial contexts. The definition of a “postcolonial” identity premises itself on a sense of nationhood that is distinct from the concept of an ex-colony; therefore, an investigation into the expression of queer sexualities in a decolonized space must take into account how the nationalist discourse articulates/marginalizes/ represses these expressions. In the introduction to *Nationalisms and Sexualities* (1992), the editors Andrew Parker *et al* draw on the work of the historian George Moss to understand this connection. Parker *et al* complicate Moss’s argument by claiming that neither “nation” nor “sexuality” is a “trans-historical, supra-national or self-evident” category: the definition of each is a variable dependent on the socio-cultural specificity of a given space or time. This claim notwithstanding, they analyze some pervasive characteristics of the nation based on Benedict Anderson’s insightful work, *Imagined Communities* (1983). They point out that the “deep, horizontal comradeship” that the nation is imagined as, makes it emphatically a “fraternity,” a definitively gendered, essentially homosocial construct that undermines the presence or even the possibility of any feminine space. The authors point out that historically, feminism has rarely been coterminous with nationalism. Ironically, the nation itself is often imagined as female. This trope of nation-as-woman is configured differently in different situations: as a victim of colonial violence, as a mother-goddess presiding over a virile community of “brothers.” In this frame of reference, any form of non-reproductive sexuality— including same-sex desire— is rendered inadmissible.

Parker *et al*’s formulation is of particular relevance to the Indian context that I focus on in my dissertation. Both the homosociality of nationalism and the oppositional

yet essential ideal of heteronormativity characterize nationalistic thought in decolonized India. The far right organizations that profess the kind of jingoistic nationalism based on hetero-patriarchal ideology are by and large “boy’s clubs,” although in recent years the cooptation of feminine consent to its workings has changed its accent to a degree.<sup>16</sup> The absence of feminine space is replicated in the absence of visible queer spaces, as same-sex desire has been erased from the narrative of nationality. In her study of the nature of nationalism, sociologist Jyoti Puri turns her attention to the Indian context in her chapter on the interrelation of nationalism and sexuality.<sup>17</sup> In exploring how sexuality is controlled by the nation, Puri raises several pertinent points: she points out how the public discourse of nationalism shapes something as private as a person’s sexual preference; she contends that nations and states uphold certain sexualities as “respectable” and others as abnormal or unacceptable; she also argues that individuals are inclined to construct their sexuality, often with unsatisfactory results, according to the mandates of the state and the nation.

Ethnographic studies confirm Puri’s point about the regulatory influence of the state in ordering sexual identities and the multiplicity of selves that sexual subjects are forced to inhabit as a result. Jeremy Seabrook and Arvind Kala undertake two such ethnographic studies, in which they establish, through their interviews with gay men, the paranoia that informs the world of the Indian homosexual.<sup>18</sup> In his work, Seabrook

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<sup>16</sup> In *Politics of the Possible* (2002), Kumkum Sangari analyzes how the rightist Bharatiya Janta Party and its allied religious organization Vishwa Hindu Parishad has used figures like the Hindu political activist Sadhvi Ritambhara to project an image of the empowerment of women.

<sup>17</sup> Puri’s analysis of the interrelation of nationalism and sexuality is part of her generalized theorization of the nature of nationalism; however, she uses the Indian context as a case in point.

<sup>18</sup> Seabrook studiously refrains from using the word “gay” to describe interviewees. He uses an distinctive nomenclature— Men who have Sex with Men (MSM)— to identify the members of this group; he feels



records the informal interviews that he conducted in 1997 with seventy-five gay men in Delhi. Through the interviews and his analyses of them, Seabrook establishes that the colonial and nationalist homophobia that had overtly and implicitly criminalized homoerotic behavior continues to linger in the minds of most people and non-normative forms of sexuality continue to remain marginalized. The result is not only a conscious terror about the consequence of coming to terms with their sexual identities, but also a deep ambivalence about the very nature of their sexuality. Kala's ethnographic study focuses on one hundred and twenty gay men and their experience as the "invisible minority" in India. Unlike Seabrook, Kala, as an Indian male, has an insider's perspective: his position as an ethnographer is visually less obvious in the cruising spots that he frequents in his quest for potential interviewees. The book, seemingly written for an Indian audience, takes for granted some of the assumptions of mainstream Indian culture: normative heterosexuality, traditional family structures, marriage as an obligatory social form. He explores the situation of gay men in heterosexual marriages, a duplicitous position that many gay men are forced to occupy in India, where heteronormative kinship patterns are a given. However, there are no such studies of the lesbian experience in India/South Asia; they are conspicuous by their absence. The attitude to female homoeroticism in South Asia could best be defined as an attempt to

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that the terms "gay" or "bisexual" are culture-specific and are inapplicable in a cultural context where being closeted is the norm. Seabrook contends that gay/bisexual are Western categories that would not adequately bracket the ambivalence inherent in the situation of the Indian homosexual, who is forced to adopt a duplicitous sexual identity because of societal pressures.

underscore its non-existence, erasing it through violence and oppression.<sup>19</sup> Similar patterns are replicated in the Indian diaspora: with the tendency of the diasporic imaginary to preserve the “traditions” of the homeland, homophobia becomes the defining element in the attitude towards diasporic sexual minorities. Access to alternative discourses of queer visibility complicates the diasporic queer subject’s position that cannot reconcile the dual identities of Indian and queer.

Resistance, however, continues— at least to the more visible aspects of homophobia. Most of queer activism in India, till recently, has been limited to the most concrete of the roadblocks: IPC Section 377. Organizations similar to the Naz Foundation have worked tirelessly to emphasize the infringement of human rights implicit in the law, and also the more palpable consequences of the neglect and stigmatization of HIV-positive people.<sup>20</sup> Naz’s efforts, however, have had success in addressing the issues of homosexual men rather than women, which is apparent in the section on advocacy of LGBT on their website. In tracing the history of Section 377, Naz claims:

MSM (Men who have Sex with Men) in India were penalized under Section 377, which could be used against anyone who ‘voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature’. Section 377 was often exploited by the police and others to harass, extort money from, blackmail, and even rape MSM, mainly those from the lower socio-economic classes who have little knowledge of the law and their rights. Section 377 was also used by the police to restrict gay-related activities and to justify raids on parties and events (Naz Foundation)

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<sup>19</sup> I examine the positioning of and the attitudes towards the female queer subject in the diaspora in chapter four of my dissertation, and of the erasure of female queer subjectivity in the region of South Asia in chapter five.

<sup>20</sup> In Pakistan, the LGBT cause is supported by the underground Green Party. In Sri Lanka and Bangladesh respectively, Companions on a Journey and Boys of Bangladesh are NGOs that work towards promoting equal rights for sexual minorities.

The lack of focus on women in section 377 is in itself an indication of the silence of female same-sex desire. Among the organizations that provide a support network for lesbian and bisexual women are Sakhi and Sangini in Delhi, Sangama in Mumbai, Sappho in Kolkata and SWAM in Chennai. There are several similar organizations for queer South Asian diasporic subjects, the South Asian Gay and Lesbian Association (SALGA) and Trikone. But the ambivalence about coming out and claiming one's rights remains in place, reflected as it is in the Pride Parade of Chennai. Queer subcultures in India also have a distinctly male bias.

Literary and artistic expression has been another mode of resistance, as has been the histories of queer artistic and cultural products. Besides the recent trend of perceptibly queer texts (like R.Raj Rao's *The Boyfriend* and Mehta's *Fire*), queer readings of apparently heteronormative cultural texts is a form of politicized, subversive criticism. Scholars like Ruth Vanita and Salim Kidwai have also attempted to uncover a continuum of same-sex desire in Indian culture. *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History* (2001), edited by Vanita and Kidwai, brings together literary representations and historical evidence of homoeroticism from ancient to contemporary India. The selections that are gleaned from historical and literary sources from a time-span of over 2000 years bear evidence to the existence and acceptability of homosexuality in the Indian cultural context. This evidence is perhaps most useful in deconstructing the myth of heteronormativity promoted by the Hindu Right Movements in contemporary India, a myth that holds homosexuality as a Western import incompatible with "traditional" Indian culture.

*The Need for Theory*

Uncovering narratives of same-sex desire necessitates the use of a lens to read them. The available critical terminology and framework is almost uniformly Eurocentric in its focus, which often is inadequate to read/articulate queer experience in postcolonial loci. In his theorization of the nexus between queer and postcolonial studies, Dennis Altman identifies globalizing trends as being responsible for the uncritical adoption of Western terminology as a means to consolidate queer identity. Altman investigates the influence of globalization on the formation of post/modern queer identities in third-world countries. As a manifestation of the influence of Western capitalism, Altman points out the recent burgeoning of gay commercial establishments in countries like Bogota, Budapest, Buenos Aires, Caracas, Istanbul, Johannesburg, Lima, Manila, Mexico City, Monterray, Prague, San Jose (Costa Rica), San Juan and Tangier. The fact that Western discourse on alternative sexuality has been internalized by non-Western cultures, Altman argues, is borne out also by the fact that gay organizing has rapidly increased in these countries. However, Altman warns against the pitfalls of an indiscriminate adaptation of this discourse for defining gay identities in non-Western communities. Terms like “gay,” “lesbian” and “men who have sex with men” remain inadequate since these terms are culture-specific. In addition to this, Altman also points out that the homo/heterosexual binary is essentially Western in origin and is an uneasy graft on cultures that categorize sexualities differently. Altman directs our attention to the fact that the globalization of capitalism has resulted in a reorganization of homosexual identities, a reconfiguration prompted by the desire to emulate “universalizing” lifestyle trends. He suggests that a discussion of modern

homosexualities ought to take into account the following: the relevance of premodern forms of sexual organization; whether sexual organizing is similar or different for women; an awareness of class/caste divides; the existence of non-Western family patterns; the specificity of the situation of the diaspora, and the networking of the developing countries among themselves. While acknowledging the rapidly shrinking gulf between the organizations of sexualities in Western and non-Western cultures, keeping these specificities in mind ensures that we not elide this distinction altogether. Although scholars like Vanita argues that the adoption of Western terms are empowering for queer politics in Third World countries, Altman, I believe, is right in cautioning us against these terms' tendency to elide the specificity of queer experience in a particular cultural context.

Evelyn Blackwood makes a similar argument in "Cross-Cultural Lesbian Studies: Problems and Possibilities" (1996). Blackwood's article, interrogating as it does the Eurocentric bias of lesbian studies within the Euro-American academy, has significant relevance for a project like mine that seeks to investigate the expression of queer identities in the South Asian context. The article makes a timely intervention in the field of lesbian studies and challenges the validity of a critical trajectory that does not take cross-cultural perspectives into account. Blackwood claims that the intimate experiences of women in other countries and cultures do not find adequate representation in Euro-American lesbian studies; in fact, the terms and parameters used in this critical field fall short of such a representation. Blackwood admits, however, that some progress has been made in this direction; the project, she claims, had received a significant impetus in the 1970s, a development that was coterminous with the gay liberation

movement that sought to establish a network of homosexual communities across cultures. To substantiate this point, Blackwood traces the development of critical works that focus on the transcultural experience of same-sex desire. In the list of works that deal with lesbian experience and transgendered practices in Asia, Africa, the Pacific and Latin America, the absence of focus on the South Asian experience is noticeable. However, in discussing lesbianism vis-à-vis the postcolonial context, Blackwood makes a distinction that I find particularly useful: she claims that indigenous writers either try to resist Western sexual ideology and reclaim their subjectivity through reclamation of traditions, or embrace Western ideology as a liberatory/revisionist discourse that is posited against oppressive traditions which marginalize expressions of dissident sexualities. Blackwood discusses the usefulness of introducing cross-cultural lesbian studies in academic curricula: she claims that it would necessitate a rethinking of what passes as “normative” sexuality, family and kinship patterns. Blackwood reconsiders the question of the inadequacy of Western terminology to encompass the diversity of lesbian and transgendered experience across cultures. As an example, she cites the colonization of the Native American language of lesbian sexuality and the attempt on the part of indigenous writers to resist this move. Blackwood sums up her arguments for the necessity of cross cultural lesbian studies by suggesting a possible trajectory that this field might take:

The trend of lesbian and gay studies cross-culturally is to shift from the identification of patterns, traits and roles towards a more dynamic perspective emphasizing the construction of particular gendered or sexual identities, the continual negotiation and transformation in the context of dominant cultural categories, the interplay between dominant and subordinate categories and ideologies, and the conflict among multiple identities of diverse sexual meanings (198).

Finally, Blackwood returns to the definition of the broader parameters of lesbian studies and points out that the inclusion of the study of transgendered practices has destabilized the term “lesbian” studies.

Gayatri Gopinath brings this debate into the specific context of South Asian studies with her study of the South Asian queer subject. She emphasizes the need for an alternative theoretical model to articulate Non-Western queer experience, which often gets subsumed under the disciplinary framework of Western queer theory. In a review of Deepa Mehta’s *Fire* in the *Gay and Lesbian Quarterly*, she critiques the mainstream reception of the film in the U.S., as expressed in reviews of the film that read its narrative as a failure of lesbian “agency”:

Indeed, almost all mainstream U.S. reviewers stress the failure of “these Hindus” to articulate lesbianism intelligibly which in turn signifies the failure of the non-West to progress towards the organization of sexuality and gender prevalent in the West. To these critics, ironically, lesbian and gay identity becomes legible and indeed desirable when and where it can be incorporated in this developmental narrative of modernity (637).

The “developmental narrative of modernity” that Gopinath refers to is the one with the insistent emphasis on visibility as the *only* agential mode in the context of queer self-expression. In her longer work on the queer diasporic subject, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (2005), Gopinath returns to this debate around the need for a distinct theoretical lens to understand the specificities of non-Western sexualities. The assumption of a monolithic gay identity and range of experience across cultures, she contends, is an essentialist move that implicitly hierarchizes non-visible queerness below “out” LGBT identities. She also contends that a break with hetero-patriarchal institutions (like the family home) does not necessarily signify agency. She wishes to interrogate the hegemony of this assumption, and emphasizes a more

nuanced attention to the historical context of the queer identities in question. Gopinath examines selected cultural productions of the South Asian diaspora to investigate how the positionality of the diaspora affects the expression of queer desire. She explores how the diasporic affiliation to the nationalist imaginary modifies the mapping of queer desire onto the diaspora. Gopinath contends that rather than “evoking an imaginary homeland frozen in an idyllic moment outside history, what is remembered through queer diasporic desire and the queer diasporic body is a past time and place riven with contradictions and multiple uprootings, displacements and exiles” (4). Gopinath argues that queer diasporic desire reimagines the histories of colonial violence that shape queer identities. Her focus in the book is on queer female diasporic subjectivity. Gopinath identifies female queer desire in the diaspora as “impossible,” because the figure of the woman is imagined as a symbol of procreative sexuality in both nationalist and diasporic discourses. The position of a female queer diasporic subject is rendered “unthinkable” because non-reproductive sexuality disrupts the notions of home and community that are central to the nationalist and diasporic discourses. She demonstrates how, in this context, the queer subject resorts to alternative agential modes, which does not necessitate a radical departure from loci of patriarchal control, but a subversion of hegemonic heteronormativity from within it. Gopinath’s theorization of this departure from the normative understanding of alternative sexualities has enabled me to formulate how queer space is represented in Indian fiction and film. Although I am cautious about the reification of “Western” and “non-Western” categories, Gopinath’s insistence on paying attention to historical specificity while understanding queer experience has been useful to me in framing my readings of queer space, a formulation that I elaborate in the following section.



*Spaces of Desire*

The first and obvious rationale for choosing queer space as the focus of my inquiry is the spatial aspect of the metaphor of the closet. Central both to the conceptualization of a major part of Western queer theory and to the motivation of queer activism, the closet remains the potent symbol of queer oppression. In her key text of queer theory, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick comments on the enduring control of this symbol: she claims it is “for many gay people still the fundamental feature of social life; and there can be few gay people, however courageous or forthright by habit, however fortunate in the support of their immediate communities, in whose lives the closet is not a shaping presence” (68). The closet, for the most part, remains limited to its metaphorical status. The power of the metaphor is undeniable: it indicates at once the restraints on queer self-expression, the terror and claustrophobia inherent in these restraints as well as to the simultaneous mystification, revulsion, fear and curiosity of the onlooker outside the closet in response to the quasi-mythical, part-demonic “other” inside it (a replication of the childhood fantasy of the unseen “monster in the closet”). Emergent trends in cultural geography, based on the perception of space as being culturally produced, have theorized the connection of space with gender and sexuality. In her seminal work on space, place and gender, Doreen Massey moves from analyzing the practical aspect of gender-segregated spaces to this *symbolic* aspect of actual geographical spaces:

From the symbolic meaning of spaces /places and the clearly gendered message that they transmit, to straightforward exclusion by violence, spaces and places are not only in themselves gendered but in their being so they both reflect and affect the way in which gender is constructed and understood. The limitation on women’s mobility, in terms of both identity and space, has been in some cultures, the crucial means of subordination (179).

Although I am not conflating the related but distinct concepts of gender and sexuality, the claim that Massey makes here about subordination of women being related as much to identity as to actual physical space is useful for me in formulating the politics of the closet in terms of geography. Just as actual physical spaces have gendered/sexual identities produced through convention, function and practice, gendered/sexual identities are constructed through limitation of mobility in or access to space. The spatiality of the closet is primarily visual: it hinges on the binaries of seeing vs. not seeing, visibility vs. invisibility. The closet— both physical and metaphorical— is a space of hiding, of darkness, of invisibility. Consequently, the definition of liberation, of relief, of returning to visibility constitutes the act of *coming out* of the closet and (re) claiming the visible space outside. The metaphorical closet in the context of queer theory/activism operates on this principle of the cycles of oppression, struggle and liberation/reclamation. In *Closet Space*, geographer Michael Brown examines the functioning of the familiar symbolic closet in the context of physical spaces: the body (or the individual queer subject), the city, the nation and the world. Brown's theoretical framework is central to my understanding the closet and framing it in terms of actual spaces. Brown's formulation of the closet, however, has to be modified in my work: primarily because I argue that the nature of the closet changes in the postcolonial locus. The focus of Brown's work is largely on Euro-American spaces; in the final section ("Worlding the Closet"), he directs his attention to other loci (Africa and Japan, for example) and the construction of closets in them, the loci are presented through the travel narratives of the gay American journalist Neil Miller. The trajectory of the chapter is largely comparative:

it is an attempt to understand the differential functioning of the closet in different geographical loci.

Which brings us to the inevitable question: what determines the location of the metaphorical closet in actual physical space? The closet, understandably, is a variable cultural construct: what forces decide where in the landscape of a locus a closet should be, and why? In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre argues that space and spatial practices are social productions. Social (in Lefebvre's Marxist analysis, largely economic) practices are reproduced in spatial practices: “(Social) space is a (social) product...the space thus produced also acts as a tool of thought and action; that in addition to being a means of production it is also means of control, and hence of domination, of power” (Lefebvre 26). According to Lefebvre, the hierarchy implicit in social relations influences spatial configuration and spatial practices. Space cannot be reified as an independent, neutral dimension preceding social relations, but is rather a product and a replication of them. He argues that “(social) space is not a thing among other things, nor a product among other products: rather, it subsumes things produced and encompasses their interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity—their (relative) order and/or (relative) disorder” (Lefebvre 73). Based on this argument, it seems reasonable to assume that the domination of the hegemonic ideology of heteronormativity is likely to affect the ordering of space. The spatial metaphor of a heterosexual “center,” with the non-normative sexualities situated in the “periphery” could be understood in actual geographical terms. In a given locus, the spaces of “power” and “domination” are occupied by subjects who align themselves with the mainstream narrative of normative heterosexuality, and lend special significance to the metaphorical

marginality of the queer subject. The spatial deployment of built environment emphasizes this split, with the production of gay “ghettos” disconnected from the spaces of power.

The disempowerment implicit in ghettoization, however, is not the only lens through which to understand the production of queer space. The politics of spatial deployment is hardly one-sided, and the notion of queer space is contested in the sense that for queer communities, a bid for inclusion into mainstream spaces is almost always counterbalanced by the desire to maintain their alterity, which complicates the understanding of the situational implication of queer space. I believe that the term “queer space,” unlike “gay ghetto,” is an expression of empowerment, of a conscious reclamation of mainstream space and imposing the desired alterity of minoritized sexualities. Lefebvre defines spatial appropriation as the space “modified in order to serve the groups and possibilities of a group that it has been appropriated by that group” (Lefebvre 165). Based on Lefebvre’s definition, the conscious production of queer space could be termed re-appropriation. In theorizing the connection between nationalism and sexuality, Jyoti Puri cites the example of Queer Nation to explain how the formation of an “imagined community” that does not privilege heterosexuality unites dispossessed sexual minorities. Queer nationalism aims at countering ghettoization and expanding the parameters of queer space. Queer theorists/activists like Gordon Brent Ingram, Anne-Marie Bouthillette and Yolanda Retter suggest that the marginalized sexualities could be restored to visibility not only through making global connections but through redefining queer space as territory re-appropriated from the heteronormative map. The dissident sexual citizens seek to reverse their dispossession through a process of reterritorialization—reclaiming territory that varies on a spatial scale (a room, a house, a

neighborhood, a city, a nation). I believe that the essence of this reclamation is, to borrow David Bell's term, the "(homo) eroticization of topography"— a positive spatial representation of homoerotics. Ingram et al suggest that re-territorialization pertains as much to the appropriation of physical space as to the imaginative conceptualization of queer space (in cultural products, for example); they claim that these imagined cartographies "lend immediacy to the more theoretical discussion of space and place by showing unique instances of courage, vulnerability, empowerment, and insight, which can motivate meaningful political action more than sterile plans or studies can" (Ingram *et al*, 55). David Bell returns us to the question of reclaiming actual physical space: citing the example of the Pride parade in Montreal, he claims that "Montreal's sexual dissidents without being challenging or confrontational to the city's heteronormative culture...by coming out into the straight space, inevitably queered the streets; indeed, queered the whole city" (Bell 18). Bell goes on to further claim that that such a reclamation exposes the fact that the heteronormativity of the city is in fact *produced*, not a given. As Bell's example suggests (as do most of the instances cited by Ingram *et al*), queer reterritorialization is, for the most part, the reclamation of *public* space. Public space is what predominantly has a (heteronormative) culture or identity, and can be appropriated and transformed to express a distinct homosexual identity.

The creation of queer space, as understood in both theory and practice of it, is also intimately tied up with the notion of sexual citizenship. In an article on sexual citizenship and space, Bell identifies "public spaces" as spaces of citizenship, and examines the tension that is set up by the figure of the "pervert" who practices (homo)sex (in this case sadomasochism) in public space (Bell 304). In another recent article, Phil

Hubbard draws our attention to the fact that studies focusing on sexuality and space have demonstrated that the notion of the citizen incorporates the unspoken idea of “appropriate sexual comportment” in public spaces and the transgression of this norm (typically by dissidents who do not conform to heteronormative practices) is an undermining of the concept of citizenship (Hubbard 51). The confinement of a certain kind of non-acceptable sexuality to semi-visible and invisible subcultures is a result of this restraint, and a form of infringement of the rights of citizenship that incorporates public space. Above all, with the idea of the nation being premised on procreative sexuality, the spatial imaginary of the nation becomes, in a sense, a lost locus—another dimension in the spatial dispossession experienced by the queer community.

This last kind of deterritorialization, or loss of space, acquires a distinct significance in the context of India. The relatively recent existence of a hostile law is an adequate rationale for the perception of being disposed of a nation. Claiming public space, the space of citizenship, is not a feasible option. Queer (male) subcultures exist in India, but are subterranean (another metaphor that gestures towards loss of visible space) and near-invisible, while female same-sex desire remains completely invisible. Invisibility, however, becomes a defining aspect of queer space in India. Rather than the reclamation of public space through queer self-expression, camouflaging “transgressive” desire to render it unmappable in spaces both public and private is a more viable strategy of survival. This essential unmappability of queer spaces, I argue, is the basis of queer politics in South Asia, which also frames the production of cultural texts. Queer space in these texts is rarely separate and visible: it exists, eluding surveillance, within heterosexual households and heterosexually oriented urban spaces, subverting the

rhetoric of separatism inherent in the coming-out narrative. The representation of queer space in the texts that I examine is a textual equivalent of both queer civic politics and what Ingram, Bouthillette and Retter describe as “cognitive mapping” or “sense-of-place mapping” of queer space: an emotional perception of the place’s potential for pleasure, violence or intimacy. This is especially crucial to the representations that I read in my project, as the queer spaces inscribed in them are connected with and imbricated on mainstream spaces, and hence require cognition of the possibilities inherent in a particular space. In my project, I examine literary and filmic narratives that give a voice to marginalized queer subjects by recognizing and making visible the very fact of their marginalization. This marginalization is both civic and textual— the texts that I examine in the project subvert a homophobic literary tradition of representing the queer subject as either a cipher or an apparition or as a pathological other. Another central concern of the texts that I read is the perceptible eroticization of space, an endeavor that takes on a special meaning in the Indian cultural context. Same-sex friendships— and spaces— are not only socially sanctioned but are part of traditional kinship patterns in India. The challenge for these texts is to inscribe queer space in a manner so that it has a distinct eroticized identity. Queer space— as represented in these texts— emerges as a dynamic space of contestation that subverts the received notions of “center” and “periphery” as it bridges the hiatus between mainstream and alternative cultures as well as finds a distinctive voice for the minoritized sexual communities of South Asia.

### *Project Design*

The main body of my dissertation consists of close textual analysis of literary texts by Anglophone, regional and diasporic Indian writers. The term “postcolonial”

signifies, for me, a political rather than a temporal category— the pre- *and* post-independence texts that I have selected for this project attempt to resist the cultural hegemony of colonial/nationalist discourse (or its legacy, as the case may be). The term “queer” as I use it in the postcolonial Indian context interrogates the fixity of gendered and sexual categories. However, the queer texts that I examine in this project focus on gay and lesbian rather than on bisexual/transgendered experience— keeping my textual analyses contained within this binary framework helps me compare and contrast the risks that gay and lesbian communities have in mapping out territories for themselves. I explore the multiple valences of the term “space” and I also consider how spaces could be gendered/ sexualized. In analyzing the literary mapping of queer space, I theorize the different dimensions of representation— homophobic erasure, literary camouflage (homographesis) and defamiliarization (creating spaces of excess and unreality). Although my primary focus is on a range of literary genres (short fiction and novels), I include one film in my readings— the strategies of constructing queer space in this filmic text provide interesting points of comparison with those used in the literary texts.

In my first chapter, “Masculinity and Space in Rabindranath Tagore’s Short Stories,” I demonstrate how the poet/novelist Rabindranath Tagore not only reconfigures masculinity as a syncretic space that accommodates a certain fluidity of gender roles, but “queers” actual physical space by destabilizing the hierarchical territorialization of the heterosexual home. I read Tagore’s artistic strategy as a politicized resistance to the aggressive hypermasculinity idealized by the counter-colonial nationalist movements of the time, which in itself was a reaction to the negative gendered stereotypes of the colonial subject constructed by colonial discourse. Tagore rejects this ideal of machismo and



recuperates non-normative expressions of masculinity valorized in pre-colonial culture. My chapter examines short stories of Rabindranath Tagore (published c.1890) to analyze how Tagore re-appropriates and restructures the presumably “stable” domestic space that lies at the center of hetero-patriarchal home in the Indian society. Written and published in pre-independence India, the stories critique normative gendered and sexual behavior prescribed by both colonial and nationalist discourses. In “The Editor,” Tagore challenges the configuration of the gender-segregated heterosexual household by conceptualizing (and valorizing) a syncretic masculinity that accommodates the traditionally “feminine” traits of nurturing and caregiving. “The Housewife” represents the figure of the victimized androgyne, an adolescent who becomes the focus of social ridicule for “playing house” with his younger sister. By means of these stories Tagore critiques a culture that had reinvented for itself a model of “pure” masculinity and was intolerant of gendered behavior that strayed beyond these specified, inflexible limits. The figure of the androgynous Vaishnava devotee is at the center of “The Divide,” which dramatizes an intense involvement between two kinsmen. The lovers’ yearnings are cast in the framework of the Vaishnava poetic convention of *viraha* (lamentations of loss). Tagore revives this familiar homoerotic trope of the passive, suffering male, suppressed by the dominant discourses of colonialism and nationalism, to challenge the rigidity of gendered and sexual behavior patterns. The narrative of “The Divide” resists colonial and nationalist hegemony by revivifying modes of pre-colonial cultural forms based on a flexible understanding of gendered and sexual identities. Space is the central concern in all three stories: in “The Editor,” the reversal of roles of the male caregiver is represented in terms of spatial reclamation: the narrator abandons his hypermasculine pursuits to reenter the domestic

space and turn his attention to his motherless child. “The Housewife” is a critique of the victimization that becomes the lot of Ashu for his investment in the domestic space. In “The Divide,” the male caregiver/lover moves between the “queered” domestic space and the overtly eroticized space of the garden (a trope borrowed from Vaishnava poetry that celebrates the male devotee’s desire for the male deity). The garden becomes a metaphoric subversion of the sexually hierarchized home.

In my second chapter, “The City as Closet: Flaneries, Journeys and Spaces of Otherness in R. Raj Rao’s *The Boyfriend*,” I shift my focus to urban queer space in postcolonial Bombay or Mumbai. I analyze the figure of the *flaneur* experiencing the gay underbelly of Mumbai in R. Raj Rao’s *The Boyfriend* (2003). I analyze how the spectrality of the queer *flaneur* and the shifting, transient nature of *flanerie* render urban queer spaces distinct yet unmappable. While urban gay male subcultures provide an alternative model of community to the “invisible” queer subject, making this model visible is not a viable strategy to counter the politics of dispossession that has rendered the nation hostile and *unheimlich* for him. In my reading of Rao’s novel, I explore what modes of existence are available to the queer subject in an urban postcolonial locus, modes other than remaining invisible and becoming visible. *Flanerie*, with its accents of transience and fluidity, appears to be the answer to the question I pose: the queer male subject’s wanderings through the city of Mumbai is the unifying representational principle that enables a complex portrayal of the urban locus, with the juxtaposition of subterranean eroticized loci and “mainstream” spaces. Yudi is simultaneously a participant and a voyeur in the gay scene in Bombay. Rao also represents queer space as a space of excess in his novel: his exaggerated representation of a fictive modeling

agency and a gay nightclub called Testosterone underscores the shifting, transient nature of this subterranean community (which nonetheless has a vernacular vocabulary to articulate gay experience and identity). Transience, I argue, is central to queer self-definition; the failure of Yudi's subsequent quest for a committed relationship underscores the impossibility of permanence. In a city where sexuality is rigidly policed, the gay male must necessarily remain a *flaneur*, an identity facilitated by the nature of life in a metropolis. The spectrality of the queer subject ties in with the supra-real inscription of the "excessive" spaces, which are constructed as a contrast to the restrictive realness of heteronormative spaces.

In chapter three, "Alternative Cartographies of Desire: Queer Utopias through the "Diasporic Imaginary,"" I examine, through my readings of Shani Mootoo's short story "Out on Main Street"(1993) and Nisha Ganatra's film *Chutney Popcorn* (1999), how the notion of utopian spaces is reconfigured and reimagined through the experience of the queer diasporic subject. My readings of *Chutney Popcorn* and "Out on Main Street" examine how the queer female diasporic subjects negotiate the differences imposed on them by normative narratives of nationalism and sexuality. I explore whether the adoptive homeland is the utopia that the queer diasporic subject often imagines it will be, a utopia where differences are resolved or at least tolerated, or if it is a locus where repressive (in this case heteronormative) social structures are reinforced. Does the marginalization, or indeed the "impossibility," as Gayatri Gopinath suggests, of female same-sex desire in the diaspora force us to question the very concept of queer utopia, or does the queer female diasporic imaginary reconfigure utopia in a way that departs radically from liberal Eurocentric interpretation of the term? In this chapter, I examine how the concept of queer

utopia is transformed by the experience of the queer diasporic subject. Mootoo's short story underscores the queer immigrants' disenchantment with the imagined utopian space they had aspired for: having left Trinidad for Canada, the narrator and her lover find themselves analyzed through the inescapable parameters of race, ethnicity and (hetero)sexuality within the diaspora. The quest for utopia in this case results in seemingly endless reenactments of exile. The trajectory of this quest for queer utopia, and indeed the accent of this imagined space, changes in *Chutney Popcorn*, a film that focuses on South Asian immigrant experience in the US. Given the tendency of the nationalist and diasporic imaginary to valorize reproductive sexuality and to conflate women with the lost homeland, an "outed" homosexual like Ganatra's Reena is alienated from the family home. Reena's "home"— the apartment that she shares with her partner and another lesbian couple— is recognizably distinct from her mother's, an open space celebrating not only same-sex desire but unconventional art and non-traditional kinship pattern where one would imagine the diasporic queer subject's quest for utopia has finally ended. However, the film ultimately transcends the urge to valorize what, in Gopinath's definition, could be called a "homonormative" imagining of queer utopia. The film ends with melding the two spaces together: I read Reena's decision to become a surrogate mother to her sister's child and her return to the family home not as a capitulation to heteronormativity, but as a restructuring of the hetero-patriarchal domestic space and redefining queer utopia by accommodating homoeroticism.

In chapter four, "Redefining Agency: Spaces of Female Queer Desire in "The Quilt", *Ladies Coupe* and *A Married Woman*," I continue complicating the question of the visibility of queer spaces that I raise in the previous chapter, this time in the specific

context of female homoeroticism as inscribed in Ismat Chughtai's "The Quilt" (1941), Anita Rao's *Ladies Coupe* (2001) and Manju Kapoor's *A Married Woman* (2002). Questioning the adequacy of the coming-out narrative in shaping and defining female queer experience in the context of postcolonial South Asia, I demonstrate, in my readings of these texts, how the queer space can be represented by an empowering reconfiguration of the closet and by destabilizing the divide between "public" and "private" spaces. In these texts, culturally acceptable forms of homosociality enable the survival of same-sex desire within hetero-patriarchal spaces. In Nair's *Ladies Coupe*, although same-sex desire does not ultimately survive the fracturing effect of the discourses of class and caste and their powerful interpellation for the queer subject, homosociality enables the queering of a traditional patriarchal household. Yet another non-erotic form of homosocial bonding transforms the public space of the train compartment in the novel into a private, emotive space of empowerment. This destabilization of the public/private continues in *A Married Woman*, where the ideal of queer space— not based on separatism but on connectedness with heterosexual spaces— is shown to be an impossibility. The reappropriation and implicit eroticization of public space approaches this ideal to a degree. My reading of "The Quilt" examines the political implication of inscribing queer space in Indian literature. I explore whether a literary text can function as a counter-discourse that destabilizes the reified categories of "normal" and "abnormal" sexualized spaces. "The Quilt" was banned for obscenity, and later cleared of the charges because its vocabulary failed to yield anything perceptibly offensive. I analyze how Chughtai uses the representation of the zenana, the all-woman core of the hetero-patriarchal household and its associated homosociality, to camouflage transgressive desire. Chughtai's strategy is comparable to

what Lee Edelman defines as "homographesis," a writing practice that resists the cultural insistence on making homosexual difference visible. Chughtai's inscription of the queer space as a "homograph" destabilizes the binary opposition of "gay" and "straight" and locates desire within the more expansive sexual spectrum of pre-colonial India, and also complicates the equation of visibility with agency.

The concluding section or the coda of my dissertation overviews what the texts achieve through their varied modes of representation of queer space, and how these representations depart from the liberal Eurocentric queer projects, a departure that makes them essentially postcolonial. My dissertation engages with the fields of both queer and postcolonial studies: while it examines the relatively underexplored spatial aspect of postcolonial sexualities, it also rethinks and complicates the ideas of queer visibility and inclusion that are often insufficient to articulate the positionality of sexual minorities in postcolonial South Asia. The texts that I examine in my project resist— through their varied modes of representation of queer space— the homophobic erasure of queer subjectivities in postcolonial loci. However, I do not suggest that they represent a chronologically concerted activist endeavor. The texts— written at different times, representing different genres, in different languages— address different audiences in different parts of India (and the diaspora beyond the geographical boundaries of the nation). What I have tried to record in this project is an awareness—spread through different phases in history— of the marginalization of sexual minorities and the desire to address this inequity. Nor do I suggest that that the queer spaces depicted in my chosen texts are utopian in nature: instead of eliding the conflicts inherent in situations where queer subjects are silenced within a heteronormative framework, these literary

representations underscore these conflicts and the strategies of negotiating them. The texts demonstrate how re-appropriating space and altering its significance can reaffirm obliterated queer identities in India.

## CHAPTER I

## MASCULINITY AND SPACE IN RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S SHORT STORIES

Rabindranath Tagore held an iconic status in the literary and cultural spheres of late nineteenth century Bengal and India. The source of his renown, however, was not confined to his literary genius. One of Tagore's most significant achievements was establishing the Visva-Bharati University in Santiniketan, West Bengal. The *Brahmacharya Ashram* (a place designated for meditation) founded by his father Maharshi Debendranath Tagore evolved into a multi-disciplinary center of learning under Tagore's care. However, despite Tagore's apotheosis— especially among his Bengali readers— the public response to this ambitious project remained ambivalent at best. For as long as I can remember, there has been in circulation among the Bengalis a half-jocular disparagement of Visva-Bharati based on the notion that it nurtures effeminacy in its male students. It is difficult to be certain about the origin of this sentiment: it could be Visva-Bharati's pastoral setting which is considered enervating, or the university's implicit privileging of liberal and performing arts over professional disciplines that are perceived as more being "manly." For instance, the filmmaker Satyajit Ray— one of Visva-Bharati's better known alumni— had second thoughts about enrolling there because of this disrepute. Ray's biographer Andrew Robinson records this, putting Ray's initial reluctance down to the "common Calcutta view of graduates from Santiniketan: that they were sentimental, intellectually second-rate and if they were male, effeminate" (Robinson 46). This association of a specific location with a particular non-normative notion of masculinity— a construction that interrogates the socially "admissible" forms of gender and by extension, of sexuality— raises questions about the interconnection of



gender, sexuality and space. What was Tagore’s investment— if any— with the production of such a subversive form of masculinity? In my readings of his short stories “The Editor” (1893), “Housewife” (1891) and “The Divide” (1891), I demonstrate how Tagore “queers” heterosexually orientated spaces by his representation of non-normative forms of masculinity within those spatial contexts. His subversive reconfiguration of space, I argue, is a critique of the way masculinity was constituted and perceived in colonial and nationalistic discourse in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century.

Rabindranath Tagore’s involvement in the anti-colonial struggle and his close association with Gandhi has been well documented. Tagore, however, was reluctant to view nationalism as a means to counter colonial oppression— this ambivalence finds a forceful expression in *The Home and the World*.<sup>1</sup> Nationalism, for Tagore, was not a viable alternative to colonialism: he believed that the monolithic nature of nationalism was an uneasy imposition on a multicultural and multiethnic nation such as India, a structure that merely tended to replicate the hegemony of colonialism. Tagore sought a political model counter to both colonialism and nationalism, and this quest, I argue, can be read in the subtextual politics of the shorter fiction that I consider in this chapter. In the stories, Tagore’s counter-colonial and counter-nationalistic politics are played out in terms of a reconfiguration of the received notions of gendered behavior. The stories, however, predate the period in which he was most visible in the anti-colonial resistance; Tagore claims that his 1890s short stories are not “political”; and they have not been read as such in previous critical assessments.

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<sup>1</sup> In this 1905 novel, Tagore expresses his deep uncertainty about the Swadeshi movement, an early phase in India’s struggle for independence that sought to curb the imperial power by principles of economic self-sufficiency. Sandeep, the proponent of this philosophy in the novel, conflicts with Nikhilesh, whose more nuanced perception of reality is the lens the reader uses to understand how a pan-national movement like this elides the specificities of individual experience and need.

My reading of Tagore's short fiction seeks to contest this apparently apolitical reading. The stories that I examine are "The Editor" (*Sampadak*), "Housewife" (*Ginni*) and "The Divide" (*Byabadhan*). For this chapter, I use the versions of the stories translated by William Radice for his collection, *Selected Short Stories* (1991). Being a reader/speaker of vernacular Bengali, I also refer to, if not actually cite, the original versions. There exist earlier translations of some of the stories, but I believe that Radice's comparatively recent translations appeals to the sensibilities of the modern reader.<sup>2</sup> Also, access to translations of all three stories by the same translator gives my analysis a desired uniformity of tone. All three stories were written and published in the early 1890s, a period marked by Tagore's prolific output of short stories (which, as a rule, was not his favored genre).<sup>3</sup> In his editorial note to the collection, Radice points out that Tagore's choice of this genre was the direct outcome of the demands from the readers of the periodicals (*Sadhana* and *Hitabadi*, in this case) that he was associated with. Although Radice remarks on the centrality of the periodical culture in Bengal in the 1890s and mentions that the periodicals that Tagore contributed to were "packed with ideas, debates, reviews, and counter-reviews" (2), he does not make any explicit connection between the political content of these contemporary ideas and that of Tagore's stories. Nor are the stories overtly political; but the readership that the periodicals catered to was politically aware and connected to the debates around colonialism and nationalism. And although Tagore's creative phase in which the stories were written

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<sup>2</sup> *Sampadak* has three earlier translated versions by W.W. Pearson (1917), by Binayak Sanyal (1959) and by Sheila Chatterjee (1962). Bhabani Bhattacharya was the first to translate *Ginni*. Radice's translation of *Byabadhan* is the only translated version that exists.

<sup>3</sup> *Ginni* and *Byabadhan* were published in the periodical *Hitabadi* in 1891; *Sampadak* was published in the periodical *Sadhana* in 1893. My analysis of the short stories, however, does not follow this chronological pattern: the logic of my organization is based on the movement from a reconfiguration of normative gendered behavior to a representation of non-normative sexuality.

preceded the period of his increased involvement with India's struggle for independence, it is reasonable to suppose that the 1890s short stories embody some form of counter-colonial politics, and also express some of Tagore's nascent anxieties about the ideological underpinnings of nationalism.

I argue that the stories are inherently political in their subversive reconfiguring of masculinity and their redefinition of the conventional understanding of masculine spaces. This new masculinity challenges both colonial and counter-colonial nationalist discourses. In the second half of the nineteenth century, imperial authorities in India had come to regard the members of the Bengali middle-class intelligentsia as a political threat. Bengal in the nineteenth century was the breeding ground of political discontent with the colonial rule and a hotbed of subversive ideas. Lord Macaulay's insistence on English as the medium of instruction in India was a strategy to facilitate communication between colonizer and the colonized and thus strengthen imperial rule.<sup>4</sup> In Bengal, this strategy backfired: Western education brought in ideas of self-governance, which fired the cultural imagination to an extent that was threatening to the British.<sup>5</sup> The stereotype of the effeminate Bengali "babu" was a colonial discursive construct aimed at countering this threat. "Babu," which is an honorific, came to be associated in the colonial parlance with a negative stereotype of the middle-class Bengali man: servile, lazy, someone who

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<sup>4</sup> In his "Minute on Education" (1835), Macaulay emphasized the need for a class of English-educated Indians in his argument for implementing Western education in India: "We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population."

<sup>5</sup> In this period, the movement known as the Bengal Renaissance came to a culmination. The Bengal Renaissance comprised literary and intellectual achievements, social reform and heightened political awareness. Raja Rammohan Roy, well known for his success in putting an end to the practice of Sati (widow burning) was associated with this movement, as was Tagore in its later stages.

uses bombastic but unidiomatic English culled from a superficial learning of the language, and above all, effeminate. The imputation of effeminacy was oblique but powerful, and the indigenous elite resisted this construction by reinventing itself as aggressively masculine, both through cultural discourse and everyday practice.<sup>6</sup>

The stories of Tagore that I examine here critique the rigidified code of gendered behavior, which is implicit in both the stereotyping of the colonized subject as “effeminate” and the colonized subject reconstructing itself as “hypermasculine.” Tagore reconfigures masculinity as a syncretic space that accommodates a certain fluidity of gender roles. This subversive strategy takes different trajectories in different short stories: some, like “The Editor” reflect on the loss or rupture of moral, familial and emotional ties that ensue from a rigidified concept of normative gendered behavior; others like “Housewife” and “The Divide” attempt to recuperate non-normative expressions of masculinity (androgyny, homoeroticism) and align them with pre-colonial cultural practices that had been suppressed or marginalized by the dominant discourses of colonialism and nationalism. I am cautious of conflating gender and sexuality; what I suggest here is that both gender and sexuality are controlled by social discourse and modified into normative, “acceptable” patterns. I analyze the specific trajectory that this modification takes in the colonial situation. My examination of the interconnection of space and gender/sexuality in Tagore’s short stories is premised on the concept of social or conceptual space. Social space does not exist in a binary opposition to geographical or architectural space; it is, rather, a mode of spatiality that takes into account the socio-cultural forces that shape the configuration of physical space. In her study of gender and

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<sup>6</sup>I elaborate on this process later in the chapter, demonstrating how the ideal of indigenous hypermasculinity expressed itself not only in more obvious practices like bodybuilding, but also through the writing of satires and the reinvention of mythology.

colonial space, Sara Mills argues that “social structures are translated into individual experiences, and those interventions by individuals and groups of people in turn have some effect on the way social space is constituted” (Mills 24). The primary focus of Mills’ analysis is the gendered configuration of colonial space; her chapter on indigenous space delineates how the ordering of indigenous space constitutes a subversion of colonial spatiality. Mills demonstrates her point through her reading of the *zenana*, the all-woman core of the household which was an empowering space in the indigenous imagination, as opposed to the space of oppression that the colonial perception imagined it to be. Tagore, I argue, moves beyond both colonial *and* indigenous signification of gendered space, locating empowerment in the synthesis of masculine and feminine gender roles and the destabilization of gender-segregated spaces. I examine how Tagore, in his stories, redefines culturally configured spatiality by queering normative spaces, which accommodate reversed gender roles and non-normative constructions of masculinity. Not only does Tagore envision masculinity as a metaphorical space of fluidity, but his concep of re-visionary masculinities is constructed in relation to actual physical space— In “The Editor,” he challenges the polarity of gendered spaces, in “The Housewife,” he envisions a trans-space that might accommodate the transgression of prescriptive gendered roles and might still be open to public condemnation, in “The Divide,” he draws upon pre-colonial cultural forms— the Vaishnava cult— to find tropes that he uses to represent (homo)eroticized space that engages with and is, at the same time, distant from spaces sanctioned by the hetero-patriarchal social structure.

I first attempt to situate my specific arguments about Tagore’s fiction in the larger socio-historical context. In doing so, I examine the way(s) in which cultural critics have

theorized the connection between colonialism and gender stereotyping. I also use queer theory as a lens to look at the cultural transformation of gendered practices. Although the stories that I am looking at incorporate moments of fluidity between gender boundaries, I refrain from designating these moments as “queer.” My reservation comes from the fact that much of Western queer theory is culture and time-specific; indiscriminate appropriation of its terminology to understand literary representations of late-nineteenth-century India would be anachronistic. However, I believe that certain strands of Judith Butler’s arguments on the social construction of gendered behavior could be profitably used to understand how Tagore enacts resistance in his short stories.

A convenient gendering/sexualizing of the colonized subject through cultural stereotyping is a recognized leitmotif in the psychodynamics of colonialism. Patrick Hogan, in his insightful work on Anglophone postcolonial literatures, views colonialism primarily as a cultural encounter between metropolitan and indigenous cultures. The burden of this encounter falls on the colonized subject, who is forced to view himself in terms of derogatory gender stereotypes. In *The Intimate Enemy*, Ashis Nandy views colonialism as a “matter of consciousness” and explores the colonialist projection of a homology between imperialism and sex. According to Nandy, the traditional binary of masculinity (*purusatva*) and femininity (*naritva*) is reordered in the colonial discourse as a hierachization between masculinity and effeminacy (*klibatva*): the control of the colonized subject is reinforced through the construction of the stereotype of effeminacy. Mrinalini Sinha historically situates this phenomenon of stereotyping by examining two discursive constructs in nineteenth-century Bengal: the “masculine” Englishman and the “effeminate” Bengali. Sinha contends that the motives behind these constructions were

essentially political: the British saw the educated middle-class Bengali as an increasing threat to political domination. The British sought to curb this real/presumed agency by projecting effeminacy onto the Bengali male elite. This was essentially a class phenomenon: the British perceived the Bengali elite to be educationally and culturally equipped to be a political adversary to the British. The idea of masculinity as a prerequisite for political agency is underscored by the assumptions of an article published in the *The Fortnightly Review* around the same time when Tagore was writing his short stories. The author makes a telling comparison between the British suffragists and the Bengali men and claims that both groups should be denied political autonomy because of their lack of manly characteristics:

To the Bengali race, and especially to the small part of it which has received a superficial English education, the above remarks (made in connection with the Suffragists) apply with some qualification. The characteristics of women which disqualify them for public life and its responsibilities are inherent in their race and are worthy of honor...but when men, such as the Bengalis are disqualified for political enfranchisement by the possession of essentially feminine characteristics, they must expect to be held in contempt by stronger and braver races who have fought for liberties as they have won or retained (Griffin 811).

The argument of the article illustrates the implicit political motive of the British in constructing the Bengali man as effeminate. The quote also makes it clear that the source of British anxiety is not Bengali society as a whole, but a section of it that has been fortified by education and aspiring to political enfranchisement.

Tagore's stories explore— and implicitly critique— the upper-middle-class Bengali male's response to this negative stereotyping. The Bengali elite chose to resist this construction by situating itself at the other end of this imagined spectrum of gendered behavior: thus, the Bengali *bhadralok* (gentleman) reinvented himself as aggressively hypermasculine by reviving the relics of a military past and a renewed emphasis on

physical prowess. This I read as what Patrick Hogan, in his theorization of the psychodynamics of colonialism, terms “Reactionary Masculinity”; he explains how the reactionary traditionalist wishes to establish a set of gender practices that are purged of the degenerate traits imputed to indigenous people by metropolitan culture. In their attempts to resist negative stereotyping, deliberately purge the indigenous culture of ‘degenerate’ traits and invent an emphatically masculine indigenous tradition, anti-colonial nationalists of nineteenth-century Bengal inadvertently played into the normative gender ideologies set up by colonial discourse. One of the ways in which the Bengali man’s fear of emasculation was articulated was in his rejection of the domestic space and all that it stood for: emotional ties, filial commitment, and parental responsibility. In this connection, Partha Chatterjee’s analysis of the curious *middleness* of the colonized elite in Bengal is relevant. Chatterjee contends that the Bengali *bhadralok* attempted to resolve the paradox of his situation— in which he feels both the desire to establish hegemony over the lower classes and the awareness of being subordinated by the ruling class— by splitting his subjectivity into an outer and an inner self. Chatterjee points out:

The public self of the intelligentsia was its political self- rationalist, modern, expressing itself within the hegemonic discursive domain of enlightened modernism. The private self was where it retreated from the humiliation of a failed hegemony (Chatterjee 72).

The bipolar model of a colonized psyche was projected onto the physical spaces of day-to-day life; in order to purge the degenerate traits imputed onto his character, the Bengali elite repudiated the domestic or inner space. Tagore’s stories capture the dilemma of the Bengali male continually trying to undermine the private self and privileging the public one in a paranoid attempt to play down his alleged effeminacy. The stories underscore the futility of reinventing the self merely to counter a false stereotype; they examine the



pitfalls of projecting a hypermasculine image to redeem oneself in the perception of the colonizer.

“The Editor” embodies Tagore’s indictment of rigidified gender roles and hypermasculinity, traits that are brought out in the middle-class Bengali male’s rejection of the domestic space. Tagore’s critique of this choice is encoded in terms of the disruption in a tragic plot: fragmentation of familial bonds, emotional loss and a lack of fulfillment. The plot of “The Editor” unfolds through this pattern of disruption, recognition and restoration of order. A playful, poignant closeness builds up between a widowed father and his six-year-old daughter and nurtures both of them till the father becomes aware of the need to make money, which leads him to embark on a literary career. The publication of a successful satirical farce gives him his first taste of fame. Convinced of his genius and oblivious now to both daughter and household, he continues his literary pursuits till he is hired as a salaried editor of a newspaper patronized by a village *zamindar* (landholder). The paper, which is set up chiefly to lampoon the landholder of the neighboring village, affords a fresh outlet for the editor’s satirical talents. His fame comes to an abrupt end when the *zamindar* of the neighboring village sets up a rival publication, which berates our editor’s fine rhetorical exercise in blunt, down-to-earth prose: an attack that provokes a cycle of humiliating sallies from friends and foes alike. Professional failure and public humiliation finally brings the father back to the estranged daughter and the neglected domestic space.

Partha Chatterjee’s binary spatial model— that theorizes the crisis in masculinity in nineteenth century Bengal — is useful in understanding the predicament of the narrator in “The Editor” and his urge to disengage with private space and all that it stands for.

However, the private/public binary and its relation to masculinity need a more nuanced reading as we consider the narrator's role as a father. Regarding fatherhood as a mythic, universal category transcending historical and cultural specificities could be problematic. The near-universal cultural construct of the mother as the "natural" parent (and by extension "naturally" situated in the domestic space) however, has prompted me to frame my reading of Tagore's short story through what Stuart C. Aiken terms the "awkward spaces of fathering" (Aiken 222). In his analysis, Aiken charts the transition in the role of fathering in Western society as a result of changing socio-economic conditions; with more women earning their living in the workplace, the emotionally distant "breadwinner" of the past has gradually transformed into an "equal co-parent" who has found a niche for himself in the space of parenting. The niche is not entirely comfortable, nor is the transition unproblematic; the space that now contains the father is what Aiken describes as "awkward." Aiken argues that "the geographies of man-as-father are almost exclusively subsumed under the monolithic geography of a persuasive patriarchy that includes the space of public authority and its transition over generations" (Aiken 223). Aiken's "awkward spaces" of fatherhood is not a transhistorical category, but it could be adapted profitably to the historical context of "The Editor." In the story, the received notions of parenting are subverted primarily by the death of the "natural" parent. The narrator's assumption of the role of the primary— and only— parent is "awkward" from the beginning. He is clearly not comfortable in the role of the caregiver. His relationship with his daughter works on a principal of reversal; it is the daughter who playfully assumes a maternal role; in time, however, this reversed role-playing is abandoned because the narrator perceives it as futile and possibly emasculating.

In “The Editor,” the narrator attempts to establish his emphatically “masculine” identity by viewing his profession (writing satirical farces) as an aggressive, masculine activity. When economic necessities force the narrator into the world of material realities, the options appear limited: he is too old for government jobs and no other opening seems to be available. Tagore does not situate his protagonist historically, but judging by the fact that he had managed to subsist without a job for this long, it seems reasonable to suppose that he has an alternative, though dwindling, source of income, perhaps landholding. In the late nineteenth century, the financial situation of the landholder in Bengal was considerably straitened. Mrinalini Sinha notes:

From the 1870s onwards, however, the Bengali *rentier* class witnessed a decrease in revenue from landholdings as a result of a combination of factors: increase in population, land fragmentation, and lack of agricultural improvements...The Bengali elites were being defined more and more through administrative and professional employment. Indeed, the majority of the Bengali middle class found their horizons severely restricted by ‘*chakri*’ or petty clerical work (Sinha 5).

The limited financial scope and social agency of the “petty clerical job” reinforced the average Bengali man’s sense of inadequacy. Such labor was inherently associated with servility (the word *chakri* is phonetically as well as semantically close to *chakar*, the Bengali word for a menial worker). The inability to find even an ordinary job such as this calls into question the protagonist’s scripted “male” role as a provider.

Understandably, the community regarded this so-called literary labor as an achievement, specifically because of the narrator’s chosen genre. In late nineteenth century Bengal, the satirical farce was a popular literary genre, both as a vehicle of anti-colonial discourse and a medium of an internalized critique of the degenerate traits of the indigenous middle-class. In his analysis of the mindset of the nineteenth-century Bengali intelligentsia, Partha Chatterjee speaks of the effectiveness of social parody as a medium

of ideological propagation in this period. It is understandable how the community likewise regarded the editorship as a means of achieving social visibility, which was a primary preoccupation of the educated Bengali middle-class man. This mode of articulation— sophisticated but scurrilous discursive attack— is described as being interchangeable with physical aggression; the editor views his job as a substitute for that of the landholder's *lathiyals* or henchmen: "The zamindars of the two villages were bitter enemies. Previously their quarrels had led to brawls— but now the magistrate had bound them over to keep peace, and the zamindars of Jahir had engaged poor me in place of the murderous *lathiyals*" (Tagore 122). This equation of writing with a job that involves machismo is telling: the editor attempts to recuperate his sagging self-esteem by identifying himself with an icon of hypermasculinity. The editor's reaffirmation of his self-worth underscores the perception of satire as a predominantly masculine literary genre— a perception commonly seen in Western assessments of this mode of writing. In a study of the characteristics of this genre, Gilbert Highet points out this gender bias and attempts to understand its psychodynamics:

Many a reader has turned away in revulsion from [Juvenal's] work, asking, 'Why should he concentrate on such disgusting subjects? What pleasure is there for him, or for us, in gazing on these foul scenes?' Women in particular, with their kind hearts, are prone to make this criticism: very few of them have ever written, or even enjoyed, satire, although they have often been its victims (Highet 235).

This gender divide around the literary mode of satire becomes apparent in "The Editor": in this specific historical context, satire is not only the exclusive territory of men, but the genre whose practice translates into the validation of one's masculinity.

We find the editor caught up in the *middleness* of the Bengali elite that Partha Chatterjee talks of: the desire to establish hegemony over the lower classes of the society

and a simultaneous sense of the futility of his colonial education that articulates itself in his ineffectual rhetoric. Humiliating the economically underprivileged is one of the ways in which the editor reinforces his masculine image:

I flared up at the maid, and cuffed the male servant; if a beggar came for alms I would drive him away with a stick. If an innocent passerby spoke through the window to ask the way, I would ask him to go to hell. Why couldn't people understand that I was writing a satirical farce? (Tagore 122).

It is remarkable that the Bengali middle-class man's supposed "manhood" plays itself out on the members of the two historically oppressed classes: women and the economically deprived. However, the editor's most visible way of establishing his manhood is by withholding the nurture that he should have ideally extended to his motherless daughter, internalizing the discourse that such behavior is implicitly gendered (i.e. feminine).

In "The Editor", the public and the private domains clearly emerge as gendered spaces: the outer/masculine sphere of economic activity, social visibility and political agency is posited against the inner/ feminine sphere of caregiving and nurturing. The story opens with an ironic focus on the narrator's deliberate segregation of the two spheres:

When my wife was alive I didn't give much thought to Prabha. I was more involved with her mother than with her...I would, whenever I was in the mood, romp around with her; but the moment she started to cry I would return her to her mother's arms and make a speedy escape. I never considered what care and effort was needed to bring up a child (Tagore 121).

While involvement— a suitably ambiguous word— with one's wife is acceptably masculine, child-rearing is considered an unequivocally feminine activity. The humiliating failure of his projected public self brings the editor back to the neglected domestic space again. There is something essentially androgynous— and I suggest that

there is a valorization of this attitude— about the way in which the he finally resumes his paternal responsibility in a renewed sense: “When her mother died, I held Prabha in my lap. Now after cremating her stepmother— my writing— I lifted her into my arms again and carried her indoors” (Tagore 124). Tagore’s choice of the “stepmother” metaphor is telling. The substitution of the act of writing for the editor’s deceased spouse, and its implicit eroticization recasts the familiar pen-as-penis metaphor into a slightly different form. Writing reaffirms the narrator’s masculinity not only by providing a mode of sustenance, but by standing in for the absent sexual partner and being an entity that is pliable, yielding and eager to be molded into shapes that he imagines for it. Recreating a mother figure for his daughter— though replete with the negative associations of stepmotherhood— also deflects the psychological pressure on the narrator to be the primary caregiver and thus preserves his manliness. The realization of this subconscious substitution, of course, comes to him retrospectively as he comes to term with his neglected role as a parent and resumes his responsibilities.

The “indoors,” then, emerges as a space that cannot be ultimately overlooked. The story, as I read it, embodies an ironic undermining of hypermasculinity, which for Tagore is ludicrous as well as damaging, a crude and immature response to colonial subjection at once practically ineffectual and emotionally unfulfilling. The conclusion of the story— the resumption of domestic/filial duties left behind by the dead wife— gestures towards a moment that embodies a possibility of moving between gender-segregated spaces. It is this mobility that is understood as redemptive, it is this transitional fluidity of gender roles that I designate as “queer”.

In “Housewife” (1891), Tagore once again sets up the tension between public and private spaces and demonstrates how this tension generates a crisis of self-definition in the gendered subject. Only this time defining oneself through the spatial frame of reference is not a matter of choice for the victimized Ashu— not entirely, anyway. Ashu, a shy, reticent adolescent has little agency in the act of his public branding as effeminate, androgynous and possibly guilty of sexual transgression. Through this representation, Tagore critiques a culture that had reinvented for itself a model of “pure” masculinity and asserted intolerance of gendered behavior that strayed beyond these specified, inflexible limits.

In the story, the first person narrator (presumably another young schoolboy) recounts the public humiliation of Ashu, his class-mate who is caught playing house with his sister. Ashu’s austere schoolteacher Shibanath— having witnessed this act of transgression— exposes him in the public space of the classroom. Shibanath is an embodiment of the aggressive hypermasculinity valorized by the indigenous elite, the quintessential uber-male set up by the national culture to counter the colonial stereotype of effeminacy and now entrusted with the responsibility of policing moral behavior in his adolescent charges (“moral behavior” in this case is interchangeable with prescriptive gendered behavior). The “clean-shaven” Shibanath has “close-cropped”, hair but flaunts his “short pigtail” (*tiki*)— his mark of Brahmanism— with pride. He laments the progressive slackness in the disciplinary structure of the classroom, and attempts to remedy it through physical violence and caustic verbal assaults. The archetypal figure of the controlling educator, who seeks to discipline his charge, is a familiar one in works as

diverse as Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* and Dinendra Kumar Ray's *Pallichitra*.<sup>7</sup> Tagore individualizes this figure— even historicizes it—by comparing it with the gods of Hindu mythology: “Then he would hurl his power down to our heads, like a slighted god, roaring thunderously; but his roaring was mixed with so many coarse words that no one could have taken it for a thunderbolt” (54). This caricature-like representation has serious undertones— it points to the contemporary cultural imperative to re-invent (that is, masculinize) the male divinities of Hinduism and thus purge the spiritual traditions of their degenerate traits. Ashish Nandy speaks of Bankimchandra Chatterjee's reinvention of Krishna in his essay “Krishnacharitra.” Chatterjee, one of the best-known literary forebears of Tagore, challenged the mythical inscription of Krishna as a playful, sometimes androgynous, promiscuous adolescent. He reimagined Krishna as “a respectable, righteous, didactic, ‘hard’ god, protecting the glories of Hinduism as a proper religion and preserving it as an internally consistent moral and cultural system...His goal was to make Krishna a normal, non-pagan male God who would not humiliate his devotees in front of the progressive Westerners” (Nandy 24). The motive behind this revisionist mythopoeia is clearly a desire to articulate resistance to the reductive stereotyping of the colonial subject.

Shibanath, the local deity in “Housewife,” reminds the narrator of Yama, the god of death. This particularly aggressive avatar of Yama has appropriated the space of the classroom and exercises a specialized mode of death-dealing blows. One of Shibanath's terrorizing tactics is a system of name-calling the students. The names that he gives to his unresisting but resentful students usually point to some attribute of their character or

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<sup>7</sup> *Pallichitra* is the title of a collection of essays on rural life in Bengal written by Dinendra Kumar Roy. The title translates to “word-pictures of the village”. The stern educator is a figure of caricature here, as in contemporary works like the essays of David Sedaris.



physiognomy. It is a calculated attack on identity, which mirrors colonial violence. The narrator remarks on this enactment of verbal violence and its impact on the students:

He would give us new names. Although a name is nothing but a word, people generally love their names more than they love their own selves: they go to tremendous lengths to further their own names; they are willing to die for them. If you distort a man's name, you strike at something more precious than life itself (Tagore 54).

An assault on a name is an attack on one's subjectivity; the students are painfully aware of Shibbanath's violent erasure of their personalities.<sup>8</sup>

Ashu's behavior at school, however, indicates that he appears to have grasped— either through experience or through exposure to the discourse around him— the ontological distinction between the public and private spaces and their relation to gender. Partha Chatterjee's useful analysis of conceptual space in colonial India demarcated the private space of the Indian home as essentially “feminine” and spiritual as opposed to the public space of rational masculinity. In an attempt to fit into an all-male space— with very definite expectations of gendered behavior — Ashu plays down his role in the private sphere to the point of non-existence:

He did not want his classmates to think of him as anything more than a schoolboy. The people at home— his parents, brothers and sisters— everything about them was very much a private matter, which he did his utmost to conceal from the boys at school (Tagore 55).

This act of dissembling in order to fit in— bearing evidence of split subjectivity— is not necessarily uncommon, but Ashu's demonstrated disengagement with the private aspect of his life in public is marked. In spite of this attempt to belong, Ashu had never been a part of the tough, homosocial world of his schoolmates; he is seen by the narrator as a “very shy” boy who “never played with any other boy” (Tagore 55). Ashu's alienation

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<sup>8</sup> It is interesting to note that the title of a 1932 translation of *Ginni* by Bhabani Bhattacharya was “Name,” a choice that points to the centrality of this particular mode of name-related erasure in the story.

from his peers is complete when Shib Nath dubs him *ginni* (the Bengali word for housewife) because he is seen playing with his little sister on a rainy holiday. Not only is the act of playing a supposedly “feminine” game with a female sibling considered irrevocably effeminate, it is also regarded as a transgression fit for public exposure and ridicule in a culture that is preoccupied with the construction and projection of hypermasculinity. As Shib Nath reveals the anecdote with “withering amusement,” Ashu sits in a state of what I read as a metaphorical emasculation: “It was as if the whole earth was dragging young Ashu down, but all he could do was sit with his legs and the end of his dhoti dangling down from the bench, while all the boys stared at him” (Tagore 56). The exposure of Ashu’s private self alienates him completely from his peers; his classmates, supposedly fellow-victims of the schoolteacher’s caustic attacks, now join Shib Nath in ridiculing him, “boisterously chanting ‘Housewife, housewife!’” (Tagore 57). This savage delight in “hunting” Ashu underscores a perception of the victim as the deviant Other.

Compared to this savagery, the actual incident of Shib Nath’s discovery had been less dramatic. It was Ashu’s sister who had unwittingly led Shib Nath to the porch where she was staging a dolls’ wedding with her brother. The spatial positioning of Ashu’s exposure is significant— it destabilizes the rigid boundaries of private and public spaces and their implicit gendering. A porch is in the list of “zones of transitional spaces” described by Malcolm Miles in his theorization of space— a category that he claims challenges the binary model of spatial configuration that posits public spaces in opposition to private ones. The porch in Tagore’s “Housewife” is visible to the public gaze and thus rendered vulnerable to public judgment; yet it is aligned close enough to

the private, invisible space so Ashu could be himself. In a culture that is forced to see itself as increasingly effeminate, Ashu's capitulation to the supposedly "feminine" sphere— or an infantile version of it— is a serious transgression. The inadmissibility of Ashu's gender-bending moment disqualifies him from all his day-to-day interactions. The domestic sphere is ruled out of bounds for an adolescent male at a formative stage, because this gendered space supposedly brings out the androgyne in him.

A related word on Shibbanath's choice of Ashu's nickname: *ginni*, meaning housewife, is a colloquial form of *grihini*, a Bengali word derived from Sanskrit. *Grihini*, though understood by association to be the mistress of the household, etymologically translates to a (feminized) part of the *griha* or house as a whole. In other words, the woman is literally an embodiment of the household, her identity subsumed under— or at best interchangeable with— the actual domestic space. This implication contrasts sharply with the word that indicates the male counterpart of *grihini*: *grihakarta* translates literally to the master/owner of the house, which also implies possession of the woman. Shibbanath's choice of the appellation *ginni* not only underscores Ashu's supposed effeminacy, but also gestures at the misogynistic ordering of gender hierarchy.

In this context, it is useful to remember that even a household as unorthodox as that of Tagores, where the cultivation of literary and artistic tastes had made the boundary between the conventionally masculine and feminine spaces comparatively fluid, imposed surprising emphasis on the "masculine" dimension in the education of the male adolescents. Tagore's biographers tell us:

One would not know of it from such works as *Gitanjali* or even *My Reminiscences*, but Rabindranath Tagore cultivated his physique as well as his mind. He could swim the Padma (Ganges) at the Tagore estates, or

walk 25 miles in the hills at a stretch....As a child, wrestling was part of his home-based education (Dutta and Robinson 48).

Reviving a culture that had grown so degenerate that it had come to disregard the value of physical prowess in man was one of the chief concerns of the immediate forbears of Rabindranath Tagore. "Housewife," which was published in 1891, could be reasonably read as a reaction on the part of an adult Rabindranath to a rigid upbringing that enforced normative gender behavior.

The idea of gender as a cultural construct and the notion of prescriptive gender behavior are not new. What is remarkable here is the way in which this categorization seems to have become rigid in late-nineteenth-century Bengal. Gendered behavior, as Judith Butler points out, is a set of performative acts scripted by cultural discourse. She argues that an organizing gender core within an individual is an illusion that is discursively maintained; the fact that the gendered subject is politically constituted through disciplinary mechanisms is obscured from perception. The body of the colonized subject, thus, becomes a surface on which colonial and nationalist discourses inscribe "acceptable" patterns of gendered behavior. In "Housewife" Ashu's perceived transgression marks him as a deviant who cannot measure up to the culturally marked, hypermasculine ideal that every adolescent must measure up to.

I do not suggest that pre-colonial culture is coterminous with the existence of autonomous bodies that are not gendered. However, certain mystical traditions that idealized gender-bending practices enjoyed a greater degree of visibility in pre-colonial India; these traditions were later marginalized and vilified as subversive and degenerate by colonial discourse as well as the dominant discourse of indigenous culture that internalized the assumptions of colonialism. I contend that by focusing on the

victimization of the androgynous male, Tagore critiques this culture that had reinvented for itself a model of “pure” masculinity purged of every trace of the feminine. I use the word *reinvented* advisedly, for androgyny, before it was re-inscribed by colonial discourse as effeminacy, was a valued construct in Indian culture, especially in certain mystical traditions. Revathi Krishnaswamy, in her work on colonial masculinity, contends that “Indian effeminacy should not be regarded as simply a false construct, an untrue stereotype, or as an invented projection, but should be seen, rather, as a misvalued and distorted recognition of something real in Indian culture” (19). Krishnaswamy traces the importance of androgyny as a spiritual ideal in the mystical cults of Bengal inspired by the Bhakti movement, particularly in the Vaishnava cult, in which the devotee visualizes himself as a woman in order to achieve erotic and spiritual union with the male deity. Even in Tantric cults where the deity is female, the male devotee transforms himself (usually through transvestitism) into a female, this time in order to avoid a union with the mother goddess. This mystical ideology was the basis of the cults of two prominent saints of Bengal: Chaitanya (1486-1538) and Ramakrishna (1836-86). The Hindu pantheon boasts of another powerful androgynous icon: *Ardhanarishwar*, the incarnation of Shiva that represents the synthesis of the male and female attributes of Shiva and his consort Parvati.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, however, androgyny was regarded as a pathological symptom that had to be purged to resist the degeneracy projected by the colonial ideologue onto the colonized male. I argue that this process of forcible purgation is a duplication of colonial hegemony, for hypermasculinity itself was mimicry of Western machismo. This purgative process is an internal aggression within the

microcosm of indigenous culture. It is this aggression that Tagore resists through his fictional representation of the victimization of the androgynous male. Despite his claim that his short stories are free from political preoccupation, I see this as a distinctly subversive move. The male androgyne is caught between the dual binds of imperialism and the custodians of the reformed indigenous culture characteristic for its intolerance of what it considers as effeminacy. In their volume on the literary/historical depictions of same-sex love in India, Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai point out how the practices of traditional Indian culture became implicitly criminalized (along with the actual criminalization of homosexuality in the Anti-Sodomy Act of 1861):

British educators and missionaries often denounced Indian marital, familial and sexual practices as primitive... Hindu gods were seen as licentious, and Indian monarchs, both Hindu and Muslim, as decadent hedonists, equally given to heterosexual and homosexual behavior but indifferent to their subjects' welfare. Brahmans came in for similar stereotyping as greedy sensualists.... Educated Indians, defending Indian culture, did not altogether reject Victorian values but rather insisted that the Indian culture was originally very similar to Victorian culture and had been corrupted during the medieval period (Vanita and Kidwai 196).

As Vanita and Kidwai point out, non-normative expressions of masculinity— although an integral part of traditional Indian religion— became marginalized as a result of the internalization of the Victorian discourse on gender behavior. This subconscious replication of colonial hegemony found expression in the reconfiguration of traditional religion. One such “purified” version of Hinduism is the Brahmo faith. The foundation of the *Brahmo Samaj*, originally called the *Brahmo Sabha*, was laid by Rammohan Roy. It was an organization that had its basis on the Brahmo religion, a reformed, monotheistic version of Vedantic Hinduism that was reconstructed along the lines of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Rabindranath’s father, Maharshi Debendranath Tagore, was a figurehead of the Brahmo movement. Predictably, a religion such as this, inspired by

muscular Christianity, was opposed to the degenerate practices of folk-cults like Bhakti and its associated movements.

Considering his staunch Brahmo background, Tagore's interest in the folk tradition of Vaishnavism is an interesting departure. Admittedly Tagore was more interested in the aesthetic form of Vaishnava worship than its philosophical underpinnings, but he seems to have been aware of how closely the two were linked. Vaishnavism is the cult of Krishna, the incarnation of Vishnu, and focuses on his relationship with his beloved Radha and their eternal cycle of union and separation that serves as an allegorical framework for man's quest for God. The language of heterosexual desire, thus, becomes the medium of expression for the Vaishnava devotee's homoerotic longings. The devotee identifies with Radha and thus vicariously feels her yearning for Krishna. The trope of the Vaishnava lyric is a recurrent pattern in Tagore's poetry, where the expression of *viraha* (separation) intensifies the poignant nature of man's quest for either transcendental or amorous union. Mary Lago, in an insightful article, has shown how the pattern of the Vaishnava lyric could be read in two of his short stories ("Punishment" and "A Lapse of Judgment"). Unlike Lago, who traces the quest motif of Vaishnava poetry to read modes of questioning in Tagore's short stories, I identify the figure of the androgynous Vaishnava devotee at the center of the short story "The Divide," and argue that Tagore posits this figure as an alternative model of masculinity opposed to the hypermasculine figures of the earlier short stories.

"The Divide" dramatizes an intense emotional involvement between Banamali, a middle-class Bengali youth of independent means, and his younger kinsman

Himangshumali. The erotic content of the relationship is not overt; in fact, the story opens with Banamali as a kind of maternal nurturing figure:

Banamali was much older than Himangshu. Before Himangshu had cut his teeth or could talk, Banamali would carry him around in the garden to enjoy the morning or evening air; he would play with him, dry his tears, lull him to sleep; indeed he did everything that an intelligent grown-up person is supposed to do to entertain a child....He nurtured him like a rare and precious creeper, which he watered with all his love; and as the creeper grew, pervading the whole of his inner and outer life, Banamali counted himself blessed (Tagore 65)

It is clear from the beginning that the relationship is asymmetrical; the gratification is almost entirely on Banamali's part and this abjection inscribes him as the figure of an archetypal devotee. The devotee's conception of himself as a maternal figure dedicated to the infant Krishna is also an important aspect of Vaishnava worship. The image of nurturing "a rare and precious creeper," however, marks a crucial transition to the central structuring metaphor of the garden (and the gardener)—a familiar trope in Vaishnava poetry. Though the fact of nurturing—the details associated with it—situates the relationship within the framework of caregiving, the dynamic of the relationship shifts as the image of the garden—a spatial signifier of erotic love in Vaishnava discourse—is added to the equation. The significance of the garden in the eroticized metaphysics of Vaishnavism has been remarked on by many scholars, including the writer and art critic Gayatri Sinha, who in an article analyzing painted gardens, identifies it both as a physical meeting point for lovers and as a metaphor for divine union. In "The Divide," Tagore uses this Vaishnava spatial trope—replete with associations of transgendered devotional practices—to represent queer space.

The Vaishnava frame of reference is sustained throughout the narrative. The choice of Banamali's name is telling: William Radice's annotation explains its meaning



as “woodland gardener” or “wearing a garland of wild flowers” and identifies it as a name of Krishna. The deity figure in the story, however, is not Banamali but Himangshu. As Himangshu grows, the relationship evolves and becomes subtly eroticized. The eroticization is at a subtextual level; it remains ambiguous as it ought to be in a form of worship. It takes an outward form of the unsophisticated Banamali’s admiration for the superior intellect of the young boy. The sensual atmosphere of the garden, however, underscores the erotic subtext of the relationship: “When it became dark they sat on a bench, while the southern breeze stirred the leaves in the trees. On some days there was no wind: the tree was still as a picture, and the sky above would be full of brightly shining stars” (Tagore 66). The intimacy implicit in the scene is reminiscent of the eroticized atmosphere of Vaishnava poetry.

The garden continues to be the space that stages the evolution of the relationship even after a severance takes place. The feud between the families pushes Banamali and Himangshu apart. Banamali, incredulous at first of the fact that anything could possibly disrupt their relationship, gradually comes to the painful realization. This sets into motion an endless cycle of anticipation and frustration, anxiety and hopelessness that mirrors the Vaishnava convention of *viraha*. This leaves the reader with no doubt about the amorous nature of involvement:

The next day he went again and sat in the garden, hoping that today Himangshu might come. His friend had come every day for so long that he never imagined that he might not come again. He never supposed that the bond between them could be torn; he had taken it so much for granted, that he had not realized that how totally wrapped up in it his life had become. He had learnt now that the bond had indeed been torn, but so sudden a disaster was quite impossible to take in (Tagore 68).

Banamali’s emotional figuration as the abandoned beloved yearning for the lover replicates the stance of the gender-bending Vaishnava devotee. Banamali’s final

exclamation of hopelessness as he turns his tearful eyes towards his friend's shuttered window is "Dear God," which, as Radice explains, is a close approximation of the Bengali word "*dayamaya*" that literally translates as the "Merciful One." It is an appeal to a *feminine* virtue in a masculine deity, which reinforces the pattern of femininity-in-masculinity that underlies the narrative.

Banamali's close companionship with his kinsman would not have appeared as an anomaly to their respective families; their connection was ruptured not because of any perceived deviance, but because of differences between the two families over clearly material issues. Homosocial bonding in nineteenth-century India, where the sexes were generally segregated in different forms of interaction, was not uncommon: there are numerous instances of both literary and mythical non-erotic homosocial alliances. Counter-colonial nationalism in India was itself a homosocial construction; the anti-colonial resistance staged in the public spheres of everyday life was exclusive to a brotherhood of men, while the inner, spiritual realm of domesticity continued to be the designated space for women. The ideological positions of this hypermasculine fraternity of nationalists and any extant forms of pre-colonial homoerotic alliances were irreconcilably polarized. This polarization can be understood along the lines of the split between non-erotic homosociality and homosexuality theorized by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Sedgwick talks of the paradox inherent in the concept of "male homosocial desire," the intermediate position between homosocial male bonding and male homosexuality:

To draw the "homosocial" back into the orbit of "desire," of the potentially erotic, is to hypothesize the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual— a continuum whose visibility, for men, in our society, is radically disrupted (Sedgwick 1).

“Our society,” for Sedgwick, indicates Euro-American culture in the twentieth century, but Sedgwick’s model of the disrupted continuum of male homosocial alliances, despite its historical specificity, serves as a useful frame of reference for my analysis of forms of homosociality in colonial India. Similar to Sedgwick’s conceptualization of homophobic male bonding, the fraternity of Indian nationalists was informed by a strand of deep homophobia— verging on paranoia— which was a reaction against the construction of sexual degeneracy in the colonial subject. However, the degree of rupture of the possible continuum between non-erotic homosociality and homoeroticism in India was greater than the one outlined by Sedgwick; while Sedgwick premises her bipolar model on the existence of a subterranean gay male counterculture, any such organized alternative to the dominant model of heterosexuality was absent in colonial India, in spite of the existence of alternative sexual practices.

In “The Divide,” Tagore delineates a male alliance that seemingly mimics the familiar, socially acceptable cultural form of non-erotic homosociality on the surface. But the deep emotional connection that informs the bond— framed as it is through Tagore’s recognizable allusions to the Vaishnava tropes of love and longing— complicates its meaning. The erotic dynamic of the relationship inscribed in “The Divide” is determined by romantic love rather than any visible references to sexuality. In a study that investigates the connection of romantic love to homoerotic writings, Kevin Kopelson claims that his central question (“What has love got to do with homosexuality?”) is a “Western question, posed and answered...by a Western scholar for his Western readers” (Kopelson 9). Kopelson is cautious about subsuming the specificities of non-Western epistemological categories under a Western model, but he admits that his question may

be “translatable into, and have some relevance within, non-Western discourses” (Kopelson 9). Kopelson’s inquiry is useful in understanding Tagore’s use of the erotic philosophy of Vaishnavism to construct an alternative erotic model that challenges the hegemonic constructions of heterosexuality. Tagore’s representation of an adult male first as a nurturing mother and then as an eroticized, feminized figure bemoaning loss of love is a boldly subversive move from within a culture that was invested in playing down its alleged effeminacy. But Tagore seems to eroticize the figure of Banamali deliberately by conceiving it in terms of the androgynous personality of the Vaishnava devotee. The mode of Vaishnavite spiritualism that Tagore chooses to invoke is the *sakhi-bhava*, a mode of spiritual quest in which the devotee transforms himself into the lover of god. This revival and valorization of androgyny is in direct contrast with the indigenous elite’s attempt to reconstruct its mythical figures in “purified” forms purged of sexual indeterminacy. Besides Vaishnavism, there were other medieval cults (particularly Sufism) that harbored gender-bending, empathetic practices; some of these were modified by monarchs. Vanita and Kidwai cite one such instance:

Aristocratic men of Avadh subverted the notions of Indo-Persian masculinity they had inherited from Mughal High culture. The king Nawab Nasirudin Haider (1827-37) added his own religious innovations to those of his mother...On the birth date of each (Shia) Imam he would pretend to be a woman in childbirth. Other men imitated him, dressing and behaving like women during that period. British Victorian men viewed this kind of transgendered masculinity as unmanly decadence (194).

Such instances of gender-bending— no matter what their spiritual implication— was rendered inadmissible by colonial and nationalist discourse.

“The Divide,” then, reads as a counter-discourse to such reconstructed mythology: it attempts to destabilize sexual determinacy not only by highlighting the motif of androgyny but by the subtextual inscription of homoeroticism. Homoeroticism was a

form of degeneracy imputed onto the character of the colonized by colonial discourse. Tagore does not explore the theme of homoeroticism explicitly; rather he treats it as an extension of the principle of androgyny underlying the trope of the Vaishnava cult. What Tagore critiques in the stories is the denial of the feminine principle which he considers an inalienable part of the traditional Indian concept of masculinity. In a letter to his niece written from Shelidaha, he makes a fundamental distinction between European and Indian temperament:

It's strange that my greatest fear is of being born in Europe, because in Europe there is never any chance to bare one's soul so loftily; or if one does, people are very critical....A stiff, durable sort of mind, clipped and hammered into shape by strict laws. Truly, I don't see this impractical, self-absorped, free-roving spirit of mine, with its love of Imagination, as anything to be ashamed of (Tagore 280).

Tagore here makes a contrasting use of the metaphors of the city and the country to state the opposition between a practical/materialistic and a fluid, imaginative temperament. At the time when Tagore was writing the short stories, this binary had extended beyond the opposed spaces of Europe/ India and had become internalized in the indigenous culture. The Bengali elite had at this time indeed become “ashamed of” minds that were not “stiff” or “durable,” as a lack of these manly qualities inevitably implied complicity with the effeminate stereotype generated by colonial discourse. The driving principle of the nineteenth century Bengali intelligentsia was the ideal of what Bankim Chandra Chatterjee had designated as *karma yoga*, or a masculine pursuit of success in the world of activity or *karma*. Tagore, sensitive to the fact that imperialism posed a threat to the cultural and gender identity of the colonized, was equally wary of the pitfalls of a construction such as this. His temperament could be best described as what Patrick Hogan defines as “sycretic androgyny”: “The combination of traditionally masculine and

feminine traits— most often masculine and feminine virtues— associated with a synthesis of elements from indigenous and metropolitan cultures” (321). Tagore envisioned masculinity and femininity as complementary and interactive, rather than categories that are mutually exclusive.

Tagore’s syncretic conceptualization of gender, as evident in the stories that I analyze in this chapter, looks ahead to and can be analyzed through the lens of Helene Cixous’s theory of bisexuality. Cixous’s concept of bisexuality opposes the heterosexual hegemony that purports to create a rigid divide between masculine and feminine behavior and desire, and challenges this binary opposition by subsuming the traits of both genders and transcending them. This ideal, she claims, is more positive and potent than the “neutering” implication of the concept of the Ovidian Hermaphrodite: “To this bisexuality that melts and effaces, wishing to avoid castration, I oppose the other bisexuality, the one with which every subject, who is not shut up inside the spurious Phallogocentric Performing Theater, sets up his or her own erotic universe” (Cixous 41). Tagore’s ideal of androgyny, which he traces back to pre-colonial cultural forms in India, is similarly enabling. Tagore’s political syncretism was evident in his view of nationalism as an uneasy graft onto a fluid, heterogeneous culture. Similarly, his refusal to accept a model of reified masculinity bears out his investment in the strand of traditional Indian philosophy that conceptualized human nature as a balanced and enabling synthesis of *purusha* (masculinity) and *prakriti* (femininity). In the stories, there is a discernible thrust towards resisting colonial and nationalist hegemony by revivifying modes of pre-colonial cultural forms based on a flexible understanding of gendered identities. I see this as a

distinctly subversive move, a move that was re-enacted by Gandhi in his valorization of androgyny in the later stages of the nationalist movement.

## CHAPTER II

THE CITY AS CLOSET: FLANERIES, JOURNEYS AND SPACES OF OTHERNESS  
IN R. RAJ RAO'S *THE BOYFRIEND*

Bombay is a city humming, throbbing with sexual energy. A city of migrant men without women; a city in heat. The womanless rickshaw wallahs, the Bollywood wannabes, the fashion models, and sailors from many countries— all in search of some heat, a hurried furtive fuck in whatever hidden corner the world will permit them. They do it in trains, railway stations, the back of taxis, parks, urinals.

Suketu Mehta, *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found*

Cities, with their simultaneous promises of anonymity and connectedness, have been central to the self-definition of queer subjects and the formation of queer communities. But could we say the same of cities across cultures, for instance, of a metropolitan locus in a postcolonial nation like India, a city like Bombay/Mumbai for instance? In answering this question, I claim that the very question of queer visibility (even in an urban locus) becomes problematized when we consider the colonial legacy of India. Remandered by the politics of colonialism and religious nationalism, sexual dissidents find their privileges of citizenship severely limited. Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code— which was instituted by the imperial authorities in India in the year 1860 and is still operative— declared sodomy as criminal activity; hence the gay population in India is confined to an invisible underground subculture.<sup>1</sup> While urban gay male subcultures provide an alternative model of community, making this model visible is not a viable strategy to counter the politics of dispossession, considering the legal implications of this choice. What mode of existence, then, can a city offer its dissident sexual citizens? Is it possible to inscribe subterranean queer spaces not merely as self-

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<sup>1</sup>A recent legislation has decriminalized consensual same-sex relationships in India, although IPC section 377 continues to be operative in cases of forced intercourse. As I demonstrate in chapter one, the cultural stigma against homosexuality continues despite this change.



contained eroticized loci but also as marginalized *parts* of the larger metropolitan framework? How can the “invisibility” of queer spaces be articulated other than in relation to mainstream, “visible” spaces of everyday city life? In this chapter, I argue that R. Raj Rao solves this representational conundrum through the inscription of the spectral figure of the gay *flanuer* in his novel *The Boyfriend*. R. Raj Rao is a writer, academic and queer activist based in Pune, India; *The Boyfriend*, published in 2003, is an important landmark in queer-themed fiction coming out of South Asia. Rao’s *flaneur* is a forty-something peripatetic sophisticate, who weaves in and out of the gay underbelly of Mumbai and infiltrates mainstream urban spaces in a manner that can be best described as “haunting.” This Protean figure, who is at once an insider and an outsider, a participant and a voyeur, is insubstantial and corporeal at the same time, a figure whose identity is fluid and transient. My reading of Rao’s novel demonstrates that transience—the essence of *flanerie*—is the only way to belong in the queer community in a locus where sexuality is rigidly policed. I also discuss Rao’s representation of a mechanized *flanerie*—the local trains of Bombay that work not only as an externalization of the queer *flaneur* but also is a queer space that could be understood in terms of Foucault’s heterotopias. Finally, I demonstrate how, in *The Boyfriend*, Rao portrays queer space as a space of excess that at once mimics and contrasts sharply with ordinary everyday spaces, thus questioning the viability of queer spaces in the postcolonial context.

*Queer Urbanities: The Function of the City in Queer Self-Definition*

The interrelation of cities and homosexuality has been the focus of a number of scholarly works, both historical and theoretical. In *Gay New York: Gender, Urban, Culture and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (1994), Gorge Chauncey

examines the potential of the urban locus to offer the sexual dissident an identity, chiefly forged through a sense of an interconnected urban community in pre-World War II New York City. In this study, Chauncey explodes the myth that a coherent gay male community emerged in New York only *after* Stonewall. He claims that the prewar urban gay male population in New York City had, as a result of extensive and consistent policing of sexual “deviance,” a less overt mode of existence. Chauncey contends that in this period, gay visibility, either in terms of activism or in terms of visible markers of difference, was not emphasized: community-formation depended instead on shared codes of communication:

Gay men developed a highly sophisticated system of subcultural codes—codes of dress, speech and style—that enabled them to recognize one another on the streets, at work, and at parties and bars, and to carry on intricate conversations whose coded meaning was unintelligible to potentially hostile people around them. The very need for such codes, it is usually (and rightly) argued, is evidence of the degree to which gay men had to hide. But the elaboration of such codes also indicates the extraordinary resilience of the men who lived under such constraints (4).

Similarity of the gay underworld of pre-war New York City to that of the present-day Mumbai is obvious: hostile surveillance, in both cases, necessitates subterfuges as a mode of survival. I would claim that the stakes are higher in postcolonial Mumbai, the visible homosexual being not only culturally marginalized but legally culpable (until recently, that is). Hence the existence of a system of codes, which, as Chauncey argues, neither presupposes what he calls the “isolation, invisibility and internalization”—myths of the non-existence of a homosexual community—nor any lack of agency on the part of a sexual minority (2). Chauncey problematizes the negative implications of the word “closet”—which, again, presupposes gay isolation and disconnectedness as opposed to

liberation and validation associated with coming out— demonstrating that in the historical period that he focuses on, gay men often resorted to camouflage:

Many gay men, for instance, negotiated the often hostile world as living a double life, or wearing a mask and taking it off. Each image has a valence different from a closet, for each suggests not gay men's isolation, but their ability—as well as their need—to move between different persons and different lives, one straight life, the other gay, to wear their hair up, as another common phrase put it, or let their hair down" (6).

The masks that Chauncey mentions here are, of course, metaphorical— symbols that signal the prewar New York gay community's ability and inclination to move between identities, which, according to Chauncey, are a form of empowerment. In my introductory chapter, I had examined the significance of actual masks used in a Gay Pride parade in Chennai in June 2009— masks that indicate both the ambivalence of the queer community about coming out and claiming visible space (despite parading on the streets of a conservative city) and their ability and desire to negotiate multiple identities. It is this fluidity of identities that Yudi's *flaneries* in *The Boyfriend* are directed at and result in, this wearing of masks that ensures the survival of socially inadmissible desires in a hostile surrounding. And like Chauncey's historical New York, Rao's fictional Mumbai offers the possibility for this camouflage through the very anonymity of its urban landscape.

Queer territorial reclamation, on the other hand, is not always uniformly empowering, and this ambivalence finds expression in David Caron's *My Father and I: The Marais and the Queerness of Community* (2009). Caron's book, which is mixture of memoir and cultural studies, traces the history of the Marais, one the oldest neighborhoods of Paris. The Marais is simultaneously a visibly reclaimed locus for the queer community in Paris and a home to Jews, another historically dispossessed

community. It is in this neighborhood that the author finds a commonality between his father (who is a Hungarian Jew, a Holocaust survivor who was later granted French citizenship) and himself— the commonality of marginalization. Despite its perceptibly queer identity, the Marais remains a marginal locus; like his father who was continually sensitive of his peripheral position in spite of his official acceptance in France, the author is aware of marginality. In an essay that preceded and anticipated the book, Caron points out this shared mindset: “What has my father transmitted to me, then? Not the stability and safety of integration he was supposed to achieve, but the instability and disintegration he came with in the first place. Not nationhood but diaspora” (Caron 16). The diasporic sense of alienation is used to define queer isolation, and the queer identity of a neighborhood, paradoxically, reinforces the sense of ghettoization rather than that of community.

Fictional and cinematic works have also explored the connection between queer subjectivity and urban culture. Alan Hollinghurst’s *The Swimming-Pool Library* (1988) is a novel that compares profitably with Rao’s novel, which it might have influenced. The gay London of Hollinghurst’s novel gives the impression of a community that counters any suggestion of ghettoization. Will Beckwith— educated, elitist, narcissistic, dabbling in journalistic and biographical writing, with a persistent interest in working-class men— seems like a fitting predecessor of Rao’s Yudi. He, however, has none of the middle-age angst that characterizes Yudi, nor the older man’s need to be restrained to an “underground” gay subculture. Will is part of a coherent gay community; he experiences very little of Yudi’s occasional isolation. Will’s thorough familiarity as well as his unerring instinct for spaces with erotic potential leads him to a succession of sexual

partners. His sexual “hunt” is not as defined by anonymity as Yudi’s is, since he is not haunted by a similar vulnerability. However, he savors the anonymity of his frequent visits to one of London’s health clubs— the Corinthian— where he relishes the voyeurism of looking at unknown men in the showers:

O the difference of man and man. Sometimes in the showers, which only epitomized and confirmed a general feeling held elsewhere, I was amazed and enlightened by the variety of the male organ. In the rank and file of men showering the cocks and balls took on the air of almost an independent species, exhibited in instructive contrasts (Hollinghurst 193).

Another place that Will goes in search of this delectable anonymity is a pornographic movie theater, where casual sexual encounters counter the stagnation of his more stable relationships. Will’s quest for anonymity, however, is largely a matter of choice. The map of gay London is, for Will, is sequence of spaces with the potential of pleasure, their urban anonymity making them desirable. Yudi’s gay Bombay, on the other hand, is map of the loci of subterfuge, where camouflage becomes the primary mode of survival. The engagement of the urban locus— the “use” of the city as it were—for homoerotic pleasure depends on the history of the queer subject, and the cultural response to his “transgression.” The city which makes Yudi’s spectrality a possibility also makes his marginal status real—and it is this paradox that is apparent in the figure of the *flaneur*.

Space plays a key role in *The Boyfriend*, in which the majority of chapter titles allude to spaces/places where significant events take place: “Testosterone,” “Mate House,” “Shravanabelagola,” “Chaitya Bhoomi,” and “A.K. Modelling Agency.” Throughout the novel, the impression is of movement—sometimes hectic, sometimes indolent, sometimes mediated (railway transportation). The narrative is a seemingly endless meandering in and out of different spaces that Yudi— the gay journalist who is the central character in the novel— inhabits (however briefly) or visits or travels through.

This meandering is essentially urban in nature: the Bombay landscape spreads out before Yudi as he moves around on an erotic quest— he “haunts” the city streets and its local trains. This pattern of movement—an objective correlative for Yudi’s quest for sexual gratification— remains repetitive till he becomes emotionally involved with one of his casual pickups— a young lower-class boy named Milind. The repeated loss and recovery of Milind leads Yudi through yet another series of spaces. Yudi and Milind enact the successive phases of their relationship in different places/spaces: their courtship takes place in the dark recesses of Café Volga and amidst the psychedelic lights of the gay nightclub Testosterone, their brief time as a couple is portrayed within the confines of Yudi’s bachelor apartment (affectionately and flippantly dubbed Mate House), and their honeymoon happens in Shravanabelagola (a tourist destination in the neighboring state of Karnataka). After Milind’s disappearance, the indolent and directionless pace of Yudi’s cruising is transformed into a unidirectional, focused search for his lover. The plot bears out the futility of this transformation, and indeed of the possibility of a long-term relationship. With Milind marrying the woman chosen for him by his parents, Yudi is back on the cruising scene.

The novel is set in the early 1990s. In 1992, Bombay became the site of violent communal riots sparked off by the demolition of the Babri Masjid by Hindu fundamentalists in Ayodhya. Although geographically distant from the site of this event, Bombay has precisely the kind of diverse, multi-layered community in which ideological differences might translate into violence in periods of social instability. The riots not only form a backdrop to the main plot of the novel: Rao manipulates the narrative by using them to create a temporary separation between Yudi and Milind. We hear most of the

incidents of and around the riots reported by Milind, who is a Dalit and has a keen awareness of the vulnerability of his social position. Dalit is a term used to denote people of low caste in India, who occupy a low place on the social hierarchy and are considered untouchables. The queer spaces in the novel, on the surface at least, seem to cut across class and caste barriers, but a sense of this hierarchization is ubiquitous. The queer culture of Rao's 1990s Bombay is subterranean but fairly coherent, with cruising spots recognized and accessed by the gay male population, gay nightclubs (one, at least), publications like *Bombay Dost* that connect the members of the subculture, and an elaborately coded vernacular lingo that the subculture shares. However, there is very little emphasis on coming out: the city remains a gigantic closet that keeps this gay male population invisible, not apart from the mainstream community, but locked in a schizophrenia that alternates between unwilling performances of heterosexuality and furtive pursuits of same-sex love. The picture has not changed radically since the 90s; however, recent globalizing influences have changed the mode of queer self-definition. In a study that explores the workings on a Bombay-based online gay community called Gay Bombay, Parmesh Shahani points out this gradual transformation and maps how the definition of gayness and indeed Indianness has changed with the acquisition of global access and vocabulary. Shahani also charts the evolution of queer activism in India—Bombay serving as a center-stage for it— and its attempts to reconcile the notions of Indianness and queer subjectivity, and redressing the iniquitous provisions of the anti-sodomy law. Rao's Bombay, however, is a step behind these exciting times of queer self-assertion; the most that the gay community can expect out of the urban locus is a sense of

*connectedness*, a shared invisibility in the mainstream spaces and a shared “haunting” of urban queer spaces.

“*Hum Hain Rahi Pyaar Ke*”: *Haunting the Paths of Love*

The title of this section alludes to both a popular score from *Nau Do Gyaarah*, a 1957 Hindi film and the title of another 1993 Bollywood production, and translates as “we are travelers on the road of love.” The sentiment expressed in the line is the familiar romantic bohemianism of the Bollywood hero, and I believe it can be usefully adapted to articulate the experience of the gay flaneur who wanders the city streets (“paths”) in quest of love. I argue that Rao’s representation of queer *flanerie* is a strategy of re-incarnating the spectral gay subject, the very spectrality or insubstantiality of the flaneur being both an outcome and a critique of the process of deterritorialization and erasure. The term *flaneur*, as we know, does not have an exact English equivalent—it translates roughly to a leisurely stroller, a saunterer, an aimless pedestrian who wanders the city streets, seemingly directionless and unburdened by any pressing business. (It has been suggested that the lack of an exact English synonym is because aimlessness is so foreign to the purposeful Anglo-saxon temperament!). The *flaneur* we encounter in Charles Baudelaire’s “The Painter of Modern Life” is essentially an artist, whose simultaneous immersion into and critical distance from the urban landscape is a stance coterminous with the phenomenon of modernity. The flaneur reappears in the works of Walter Benjamin—to which my project is indebted—this time as a product of the commodification of urban culture. Benjamin’s flaneur is at once a commodity on display and an avid consumer of the cornucopia of commodities that the city has to offer. Indeed, the city itself opens itself up for this peripatetic consumer in more ways than one: it is a



hieroglyphic text that the flaneur decodes, a sea of anonymous faces that he feels a deep empathetic connection with: "Empathy is the nature of the intoxication to which the *flâneur* abandons himself in the crowd. He . . . enjoys the incomparable privilege of being himself and someone else as he sees fit. Like a roving soul in search of a body, he enters another person whenever he wishes" (*Baudelaire* 55). The *jouissance* hinted at in this sentence is perceptibly erotic; not only does this disengaged identification (and I use an oxymoron here) offer the possibility of gratification that borders on the erotic, the faceless crowd also offers the possibility of actual and anonymous erotic encounters. When one notices this desire for anonymity and camouflage coupled with this hint of *jouissance* in the Benjaminian *flâneur*, the parallel with cruising is hard to miss. This erotic— or even specifically homoerotic— dimension of *flanerie* has been theorized by critics, notably by Dianne Chisholm in *Queer Constellations: Subcultural Space in the Wake of the City* (2005), who, while noting the similarities between the classical flaneur and cruising *flâneur*, also points out the dissimilarities between the two figures:

Unlike the classical flaneur, who has no object, the cruising flaneur is on the outlook for love, where the gay gaze is misrecognized for the look of the commodity. A city lover, as much a lover of his or her own sex, the cruising flaneur gravitates to the city's hot spots in search for a companion. En route, she or he encounters the other in commodity drag, and vice versa, the commodity dressed in gay masquerade. In either case, the deception is as devastating as it is exhilarating (47).

According to Chisholm, what distinguishes the cruising *flâneur* are the specificity and the emotional content of his quest— indeed, the quest itself, which is essentially different from the aimless strolling of the classical flaneur. I agree with Chisholm's formulation only partially. The classical *flâneur's* wanderings are not without emotional content, for did we not just comment on the deep empathetic connection that he feels with the faceless— or ever-changing—face of the crowd that he immerses himself in? And the

cruising *flaneur's* commodification, I claim, is more self-conscious than a simple “misrecognition”: the materiality of cruising is based on a complicated barter of sought-for attributes in the companion, a coded system of exchange that makes cruising no less transactional than the exchange of commodities. Even the sense of urgency that defines the cruising *flaneur's* quest— that Chisholm describes as “love”— can be explained in terms of this transactional process. I will elaborate this argument further with illustrations from Rao’s novel.

Now, as to the question of why I have decided to reincarnate the *flaneur* in Bombay (or chosen to read a figure in a Bombay novel as a flaneur), contemporary *flaneur* literature will testify that the flaneur has taken several walks away from the Paris of Baudelaire and Benjamin, sometimes in the guise of the cruising *flaneur*. While there has been no other examination of the queer *flaneur* in the South Asian context (to my knowledge at least), Rajeev S. Patke, in an article titled “Benjamin in Bombay? An Extrapolation” (2002) evaluates the adequacy of the Benjaminian lens to examine the nature of what he calls the belated “postmodern modernity” of a South Asian metropolitan locus like Bombay. Patke’s project involves reading the city of Bombay using Benjamin’s terminology— the city as a palimpsest of collective memories, the city as a runic text, as a trace, as a labyrinth through which the *flaneur* wanders. In this brief analysis of the concept of *flanerie* in Bombay, Patke highlights the *discomfort* that the sights of the Bombay streets cause by assaulting the sensibilities of the flaneur: “The flanneries of Bombay are as convoluted as those of any European city, but a stroll there is more reliably fraught with unpleasant discovery...cities like Bombay show the limits beyond which the Baudelairean figure can stroll only with extreme discomfort to the

figuration. The limitation separates the Asian from the European metropolis” (Patke). The cruising *flâneur* in Rao’s novel, I suggest, is more ambivalent in his response to the sights, sounds and smells of the city that he is exposed to in the course of his wanderings in Bombay. His cruising spans spaces fragmented and separated by an asymmetrical class hierarchization; the visual/olfactory markers of class at once arouse and disgust him:

Yudi, ignorant of the boy’s confusion, drew closer. The odor of sweat from the young working-class body made his head spin, but then he noticed the lad’s feet. The fellow was wearing slippers. The feet were as shapeless as a leper’s, like the feet of most men who came to Churchgate. The uncut toenails were pallid. There were cracks on the soles, especially visible around the heels. Yuck, Yudi burped (Rao 7).

Yudi— educated, wealthy, man of leisure, freelance journalist for the leading dailies of the city, speaking with an inflection that testifies to an upper-class upbringing— pursues what he calls “working class homos” in the men’s restroom at a railway station in Bombay. The railway station mentioned here is Churchgate, which is a terminus of the Western zone of the Mumbai Suburban railway. The station gets its name from the Churchgate street— one of the most prominent business districts of South Bombay. Small wonder, then, that the busy railway station serves as a point of anonymous erotic contact. The cruiser’s sense of safe spaces very specifically demarcates these contact zones: “The Churchgate loo has two sections. By convention one of them is the gay wing, the other the straight. The hetero wing of course has a better supply of mainstream men, but one dare not cruise in that area for fear of being bashed up. The gay wing gets nice guys only intermittently” (Rao 6). This regret about the unavailability of “nice guys”— indeed, the categorization of “niceness” itself— is based on class. The sense of class— and the asymmetry that it generates— is far from absent in these contact zones of pleasure-seeking, despite their being identified as safe spaces. Nor is this sense of unease

unidirectional: Yudi's revulsion is mirrored in the paranoia and mistrust of the working class men that he picks up, who refuse to divulge their true identities. The microcosm of safe spaces is fractured by the discomfort of crossing class lines and possibilities of risk-taking; again, this very potential for uneasiness, danger, violence or violation (the unsought for kind) make these erotic contacts exciting. Elsewhere in the novel, the author draws attention to Yudi's tendency to venture out of his comfort zones in the course of his sexual pursuits: "Yudi also looked for sex and solace in unusual places and among unusual men. Men who were physically disabled, for instance, turned him on. It could be any handicap: blindness, lameness, a hunched back; he was ready to give anything to sleep with them" (Rao 30). These "unusual" digressions from the "norm" as Yudi understands it (even from within the framework of his non-normative sexuality) are gratifying because they are transient, brief, matter-of-fact and unhindered by any internal conflict; the *flâneur* in Yudi understands that these encounters do not define him in any way and are mere equivalents of eroticized urban spaces that he saunters in and out of. The actual, physical spaces that provide opportunities for such encounters are— like the Churchgate restroom— are essentially urban in character.

Patke may not have elaborated on the idea of the flâneur in his Benjaminian reading of Bombay, but Bombay flâneurs surface in Bollywood cinema in different incarnations, the most common among them being the *tapori* or the street rebel. The *tapori* has been a familiar Bollywood figure in the last few decades. The Hindi word roughly translates to "vagabond," but contains the added dimension of an aggressive streetwise sensibility that is essentially urban and characteristically *Bambaiyya* ("of Bombay"). Over the decades, the happy-go-lucky wanderer of the city streets from the

1950s (usually an innocent from the countryside whose infatuation and subsequent disenchantment with the metropolis constitute the rite of passage into a kind of urban maturity/mature urbanity) has metamorphosed, over the decades, into the tough rebel who challenges the deployment of power in the urban landscape.<sup>2</sup> The *tapori*, who typically represents the blue-collar, working-class stratum of the society, attempts to destabilize class power through the public performance of an aggressive masculinity. In her analysis in the *tapori* figure in Bollywood film, Ranjani Mazumdar reads this performance as a means of taking possession of the city:

Drawing attention to the self through linguistic and stylistic performances, the *tapori* creates a space where control is possible...part small-time street hood and part social conscience of the neighborhood, the *tapori* embodies a fragile masculinity that is narrated through a series of encounters with the upper class and the figure of the woman. In performing and depicting marginal figures whose narrative predicaments seem to mirror their psychological states of marginality, we see a verbal and social alienation expressed in the *tapori*'s performance. This alienation is countered through both shock and play with the signs of everyday" (Mazumdar 42).

The *tapori*'s spatial reclamation and attempts to transform the streets into a space of control by subverting the economy of power depends on the kind of performance that is visually coded. Since the figure of the *tapori* is used as a cinematic (hence visual and aural) strategy of embodying a combination of the "small-time street hood" and "social consciousness of the neighborhood," it is made both visually and aurally distinct, through flamboyant, larger-than-life, excessive appearance and gestures and "sharp street humor" and "an everyday street language" (Mazumdar 41). Performance, for the *tapori*, is the means of addressing his liminality; by bringing this performance out on the public

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<sup>2</sup> The innocent disenchantment of the lovable tramp, played by Raj Kapoor in *Awaara* (1951) and *Shree 420* (1955) later gave way to the aggressiveness of screen *taporis* played by Amitabh Bachchan and Amir Khan in films like *Amar Akbar Anthony* (1977) and *Ghulam* (1998).

space he challenges the propriety of the dominant social order. It is, as Mazumdar points out, an expression of a “deep skepticism toward power and wealth,” and hence contains an element of the idealistic desire to change the social order. The performativity of the queer *flaneur* in Bombay, I argue, is of a different order: it is, indeed, positioned at the other end of the spectrum from that of the *tapori*. The queer *flaneur* performs camouflage, not identity: not one distinct identity at any rate. His identities are shifting and fluid: he claims the coded sub-terrain of queerness by speaking its language, and shifts back, undetected, into the “signs of everyday.” This undetectability, I feel, is a more potent strategy of spatial reclamation than the visual challenge staged by the *tapori*. This potent spectrality of the *flaneur* in Rao’s novel is evident not only on the streets, but also in the mobile confinement of a train compartment—as I demonstrate in the next section.

*Pleasurable Incarceration: The Trains of Bombay*

The Manager of Bombay’s suburban railway system was recently asked when the system was going to improve to a point where it could carry its 6 million daily passengers in comfort. “Not in my lifetime”, he answered. Certainly, if you commute into Bombay, you are made aware of the precise temperature of the human body as it curls around you on all sides, adjusting itself to every curve of your own. A lover’s embrace was never so close.

Suketu Mehta, *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found*

*The Boyfriend* also represents a new kind of flanerie, a mediated, mechanized ambulation on a mobile locus— the local trains of Bombay. The Bombay Suburban Railway is an institution in itself, ferrying more than six million passengers back and forth daily from the suburbs to the city. According to statistics, it has one of the highest passenger densities of any urban railway system in the world: “Bombay, also known as Mumbai, is a city of 16 million inhabitants, of whom six million ride the city’s three main

lines daily— more riders than all of New York City’s subways, buses, trains and ferries combined. Trains designed to hold 1700 passengers carry as many as 4700 during peak hours in a bone-crushing 1.4 bodies per square foot of space” (Verma). No Bombay narrative is complete without a reference to its railway system, which structures the lives of the city dwellers. The trains, which constitute a key leitmotif in Rao’s novel, are materialized reincarnations both of the flaneur and the cityscape that he mines in search of his erotic quarry. The railways system is a pivot on which Rao’s narrative turns: for Yudi, it helps bridge the gap between the Nalla Sopara, the suburban ghetto that he is forced to inhabit and nodes of urban anonymity that offer uncomplicated erotic contact. The route that Yudi frequents is the Western line of the Mumbai Suburban Railway, which has twenty-seven stations between the terminal points of Churchgate and Virar: Marine Lines, Charni Road, Grant Road, Mumbai Central, Mahalaxmi, Lower Parel, Elphinstone Road, Dadar, Matunga Road, Mahim Junction, Bandra, Khar Road, Santacruz, Vile Parle, Andheri, Jogeshwari, Goregaon, Malad, Kandivali, Borivali, Dahisar, Mira Road, Bhayandar, Naigaon, Vasai Road, Nala Sopara (where Yudi lives). This apparent mundane litany of names signifies for Yudi a coded map of cruising spots. The busier railway stations— Andheri and Churchgate, for instance— that this mechanical flaneur weaves in and out of become for Yudi destinations (temporarily, at least) rather than points of transit that he must touch on before merging into the demanding, “real-world” activities of the city. The desire that drives Yudi to these nodal points is at once predatory and detached: the sharp focus on a seemingly promising destination wavers and changes direction if this preferred locus fails to deliver on its promise.

The main spots for cruising are the men's restrooms of the Mumbai railway stations. The abstraction of the cruising potential of these loci are quantified and mapped in a publication brought out by the leading gay newspaper of Bombay:

He had an A to Z of all the loos in South Bombay where men had sex with men. He bought it from the office of *Bombay Dost*, for which he occasionally wrote. He popped in at all or some of these loos every evening between 7 and 8. The stinking places were always humming with erotic activity. Orgies in the dark, among piss and shit. The foul smell, however, made the sex more enjoyable. Having spent so much of his life in these loos Yudi had come to the conclusion that there was indeed something sensual about filth. If the toilets were clean, scrubbed with phenyl, patrons wouldn't achieve orgasm (Rao 28).

These subterranean stages of coprophilic orgies punctuate the trajectory of the Bombay trains, which endlessly reenact the queer *flanuer's* wanderings through the city. Yudi's journeys on the trains are, then, a variation of his wanderings on the city streets, a mediated *flanerie* that leads to multiple destinations.

The mobile interiority of the trains themselves replicates the configuration of the urban landscape. The densely crowded trains provide unlimited opportunities for cruising, to the extent that certain train compartments are reputed as gay coaches by convention, compartments that serve as hunting grounds for Yudi:

When the train arrived, the two of them boarded on the very first compartment. Yudi knew this to be the gay compartment by convention. Activity, however, was restricted to the empty space between the entrances and the exits. The train had to be quite full for people to have a go at each other...By the time they reached Bombay Central, all the seats were taken and the people were beginning to press on each other in aisles. In the Virar trains that Yudi caught, this happened all the time, and he was thankful for it. Rubbing his body against someone's was the best way to handle the tedium of the journey-- it was much better than reading or singing bhajans or playing cards (Rao19).

This intricately choreographed dance of desire— familiar yet always unpredictable— is infinitely preferable to the religious hymns or card games that simply repeat the tedium.



The paradox of the queer flaneur's simultaneous insubstantiality— even spectrality— and corporeality is nowhere more apparent than in this instance: amidst the crush of the sweating bodies around him, Yudi is a mere disembodied hand (or foot, or ankle, or whatever part of the anatomy you wish to choose) reaching out for erotic contact. Preliminaries of seduction are redundant in this hurried barter of caresses, which are unburdened by the “substance” of stable relationships. The train compartment then, in a sense, is a peripatetic reconfiguration of the Parisian arcades— the display of commodities nowhere near as elegant, the pace of the transaction not as leisurely, or the commodity hunters not as discriminating— but the exchange of commodities is carried out just the same. Admittedly, Yudi is averse to mixing monetary transaction with pleasure: “Yudi rarely paid for sex. He believed that the time for that had not come yet, although he was beginning to grey at the temples. But he was trim despite his forty-two years and had no tummy” (Rao 5). However, Yudi ultimately cannot prevent his commodification: what he offers in lieu of money is the potential for sexual attraction, a fact that is borne out by the episode of competitive exhibitionism in the men's restroom in Churchgate station. Yudi, however, sees himself as being more discerning than the average consumer, guided by a distinct taste as he browses through the merchandise on offer. As a possible antidote to his approaching middle age, he looks for extreme youth in his potential partners, even in the body parts that he seeks out or the ones that approach him:

The gay coach didn't seem to be living up to its reputation. It was stuffed with the most insipid, uninspiring males, entirely devoid of sexuality...the sight of sweaty old men towards whom he did not feel an iota of attraction sickened Yudi. 'Stand properly', he felt compelled to say to one of them whose arms were matted with long white hair (Rao 21).

The same disgust is reiterated when he has a restroom encounter with an older man. Ironically, when Yudi balances himself on the footboard of the compartment and leans out to eye the young men precariously hanging out of the train, a shouted comment from an observer reminds him that he is too old for such a feat. Jolted back into the awareness that “his days for acrobatics were over,” Yudi also becomes conscious of his place in the hierarchy of commodities.

We witness this mass commodification of humanity— within the context of homoerotic desire— being played out within the enclosed locus of the train compartment, which serves both as a stage for this transaction and as a display-case for the human merchandise involved in it. The train compartment, then, becomes a contemporary equivalent of the Parisian Arcades that Walter Benjamin identifies as a “primordial landscape of consumption” (Benjamin 827). In his analysis of the correlation between the architectural and the cultural significance of the Arcades, Benjamin comments on how the structure of the Arcades becomes an objective correlative for its function; the insulated, enclosed space of the passageway of shops enfolds the consumer and contains his attention. Cut off from the distractions of an external landscape, the consumer is rapt in fetishizing the commodities on display; his visual focus can possibly have no other trajectory. The immersion into this seemingly utopian space is in character with the defining tendencies of the *flaneur*, whose idle strolling is more gratifying when sealed off from the crude realities of the actual world. This disjunction from reality is true of the situation of train travel *per se*, where the passenger is enclosed in a womblike mobile locus, disconnected from the rapidly unfolding scenery outside. The kaleidoscopic, fragmentary nature of the external world as seen from within the moving train makes its

reality questionable. However, despite this disconnect with the external landscape, the interior of a Bombay train compartment cannot be designated as “utopian.” The feel of perspiring flesh, the unavoidable proximity of bodily effluvia, the stifling heat— these elements merely replicate the real world around Rao’s queer *flaneur* traveling on the local trains. And the flaneur himself— the archetypal stroller— remains physically arrested amidst a limited choice of commodities that may or may not be appetizing.

What, then, is the ontological relationship between this peripatetic queer space (and the stationary flaneur within) and the stationary-yet-seemingly-mobile world outside? The mobile arcade of fluctuating pleasures could be understood not as a *utopia* disconnected from reality, but as a *heterotopia* that exists in the lacuna between real and imagines (i.e. utopian) spaces. In a lecture titled “Des Autres Espaces” delivered in 1967, Michel Foucault coined the term “heterotopia” to designate “other” spaces that fall between real and utopian spaces. Foucault defines heterotopias as alternative spaces which interrogate the received notions of chronology and identity. Foucault’s heterotopias are not utopian, but they are not real either—they reconstitute reality by reflecting it. The mirror itself is, in fact, a heterotopic space for Foucault:

The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there (Foucault).

This “mirroring” or replication of reality—and a simultaneous distancing from it— is doubtless true of the train compartment in *The Boyfriend*, which, despite rupturing the queer *flaneur*’s connection with the exterior space of reality, actually replicates this space around him.

Train travel, as it is represented in Rao's novel, also recreates what Foucault describes as the heterotopian capacity of "juxtaposing in a single real place with several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (Foucault). In doing this, heterotopias straddle segments of disparate spaces and subvert the linear trajectory of time by constituting what Foucault terms "heterochrony." While Yudi's febrile erotic hunt fixes him in the immediacy of his experience, he is capable of traversing chunks of time and space:

The train took off once again. The highrises of Dahisar and Mira Road, the salt pans of Bhayandar and Naigaon, and the span bridge of Vasai Road came and went, even as a rejuvenating breeze lashed against Yudi's face. The train thundered over Vasai creek, and he went into a familiar trance, imagining he was a sanyasi who had renounced the world and now nothing at all mattered. Then, at last he was home. The diamond shaped sign board on the platform said: Nalla Sopara. Yudi waded his way towards the exit with some difficulty, before jumping off. 'Goodbye, train,' he said (Rao 23).

The juxtaposition of spaces of eroticism and asceticism, the heterochronous experience of being simultaneously in the present and in another segment of time is characteristic of Foucauldian heterotopias, in this case the train compartment that Yudi travels in. Trains, for Yudi, at once suggest the here-and-now of a manhunt and the possibilities of distancing himself both from the hunt and the quarry:

He looked out of the window and saw several out-of-Bombay trains parked in the shunting yard. The Rajdhani express was being washed with hosepipes. The sight of these long-distance trains excited him; Yudi decided he would go on holiday soon. Not with any of his pickups, but by himself (Rao 19).

The idea of vacationing indicates for Yudi a break from the pleasurable subservience to cruising: only within the heterotopic space of the train, he can be a part of both this imagined departure and the thrill of cruising. Here solitude becomes imbricated on camaraderie, the present becomes heterochronous with a projected future. Yudi

comprehends, on some level, the essentially fractured but inclusive nature of this liminal space, hence the very self-conscious adieu to the train as he steps off it and walks into the real world. The Foucauldian counterpart to this mobile heterotopia is the ship, which Foucault calls the “heterotopia par excellence,” without which “dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates” (Foucault).

The ship, for Foucault then, is the quintessential heterotopia: not just because its mobility and its real-yet-ephemeral nature makes heterochrony a possibility, but also because it is *beyond surveillance*— an idea that is reinforced by the oppositional pairing of espionage/adventure and police/pirate. One of the most powerful spatial metaphors conceptualized by Foucault is the panopticon, the all-seeing eye-in-the-sky that exerts control through relentless monitoring of human experience and activities. Foucault inscribes the ship as an emblem of flamboyant excess— replete with associations of adventure and piracy—precisely because it slips through the panoptical network of surveillance. The same could be said of the heterotopic queer space of the train compartment in *The Boyfriend*. Although affiliated with an institution, it slips past the gridwork of power relations. The gay compartment is gay through “convention,” through word-of-mouth that is transmitted among those initiated into the subculture. It is not even mapped on a subcultural text, unlike the “gay” public restrooms of Bombay.

Michel de Certeau’s theorization of railway navigation, however, differs from the Foucauldian heterotopia. According to de Certeau, in a railway compartment everything “has its place in a gridwork. Only a rationalized cell travels. A bubble of panoptic and classifying power, a module of imprisonment that makes possible the production of an order, a closed and autonomous insularity— that is what can traverse space and make

itself independent of its roots” (de Certeau 111). De Certeau’s railway compartment, then, does not escape the panopticon but internalizes it as a way of subverting its surveillance. Very much in the manner of Foucault’s heterochrony, de Certeau’s railway compartment is a space where “rest and dreams reign supreme” (de Certeau 111). De Certeau claims that this immobility-within-mobility is a transgression of both space and time, and in that sense is a breaking away from roots. This is, according to de Certeau, one of the ‘tactics’ that individuals employ to subvert the strategic imposition of order. The subversion is staged behind the appearance of an order. The queer space of the train compartment in *The Boyfriend* could be understood within this framework as well. The packed compartment is a manner of incarceration, where each person is fixed in his position. But the incarceration, with its erotic charge, is pleasurable—also because of its ability to flout surveillance of the outside world. The technology of the train, which makes possible the coexistence of mechanized strolling and pleasurable incarceration, eludes surveillance by creating the kind of queer space that transcends—or transgresses—the limitations of physical space and unilinear chronology.

*“Des Autres Espaces”: Of Other Spaces and Spaces of Otherness*

Although I have borrowed the title of Michel Foucault’s 1967 lecture on heterotopias for this subsection, the queer spaces from *The Boyfriend* that I discuss here would be perceived as “real”—as opposed to utopic or heterotopic—within the Foucauldian framework. From the maze of city streets, to the mobile heterotopic space of the trains and the subterranean network of men’s restrooms, Rao periodically pulls our attention back to the interiors of spaces that are less chameleonic in nature and have a comparatively better defined identity. A gay nightclub in Bombay, a modeling agency

that doubles as a clearinghouse for hustlers— these are among the more recognizably queer spaces in the novel. The two loci are clearly commercial in nature and sites for transactional sex. Each locus has a definitive function that enables its categorization as “real.” And yet, Rao’s conceptualization of these spaces indicates a sense of excess, of overdoing the expected mundane order of things that challenges the perceived “reality” of these spaces. This strategy, in turn, reinforces the instability of “real” queer spaces in the postcolonial context. I argue that these spaces of excess ultimately remain mythic in their unreality— or unstable reality. I wish, however, to distinguish “mythic” from utopian: flamboyant, excessive, surreal, these spaces do not wish to approach the ideal reality of utopias.

The idea of gay nightclubs is neither mythic nor utopian in present-day Bombay. The Voodoo Pub in the Colaba area is an establishment that is known to host weekly gay nights, and online communities like Gay Bombay organize periodic social mixers in restaurants and nightclubs of repute. Rao’s Testosterone is a fictional version of Voodoo, and this fictionality is stressed right at the outset of our introduction to the club:

The psychedelic lighting made everyone look as if sprayed with silver dust. Music blared...Waiters with V-shaped bodies and tight butts, more sleep worthy than any of Testosterone’s regular clients, walked up and down with trays of alcohol. A very fat man was on the dance floor, dancing all by himself. He was so bloated, he looked like the corpse of someone who drowned in the Arabian Sea and bobbed to surface three days later. He gyrated to music as if possessed (Rao 33).

The obesity of the man in the limelight is in stark contrast to the perfection of the bodies of the servers that glide around him. He is flamboyantly grotesque in a place that showcases and barter perfection. The allusion to death by drowning and a disfigured corpse come back to life intensifies the element of the surreal in the scene.

The macabre in *Testosterone* is reinforced by an undertone of real violence, or an excessive form of it. The situation that this description alludes to has a motif of revenge. Yudi brings to *Testosterone* a man named Dnyaneswar, a railway restroom pickup who turns and blackmails him. Forced to pay money as Dnyaneswar threatens to injure him with a penknife, Yudi invites him back to *Testosterone* the following day with a plan of setting the vicious drag queens of the nightclub on him. The giggly, coy exteriors of the queens are a performance of excess, as is their inclination to vendetta:

Yudi told Gulab all about Dnyaneswar. Gulab loved action; he got to work at once. He approached all his dancing queens, including two in drag and whispered into their ears. The queens shrieked with laughter. They were all for vendetta. Everyone sacrificed their dancing and assembled at the bar. Here, as they sipped their lager, they worked out their strategy (Rao 34).

In this dream-vision, the queens are figured as theatrical but no less sinister versions of the mob, and their exaggerated pleasure in vendetta is redolent of comic-book villainy. The actual assault of Dnyaneswar— who, ironically, is a policeman in training— is staged outside *Testosterone*, near Apollo Bunder, the pier on the Arabian Sea where the queens threaten to throw Dnyaneswar after disrobing and beating him. Violence— exaggerated to the point of caricature— seems to be a leitmotif in the representations of *Testosterone*. In a subsequent visit to the club with Milind, Yudi finds himself in the middle of a wrangle with a man who attempts to seduce Milind. The encounter is too campy to be seriously disturbing:

As he spoke, he punched his rival on the nose, a la Hindi film style. All hell broke loose in the bar...Had the dance floor been less crowded, they would have lain flat on the ground and lain over each other in a passionate fit of hate and love. However, that being impossible, they rewarded each other with fisticuffs and abuses. Fuckers. Asshole. Son-of-a-bitch. Faggot. Both bled from the nose (Rao 93).



The theatrics of the fisticuffs is emphasized as the encounter is located within the recognizable framework of Bollywood cinema, a genre defined by its campy excess. Yet the juxtaposition of love and hate creates an ambivalence that contrasts sharply with the monochromatic and unilinear emotions that characterize mainstream Hindi cinema. The appropriation of Bollywood mannerisms and lingo to more ambiguous emotions underscores the “otherness” of this queer space.

Men who frequent one space of excess are channeled off into another: Testosterone also serves as a recruiting site for the A.K. Modelling Agency. Milind, Yudi’s lover, becomes a recruit on one of his solitary trips to the nightclub, and the impressions of the agency are presented through his perspective. From the outset, the description of the agency seems divorced from reality:

A.K. Modelling Agency was a gurukul. At least that was how its owner, a leading Bollywood star, saw it. This gentleman was bisexual, but strictly closeted. In a mainstream occupation like Hindi films, where heroes had to be tough and macho (and strictly hetero), he couldn’t afford to be open about his sexual preferences. Or no producer would approach him with offers, and his rivals would swoop down and devour all the meaty roles. In order to deal with the difficult situation in which he found himself, the star, Ajay Kapur, floated his agency, nay gurukul, which gave him a splendid opportunity to lead a double life: to be a hetero by day and a homo by night (Rao 177).

Rao once again draws our attention to the simultaneous proximity of and opposition between Bollywood and queer subjectivity. The proprietor of the agency is a Bollywood star who is forced to inhabit the normative gender and sexual stereotypes “by day,” and makes his sexual proclivities co-extensive with a money-making scheme “by night.” The term “gurukul”— meaning an ashram or residential school for young scholars seeking spiritual enlightenment— is used to underscore the strict regimentation of the “models” who reside in the agency, and also to obscure (and thereby draw attention to) the

commercial aspect of the project. Kapur's establishment is, on the surface, an agency for up-and-coming male models that are looking for an opening in the industry; behind a few second-rate modeling assignments, however, Kapur's minions run a successful business in male prostitution.

This caricature of regimentation and classification that characterizes the agency also situates it very far from any real locus. The "models," would-be hustlers, whose physiques need to be cultivated to cater to the needs of a wealthy clientele, undergo training that approximates—and parodies—military precision:

The boys rose early. Their day began with exercises and lessons in martial arts. Much emphasis was laid on working out. No one could skip workouts, no matter what his excuse. The agency hired the best teachers to train its recruits. It adopted a no-nonsense policy with respect to physical fitness. If anyone made a fuss, or proved to be a weakling, he was simply shown the door. Even the RSS was not as stringent (Rao 178).

It is interesting to see that even within the agency, the men are assessed by the same stereotypical standards of machismo that keep Ajay Kapoor closeted. The unreality of this regimentation is reinforced by another binary opposition—the comparison to the disciplining of the RSS cadets. The RSS or the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (which translates into National Volunteer Organization) is a Hindu nationalist organization in India that is invested in the dissemination of right-wing Hindu values, which includes the policing of alternative sexualities that are vilified as imports from the West corrupting "traditional" Indian culture. The mock militarization of a queer space—especially along the lines of the RSS-- articulates an awareness of disruptive forces both within and outside it that threaten to destabilize it.

Parody is also inherent in the way the models are "labeled" in accordance with what goods they have on offer. The agency maintains a record of the penis sizes of the

models—S, M, XL and XXL—and rents them out to clients based on what they demand.

The models are also made to wear t-shirts with catchy innuendoes:

Their t-shirts had slogans that the agency's badshah was said to have invented himself. One such slogan read: PEN IS MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD. Was PEN IS one word or two? It was one-and-a-half, Ded Galli. There was just that extra millimetre of space between PEN and IS that would allow their lawyers to argue that they weren't being vulgar...Another trademark A.K. slogan read: MY LILLIPUTIAN IS A BROBDINGNAGIAN. This was too literary though, and not very popular (Rao 179).

In a sense, then, the men in the agency are at once models and commodities; what they have on offer is themselves. The attempt at subterfuge is ridiculous to the point of absurdity. However, the very attempt to stage a subterfuge reminds us of the reality of surveillance that threatens the very existence the space. This, then, might be read (like the railway compartment) as a panoptic-within-a-panoptic; the vigilance of the outside world necessitates the regimentation of the members of the agency and the organization of the elaborate— though flimsy— subterfuge. The comparatively esoteric allusion to Swift, unpopular as it might be within the agency and among its clientele, is more than just an indication of penis size. By evoking the fantastical world of Gulliver's travels, it reinforces the absurdity of a queer space like the agency and points to the presence of dystopic elements that threaten to destabilize the space. The exaggerated absurdity of the activities in the agency marks it as a space of excess, not quite real and vulnerable to forces both from within and outside.

Mate House, Yudi's apartment in the suburbs of Nalla Sopara, is another instance of a queer space of excess. "Mate House" (pronounced Maa-tey) is actually the name of the building that houses the apartment; Yudi adopts the name and alters it phonetically (to make it rhyme with "date") in a burst of sensual love for his lost-and-found young lover

who comes to spend a week with him. With this move, the function of the apartment is transformed: what used to be a bachelor pad for casual sex with pickups (with a designated “fucking room”) becomes a domestic space. But this move towards domesticity remains at the level of aspiration, primarily because Yudi continues to be ambivalent about coming out of the closet, particularly about his relationship with Milind. On the eve of the arrival of Saraswati the maid, Yudi sends Milind on a long walk. Even Milind’s insistence on staying on in her presence the following day does not earn him the recognition that he yearns for:

When it was time for Saraswati to come the following morning, Milind refused to run off to the bus stop. ‘I look respectable now’, he explained. He froze on the bed like a mannequin when she arrived, and as a consequence got assaulted with a yellow dusting cloth, the bai mistaking him for a new curio her saab had picked up (Rao 104).

This ridiculous mistake only serves to underline how much of a misfit Milind is within the parameters of Yudi’s world. His Dalit background makes him suspicious and defensive as he attempts to force his presence on the pattern of Yudi’s everyday life. But what creates a schism between the lovers is not the disparity between castes but their social classes. Yudi— upper-caste (but paying little heed to it), intellectual, educated— declares himself free from the prejudice of caste, and believes homosexuality, a liminal position in itself, to be the great equalizer: “What I am saying is that homosexuals have no caste or religion. They only have their homosexuality....Straight people are Brahmins, gays Shudras. So you see, both you and I are Shudras. That is why we are best friends” (Rao 82). Despite this declaration, he feels threatened and embarrassed by Milind’s “menial” ways, the sense of class deeply entrenched into his subconscious social being.

This is the only form of give-and-take possible for the upper-class queer subject in Bombay or in all of South Asia, for that matter, a locus circumscribed and limited by

the impossibility of assimilating same-sex desire into any socially acceptable form. Yudi's emotional attachment to Milind— the boy of the leper feet— and his subsequent quest for something resembling a long-term relationship is doomed to fail from the start, riddled as it is with social taboos, class barriers, personal vulnerabilities and legal loopholes. At the end of the novel, we find Yudi back on the cruising scene, disillusioned by Milind's capitulation to the heterosexual institution of marriage, but aware of the fact that this shifting chiaroscuro of identities is the only mode of existence available to him.

Bombay is a city of contradictions: at once the place which nurtures queer subcultures (which even has a vernacular vocabulary to articulate queer identity and experience), a city that serves as a center stage for queer activism (including demands to have the anti-sodomy law repealed) and simultaneously a place where sexuality is policed not only by the word of law but right-wing Hindu organizations (one remembers the movie theaters being attacked by the Shiv Sena when Deepa Mehta's queer-themed film *Fire* was released in Bombay). For men like Rao's Yudi, the transience of flanerier— made possible by the co-existence and mainstream and alternative spaces in the urban landscape of Bombay— is the only way to perform their queer identity.

## CHAPTER III

## ALTERNATIVE CARTOGRAPHIES OF DESIRE: QUEER UTOPIAS THROUGH THE “DIASPORIC IMAGINARY”

Finding roots in unaccustomed earth is the essence of diasporic experience, an emotionally fraught process that never quite reaches a point of closure.

<sup>1</sup> Belonging demands readjusted self-definition and cognition of the new landscape. And yet, displacement does not dilute but reinforces memories of the lost/abandoned locus of origin, complicating this process of redefining home. But amidst the ever-present nostalgia and sense of loss, the diasporic subject scarcely, if ever, loses sight of the most potent impulse that had actualized this displacement: the desire for a utopia.<sup>2</sup> The desired utopia is not the reality of the adoptive homeland, nor a mythic reconstruction of the old, but an imagined locus of perfection that is “better” than both the old home and the new, that transcends the limitations imposed by both, that allows the forging of new identities while holding on to the old. For the queer diasporic subject, this utopian ideal translates to expression of desires heretofore restrained as inadmissible, and a simultaneous redefinition of the self through national and transnational parameters of identity. This ideal redefinition does not involve radical change, but an inclusion of selves old and new. But the quest for this ideal merely emphasizes the impossibility of the utopic locus, or a

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<sup>1</sup> I refer, of course, to the title, of Jhumpa Lahiri’s short story collection *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008). The stories in the collection sensitize us to the multiple aspects of diasporic displacement, and their differential effects on first- and second-generation immigrants.

<sup>2</sup> As the editors of *Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration* (2003) remind us in the introductory section to the work, there can be no unified theorization of the process (es) by which migrant subject defines the idea of home, because “the forms and conditions of movement are not only highly divergent—consider the difference between tourism and exile—but also necessarily exist in relation to similar divergent configurations of placement” (Ahmed, Castaneda, Fortier and Sheller 1). I do not assume the quest for utopia to be a universal diasporic narrative, thus overlooking the specific contexts of migration and displacement. In this chapter, I situate the desired utopia of the female queer diasporic subject from India with her specific history.

willingness to redefine the idea of utopia as such. In this chapter, I analyze the dilemma of the female queer subject of the Indian diaspora, who is perceived and marginalized through the inescapable parameters of ethnicity, gender and sexuality, who either realizes the implausibility of the quest for this ideal space, or reconfigures it to align it with reality. I examine two diasporic texts— Shani Mootoo’s short story “Out on Main Street” (1992) and Nisha Ganatra’s film *Chutney Popcorn* (2001)— to chart the trajectory of this utopic quest, which plays out differently in each case. I also demonstrate how this quest becomes problematic in the case of postcolonial diasporas, whose histories continue to problematize their attempt at self-definition.

Before I became interested in a project on postcolonial sexualities, I had seen an episode of the British television series *Goodness Gracious Me*, a series that strung together vignettes about Indian immigrants in England. In it, young gay second generation immigrant, decides to come out to his parents, and brings home his (white) partner to this end. His parents, with obstinate naiveté, continue to block out the hints that he drops about his sexual orientation; his frustration mounts as they delightedly babble about his “friend”/ “roommate”/ “bed-mate” (they assure him that they know about cramped student apartments that could house just one bed!). Finally, the young man spells it out baldly, “Mom, Dad...we’re having *sex!*” After a moment of frozen silence, the mother breaks down, “But son, couldn’t you have found yourself a nice *Indian* boy?” The punch line focuses on the stereotypical immigrant’s exaggerated sense of community and fear of interracial liaisons, but the entire exchange raises several questions. What does the parents’ persistent denial about homosexuality signify? How do notions of race and ethnicity intersect with the perception of alternative sexualities in the diaspora? And

a related question that I raise and examine in this chapter: how is the concept of queer utopia transformed vis-à-vis the experience of the queer diasporic subject? Is it possible to actualize a utopic space where queerness can coexist with national/ethnic identity? I explore these questions specifically in the context of the positioning of the diasporic female queer subject.

My readings of Shani Mootoo's short story "Out on Main Street" and Nisha Ganatra's film *Chutney Popcorn* examine how the queer female diasporic subject is positioned to negotiate the concepts of tradition, displacement, ethnic identity and sexual difference. In recent years, emergent trends within the field of queer studies have paid increased attention to the positioning of the transnational (diasporic/immigrant) queer subject. The works of diasporic queer theorists such as Gayatri Gopinath, Martin Manalansan, Cindy Patton and Nayan Shah represent a critical trajectory that questions neo-liberal assumptions of Euro-American queer studies. This new focus on the cultural specificity of transnational queer experience subverts— or at the very least complicates— the essentializing framework of the coming-out narrative valorized by the liberalist discourses of Western queer theory. The monolithic structure of this narrative may or may not accommodate the experience of the queer diasporic subject (as we see in the exchange from *Goodness Gracious Me*, which, though exaggerated, has some grain of truth) whose migrant body is positioned at the cross-roads not only of geopolitical boundaries but of divergent traditions and cultures. I believe that the received notion of queer utopia—which is premised on the coming-out narrative and its spatial disjuncture from heteronormative social institutions— should be used with caution in case of queer



diaspora. Cindy Patton draws our attention to this unique positioning of the migratory queer body:

When a “practitioner of homosexual acts”, or a body that carries any of many queering marks moves between officially designated spaces—nation, region, neighborhood, or even culture, gender, religion and disease—intricate realignments of identity, politics and desire take place (Patton 3).

As Patton’s analysis indicates, the diasporic queer body is distinctive not only for its “many queering marks” but also because it functions as a palimpsest that registers and retains the multiple histories of displacement, relocation and the violence of colonization (in the case of South Asian diasporas that I discuss in this chapter).

*Diasporas, Women and Queer Identity*

The transnational queer subject’s quest for the imagined utopia is not the linear trajectory that liberal discourses of same-sex desire assumes or expects it to be; the quest here is ruptured and complicated by the intrusion of the competing (and sometimes convergent) discourses of colonialism, nationalism and more recent trends in globalization. The homophobic underpinnings of colonialism and nationalism are often replicated in the mainstream discourses of the diaspora, rendering the queer diasporic subject as the “inauthentic” or “demonized” other. The adoptive homeland oftentimes does not turn out to be the utopia that the queer diasporic subject imagines it to be: a utopia where differences are resolved or at least tolerated. It is a locus where repressive (in this case heteronormative) social structures are reinforced. Breaking away from the diaspora would mean a relinquishing of ethnic identity (which for many is a fairly consistent parameter of self-definition); finding a niche in the diasporic community would be the equivalent of being permanently closeted. Gayatri Gopinath points out the irreconcilability of queerness and South Asian identity by using the word “impossible” in

relation to female same-sex desire in the diaspora. Given the tendency of the nationalist and diasporic imaginings to valorize reproductive sexuality and to conflate women with the lost homeland, female queer subjectivity indeed becomes “impossible.”

The tendency to conflate women with nations has been identified and theorized by a number of writers. Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis have analyzed the diverse ways in which women are related to the concept of nation— as mothers of patriots, as symbolic national boundaries and as carriers of culture. The inscription of Indian women as symbols of the nation was most visible in the period of anti-colonial nationalism, when the indigenous elite were attempting to resolve what Partha Chatterjee terms the “woman question.” According to Chatterjee, the bourgeois nationalists’ conception of the nation imagined an inner/ outer divide in the cultural life of the people: an outer “material” sphere exposed to the cultural depredations of colonialism, and an inner “spiritual” domain that was perceived as incorruptible. This spatial dichotomy was gendered: the “world” was the domain of the man and the “home” of the woman. Women were thus made to embody the “pure,” spiritual essence of the nation that served to counter the cultural assault of colonialism. Chatterjee notes: “The home was the principle site of expressing the spiritual quality of the national culture, and women must take on the main responsibility for protecting and nurturing this quality” (Chatterjee 243). In her analysis of the concept of the diaspora, Floya Anthias suggests that it would be useful to investigate the diasporic positionality of women in the light of their relationship with the nation. Although it is simplistic to read the situation of immigration as a replication of colonialism, parallels could be drawn between the cultural confrontation and patterns of

domination and subordination that exist between colonizer/ host culture and the colonized/ immigrant.

This homology has been theorized by Anannya Bhattacharjee, who analyzes the Indian immigrant bourgeoisie's attempts to define itself as a community by projecting the idea of nationhood onto women, confining them in patterns of prescriptive behavior congruent with this iconic status. Bhattacharjee points out the significance of class in the South Asian diaspora's attempt to define itself: she identifies this impulse as an essentially bourgeois phenomenon. She points out:

As a minority community is a foreign nation, the Indian immigrant bourgeoisie experiences the loss of its power of ex-nomination...the immigrant bourgeoisie's desire to overcome this condition manifests itself through its grasping for familiar essentials in whose shadows it can regain the power to remain un-named (Bhattacharjee 232).

The emphasis on normative behavior for middle and upper-class women is not exclusive to the diaspora: it is a familiar phenomenon in the nation as well. There is a great deal of this regulatory control of middle-class women's sexuality in postcolonial India. In a study examining the constructions of gender and sexuality among women in India, Jyoti Puri establishes the way in which "*middle-class* women in postcolonial India are being regulated and constrained through normative definitions of their sexed bodies, sexualities and gender identities" (Puri 21, emphasis mine).<sup>3</sup> In the case of the women in the diaspora, however, the normative code of behavior is, at times, taken to an extreme to transform them into models of iconic femininity congruent with a museumized version of indigenous culture.

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<sup>3</sup> Puri's book, *Woman, Body, Desire in Postcolonial India: Narratives of Gender and Sexuality* is based on interviews with fifty-odd upper and middle-class Indian women. It explores the issues of gender and sexual identity and the ways in which they intersect with concepts of class and nationhood.

Thus, the use of the spatial metaphor of “home” to designate diasporic women as repositories of national honor converges with prescriptive behavior, which implicitly includes reproductive heterosexuality (since the perpetuation of the diaspora as an ethnically distinct community depends on it), rules out the consideration or accommodation of queerness. A classic example of this hegemonic construction is recorded by Sunita Sundar Mukhi in her account of the exclusion of SALGA (South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association) from the India Day Parade in 1994. The India Day Parade is an event organized by the Federation of Indians in America in the Manhattan area to celebrate Indian Independence Day, and according to Mukhi, is “an exemplar of a vernacular nationalism as expressed by Indians in the diaspora” (Mukhi 187). Mukhi contrasts this significant exclusion— based on an implication of same-sex desire being an element extraneous to the essential definition of Indianness— to the inclusion of a particularly provocative song-and-dance performed by a pre-pubescent girl. According to Mukhi, this contrast bears out the selective definition of national identity, especially in the context of womanhood: while Indian lesbians are inadmissible as participants in an organized spectacle of nationhood, an eroticized performance by an underage girl is acceptable because it provides an oblique, subconscious reassurance of heterosexuality being the keystone of Indian womanhood:

As adult women, these young Indians have the vital capacity to produce more Indians, assuring that the culture will prevail in the bodies of their children regardless of their residence. Needless to say, the lyrics of the song, the hip and pelvic gyrations of the dance, the familiarity and personalism between audience with the performers, reiterate the girl-child’s heterosexist fate of marriage, and consequently, a biological family (Mukhi 196).

This rigid conceptualization of female sexuality irrevocably consigns the queer female diasporic subject to the margins of the narratives of nationhood. This nullified subject-

position— the unattainable juxtaposition of “queer,” “female,” “South Asian” and “diasporic”— is the “impossibility” that Gayatri Gopinath talks about: the first category necessarily precludes the others. In a sense, then, this impossibility becomes the desired utopia for the queer female diasporic subject.

The term “utopia” connotes a temporal/spatial disjunction with the present, a disjunction that is prompted by the desire for personal, political or social transformation. The idealistic underpinning of this concept is reinforced by the etymological root, where we find a slippage between the Greek homophones “u-topia” (no-place) and “eu-topia” (good place). The essential “goodness” (moral/political/ideological) of this imagined place is undercut by its implicit impossibility, an impossibility very similar to that which informs the subject-position of the diasporic South Asian lesbian. Can there, then, be (utopic) spatial modalities that would make this subject-position possible, or does the idea of such a space remain essentially unattainable? Literary utopias have often functioned as a critique of social anomalies, the criticism premised on the contrast between the ideal and the actual. Juxtaposed with this realistic perception of the difference between what is and what could be, however, is the desire to actualize the ideal in this imagined spatial modality. The imaginings of queer utopias have been based on an ideal of emancipation from hegemonic heteronormativity. Diasporic imaginations, too, have often been informed by utopic longings— a desire to escape repressive social structures in search of the ideal promised land— that are counterbalanced by nostalgia and feelings of rootlessness.<sup>4</sup> It seems ironic that diasporas often reproduce and

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<sup>4</sup> In Jhumpa Lahiri’s classic diasporic narrative *The Namesake*, dreams of America persuades Ashima to marry Ashok, who is her passport to the Promised Land. Ashima’s subsequent disillusionment and isolation undercuts her utopian picture of the United States. This desire/disillusionment is captured by Mira Nair in the film version, where Ashima tries on a pair of Ashok’s shoes branded “Made in USA”, mentally

perpetuate the very social structures that it seeks to escape— a circular movement that invalidates the utopian ideal. For the queer diasporic subject who gets caught up in such a circular pattern reinforcing normative heterosexuality, utopia would consist of a space removed from such hegemonic social constructions. In this chapter, I analyze this quest for a queer diaspora, first in the case of a second-generation indo-Trinidadian lesbian couple, the descendants of an Indian labor diaspora in the Caribbean who have migrated to Canada, and then that of a second-generation Indian woman in New York, who ultimately locates her queer utopia not apart from but within the parameters of the family home.

*Queer Utopia: An “Impossible Desire?”*

In my reading of “Out on Main Street,” Mootoo’s narrator, an Indo-Trinidadian woman who has relocated to Canada, is confounded by the perception of this “impossibility.” The title of story— which, on one level, refers to the narrator’s experience of promenading with her lover on Main Street, an Indian neighborhood of Vancouver— might also indicate a quest for a utopian space where an outed lesbian tries to find her room in her mainstream diasporic community. This search for roots, for unadulterated ethnic cultural forms (if any such category exists) might read like a reversal of the coming-out narrative; it embodies the transnational queer subject’s repeatedly staged and repeatedly frustrated search for an ideal, utopian existence in which queerness can coexist with ethnicity. The story captures a series of encounters that the two Trinidadian women have with the Indian immigrants on Main Street. The narrator’s dismissal as an inauthentic diasporic subject results primarily from her history of multiple

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transported to this faraway utopia. In the subsequent shots, Nair focuses on the transformation of Ashima’s utopian notions: the dreamed-of land turns out to be a cold, unfriendly, snowy landscape, the only alternative to which is the cramped student apartment that Ashima is confined to.

migrations. Indo-Trinidadians— descendants of a community of Indians that was transported to the Caribbean as indentured labor—represent a diluted or “bastardized” form of Indianness unacceptable to “authentic” Indian diaspora. Falling far short of the prescriptive cultural purity of the Indian diaspora, the narrator and her lover stand out as aliens, their “outsider” status repeatedly underscored by the lacunae in their knowledge of Indian cuisine, Indian languages, Indian religions and Indian traditions. Their favorite indulgence— eating sweets in an Indian sweetshop on Main Street— is embittered by an encounter with the “real flesh and blood Indians from India,” who insist on being patronizing, condescending and distant by turns:

But Indian store clerk on Main Street doh have no patience with us, specially when we talking English to dem. Yuh ask them a question in English and dey insist on giving de answer in Hindi or Punjabi or Urdu or Gujarati. How I suppose to know the difference even! And den dey look at yuh disdainful, disdainful— like yuh is disloyal, like yuh is a traitor” (Mootoo 48).

The narrator’s marginalization as a “traitor” marks a moment of historic amnesia in the diasporic consciousness. The narrator’s ironic yet wistful tone masks a deep sense of alienation: “Cultural bastards, Janet, cultural bastards. Dat what we is” (Mootoo 51).

If “cultural bastards” occupy a liminal space in the margins of the authentic diaspora, queer immigrants are condemned to stay out for ever. As Monisha Das Gupta points out in her theorization of the social and cultural positioning of “unruly immigrants,” the “place-taking” politics of mainstream South Asian diaspora dismisses queerness as an aberration that might sully its reputation as a model minority:

The same national project that requires chaste and domesticated women to signal cultural purity in the diaspora also banishes queerness outside national borders. The body politic of diasporic nationalisms outlaws queer sexualities through cultural discourses about authenticity (Das Gupta 70).

Thus, the narrator is positioned as doubly inauthentic; with no hope whatsoever of inclusion or assimilation into the diaspora. Janet, the narrator's lover, is privileged and recognized because of her deceptively exaggerated feminine façade. It is ironic that Janet had left Trinidad because she was maligned for her not-so-feminine traits— information that the reader picks up from the narrator's artfully reconstructed piece of Trinidadian gossip: "Yuh ain't hear de good 'bout John Mahase daughter, gyul?...Is a big thing thing! Everybody talking about she...Yuh ever see she wear a dress? Yes! Doh look at mih so. Yuh reading me right" (Mootoo 47). Janet's charade— and the resulting advances from the men around her—enrage the narrator. The Indian diaspora refuses to accommodate the narrator's markedly queer body; her half-hearted attempts at heterosexual performance for the benefit of the observers leave her disoriented and dissatisfied:

Walking next to Janet, who femme that she redundant, tend to make me look like a gender they forgot to classify. Before going to Main Street I does parade in front de mirror practicing a jiggly-wiggly kind a walk. But if I ain't walking like a strong-man monkey I doh exactly feel right and I always revert back to mih true colours (306).

The narrator's desire to belong forces her into the desire for performance, but the discomfort of this pushed her right back to what she understands as her true self.

Flaunting one's true colors— is it possible on Main Street? The diasporic space— where identities are spilt into irreconcilable binaries (authentic/inauthentic, gay/straight, masculine/feminine, Indian/Trinidadian)— requires a subject to dissemble in one way or another. Ironically, the narrator's color— her "Brown self" (49)— that mirrors the brown selves of other immigrants on Main Street— does not help her dissemble or belie her identity in any way. Mootoo's short story underscores the queer immigrants' disenchantment with the imagined utopian space they had aspired for: having left



Trinidad for Canada, the narrator and her lover find themselves analyzed through the inescapable parameters of race, ethnicity and (hetero)sexuality within the diaspora. The quest for utopia in this case results in seemingly endless reenactments of exile, a cycle in which the possibility of belonging is ruled out altogether.

The trope of exile is an ever-present element in the experience of diaspora, even in the diasporic members of the second generation who have not experienced exile firsthand, but have inherited its implicit sense of alienation as a cultural legacy. However, the experience of exile is different for diasporas that are chronologically distant from one another and are dispersed under different historical situations. In distinguishing between “old” (nineteenth-century indenture) and “new” (late modern/late capitalist) South Asian diasporas, Vijay Mishra highlights the ability of the new diaspora— aided as it is by technological progress— to bridge the gulf between itself and the abandoned homeland as the key difference between the old and the new diasporas:

In a thoroughly globalized world the act of displacement now makes diasporic subjects travellers on the move, their homelands contained in the simulacral world of visual media where the ‘net’ constitutes the ‘self’ and quite unlike the earlier diaspora where imagination was triggered by contents in gunny sacks: a Ganesha icon, a dog-eared copy of the *Ramayana* or the *Qur’an*, and old sari or other *deshi* outfit, a photograph of a pilgrimage and so on. Indeed, ‘homeland’ is now available in the confines of one’s room in Vancouver, Sacramento or Perth. In short, networking now takes over from the imaginary (Mishra 4).

The labor diaspora’s less reliable resources for reconnecting with its roots— unlike web versions of “authentic” recipes and online communities of immigrants of shared religious faith— had less coherence and were more likely to be transformed by competing cultural influences. The coexistence and the interaction of different ethnic communities and the production of corresponding structure of hierarchical power is, according to Mishra, another marker that differentiates the situation of the old Indian diaspora. This inter-

diasporic positioning makes the ideal of a “pure” diasporic/national culture— elusive as it may be— an impossibility. The poignancy of this disconnect is felt more acutely by the second-generation labor diaspora, who, with the growing distance from their roots, feel the need to define themselves within the framework of an undiluted national culture. This yearning for coherence and consistency is, again, intensified in the group that Mishra calls the “twice-displaced”— second-generation immigrants of East Indian descent who now inhabit First World countries like the US and Canada.

The narrator of “Out on Main Street” is one such character, who perceives her cultural hybridity as a deficiency rather than as a means of empowerment, especially as it stands out in stark contrast with the presumed cultural authenticity of a diaspora in Vancouver that consists of “authentic” Indians from India. This categorization implies a degree of coherence and wholeness that is posited against the Indo-Trinidadian diaspora’s designation as “kitchen Indians,” the culinary legacy of India being the only element that defines its Indianness. Even the sense of acquiring this legacy is undermined when the narrator confronts the lacunae in her knowledge: on a trip to the sweetshop on Main Street, she realizes her nostalgic allusions to “sweetrice” and “sugarcake” and “meethai” make little or no sense in the context of a vernacular vocabulary. This realization engenders something greater than mere social embarrassment— a sense of alienation from one’s roots and a reinforcement of one’s liminal status.

The Indian diaspora’s obsession with purity and homogeneity is both reflected in and contradicted by its being comprised of regional and linguistic groups, where the twice-displaced Indo-Trinidadian narrator is an outsider. Within the spatial confines of the sweetshop, the narrator and her lover are clearly marked as outcasts. The signage of

the café sets the tone of the space by pointing to an imagined Hinduism-dominated national culture: “In large deep-orange Sanskrit-style letters, the sign on the saffron-colour awning above the door read “Kush Valley Sweets”. Underneath in smaller red letters it had “Desserts Fit For the Gods” (Mootoo 49). In a reading of the story, Sebastian Stein frames the space of the sweetshop/café as a cultural “contact zone”, where the interactions of ethnically and culturally diverse groups reenact their historical relations of power. Despite being such a zone of cross-cultural contact, it is interesting to see that the proprietors construct the myth of a unified Hindu past— with a nod at the Hindu pantheon and the saffron color associated with Hinduism. This emphasis on a revisionist history of homogenous Indianness is ironic considering that the proprietors are Fijian-Indians, members of a twice-displaced diaspora descending from indentured laborers. However, the highlighting of authentic Indian roots in the favor of the hyphen. In this imagined space of homogeneity, the narrator and her lover are infiltrators and traitors: the narrator’s affiliation to a diluted, adulterated form of Hinduism is not any better than the Presbyterianism that Janet’s family had converted to.

Within this space of hostility and discomfort, however, the two women occupy differential positions, at least for as long as their relationship is not apparent to the observers. The obvious, “redundant” femininity of Janet attracts male attention and contrasts sharply with the butch persona of the narrator. Janet’s initial acceptance and the enthusiasm around it is based on her conformity with normative gendered behavior, a standard which the narrator violates. The narrator’s discomfort at Janet being perceived as an object of desire by males is compounded by the fear, revulsion and curiosity that she herself inspires both in men and women:

De men dem look at me like dey is exactly what I need a taste of to cure me good and proper. I could see dey eyes watching Janet and me and dey faces growing dark as dey imagining all kind situation and position. And de women dem embarrass fuh so to watch me in mih eye, like dey fraid I will jump up and try to kiss dem, or make pass at dem (Mootoo 48).

The men's response to Janet is ambivalent: as a desirable woman she attracts attention but as a possible part of a lesbian couple is threatening and inscrutable. We can safely assume that some version of this reaction to non-normative gendered and sexual behavior is what the women had been used to back home in Trinidad; the resurrected gossip about Janet bears testimony to this assumption. It is interesting to note that there is very little information about the narrator's Trinidadian past and the way in which it accommodated her sexuality. In a study of Indo-Caribbean women writers, Brinda Mehta charts the comparative social positioning of the men and the women of the labor diaspora. Mehta traces the cultural history of the emancipation of Indo-Caribbean women as a result of a spatial disjuncture with the homeland and the gendered oppression that it stood for, and the simultaneous erosion of self-confidence of the Indo-Caribbean patriarchy. The anxiety of the Indian male diasporic community in the Caribbean was a result as much of the transformation of the women's roles as of a disadvantageous position in the competitive hierarchy of other patriarchies (white and Afro-Trinidadian). In the post-indenture period, the Hindu male hierarchy recuperated its lost self-esteem by reestablishing its control over its women through reinstating a traditional cultural model:

The post indenture consolidation of Hindu culture provided men with the necessary defense mechanism to reconfigure and reinstate patriarchal sexual and social control over women, thereby establishing the primacy of the Hindu patriarchal model as a classic signifier of ethnic difference in Trinidad...Male control, in the name of preserving ethnic distinctiveness, justified the use of violence to curb women's sexual transgressions, thereby ensuring the sanctity of the ancestral cultural heritage. The high incidence of rape, domestic violence and murder testifies to the attempts

made by men to restrict and subjugate women within the narrow confines of rigid familial ties (Mehta 195).

This bid to control female sexuality and its supposed transgression finds an explicit representation in Mootoo's longer work *Cereus Blooms at Night*. It seems reasonable to assume that as a member of the second-generation Hindu diaspora in the Caribbean, such repression— if not explicit violence— would have been a part of the Trinidadian history of the narrator in “Out on Main Street.” Her Indo-Trinidadian family might have modified the customs and traditions of their Hindu ancestors, but an unrelenting adherence to a reified form of Hinduism to control transgressive sexual behavior might have been what drove the narrator away from the familial space, like Janet who left home in “in two twos,” who is known to have pack up and take off like a jet plane so she could live without people only shoo-shooing behind she back” (Mootoo 47). What the narrator seeks is an escape from this repressive past, of whispered gossip and potential of (or even actual) violence, without severing her connection with her roots. This balancing act, for her, would create and maintain the ideal utopic space, the quest for which leads her to Main Street. Ironically, Main Street reenacts the violence of her past— albeit tacitly (“De men dem look at me like dey is exactly what I need a taste of to cure me good and proper”)— in addition to underscoring the fact of her rootlessness. The Indian diaspora on Main Street defines itself as much through heteronormativity as through an imagined national identity and both of these parameters exclude the narrator. This double marginalization points to the implausibility of her utopian longings.

In her reading of “Out on Main Street,” Mehta reads the narrator's reaction to her hostile reception on Main Street as a measure of a double standard:

The narrator's discomfort at being exposed in public reveals her hypocritical stance of wanting to affirm her sexual difference without

suffering the consequences of social disapproval. Her stance is also reflective of the limited opportunities for affirmation offered to women in Indian society (Mehta 219).

What Mehta interprets as hypocrisy, I read as the narrator's desire to actualize an imagined utopia within the spatial limits of Main Street (and more specifically inside the café/sweetshop). The narrator's desire to "affirm her sexual difference" is less a consciously politicized act of subversion than a yearning to reconcile her sexual and ethnic identities. But this desire itself constitutes a utopian impossibility: just as the narrator's endeavor is a microcosmic expression of a larger, more concerted demand for visibility and sexual citizenship (since the political is imbricated on the personal), sexuality—an apparently private area of human experience—is controlled by the public discourse of nationalism. In an analysis of "Out on Main Street," Rajni Srikanth points out this dilemma:

It is as though Mootoo wishes to underscore that the story of two Indo-Trinidadian lesbians is not just the narrowly defined narrative of their personal relationship, but also a narrative that encompasses many diverse forces. Thus, desire is not just personal; it is shaped in myriad ways by the world around it (Srikanth 109).

The narrator's inability to find a spatial modality distinct from and impervious to the hegemonic discourses of both heteronormativity and nationalism leads her, finally, to look inward for that aspired-for space inside herself: "I look forward to de day I find out dat place inside me where I am nothing else but Trinidadian, whatever dat turn out to be" (Mootoo 52). It seems interesting that within this internal space, the identity that the narrator chooses is "Trinidadian." The Trinidad that the narrator longs for is not the actual geographical locus that she has left behind, but an imagined utopic space that celebrates her hybridity and accommodates her sexuality. The note of uncertainty about both this identity and this imagined interiorized space also underscores its fluid nature,

which intersects with the scope of multiple possibilities implicit in the ideal of a utopia. But this utopic space remains interiorized and unmappable: Mootoo's narrator ultimately cannot find it in any actual physical locus. The narrator does not look at Main Street as an already existing utopia— her ambivalence about going there in the opening of the story emphasizes that. But her repeated trips there suggests a hopefulness about the possibility of making her sexuality coexist with her roots, a utopian longing that never materializes.

*Reconfiguring Queer Utopia*

The desire for a utopian space is represented differently in Nisha Ganatra's *Chutney Popcorn*, a film that focuses on South Asian immigrant experience in the US. Like its title, the first part of the film captures recognizable— if not stereotypical— instances of cultural crisis in a second-generation immigrant's life. The crisis here, however, is more nuanced— Reena's (played by Ganatra) lesbianism is a fact that her mother finds hard to accept. Reena's sexuality is a violation of the diasporic conception of womanhood and sexual purity. Vijay Mishra draws our attention to the ways in which sexuality— and especially the sexuality of women—becomes politicized in diasporic discourse. Drawing on the work on Slavoj Žižek, Mishra argues that in an attempt to counter the trauma of the rupture of connection with the homeland, "diasporas very often construct racist fictions of purity as a kind of jouissance, a joy, a pleasure around which anti-miscegenation narratives of homeland are constructed against the realities of the homelands themselves" (423). The "anti-miscegenation narratives of homeland" that Mishra identifies as a constituent of the diasporic imaginary are a clear indication of the fact that the diaspora's imaginings of a national identity are intimately bound up with notions of female sexual purity. Upper-middle class women of the diaspora not only

become the repository of a ghettoized national culture, but their bodies become emblematic of the lost/ abandoned homeland. Defying this pattern becomes a site for conflict— both in the case of Reena and her older sister Sarita, who marries a white American man and thus deviates from the diasporic myth of racial purity. Interestingly, Sarita’s choice— based as it is on a recognizable form of (hetero)sexuality—is perceived as less of a “deviation” than Reena’s aberrant sexuality that has no place in the hetero-patriarchal space of the family home and, by extension, in the diasporic community. Sarita is held up to Rina as an example of normative Indian femininity: although Sarita is outwardly “Westernized” and married to a white man, she conforms to most of the received assumptions of tradition in the negotiation of her marital relationship. Reena’s banishment from home reads like the familiar severing of the cord that ties her to her community. Reena’s other “home”— the apartment that she shares with her partner Lisa and another lesbian couple— is recognizably distinct from her mother’s, an open space celebrating not only same-sex desire but unconventional art and non-traditional kinship patterns. For a while, it appears to be the true queer utopia where gender and sexual hierarchies are dismantled. It seems interesting to note that Reena appropriates the art of henna tattoos (an art that is traditionally associated with marriages in Indian culture) to decorate the bodies of her lover and her friends and then photograph them.

In *Chutney Popcorn*, we find Indian-American women attempting to grapple with the anxieties of their hyphenated condition, anxieties that often concern issues of national and ethnic authenticity. This sets them apart from the first-generation immigrants, whose claim to nationhood is authenticated by the trauma engendered by the rupture of ties with lost homeland, as also by their repeated attempts to recreate a simulacrum of this



homeland. The absence of this trauma marks the hyphenated diasporic subject “inauthentic” by repute, just as a painless childbirth renders a woman’s motherhood questionable. Their memories of the lost nation of origin are understood as second-hand and questionable, and are as likely to have been generated by a popular Bollywood flick as by any actual ties to the homeland. In his theorization of the positionality of the hyphenated subject, Vijay Mishra discusses the contradictions inherent in this position:

In a nation-state the citizen is offered as being generically pure, he/she is always unhyphenated, if we are to believe what our passports have to say about us. In actual practice the pure, unhyphenated generic category is only applicable to citizens whose bodies signify unproblematic identities of selves and nations. For those of us who are outside of ‘universal’ identity politics, whose corporealities fissure the logic of unproblematic identification, plural/multicultural societies have constructed, for their unassimilable others, the impure genre of the hyphenated subject. But the politics of the hyphen itself is hyphenated because in the name of empowering people, the classification indeed disempowers them; it makes them, to use a hyphenated term, ‘empoweringly-disempowered’ (185).

As I attempt to unpack Mishra’s formulation of the hyphen with reference to *Chutney Popcorn*, I argue that what undercuts the diasporic subject’s empowerment as a member of a multicultural society is the perceived inconsistency in her historic identity, and a consequent fragmentation of subjectivity. The hyphen, in the context of nationhood, serves more as a catalyst of fragmentation than of a suturing of identities.

The impurity of the hyphenated position is predicated on the supposed epistemological disadvantage of the second-generation immigrant. The lacunae in her knowledge of the country of origin disqualify her as an authentic member of the diasporic community, both within the community and outside it. “You don’t know anything,” Reena’s mother responds to her query about whether they hail from Punjab. And yet, Reena’s question is raised in the wake of a claim made of by one the guests at her sister’s wedding, who waves aside Reena’s reluctance to dance at the wedding and asserts that

dancing is a legacy of her “Punjabi blood.” If simply being born into a community—albeit geographically distant from its location of origin—presupposes the subconscious mastery of its cultural rituals, then why does Reena’s uncertain grasp of her cultural roots mark her as outsider to the diasporic community? The problematic logic of the diaspora leaves the rules of belonging ambiguous at best. This ambiguity makes Reena’s childhood home a space of perceptible discomfort if not outright hostility. Handy around the house for gardening chores and repairing electrical equipment, Reena is made acutely aware of her outsider status when it comes to participating in religious and social functions, or even at displays of her incompetence at “feminine” household chores that are understood to be an integral part of Indian womanhood (her ineptitude at cooking and cleaning is the subject of tired anecdotes in family gatherings). Reena’s sense of herself as a misfit in the traditional Indian scenario is heightened at her sister Sarita’s wedding; a subconscious anticipation of this delays her to the extent of missing the entire wedding ceremony. Central to this anxiety is, of course, an awareness of her invisibility as an Indian lesbian, a position that I discuss elsewhere in this chapter. Reena’s awareness of her lesbian identity as being incomprehensible to her family is closely tied up with her sense of disconnection with her cultural roots. Dressed in a sari for Sarita’s wedding, Reena is clearly uncomfortable; she mentions to Lisa that wearing a sari feels like “being in drag.” What Reena rejects here is not her Indian identity, but the cultural baggage of womanhood that comes with it. Unspoken expectations of normative gendered behavior are imbricated on cultural identity, and this complicates Reena’s attempts to belong. An appearance at a wedding—officially as a single woman, since Lisa is passed off as “the roommate” by Reena’s mother—is inevitably followed by a set-up with an equally

reluctant suitor (who, ironically, desires Lisa). Reena's inability to transcend the "impurity" implicit in the hyphen is as much a result of her departure from the heteronormative framework of diaspora as of her lack of familiarity with its cultural nuances.

Sarita, on the other hand, has succeeded in finding a relatively comfortable niche within her hyphenated position, not only because she attempts to emulate the behavior associated in the diasporic imaginary with traditional Indian womanhood, but also because she conforms to the heteronormative ideal. Her marriage to Mitch, a violation of another unspoken law of the diaspora that valorizes racial purity, actually redeems her position in the family home, simply because it is perceived as a more desirable alternative to Reena's transgression. Her traditional wedding, her attempts to recreate her mother's cuisine, her desire to raise a "normal" family repositions her at the center of the parental home. A postcolonial diaspora's heteronormative focus is in itself an attempt at redemption and authentication, a bid to shape itself as a mirror image of a nation purged of the colonial imputations of deviance. In her theorization of the queer South Asian diaspora, Gayatri Gopinath astutely compares the nation's relation with its diaspora to the relation of heterosexuality to queerness:

A queer diasporic framework productively exploits the analogous relationship between the nation and the diaspora on the one hand, and between heterosexuality and queerness on the other: in other words, queerness is to heterosexuality as the diaspora is to the nation. If within the heteronormative logic the queer is seen as the debased and inadequate copy of the heterosexual, so too is the diaspora within nationalistic logic positioned as the queer Other of the nation, its inauthentic imitation (Gopinath 11).

Thus, the diaspora's relentless valorization of heteronormativity is an attempt to downplay this alleged inauthenticity. Within this frame of reference, a second-generation

woman like Sarita can transcend the hyphen— partially, at least— because of her sexual orientation, while Reena remains doubly Othered, rendered inauthentic both by her non-reproductive sexuality and her lack of cultural knowledge.

However, the niche that Sarita finds in the parental home or in her life with Mitch is not unequivocally blissful. Staying in touch with her Indian roots is for Sarita a constant effort—a challenge almost, one that she has to undertake to prove her authenticity both to her Indian mother and her American husband. An elaborate Indian-style wedding, cooking Indian meals perfect to the last detail and shopping for Indian groceries (a task at which she is much more adept than Reena, who can barely distinguish one spice from another) with her mother in Jackson Heights in Queens, New York are parts of her ongoing endeavor to establish her Indianness. Her sexuality is a less questionable aspect, at least till it turns out that she is incapable of childbearing and Reena offers herself as a surrogate mother for her child. Though Sarita understands Reena's choice, she perceives it through the lens of heterosexual privilege, a position that is eventually threatened by the failure of reproductive sexuality. In the critical period in which Sarita is dealing with her sense of "failure," she snaps at Mitch, who offers her unsolicited insight on Hindu mythology: "I don't need Reena showing me how to be a woman and you teaching me how to be Indian." Sarita's perception of herself as a failed woman is reinforced by Reena's pregnancy and consequent usurpation of her status as an original, but it is remarkable to see how this insecurity is tied up with the sense of herself as a second-rate diasporic subject, the adequacy of whose cultural knowledge might be called into question.

Reproductive sexuality and normative gendered/sexual behavior are tacit (and often explicit) prerequisites for the female diasporic subject to enter into and belong in the diasporic space. Posited against this is Reena's artistic creativity, which goes unrecognized by her mother and only partially appreciated by her sister. Reena works in a beauty salon, and in addition to the usual services offered there, she adorns her clients' bodies with henna tattoos and photographs them. The opening of the film consists of a series of shots of Reena creating intricate patterns with henna on the bodies of the clients in her salon and photographing them, frequently on black-and-white film. Henna (also known as *mehendi* in some regional Indian languages) is traditionally associated with weddings, especially in Northern India. The palms of the bride are decorated with henna patterns, which mark a rite of passage in her life as a woman and signify a desire for marital bliss, fertility and social acceptance. Reena's use of henna tattoos is an interesting appropriation of the tradition and a simultaneous subversion of its cultural signification. She often photographs her subjects in the nude, with tattoos on breasts, at the base of the spine, on the back and around the navel. The choice of the body parts that she illustrates as well as the poses of her subjects can be viewed as a subversion of the associations of bridal modesty that comes with henna tattoos. The cinematic narrative does not explicitly tell us whether this is a conscious subversive act on Reena's part, but the dominant mood in Reena's photographs is sharply in contrast with expectations of bridal propriety. The frank sensuality of the nude models is in opposition to bridal appeal and desire, which expresses itself in codes and innuendos. Reena's use of colors is also significant: the stark black and white of the photographs cancel out the color of henna and its inherent symbolism (the degree of intensity and depth of color the rust-red bridal henna is

understood to correspond to the assurance of marital happiness). Thus, Reena's interpretation of the art of henna reconfigures its meaning and transforms it into a medium of artistic and personal expression emblemizing agency and empowerment of female sexuality. The henna patterns are reclaimed from their original significance as markers of normative gendered behavior and re-inscribed as aesthetic symbols celebrating the beauty of the human body, and Reena's salon appears to be the ideal utopic space that accommodates non-traditional art like this. The salon, for Reena, is much more than the locus of commerce where she earns her living: it is, for her, the space of self-expression, one that allows the coexistence of old and new identities, the imagined utopia where the diasporic subject can be herself by defining herself through a form of cultural syncretism.

I view Reena's use of henna as syncretic because although she gives art a new, non-traditional significance, she does not altogether abandon its traditional meaning. Her choice of henna expresses a desire to reconnect with her roots from within her chosen space of perceived liberation, to arrive at an enabling combination of the aesthetic of tradition and the celebration of female sexuality. Reena's art purports to emphasize that the sensuality of the female body can be celebrated without disconnecting oneself from the traditional art form but by redefining its symbolic dimension. In this equation, henna becomes symbolic as much of the essence of female sexuality as of the culture that Reena wishes to reconnect with. This desire is an extension of the urge to transcend the perception of rootlessness implicit in the hyphen.

Henna as the essence of a lost culture and its inherent spirituality is also the motif of "Sushila's Bhakti," a short story by Shani Mootoo. In it, an Indo-Caribbean diasporic

artist in Canada attempts to counter the void of her hyphenated condition through a deliberate choice of henna (or “mendhi” as it is called in the story) to substitute for paints in her artwork. Mootoo’s Sushila, like the narrator of “Out of Main Street,” is twice-removed from her roots, an East Indian woman whose ancestors formed the labor diaspora in Trinidad and who has now made Canada her home. In Trinidad, her family—once Hindu Brahmins, later converted to Presbyterianism—had resurrected and maintained certain remembered forms of Hindu cultural practices. It is her move to Canada that, ironically, makes Sushila aware of her status as an inauthentic Indian. Her sense of alienation and the solace that she seeks from reconnecting with Indian culture are similar to Mootoo’s other narrator in “Out on Main Street.” However, while the latter yearns a sense of belonging to play down the rootlessness of migrancy, Sushila’s quest is to rediscover the spiritual essence of India—one that she sees embodied in henna—by incorporating henna into her art. Henna, for Sushila, represents the quintessence of the very purity and consistency that her itinerant, multicultural past and present lack:

For ten years she has been floating rootlessly in the Canadian landscape, not properly Trinidadian (she could not sing one calypso, or shake down her hips with abandon when one was sung—the diligence of being a good Brahmimgirl), not Indian except in skin color (now curries and too many spices gave her the frightful cramps, and the runs, and in her family a sari had always been a costume) certainly not white and hardly Canadian either (Mootoo 60).

Rootlessness haunts Sushila like a spiritual malaise; her attempts at redefining herself as a Canadian artist—by painting “large temperate-zone fruit and immense cold-country vegetables, with broad, sweeping, gestural strokes in imitation of the size, depth, feel, color and temperature of the Canadian landscape”—leaves her feeling empty and colorless and inauthentic. She sets out to remedy this situation by using henna, whose depth and intensity signify for her not only a means of reconnecting with what she

understands to be her roots but also symbolize a universal transcendence. Hence, the tactile experience of handling the henna paste and the visual intensity of the substance both on her skin and on her canvas is for Sushila an act of “bhakti” or devotion. It appears that in engaging in this act, Sushila is reinscribing herself precisely within the oppressive parameters of caste and gender that she had transcended as a member of the diasporic community both in Trinidad and Canada. Brinda Mehta comments on this transformation of the social position of the Indo-Caribbean women:

The crossing of the kala pani by Indian women led to corresponding reevaluation of gender roles and definitions...Spatial dissolutions motivated the blurring of caste, class and regional distinctions that provided Indian women with the scope for a certain sexual mobility (Mehta193).

Sushila appears to be reaffirming the caste and gender hierarchies implicit in the art of henna, ritualistic devotion being the privileged realm of Brahmins and henna traditionally associated with bridal submissiveness. Sushila’s choice of henna as a medium for her art, however, is an expression of a conscious desire to subvert this frame of reference:

Priests, pundits were men, she thought. But Sushila was getting wise to time before his-story wiped out her-story, when women ruled, and were the spiritual guides and mediums. Sushila became, right there and then a Brahmin woman pundit kneading and packing earth into a pooja box. Using mendhi was like having a fine poetic substitute for earth. Suddenly using earth for one’s devotion lost its primitiveness and she experienced a moment of completeness, oneness with the universe, a feeling unlike any she’d experienced when she tried on Catholicism, or gone vegetarian with an effort to finding a lasting identity and purpose (Mootoo 62).

The allusion to her Brahminical heritage in association with the henna is, then, not a regression into social hierarchies, but an appropriation of the upper-caste male devotee’s privileges to reinscribe a feminine continuum of power that had been written out of history. The art of henna, reinvented by Sushila, enables her to transcend not only her historically underprivileged gendered position, but also the limitations of the hyphen.



In *Chutney Popcorn*, Reena's unconventional use of henna also serves this dual purpose: of renewing her connection to her roots as well as of recuperating femininity and female sexuality from repressive stereotypes. The beauty salon that she works in doubles as her studio and her exhibition space: it allows her to showcase her creativity—and the reinterpreted art it produces—with a degree of freedom that would be unthinkable either within the parental home or her larger diasporic community. Reena's art elicits an ambiguous response from her family: they either ignore it as non-existent, or misunderstand its significance. Photographing henna tattoos on the bodies of nude salon clients does not qualify as “mainstream” art to them: what makes the art the more incomprehensible and unacceptable is its essential hybridity. Reena's experimental approach to henna dilutes its authenticity and threatens the purity that the diaspora chooses as its defining element. Ironically, the dilution/adulteration of a traditional wedding custom is, to the diaspora, a graver transgression than an interracial heterosexual marriage (as in Sarita's case). Reena's hybridity—which is reflected in her art—is perceived as an extension of her unclassifiability as a woman, and she is caught in an inescapable binary between her creativity and Sarita's reproductive sexuality. Her artistic personality is a cipher to her family, just as her art is an enigma that they choose to ignore or treat as a temporary whim. The incomprehensibility of Reena's sexuality—and their willful incomprehension of it—is similar to their response when confronted with Reena's art.

If the space of Reena's family home refuses to accommodate her art, even the supposedly utopic space of salon/apartment cannot do so unambiguously. The proprietor of the salon comments on the displayed photographs crowding the salon wall: “This place

has begun to look like a museum, Reena.” The aesthetics of the photographic display— in their deliberate black-and-white starkness— stand in sharp contrast to the humdrum utilitarian space of the salon. If the innate subversiveness of Reena’s art makes her family uncomfortable, its strangeness and indecipherability (at least in the functional context of the salon) disconcerts her employer. The tattoos— unlike the photographs themselves— have commercial value because the salon clientele seem interested in it. However, the commodity value of this “ethnic” art is again undercut by of Reena’s dubious status as an authentic diasporic/national subject. One question that Reena often encounters while working on her clients is: “Is that how they do it in India?” Reena’s hyphenated status invalidates her artistic authority: her incomplete Indianness devalues her art. What makes matters worse is Sarita’s apparent mastery of this legacy— if not of the art then of the mythic framework behind it. On a visit to the salon, Sarita erases and corrects Reena’s hennaed inscription of the Hindu religious symbol “Om,” thereby establishing her superior grasp of Hindu mythology and Indian culture. This further undermines Reena’s credibility as an Indian who has been successful in maintaining connections with her roots, and by extension as a practitioner of an art that purports to be an expression of those roots. The exotic appeal of art fades for her clients as its authenticity turns out to be dubious.

The reception of Reena’s art is ambivalent, but her sexuality is less problematic to her friends/housemates/coworkers, at least at the outset. The space that Reena co-inhabits with them appears to be a lesbian utopia, a sort of lesbian commune of shared interests, activities, mindsets and lifestyles. Visually, the space occupies a radically different position from Reena’s parental home: besides reinforcing the binary of urban vs.

suburban living, the space self-consciously celebrates an excess symbolic of female sensuality. The squalid apartment is not only an unabashed display of unmade beds, unwashed dishes, overstuffed closets (which double as hideouts for secret lovers) and filthy takeout boxes but also the stage for explosive emotional dramas. Reena and Lisa's monogamous relationship is the stable focal point of an ever-changing kaleidoscope of amorous combinations. The histrionics accompanying these upheavals almost have a quality of performance, with Reena and Lisa as the audience and occasionally arbitrators. The women revel in their separateness, expressed as much through this space as through their lives and sexualities, and it is this separateness— this positioning of oneself or the community *contra mundum*— that defines the utopic nature of the space. This disconnection is what Reena escapes into, eluding the pressures that her family puts on her and the recurrent near-humiliations of her failure to measure up to the expectations of the diasporic community. From within this space, Reena has as much difficulty comprehending the heteronormative world her family inhabits, as they do hers. Her empathy with the distraught Sarita is at first incomplete, unable as she is to understand the centrality of reproductive sexuality in Sarita's world. In a comparable moment of mutual incomprehension, Sarita rejects Reena's offer of solace— a proposed visit to her photographic exhibition. The nature of the space that Reena inhabits and its sexual and aesthetic dynamics remain inscrutable to Sarita.

This utopic dynamic— defined as it by its distinct identity— changes with Reena's decision to become a surrogate mother for Sarita's child. Surrogacy, in this case, is taken a step beyond offering her body as a receptacle for Mitch and Sarita's offspring: Reena offers herself as a biological parent of the child since Sarita is unable to conceive.

This decision sets off a range of diverse reactions from the stakeholders and the onlookers alike. For Sarita, this amounts to Reena's intrusion into a space of heterosexual privilege; for their mother, it is an unnatural and sacrilegious violation of the logical progression from matrimony to childbearing; for Reena's friends, it is an imposition of heterosexual hegemony on the ideal of the lesbian utopia. Reena's queer body becomes a site of contestation as the others around her attempt to unpack the political, social and cultural implications of her decisions. One of Reena's friends' comments: "You're just being used to perpetuate the heterosexual family model." Reena is perceived as being complicit with the heteronormative valorization of reproductive sexuality, and this perception fractures the homogeneity of the lesbian utopia. Reena's partner Lisa is ambivalent at first and then decides to support the surrogacy plan, but then demurs at the idea of co-parenting with Reena when Sarita rejects the idea of participating in it. Parenting, according to Lisa, is "going backwards," the product of an atavistic impulse that ruptures the progressivist narrative of same-sex desire. Even when Lisa decides to return to Reena and co-parenting, the couple faces criticism from their friend Janice for giving in to the stereotypical family model, albeit in a lesbian context: she accuses them of falling into the "pseudo-nuclear-family diaper-changing-let's-get-a-dog-Heather-had-two-mommies" trap. According to this view, same-sex parenting undermines the separatist ideology of the lesbian utopia by emulating heteronormative family and kinship patterns. The ideal of the lesbian utopia is based on a rigid conceptualization of what is expected of its inhabitants, which, ironically, undermines the essential limitlessness of utopic possibilities.

Reena's family eventually learns to accept her decision— indeed celebrates it in halting, tentative steps. Her mother performs the Punjabi ritual that is the equivalent of a baby shower, and this involves welcoming Lisa into the family as Reena's legitimate partner. This strengthens the tenuous connection between Reena and her family, a connection that was strained if not entirely severed by her coming out. Reena's decision to become a surrogate mother to her sister's child (and reestablishing her connection with her family), on one level, seems to undermine the viability of the spatially, visually, ideologically distinct utopia that she has created for herself. Is her decision, then, a capitulation to heteronormativity? As Gayatri Gopinath suggests, the space of the family home remains central to the experience of the diasporic queer subject; she argues that the resignification of home resists the perception of the queer subject as "alien" and "inauthentic" within the parameters of family, community and nation (Gopinath 15). *Chutney Popcorn* ultimately transcends the urge to valorize what, in Gopinath's definition, could be called a "homonormative" imagining of queer utopia as a spatially distinct locus. Far from capitulating to a hetero-patriarchal framework, Reena occupies a multiply transgressive space in the imagined homogeneity of the diasporic community— both as lesbian and a surrogate mother (a biological situation that rules out the possibility of sexual control by the male). She defies patriarchal intervention in the area of female sexuality. At the same time, her unconventional motherhood helps her restructure the domestic space and redefine queer utopia. In a sense, the received notion of queer utopia remains an elusive, impracticable idea in the texts that I discuss in this chapter— Mootoo's narrator never finds it, Reena in *Chutney Popcorn* redefines utopian longings for a hermetically sealed-off queer space by reconnecting with the family home, and

ruptures the heteronormative ordering of the family home by accommodating homoeroticism. For the transnational queer subject straddling diverse cultures and geographical spaces, the utopian queer space does not exist in a kind of irreconcilable binary opposition with spaces sanctioned by the society. Queer utopia, in these texts, defines itself very much in relation to heteronormativity, not by mimicking it but by engaging with it and challenging its bases. The “utopian” nature of this aspired-for, syncretic queer space is undercut by the fact that it does not elide the conflicts inherent in situations of the diasporic queer subject—the texts that I discuss test the available means of negotiating these conflicts.

## CHAPTER IV

REDEFINING AGENCY: SPACES OF QUEER DESIRE IN “THE QUILT,” *LADIES COUPE* AND *A MARRIED WOMAN*

Astha: I have a fantasy, listen my love, and do not laugh. It is not much, I think it is not much.

I have a room, small but private, where my family pass before my eyes. It is very light, before me is a wall which divides the house, but I can see my children, that satisfies me, though to them I am invisible, that satisfies me too.

This room will be our room, you with me, living in harmony. Our lives are separate, different things call to us, different demands are made on us, but always that solid base beneath as, like two flies caught in a sticky pool they cannot leave.

Manju Kapur, *A Married Woman*

The visualization of a room of one’s own, in these lines, embodies a juxtaposition of the erotic and the maternal, the personal and the familial. It is an imagined space that contains and conjoins desires of different registers, a space bounded by one-way glass that might render the desiring subject invisible for the audience/objects she chooses—objects of desire who inhabit a segment of the same space but do not perceive her presence. The space simultaneously functions as a trap, a “sticky pool” of desire to which the desiring subject submits willingly, buoyed by the awareness that it is also the “solid base” of a stable erotic relationship. This paradoxical spatial metaphor— in which visibility and invisibility mesh together— sums up the subject position of queer South Asian woman. The visibility in acceptable societal roles— as a wife, mother, sister, friend— is complemented by the desired invisibility as lesbian lover. It is a space of conscious— but not necessarily pathological— schizophrenia, of artfully split identities that are not necessarily disempowering. In my readings of Ismat Chughtai’s “Lihaaf” (1941), Anita Nair’s *Ladies Coupe* (2001) and Manju Kapoor’s *A Married Woman* (2002), I wish to continue my argument from the previous chapter: the location of same-

sex desire need not, in every situation, be spatially distant from the hetero-patriarchal locus of the home; indeed, at the center of the heterosexual spatial configuration of the home are socially sanctioned same-sex spaces that can potentially alternate as spaces of desire. This brings me to the second strand of my argument: the invisibility of these homoerotic/homosocial spaces does not undercut the agency of its inhabitants but reinforces it. “Agency,” I argue, is a contested term, whose valence shifts with changing contexts. The tendency to regard agency as coterminous with visibility is problematic; it is a form of essentialism that elides the specificity of queer experience in certain contexts<sup>1</sup>. The centrality of the coming-out narrative to queer activism has undermined the potency of silence, secrecy and camouflage as possible agential modes available to the queer subject. In this chapter, I investigate how these alternative modes of (female) queer self-expression modify the configuration of queer space. Through my readings of these colonial and postcolonial “lesbian” texts, I demonstrate how same-sex desire is represented not through repudiating the spatial metaphor of the closet but through reconfiguring it: by restructuring the heterosexual domestic space as a space of queer desire, by appropriating public space and queering it, and by imagining spaces of resistance within hetero-patriarchal spatial systems. None of these strategies rely on visibility, and thereby redefine agency in the context of queer self-definition and spatial reclamation.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The context that I talk about specifically here is the context of postcolonial India, where female same sex desire has been erased by a simultaneous use of silence and violence, a process that I discuss later in the chapter.

<sup>2</sup> None of the texts that I read in this chapter can be specifically labeled as “lesbian” text, and the absence of this label has significant impact on how queer space is imagined or represented.



*Historicizing Invisibility, Understanding Agency*

Before I analyze the implications of the choice of invisibility as an agential mode in the context of queer experience, I wish to set up a differential understanding of the terms “invisibility” and “erasure”: while the first implies a possibility of agency and volition, the second gestures towards coercive marginalization. In the previous chapter, I had examined the marginalization of the diasporic queer female subject and had problematized the possibility of a queer utopia. But whereas the location of these communities and their (at least the second generation’s) access to an alternative discourse makes it possible to set up a dialogue about homosexuality, the silence around this issue in a postcolonial locus is deafening. This is true of the Indian lesbian; the silent erasure of this figure is a specific form of homophobic violence in postcolonial India. How do public discourses, pre- and postcolonial, control the expression of lesbian sexuality? Geeti Thadani connects the phenomenon of lesbian invisibility in India to what she calls the “myth of tolerance” (149). She points out the inherent contradiction in the simultaneous ideas that are discursively constructed in mainstream Indian society: lesbians do not exist, and lesbians are not discriminated against. It is true that the infamous Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code is specifically an anti-sodomy law and criminalizes male homosexuality, but the very fact that it does not mention lesbianism implicitly undercuts female agency. Thadani remarks that “rendering lesbian sexuality explicit was tantamount to acknowledging it and thereby going against the other punitive strategy of silence and invisibility” (149). Thus, the process of policing female sexuality and the attempt to contain it within a recognizable pattern of sexual binarism remain implicit. Lesbianism, when acknowledged, is constructed and critiqued as a Western

import. Although Thadani mentions that lesbianism falls within the purview of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, she does not elaborate on the specific implication that the law has for women. However, she cites instances where homophobia against women has been expressed in the form of legal punitive measures and incarceration. A woman who had undergone sex reassignment surgery (SRS) and “married” her lesbian lover was brought to court by her lover’s family; she was penalized under IPC Section 377 and the marriage was annulled on the grounds that SRS did not make the couple capable of “normal,” procreative sexuality. The equation of normalcy with procreative sexuality is a recognized method of marginalizing alternative sexualities; it is interesting to see, however, that Thadani implicitly connects this marginalization to the colonial legacy inherent in Section 377. This view contrasts sharply with the one she puts forth in another longer treatise, where she contests the notion that pre-colonial Indian culture was co-extensive with alternative sexual practices. In *Sakhiyani*, Thadani reveals the heteropatriarchal mechanism encoded in a corpus of ancient Indian theological work that consciously distorted or silenced expressions of lesbian desire in various pre-colonial cultural productions and practices (art, religious rituals). But even if we assume for a moment that esoteric mystical philosophy or theology does not embody mainstream thought, it seems reasonable to speculate whether there was, in pre-colonial India, a legal discourse comparable to section 377 by the British, one that sought to contain, limit or even eradicate lesbian practices.

A study that is particularly relevant in this context is Mina Kumar’s “Lesbians in Indian Texts and Contexts.” Kumar compares two simultaneous— though discordant— streams of thought that existed in ancient India and encoded contrasting attitudes to

lesbianism. While the dominant discourse of post-Vedic Brahminical texts (literary, legal, medical) identifies lesbian desire as both transgressive and pathological, the comparatively minoritarian discourse that drew on non-Brahminical religious practices (like Tantrism) valorized and sanctioned lesbianism<sup>3</sup>. Kumar demonstrates how the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, popular epics of post-Vedic India, constructed lesbian proclivities as “abnormal” and unworthy of the “morally upright.” Similarly, legal texts like the *Artha Shastra* and the *Manusmriti* made tangible attempts to repress same-sex desire among women by spelling out specific punitive measures (it is interesting to note that the legal texts penalize married women far more harshly than they do virgins). Medical treatises, like the *Carak Samhita* and the *Susruta Samhita* elaborate on the pathology of lesbian desire; in some cases, it is understood to be procreative and the offspring, supposedly of indeterminate sex, further subverts the received notions of gendered behavior. As Kumar rightly points out, most of the subtextual anxiety in these discourses stems from the possibility of lesbian sexuality challenging the gender hierarchies of a hetero-patriarchal society. Tantrism’s positive focus on lesbianism was gradually marginalized and the dominant discourse gained sway. Kumar contends that the post-Vedic Brahminical texts “define lesbianism as improper because it violates the hierarchy that is supposed to be implicitly coded in sexual encounters, and because it defies the reproductive imperative. Furthermore, lesbianism is interpreted as an outcome of the naturally promiscuous and corrupt female temperament.” (223). Kumar’s analysis enables me to direct my attention to two opposed trends of thought that resulted in the

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<sup>3</sup> A religion based on the scriptures called the *Tantras*. It served as a counter-discourse to the patriarchal Brahminical traditions, because it recognized and valorized the spiritual significance of female sexuality.

same effect: the silencing of the lesbian. While the colonial discourse ignored the Tantric valorization of lesbian sexual practices and criminalized homosexuality (further marginalizing women by *not* alluding to lesbianism in the anti-sodomy law), the anti-colonial nationalist discourse constructed a flawed notion of “tradition” that had no place for lesbian sexuality, which was looked on as a result of the corrupting influence of the West.

The erasure of lesbian subjectivity through legal restraint is supplemented by the more subtle control exerted by less visible, more private structures of power. In an article discussing the violence faced by lesbians in India, Gomathy N.B. and Bina Fernandez contend that the “normative presumption of heterosexuality is an epistemic violence that ensures the absence of knowledge of the realities of lesbian experience” (159). The article, based on a study conducted under the aegis of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, analyses the personal narratives of a number of lesbian and bisexual women to understand the nature of the violence that they have to sustain. Fernandez and Gomathy point out that one of the ways in which lesbian identity is suppressed is through acts of “silent hostility.” The women themselves have very little agency in making their voices heard: in most cases they have no knowledge of their sexual orientation (because they have internalized the myth of compulsory heterosexuality). If they do recognize it, they either try to resolve their internal conflict, or choose to keep quiet about it for the fear of consequences. Their families, at times, lack knowledge about lesbian experience too; they also keep themselves disengaged from the issue and deny the expression— even the existence—of same-sex desire. Fernandez and Gomathy read this blocking out as a violent erasure of lesbian sexuality: “Categorizing these acts of silent hostility as violence

unpacks the grey area of silence masquerading as tolerance or acceptance” (159). These acts of silent hostility are as effective, if not more, as physical aggression (which is also one of the ways in which the families of lesbian women routinely respond). While the mainstream Brahminical society in pre-colonial India— as Mina Kumar’s examination of the medical, legal and literary texts testifies— had articulated its intolerance of lesbian sexuality in no uncertain terms, same-sex desire between women appears to be consigned to a zone of silence in postcolonial India.

Literature documenting the erasure of lesbian sexuality in postcolonial India also identifies the familial home as the primary site of homophobic oppression and in some cases, of violence. The forms of “silence”— which Gomathy and Fernandez identify as the chief agent of countering expressions of lesbian desire—stem chiefly from the family. The family’s response may vary from ignorance and confusion about lesbian sexuality (blindsighted as they are by an unavoidable internalization of normative heterosexuality) to a silent hostility that deliberately refuses to recognize the possibility— let alone the fact— of woman desiring woman. Instances of using silence as a regulatory measure to contain and erase lesbian desire are perhaps more common than episodes of actual violence, since the latter would amount to an acknowledgement of homosexuality. The ideal of “womanhood” is constructed within the narrative framework of normative heterosexuality: any possibility of departure from this narrative is either tacitly dismissed or violently erased. This disciplining mechanism, interestingly, is also a classed phenomenon. In a study based on taped interviews of fifty-four middle- and upper-class Indian women, Jyoti Puri analyzes the centrality of these regulatory narratives of putative “normalcy” in the experience of women who enjoy social privilege. Puri comments on

the ironic co-existence, in these women, of an awareness of this privilege with a counteractive sense of discomfort with the hegemonic mandates of this class:

As members of the middle and the upper classes, the women who are the focus of this study are privileged. Moreover, as women speaking about the normative aspects of sexuality and marriage, they are able to draw upon the privileges of a social system that mandates heterosexual relations. Therefore, to look for the ways in which these women are socially regulated is also to raise questions about their entanglements in the process. On the other hand, partly reflecting their discomfort with the nature of social regulations that attends privilege, these women also suggest how they undermine and challenge these constraints in their lives (Puri 4).

The unwitting complicity of these women in this regulatory mechanism is countered by a critique of it— in the form of responses that range from a nascent, partially articulated “discomfort” to a more self-conscious resistance. The social constraints on the middle- and upper-class women often make it impossible for them to translate this resistance— however self-conscious— into complete breaks from the sites of oppression (family and society).

Constructing and articulating a “lesbian” identity and existence becomes impossible in a social context where the figure of the lesbian remains a cipher and the language of female same-sex desire unarticulated. Under the circumstances, women re-appropriate silence as an agential mode which functions as a means of survival. This is the third kind of silence that Gomathy and Fernandez identify in their study as one of the responses of the lesbian subject to the recognition of same-sex desire. Gomathy and Fernandez, however, refuse to credit this act of silence as having an element of choice:

In the third possibility, women may choose silence to maintain their privacy. This silence, however, can only be a ‘meaningful individual choice’ only if it is made in the context of freedom from the fear of violent consequences (159).

I wish to depart from this conditional formulation of the definition of “meaningful individual choice”: the choice of silence in contexts such as these is not merely a bid to maintain “privacy,” but the very existence of the kind of desire that risks erasure— either through violence or through a countering silence of deliberate incomprehension or misrecognition— upon exposure. What Gomathy and Fernandez obviously understand as fear I interpret as strategy, a conscious attempt to maintain a queer identity within the domestic space which, by its very hetero-patriarchal nature, functions as a site for the control and regulation of female sexuality. This construction has roots in the patriarchal formulation of nationalists in colonial India of home as a spiritual, feminine domain supposedly inviolate and immune to the corrupting and humiliating effects of colonialism, a formulation theorized by Partha Chatterjee and discussed by me in the previous chapter. This conceptualization of home as a feminine space, instead of empowering women through any kind of spatial control, undercuts their agency through a mythic construction of a sanitized version of womanhood. Thus, “spiritual” becomes synonymous with asexual or a position congruent with the kind of procreative sexuality harnessed to the imaginings of a national identity. Any expression of female sexuality that departs from this norm— be it a transgression across caste or class or a violation of normative heterosexuality— is dismissed as deviant and subsequently erased. The primary locus for this erasure is the home. The research conducted by Gomathy and Fernandez testifies to this:

The arena of maximum violence was the family...in the survey, 77 percent of women who experienced violence (30 out of 39) indicated family as the domain for incidence of violence. This is not surprising given the central role of the family in Indian society and the patriarchal familial control exerted on a woman’s sexuality, mobility and access to resources. The form of violence exerted by the family lies in the continuum between

silent and punitive, and depends on the degree of exposure and the nature of the existing relationship (160).

Among numerous literary and cinematic representations of such violent familial repression, Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* and Ligy J. Pullapally's film *Sancharram* (The Journey) stand out. Set in small-town/rural Kerala, both texts explore the repercussions that socially transgressive relationships might have for women within the immediate familial context. Roy's Ammu, the daughter of a Syrian Christian family, consciously crosses rigidly codified caste lines by having a relationship with an untouchable man. The revelation of this results in Ammu being forcibly confined, physically assaulted and finally banished from the family and separated from her twins. In *Sancharram*, a sudden awakening to a mutual homoerotic attraction simultaneously terrifies and delights childhood friends Kiran and Delilah, and eventually has dire consequences for both. Exposure in this case is more delayed and less dramatic, primarily because the lovers succeed in camouflaging their relationship as an intensified, non-erotic continuum of their existing friendship (which in many ways it is). Upon disclosure, Delilah's orthodox Christian family set into motion the same cycle of violence, coercion and oppression. Both these texts establish the familial home as the site for violence directed at controlling and containing female eroticism that transgresses socially mandated boundaries, as does Deepa Mehta's *Fire*, a landmark in South Asian queer cinema that explores the relationship of Radha and Sita, sisters-in-law who forge an erotic relationship within the confines of a traditional North Indian home. The women in *Fire* do not attempt to claim a separate space for themselves, but use socially acceptable homosocial arrangements to eroticize the traditionally constituted space of the home, at least till they are discovered. Exposure, again, results in violent retaliation.



And yet, seeking visibility through a repudiation of this locus of oppression is an alternative that is either not available to or not accessed by many South Asian women. Queer imaginations rarely— if ever— construct an independent locus and actualize a site of desire and identity *outside* the familial or marital home. The survival of female same-sex desire in a hetero-patriarchal home depends on secrecy, camouflage and indirection, strategies that occupy an ideological position that is opposite to the coming-out narrative, a form of agency that becomes complicated in the context of South Asian women. Gayatri Gopianath, who, in her work has repeatedly problematized an unquestioning valorization of the coming-out narrative, stresses that the adequacy of this narrative needs to be examined in accordance with the cultural context. This approach is the basis of her critical estimate of Mehta's *Fire*, in which she states that queer desire functions differently in an Indian context than in a Euro-American one, and emergence into a public visible sphere does not necessarily constitute agency in this context. It would be simplistic to set up a Western vs. non-Western binary when discussing queer visibility, especially when I am using the theoretical paradigm of Lee Edelman's homographesis, which identifies the representation that resists "outing" as a queer artistic practice. What I examine in this chapter in the literary representation of female queer space— in Ismat Chughtai's "Lihaaf," Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* and Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman*— that relies on strategies other than the direct claiming of a separate space of queer identity and desire. I demonstrate how these texts carve out queer space using indirect agential strategies, by reclaiming and refashioning both traditional spaces of hetero-patriarchy as well as appropriating public spaces that have little erotic connotation.

The strategies of indirection are, for the most part, based on apparent consent to hetero-patriarchal ideologies and institutions, as I demonstrate in the last section of the chapter.

### *Reconfiguring Domesticity*

In 1942, the Lahore High Court charged the noted Urdu writer Ismat Chughtai with obscenity for her short story *Lihaaf* (“The Quilt”). The British government in India regarded the story’s focus on lesbian desire as a “corrupting influence” on public morality. Chughtai was later acquitted; readings of “The Quilt” during the trial did not yield recognizable “obscenities” that might “corrupt” the readers’ sensibilities. My reading of the translated story argues that the subversive potential of the story lies in making same-sex desire impossible to isolate as “abnormal.” Chughtai’s project is comparable to what Lee Edelman defines as “homographesis”, a writing practice that resists the cultural insistence on making homosexual difference visible. The homographetic technique in “The Quilt” consists of constructing queer space as an unmappable locus with an indecipherable identity. In the introductory chapter of his seminal work, Lee Edelman uses the neologism “homographesis” in connection with the cultural construction of queer subjectivities. The term, for Edelman, indicates the simultaneous but opposed processes of oppression and subversion inherent in discursive practices, specifically writing practices. In its first sense “homographesis” signifies the way in which dominant cultures use discursive strategies to assign a visible, readable “difference” to gay bodies. Edelman defines this as “the cultural mechanism by which writing is brought into relation to the question of sexual difference in order to conceive the gay body as text, thereby effecting a far-reaching intervention in the political regulation of social identities” (Edelman 10). According to Edelman, this insistence on

outing is less a liberationist project of returning the homosexual to visibility than a paranoid attempt to identify and thereby marginalize him. Although Edelman uses the term “homographesis” to indicate the practices used in positioning the gay male subject in Western cultures, I believe that the term can be used profitably in a South Asian context to understand colonial and nationalist anxieties around sexualities positioned outside the hetero-normative binary pattern. The discursive construction of the “deviant” sexual subject is comparable to the dominant ideological project of homographesis that Edelman outlines.

Is there a way to resist this branding as “deviant” and the consequent marginalization? This brings us to the second sense of the term “homographesis,” a subversive writing practice that Edelman claims defies or “de-scribes” the codified identities that a conservative social order insists on imposing. In other words, this second instance of homographetic inscription is a kind of discursive camouflage that resists identification and blurs the boundaries between “normal” and “abnormal.” Ismat Chughtai’s short story “The Quilt”, in my opinion, is a perfect example of resistant homographesis. In addition to a homographetic inscription of the queer body, Chughtai’s representation of the *zenana* also bears evidence of homographetic technique. The story is retrospectively narrated by a pubescent girl who spends a few days with her mother’s aristocratic friend, Begum Jaan. Neglected by her husband (who, interestingly enough, pursues young boys) and confined to the female quarters (*zenana*) of the household, Begum Jaan develops a close physical relationship with her maid and masseuse Rabbo. The relationship is witnessed, but not entirely understood, by the narrator; but the partially comprehended images of intimacy keep returning to haunt her. It must be noted

that although the publication of the story elicited outraged responses from readers and the Crown charged Chughtai with obscenity, she was acquitted because the story did not yield any word or phrase that might pose a threat to public decency. How can we account for this slippage? In a latter-day interview, Chughtai looks back on the incident:

The obscenity law prohibited the use of four letter words. “Lihaaf” does not contain any such words. In those days the word ‘lesbianism’ was not in use. I did not know exactly what it was. The story is a child’s description of something she cannot fully understand. It was based on my own experience as a child. I know no more than the child knew. The lawyer argued that only those who had some knowledge could understand the story. I won the case. (Manushi, 1983).

In other words, the epistemological lacuna that Chughtai claims for her narrator (and herself) prevented the categorical identification of the lesbian theme in the story, as did the lack of terminology for same-sex desire in vernacular Urdu. It is perhaps safe to assume that in pre-colonial South Asian culture sexual preferences and identities were less rigidly codified than the categories constructed by colonial discourse.

This indeterminacy of the nature of desire finds expression in Chughtai’s inscription of the *zenana*, the female quarters of a traditional Muslim household. The plot of the story positions the *zenana* as a paradox: traditionally constructed to maintain sexual purity of women in the logical space of sexual contact in a marital home, here it signifies a space of conjugal (and by extension, sexual) activity. The nature of Begum Jaan’s marriage implicitly makes the *zenana* a space of (hetero)sexual seclusion for her. With the *nawab* seeking his sexual pleasures elsewhere, the *zenana*— the space to which he is the only male who has access— remains “officially” sterile, the space where the Begum stages her marital frustrations. It is also, fittingly, the women-only space where the narrator’s mother leaves her for a “womanly” education, both as a punishment for fighting with her brothers and as an inevitable remedy for her tomboyish nature. What

she encounters there, however, is a baffling expression of femininity and feminine desire, something that she fails to comprehend and explain within the familiar framework. And yet, the space that accommodates this desire of (possible) difference remains recognizably familiar and unthreatening in its identity. Although Edelman uses the concept of homographesis— both in the context of identifying homosexuality and resisting identification— in connection with queer *bodies*, he alludes to Alan Bray’s historicization of the project of homographesis in Britain, with the emphasis on identifying and outing “clothes, gestures, language, particular buildings and public places” which “have homosexual connotations” (Edelman 6). Admittedly, such a frame of reference to identify homosexual spaces— particularly in the case of female same-sex desire— would be conspicuously absent in colonial India. However, it seems significant that Chughtai appropriates the locus of the zenana and refashions it as queer space. On the one hand, its women-only composition logically makes it a possible space for same-sex desire; on the other, the colonizer’s perception of the zenana as a space of oppression created by indigenous patriarchy reinforces the image of the women in the zenana as victims, not practitioners of “unnatural vices.” And yet, the zenana as a site of ambiguous desire also subverts the patriarchal imagination of it by rupturing its ideological basis: a site that contains and maintains the sanctity of womanhood as patriarchy imagines it. In her reading of “The Quilt,” Geeta Patel comments on how the (homo)eroticization of the zenana destabilizes both the definition of marriage and the heterosexual home:

The complex registers of desire enacted in the story refigure both the home and the women settled firmly at the center of it by narrating the pleasure of physical desire between women and children in the context of a marriage. Yet because the wife does not ultimately leave the zenana, run away with her masseuse-lover, or repudiate her wifely assignments, the

story provokes a retelling of the sanitized, secular heterosexual domestic space so necessary to nationalistic narratives (146).

Patel's claim about situating queer desire within the heterosexual domestic space and thus destabilizing the economy of a marriage reinforces my overarching argument in this chapter. Yet what is pertinent to my reading of Chughtai's homographetic strategy is her comment on "the complex registers of desire enacted in the story": the very complexity and illegibility of the desire, I argue, makes it more potent and thus posits a threat to both the colonial and nationalistic construction of the woman-only space that it is situated in.

One of the central, much written about symbols in the story is the *lihaaf* or the quilt, which serves as a queer-space-within-a-space in the short story, the space that both contains and conceals queer desire. Coming as it usually does with associations of warmth, comfort and childhood memories, the quilt is posited as an ambivalent object in the story— simultaneously a space of remembered comfort and security and a space of enigmatic difference. The narrator does not actually see evidence of physical intimacy (other than the frequent massages, of course) between Begum Jaan and her masseuse till the very end of the story— the quilt functions as a visual obstruction that leaves much to her imagination. Rabbo, the masseuse, shares Begum Jaan's bed; the narrator witnesses their heaving quilt with growing terror and fascination: "When I fell asleep Rabbo was scratching her back...At night I awoke with a start. It was pitch dark. Begum Jaan's quilt was shaking vigorously, as if an elephant was struggling beneath it" (Chughtai). The reader is invited to participate in this reluctant voyeurism and interpret what might be going on beneath the quilt; the childish absurdity of the "elephant" comparison almost throws us off the sensual associations of the quilt. The quilt, which seemed to the narrator to be "such an innocent part of the bed," becomes for her an ambiguous object of terror

that is “imprinted on my memory like a blacksmith’s brand” (Chughtai). Interestingly, the final, accidental “unveiling” of the quilt does not give up its secret: What I saw when the quilt was lifted, I will never tell anyone, not even if they give me a lakh of rupees.” With this claim that concludes the story, the narrator becomes an accomplice to the act, as much a custodian of the secret as the quilt itself. The emphasis, now, shifts from the unknowability of homoerotic desire—and of the desiring subject—to its essential unrepresentability. Like her role as an observer, the narrator’s response to the homoerotic act remains ambivalent too, alternating between revulsion at its seemingly cannibalistic aspect and attraction for the enigma central to it.

Although same-sex desire remains unmapped in “The Quilt,” the bodies of the desiring subjects in the zenana are inscribed in isolation, but the same undertone of ambiguity pervades these inscriptions. For instance, ambivalence is central to the representation of Begum Jaan as seen through the eyes of our naive narrator. One of the characteristics of the resistant homographetic writing practice that Edelman outlines is the inscription of a “homograph”— a term that he borrows from linguistics and that denotes a gay body that can pass as straight. The narrator’s description of Begum Jaan is replete with admiration for her exaggerated femininity: “Her complexion was fair, without a trace of ruddiness. Her black hair was always drenched in oil. I had never seen her parting crooked, nor a single hair out of place. Her eyes were black, and carefully plucked eyebrows stretched over them like a couple of perfect bows” (Chughtai). The narrator, however, drops a detail which changes this epitome of femininity to a possible androgyne: “The most amazing and attractive part of her face were her lips. Usually dyed in lipstick, her upper lip had a distinct line of down...Sometimes her face became

transformed before my adoring gaze, as if it were the face of young boy” (Chughtai). A single, tantalizing hint— a possible marker of “difference”—but the narrator does not allude to it again in the course of the story. The personality of the Begum strikes the reader as a shifting chiaroscuro; a maternal figure who is protective of her charge, she nonetheless turns her “arduous heat” on the narrator and makes an attempt to seduce her in Rabbo’s absence. Although some readings of the story claim that Chughtai “masculinises” the female characters in “Lihaaf,” I argue that the eroticized bodies in the story ultimately remain essentially “queer,” moving between the fluid categories of masculine and feminine, gay and straight.

Is same sex-desire seen as a pathology or panacea in “The Quilt?” Despite the narrator’s ambivalent response to Begum Jaan’s relationship with Rabbo, there is nothing perceivably pathological about it. The only physical sign of pathology—the Begum’s persistent skin rash— seems to be an outward manifestation of her dysfunctional marriage to the Nawab. Rabbo, if anything, appears as a healer. Her constant massaging gives Begum much needed comfort: “Rabbo used to sit by her side and scratch her back for hours together— it was almost as if getting scratched was for her the fulfillment of life’s essential need. In a way, more important than the basic necessities required for staying alive” (Chughtai). The massage becomes an elixir, as much a sensual comfort as a means of emotional fulfillment: “Rabbo came to her rescue just as she was starting to go under. Suddenly her emaciated body began to fill out. Her cheeks became rosy; beauty, as it were, glowed through every pore” (Chughtai). The homoerotic potential of the zenana— the female quarters of the household— remains debated, but the zenana



emerges as a homoemotive space of warmth and companionship, a contrast to the Nawab's sterile liaisons with his train of effeminate boys.

Is "The Quilt," then, a valorization of same-sex desire, a statement that challenges the homophobia inherent in colonial discourse? It is hard to make such a claim of a text in which the very nature and dynamics of desire remain ambiguous and almost literally veiled. In her nuanced reading of the story, Gayatri Gopinath argues that in "Lihaaf," Chughtai complicates the familiar liberatory coming-out narrative by framing homoeroticism along multiple axes of gender, class and cross-generational positions of the subjects. My reading of "The Quilt" focuses on Chughtai's use of deliberate textual camouflaging of same-sex desire. Interestingly, "The Quilt" has also been criticized on the grounds that it lends itself to a homophobic reading, because the neglected Begum Jaan's involvement with Rabbo could be seen as an instance of "situational lesbianism." To me, however, reading such a judgmental undertone into the story seems rather simplistic; a reading like this is problematized by the ambivalence central to the story. In her seminal work on literary radicalism in India in the years preceding independence, Priyamvada Gopal turns our attention to Ismat Chughtai's affiliation to the Progressive Writer's Association. The association— which boasted of well-known names like Rashid Jahan and Sadat Hasan Manto— focused on using literary craftsmanship to envision an emergent postcolonial nation-state. Gopal feels that Chughtai's claim to modernity lies in her choice of subject for "The Quilt," "...Chughtai was claiming for herself the right to write about the female body...but she was also going further by recognizing its claims to pleasure and fulfillment" (Gopal 67). I would like to take this claim a step further: "The Quilt" could be read as counter-colonial discourse because of its radical attempt to de-

classify pleasure. What I choose to call Chughtai's "homographetic" technique defies labels and descriptors and destabilizes the polarization between transgressive and acceptable desires that colonial discourse had inscribed so rigidly. Its ambivalent inscription of queer bodies subverts the cultural insistence on recording and tabulating sexual pathology, and ultimately makes same-sex desire unmappable.

*Queer Spaces: Mobility and Stasis*

The representation of same-sex space in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* shifts its valence from homoeroticism to homosociality, at least in the larger scheme of the novel. Nair uses the familiar narrative format of a shared journey intersecting with shared confessions: she transforms the humdrum space of a woman-only coupe in a railway compartment into a space of intimate exchanges. The common thread running through these autobiographical fragments is the story of Akhilandeswari, "spinster, government employee, eater of eggs," the turning point of whose life is a decisive break from her parasitical family that she has supported since her father's death (Nair 90). This break takes the form of an impulsive, unplanned train journey to Kanyakumari, the southernmost point of the Indian Peninsula, the "Lands end" of Akhila's imagination, the spatial point farthest from the boundaries of unwelcome domestic responsibilities. Throughout the length of the journey—in which Akhila finds herself in an all-woman railway compartment—the narration alternates between Akhila's reminiscences of her gradual, unwilling cooptation into the role of the family breadwinner and personal narratives by her co-passengers, who represent a cross-section of society. These subsidiary narratives, which typically map a moment of transformation in which the narrator either has an epiphanic revelation about the real nature of her life or takes control

of it for herself, serve to mirror and reinforce Akhila's master-narrative of desired transformation (which spans the length of the novel).

Most of the narratives are in the form of confessionals, in which women reveal conscious or subconscious strategies they have adopted to subvert forms of patriarchal oppression: abusive or overprotective relationships, being limited within well-defined gendered roles in marriage or motherhood, sexual exploitation in its different forms, erasure of sexual subjectivity. The style and content of these confessions vary according to the personality, social position and age of the speaker: a teenager who learns to question the meaning of womanhood through the experience of her grandmother's death, a homemaker who comes to redefine marital intimacy after years of togetherness, a schoolteacher who subtly but relentlessly shifts the dynamic of her relationship with her abusive husband. What binds the narratives together is the unmistakable intimacy of the confessions, which transforms the spatial dynamic of the compartment. The public space of the train coupe is appropriated and refashioned as a homosocial/ homoemotive "safe" space where women across different classes and regions achieve a degree of emotional intimacy through shared memories and intensely private confessions. In that sense, the coupe is positioned as what Malcolm Miles defines as "transitional space," the intermediate space between the public and the private that challenges a binary spatial model. The conceptual basis of the "ladies coupe"—the imagined vulnerability and sexual purity of women needing to be kept in safekeeping—is subverted not only through these narratives of feminine empowerment, but through the trope of feminine solidarity and connection established through the shared confessions and reinforced through mutual concern (just as the eroticization of the *zenana* in "The Quilt" challenges

the ideological basis of the space). This subversion, in my reading, becomes a queer move: it evokes Adrienne Rich's definition of the lesbian continuum:

I mean the term lesbian continuum to include a range—through each woman's life and throughout history—of woman-identified experience, not simply the fact that a woman had had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman. If we expand it to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support...we begin to grasp breadths of female history and psychology that have lain out of reach as a consequence of limited, mostly clinical definitions of lesbianism (Rich 648).

Rich's emphasis on non-erotic connection and political/emotional support between and among women is replicated in the ideological basis of the novel, an ideology that is actualized in the narrative device of the women-only railway coupe. In that sense, this imagined space is also a subversion of the heterosexual domestic space, not only because of its gendered composition but also because of its potential to empower women through shared narrative.<sup>4</sup> Although each narrator succeeds in challenging the limits of societal expectations of gendered behavior on her own, the act of sharing the experiences reinforces the significance of the subversion, especially because the confessions function as exhortations to Akhila to live her life to the fullest.

This empowerment takes the form of the affirmation of the desires and corporeal selves of the women, an expression that is often denied them within the hetero-patriarchal structure of the society. The intimacy of the confessions, in most cases, cuts across class divide and produces a connection that on some level remains dubious. I say "dubious"

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<sup>4</sup> According to a note by Nair, the ladies coupe, a separate enclosure for women passengers in a railway compartment, existed only till 1998. The novel, written in 2001, takes a retrospective look at it.

because even within this seemingly classless utopia, Marikolanthu is ignored and ostracized by the upper-middle-class women. The visible markers of her class and social status encourage her co-passengers to overlook her within the space of compartment; she, too, holds back till the other others leave and only Akhila remains as her listener. Her narrative comes at the very end of the novel, and she is aware that the disruptive element of her narrative would shock her listeners out of their middle-class complacency, primarily because it has elements that stray farthest from the ideal of womanhood: violence, rejection of motherhood and inadmissible (same-sex) desire. Raped and exploited in the household of *chettiyars* (landholders) in her village in Tamil Nadu, Marikolanthu eventually finds solace in an intimate relationship with Sujata, the daughter-in-law of the aristocratic household. Her notions of lesbianism—she remains ignorant, of course, of the actual word— are formed by her experience in the household of two English doctors in Vellore that she works for; she understands, in retrospect, the nature of their relationship in the light of her own erotic involvement with Sujata. But her relationship with Sujata is doomed to fail: never verbally acknowledged from the very beginning, it finally falls apart as Marikolanthu attempts to keep her object of desire sacrosanct by seducing Sujata's husband Sridhar. Marikolanthu's girlhood is comparable to that of the other women in the novel (Akhila, Sheela, Prabhadevi, Margaret) in being riddled with her mother's anxieties around her sexual vulnerability; however, unlike the other narrators who are sheltered and protected by their families for a comparatively longer time, Marikolanthu has to help her mother earn a living after her father's death. Being part of the workforce— like Akhila in the master narrative— does not necessarily give her liberation that is often conterminous with economic independence; her meager

income is added to the household expenses and her mother's surveillance of her person continues. To the prepubescent Marikolanthu, Sujata seems the apotheosis of womanhood— desirable, adored, beautiful, mother to a male heir, the cynosure of the Chettiyar household: "The Chettiyar had said that Sujata Akka's every whim and desire had to be fulfilled. She was special. She was a city girl; she'd come from Coimbatore and she had even gone to college for two years. And Sujata Akka had given birth to a son. Next to the Chettiyar, Sujata Akka was the most important person in that house" (Nair 217). In her perception of Sujata's exalted position in the Chettiyar household, Marikolanthu overlooks that Sujata's apotheosis is in fact a reaffirmation of the patriarchal structure of the Chettiyar family: her beauty and intellect handpicked for the consumption of the Chettiyar son and for the production and nurturing of the Chettiyar heir.

This much-needed clear-sightedness is one of the attributes that Marikolanthu acquires in her time with Kate and Vivien (Missy K and Missy V to her), the English doctors that she finds a position with in Vellore. She sheds embellishments that are looked on as markers of womanhood, much to the disappointment of her mother. Her partial comprehension of same-sex desire also begins in this household: "Missy K talked to Missy V as if she were the husband and Missy V the wife. Sometimes I caught Missy K caressing Missy V's face with her eyes. It sent a line of goose bumps down my back" (Nair 233). Lacking an adequate frame of reference, Marikolathu tries to interpret what she sees by connecting it to her understanding of heterosexual desire. Used as she is to understanding female companionship within a framework of homosociality, Marikolanthu is baffled by the Missies' furtive manner of seeking each other out:

Every night, I watched Missy K leave her room and walk past me...and go into Missy V's room. In the early hours, he crept back to bed. Why this secrecy, I wondered. If Missy K was afraid to sleep alone, the sensible thing to do would be for them to share a bed. I would have thought nothing of two women sharing a bed. It was the most obvious thing to do when men weren't around. For the women to stick together (Nair 232).

The acceptability of women “sticking together” is what Marikolanthu later uses to forge her relationship with Sujata, where desire, however intense, remains unspoken. In this moment, however, she can be aligned with the “naïve” narrator of Chughtai’s “Lihaaf”, who, despite being ignorant about the nature of the desire confronting her, responds to its mystery and its difference, but at the same time persists in her bafflement about the fragmented space that it is forced to occupy.

Marikolanthu’s first experience of desire is fraught with violence and coercion: her rape by a Chettiyar relative on a night of festivities transforms the Chettiyar *kottai* (palace) for her into a spatial symbol of oppression, where sexual exploitation of women is the order of the day. The unwanted pregnancy following the rape only manages to reinforce her revulsion, the child a tangible embodiment of her exploitation. Marikolanthu’s rejection of motherhood— and of life as such— is coterminous with a void in Sujata’s life, and the two women are drawn to each other gradually, first as companions and then as lovers. However, Sujata’s desire for Marikolanthu does not stray beyond the confines of Sujata’s bedroom. Explicit in the erotic details, Marikolanthu’s reminiscences of her intimacies with Sujata never actually construct their involvement as a reciprocal relationship. Marikolanthu admits to, and is content with this asymmetry: “Her fingers slid through my palm. That is all she would do for me. It was I who had sought to give her pleasure and in her pleasure lay my reward” (Nair 261). Sujata ends the liaison when she finds out that Marikolanthu had simultaneously

seduced her husband Sridhar, whose sexual attentions she (Sujata) had claimed as being unwelcome and repulsive. But at the same time, Sujata wants to hold on to her heterosexual privilege, just as she is unwilling to relinquish the distinction conferred by a privileged class and caste position. The class hierarchies instituted by a heteropatriarchal social system positions the two women differentially. This particular narrative in *Ladies Coupe* explores class hierarchy and the absence of a language of desire as hindrances in realizing the potential of same-sex desire. Although written in English, Nair positions the narrator Marikolanthu within a class that has access neither to the language nor to any “Westernized” notion of lesbianism. This class-induced hiatus is widened by the inability and the lack of willingness to “name” the liaison: when Sujata finally spurns Marikolanthu, she indicts her as a false “friend,” using the façade of homosociality to cancel out the erotic desire. Sujata’s language falters as she attempts to name Marikolanthu’s “unnatural” vices: “I know you used black magic to make me your slave...make me do things no woman would...but not any more, it won’t work any more” (Nair 264). Sujata speaks the language of heteronormative ventriloquism, sealing off any possibility of identifying their desire as distinct. The homosociality that Sujata cites to negate her desire is what Marikolanthu had used to establish hers and carve out a space of desire within the oppressive confines of the Chettiyar *kottai*. In *Ladies Coupe*, same-sex relationships cannot ultimately transcend the implied respectability of social institutions. However, Marikolanthu’s attempt to spatially situate transgressive desire *within* the hetero-patriarchal limits of the Chettiyar household not only aligns her narrative with those of the other fellow passengers, but actually makes it more potent. If the other women assert their corporeality by emphasizing their desiring selves,



Marikolanthu pushes the very limits of admissible desire by moving into the territory of transgression.

*Spaces of Desire: Public and Private*

Is the inability to leave the secure space of marriage always an expression of the unwillingness to relinquish heterosexual privilege? I began the chapter with a passage from *A Married Woman* that articulates Astha's visualization of an ideal space of homoerotic desire: a space simultaneously separate from and connected with the domestic. Inured by her sheltered upbringing to conventional ideas about womanhood, Astha unquestioningly accepts the primacy of marriage in defining her identity. Her occasionally disturbed complacency with her marriage continues till she meets, befriends, and finally falls in love with Pipeelika. The title of Manju Kapur's novel gives us a clearer understanding of Astha's perspective, which is largely shaped by her identification with the institution of marriage. The daughter of a middle-class North Indian family, Astha "was brought up properly, as befits a woman, with large supplements of fear" (Kapur 1). The "fear" is an unspoken, implicit but nonetheless very specific gesture towards her vulnerability: "One slip might find her alone, vulnerable and unprotected. The infinite ways in which she could be harmed were not specified, but Astha absorbed them through her skin, and ever after was drawn to the safe and the secure" (Kapur 1). The indefinable element of fear that the linguistic indirections in her parents' exhortations reiterate underscores her essential vulnerability as a sexual object, an object that has been entrusted to their safekeeping till it is taken over by its rightful owner, a husband who is the embodiment of "the safe and secure" that Astha is involuntarily drawn towards. This discourse of woman-as-object and of the commerce of

marriage based on the concept of allegiance-in-exchange-of-economic-and-sexual-safekeeping is premised on normative heterosexuality. The vaguely articulated threats to Astha's "chastity"—both pre- and post-marital—come from imagined *male* sources; the possibility of the sanctity of her marriage being undermined through a lesbian affair is unthinkable even to Astha, who is steeped in the discourse of heteronormativity. Thus, the trope of a married woman in an extramarital relationship is figured differently in the novel: Astha is not haunted— at least not consistently— by the familiar angst because she imagines her marriage to continue alongside her relationship with her lover. To her, her imagined closet within the marital home is not a source of oppression (as her lover sees it) but a space that accommodates and balances her different roles.

The centrality of marriage to Astha's self-definition is a result of parental conditioning: her parents view the different phases of her growing up as events geared towards that one ultimate outcome. Growing up, Astha's sporadic expressions of individuality are tentative at best: half-hearted stabs at writing and relationships which bear testimony to little agency on her part, her self-expression curbed by the unspoken threats to her vulnerability as a woman. She seems to be going through the motions of living a life, her actions informed with an indefinable *ennui* that stems from a subconscious sense of her own lack of agency. An arranged marriage to Hemant, a US-educated professional from a distinguished Delhi family, functions as the rite of passage into adulthood and respectability that Astha had been waiting for:

On the plane to Srinagar, Hemant held Astha's hand, while she looked shyly out of the window at the mountains they were flying over. A deep seed of happiness settled in the pit of her stomach, she was married, she didn't have to be the focus of her parents' anxieties any more. She was now a homemaker in her own right, a grown woman, experiencing her first plane ride (Kapur 37).

Motherhood— especially giving birth to a son— marks for her, temporarily at least, a completion of this process of maturity that leaves her replete with “a gratitude as profound as it was shamed” (Kapur 68). The ambivalence of this response— euphoria tempered with shame— could be read as the beginnings of a possible rupture in Astha’s complacency at being firmly ensconced in the domestic space. It is also the beginning, for Astha, of a subconscious awareness of her cooptation into the patriarchal figuration of home as the rightful domain of the woman and wifedom/motherhood as her proper roles. This differential construction of gendered spaces is a residual practice based on the nineteenth century anti-colonial nationalistic imaginings of ideals of gendered behavior, which mandated home as the spiritual domain designated for the woman. This delimitation came with conditional privileges; according to Partha Chatterjee, the New Woman constructed by the discourse of nationalism had access to the world outside the home and to a form of modernity that was not at odds with the desired traits of femininity projected on to her. We witness this destabilization of the boundaries between the exterior and the interior in Rabindranath Tagore’s *The Home and the World*, a destabilization regulated and controlled by patriarchy and thus serving to confound feminine self-expression. Astha’s positioning between the “home” and the “world” is more an outcome of deeply entrenched cultural practices balanced with practical concerns than of any idealistic figuration of womanhood. Primarily cast in the role of wife and mother, Astha’s involvement with her work (teaching, a profession considered suitably “feminine” by her husband and her in-laws) is tolerated only to the extent in which it does not challenge or come into conflict with her designated role as a

homemaker. In her study based on interviews of middle-class Indian women, sociologist Jyoti Puri concludes:

From a cultural standpoint, marriage and motherhood are considered the primary gender roles for women across social classes. Indeed, motherhood is seen as the essence of womanhood, and marriage, the context within which woman should bear children. To the extent to which statuses are considered normal and essential aspects of adult womanhood, they also serve to limit and regulate women's lives (135).

Like Puri's interviewees, Astha over the course of years becomes aware of marriage and motherhood limiting her to the private sphere of the home, while Hemant continues to define himself through his work and ownership of property (more efficient and successful than Astha's father in both these aspects, Hemant is perceived as more of a *man* by both Astha and her mother).

In a move that juxtaposes the personal with the political, Kapur sets Astha's heightening consciousness of her limits within the framework of unfolding history: her investment in the workshops that the actor-activist Aijaz Khan conducts in her school makes her aware of incidents beyond the immediate microcosm of her home that she can hope to make intervention in some small way. Her growing involvement with Aijaz's progressive work on the Ram-Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid conflict in Ayodhya compels her to see herself in spatial contexts larger than the well-defined limits of her home: first the conflict-torn Ayodha, then the entire nation that is shaken by the concatenation of violent incidents set in motion as a result of the Hindus and Muslims colliding over the legitimate historical claim over Ayodhya.<sup>5</sup> Aijaz's tragic death is an outcome of this

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<sup>5</sup> Ayodhya is a small town in Uttar Pradesh in India, which has been the site of some major Hindu-Muslim conflict in the past few decades. In 1528, a general in the army of the Mughal emperor Babur built a mosque by tearing down a Hindu temple that was constructed on a locus believed to be the birthplace of the mythical Hindu god Rama. Conflicts have marked the site in subsequent decades, with Hindus and Muslims striving for religious primacy over the contested territory. Matters came to a head in December 6, 1992, when a crowd of Hindus demolished the mosque and wide-spread violence ensued as a result, with

violence: in its wake, Astha is recruited as a sympathizer and artist in the anti-communalism activist group (the Sampradayakta Mukti Manch) that is formed to commemorate Aijaz. It is on one of the trips to Ayodhya with this group that she meets Pipeelika Trivedi-Khan, Aijaz's widow who is a sociologist and works for a Delhi NGO. Although her marriage to Aijaz had been— at least outwardly— a secular statement breaking down the Hindu-Muslim divide, Pipee had lost faith in the kind of organized activism that the Sampradayakta Mukti Manch claims to undertake, and it is the isolating element in this disenchantment that draws Astha to her. It seems noteworthy that Astha and Pipee first encounter each other in a public space branded by the wounds of history, and from here on out, public spatial settings become a leitmotif in their relationship. In a critical evaluation of *The Married Woman*, Christopher Rollason analyzes the centrality of the Ayodhya episode to the plot of the novel, undercutting the claim of the “lesbian” plot to primacy. However, he underlines the significance of Kapur's choice of Ayodhya as the meeting place for Astha and Pipee: he argues, without making an explicit connection, that the fluidity of both Astha and Pipee's sexual identities can be compared to the fluid secularism of the pre-conflict Ayodhya: “Both women may be seen as adopting de facto a fluid rather than fixed model of sexual and emotive relations that resist categorization into rigid sexuality-based compartments” (Rollason 6). Rollason also suggests that this transgression of sexual identities is a subversion of rigidified religious identities and the mandates of gendered behavior that they come with. I would like to clarify this spatial connection further: we need to accord primacy to Ayodhya in understanding the Astha-Pipee relationship. I do not completely agree to Rollason's

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riots spreading to Pakistan and Bangladesh. Mumbai witnessed some of the bloodiest Hindu-Muslim riots as a result of the Babri Masjid-Ram Janmabhoomi conflict.

reading of Astha and Pipee's guilt-free subversion of sexual categories: both women display an acute awareness of the roadblocks in an act of subversion such as theirs. However, the image of a secular Ayodhya, which is present as a palimpsest in the conflict-torn space of the modern-day city, may be read as a spatial equivalent for pre-colonial India where sexual categorizations had not rigidified into inflexible categories.

On returning to Delhi their acquaintanceship progresses to a close friendship and then to an intimate physical and emotional relationship. The early phases of their relationship are staged alternately in the privacy of Pipee's apartment and in appointed public meeting places in the urban landscape of Delhi: beyond the first lunch invitation, Astha's home, needless to say, is out of bounds after they become lovers. The consummation of their mutual attraction is an epiphanic revelation for Astha: "Afterwards Astha feels strange, making love to a woman took getting used to. And it also felt strange, making love to a friend instead of an adversary" (Kapur 231). Subsequent encounters between the lovers underscore the distinctiveness of this homoemotive bond, a mirroring of their desires and selves that sets their relationship apart from their marriages. The sensuality that informs their relationship communicates itself through everyday, non-sexual acts of togetherness: "She turned the other's face towards her, took out her pins and stroked her open hair, reaching into the scalp, in a way that reminded Astha of her mother oiling her hair every Sunday when she was young. She closed her eyes and sank against her, feeling as though she were in a warm bath. With Pipee there was no battering against something hard and ununderstanding, she was all warmth and intuition" (Kapur 235). The lines reiterate the mirror images of the lovers by a deliberate play on pronouns before alluding to the names of the lovers. The evocation of the image from Astha's childhood— her mother oiling her

hair— also destabilizes the rigid divide between the erotic and the non-erotic and extends the definition of “erotic,” thereby looking back at Adrienne Rich’s definition of the lesbian continuum, the existence between women of emotional bonds that are not necessarily based on sexual/genital experience. They also recall a similar episode in Deepa Mehta’s *Fire*, where Radha oils Sita’s hair as the two women look at each other in the mirror, the act communicating a bond in which sensuality and emotion are coextensive and that draws the women close to each other. Such acts constitute the “domesticity” that Astha experiences in the privacy of Pipee’s apartment, a haven safe from the demands that marriage and motherhood makes on her. But another kind of demand fractures this imagined idyll: Pipee’s desire to monopolize Astha and sever her from her marriage and family. The space of connectedness that Astha visualizes— one in which her relationship with Pipee can coexist with her marriage and motherhood— seems too convenient to Pipee, who envisions a separate, self-contained space that she can share with Astha. Though capable of raising her voice against Hindu fanaticism (which her husband Hemant tacitly condones) through paintings and protest marches, Astha ultimately remains incapable of transcending her status as a wife and a mother. One wonders whether Pipee— who condemns Astha’s weakness— could be who she is because of her lack of ties. Pipee echoes the Western rhetoric of sexual liberation with the same gusto with which she transforms the facts of communal riots in India into material for doctoral work in North American academia; she is curiously unempathetic towards Astha and the limitations of the space that she occupies. Over time, the Astha-Pipee relationship begins to replicate the patterns of Astha’s marriage, with the “hard and ununderstanding” replacing the “warmth and intuition.”

With the disruption of the short-lived, precarious domesticity that Astha had found with Pipee, the two women increasingly rely on public spaces to be together, not only in theaters and restaurants but in shared journeys. Culturally sanctioned homosociality permits the lovers not only to be seen together in public places, but its perverse logic increasingly makes it their only mode of being together. In a reenactment of their first meeting in Ayodhya, Astha and Pipee make a cross-country railway trip; once again, a journey that is not outwardly personal, but in which the private and the public intersect. Pipee, whose academic and professional interests have shifted over time from underprivileged children to communal unrest in India, is on this trip to cover the details of a national unification journey (Ekta Yatra) undertaken by an unnamed political leader, and she asks Astha to accompany her so that they could be in each other's company, away from the constraints of Astha's Delhi life. The train compartment, moving through the rapidly changing terrain of the country, becomes the site of an exhilarating domesticity-- of shared food and money; of petty jealousies, bickering and unflinching tendresse; of uninterrupted togetherness for weeks—which had been an impossibility in Delhi. Kapur chooses to inscribe the moments of the journey—from the conflicts involved in its planning to the actual phases of the trip— as records in Astha's journal, a formal shift that interiorizes the narrative just as it simultaneously positions the relationship in a public space. This destabilization of the divide between private and public spaces becomes a significant strategy in representing queer space in *A Married Woman*. Like *Ladies Coupe*, the train compartment here becomes a space of transition poised between the public and the private, an eroticized version that does not function as a stage for actual sexual contact (like the train compartment in R. Raj Rao's *The*



*Boyfriend*) but the potential for it. The return to Delhi inevitably breaks up this togetherness; the short stay at Pipee's apartment once again becomes the site of discord as Astha feels the inevitability of her impending return to her marriage and family, and Pipee demands a continued, permanent version of their three-week sojourn: a separate life and a separate space for the two of them to be together. Unable to realize either this space, or the connected space of Astha's imagination, the women finally part ways: Astha returns to her life as a "married woman" and Pipee decides to go to an American university for graduate studies. For Astha, America becomes a remote geographical locus that threatens the slowly eroding possibility of an imagined space of connection with Pipee. Not that it remains remote for very long: Hemant takes the family on a trip to Florida, and the crass consumerism that defines it burns itself on Astha's mind: "On and on marched the holiday, relentless, inexorable, eating up money, energy, rolls of film, pushing them to cheap eating places, and suitcases that grew heavier by the day" (277). America for her is the very spatial antithesis of the mobile space of intimacy that she had shared with Pipee and Ayodhya seen through a lens of idealism; it also becomes the place where she sexually reconnects with Hemant and realizes the inexorability of her situation. She tries to impress upon Pipee the inherent hostility of this locus ("You won't like abroad"), but she feels the distance between them growing nonetheless. Upon Pipee's departure, Astha sinks into stupor; desensitized to the immediate surroundings of her home, she feels "stretched thin, thin across the globe" (307). The spatial metaphor in the very last sentence of the novel reinforces the rupture in the relationship through an image of desired connectedness.

In *The Married Woman*, the first indication of the rupture in Pipee and Astha's relationship begins, ironically, in a public setting too: at a screening of a gay and lesbian film festival in a Delhi community center. Pipee expresses the wish to see the films with Astha: she feels that the films have, for the two of them, a "special significance" (235). The rendezvous proves to be more challenging for Astha than their usual ones, primarily because the event is scheduled on a weekend and she has to balance it with the numerous demands that her family makes on her. Delayed and disgruntled, Astha finally reaches the venue of the screening to join Pipee. But the much-anticipated films are for her simultaneously a disappointment and an enigma:

She sank down next to her, feeling exhausted after her battle with Hemant, looking with cursory interest at the screen, registering indifferently the men and women, speaking broad American about the discrimination they faced as gays. In between some social scientist gave his opinion, in between that there were clips of marches and demonstrations. Astha looked at the faces on the screen. All of them were open, none of them living a life of lies (Kapur 237).

Watching the films renews her awareness of the shame in her "life of lies," but she cannot connect, on an ideological or personal level, with the openness that characterizes the demands for an end of discrimination on the screen. Much of what she sees represents for her an alien existence, of a community socially marginalized but equipped with a language that can verbalize that marginalization and seek redress. This language of protest makes sense to Pipee ("We have to struggle for acceptance and right to love as we feel"), but Astha persists in her disconnection: "Her own situation was different, though if Pipee didn't think so she would keep the information to herself" (Kapur 237). This secrecy, that drives a wedge in their relationship, is an outcome as much of Astha's inability to connect with situations in the films as of Pipee's inability/reluctance to empathize with hers. Halfway through the screening, Astha leaves to attend to a minor

family crisis: a math test preparation for her daughter Anuradha who is falling apart with anxiety. The episode constitutes, in my reading, a key moment not only in this text but a framework to understand the nature of queer agency in all three texts that I am reading in this chapter. In pointing our attention to Astha's skepticism about appropriating the vocabulary of protest without being sensitive to situational specificities, Kapur opens up a bigger debate: can one take an ahistorical approach to the politics of the closet, with an unquestioning valorization of the coming-out narrative? Can the language of queer self-identification—again, appropriated from a different context—confer agency on the invisible “lesbian” in India? Does this assumption not support a monolithic understanding of the concept of agency?

The identity politics of lesbianism in India is a fraught question. The “lesbian” invisibility in India that I am analyzing in this project is predicated on, among other factors, the absence of a vernacular equivalent of the word “lesbian.” Ruth Vanita, in her introduction to a collection of essays on the expression of alternative sexualities in India, points out this inadequacy and connects it with a historical moment of colonial intervention. Vanita argues that although words describing same-sex desire between women were present in pre-colonial Indian texts (she cites, as examples, the words *dogana* and *zanakhi* found in erotic Urdu poetry of the *rekhti* genre that celebrates female-to-female sexual relations), their absence is conspicuous in colonial and postcolonial discourses. Vanita identifies the nineteenth century as “the crucial period of transition when a minor strand of pre-colonial homophobia became the dominant voice in colonial and postcolonial mainstream discourse” (3). Vanita identifies the colonization of India as a definitive point of disruption as far as the visibility of alternative sexualities is

concerned, and this seems reasonable when we take into account the Victorian condemnation of “unnatural” sexual practices implicit in the colonial discourse. The anti-colonial nationalists, in their attempt to construct the notion of “tradition” purged of degeneracy, further suppressed same sex desire. This suppression, I argue, is gendered: while the rhetoric of homophobia in post-independence India has lacunae that allow a vernacular vocabulary of gay male self-definition, any such mode of self-expression is unavailable to women loving women. It is interesting to see that Vanita does not address this gender bias in her essay. Maintaining her focus on the issue of language, Vanita elaborates on the impasse that has been created by the colonial suppression of vernacular Indian words defining same-sex love and the objections raised by present-day scholars to Western terminology as being historically inaccurate and anachronistic. Such an impasse, I suggest, has further obliterated lesbian subjectivity. Vanita does not explicitly suggest a solution to this problem, but her position in this debate is borne out by the title of her anthology (“Queer”-ing India); it indicates the need for postcolonial India to make its alternative sexualities visible by using the language of power and resistance.

I do not completely agree with this implication: language, like visibility, cannot always be empowering, nor can invisibility be unquestioningly equated with erasure. In the texts that I read in this chapter, the queer subjects may not “come out” and reclaim a lost territory, but choose invisibility that finally translates, albeit in some limited way, into agency—in so far as it ensures continued survival. The question of agency in the case of these narratives is a complicated one. Agency is a conflicted term as such; its connotations change according to the situation in which it is used. In “The Quilt”, for example, the strategy of camouflaging queer desire ultimately becomes a mode of

survival, as does maintaining the zenana as an undetectable space of subversion within the heart of a heterosexual household. In *Ladies Coupe* and *A Married Woman*, women appear to be co-opted by the patriarchal discourse of marriage, motherhood and sexuality, but find indirect ways of subverting these discourses— ways which do not involve direct engagement with or resistance of hegemonic heteronormativity. However, it would be simplistic to look for a direct form of resistance in every situation: consent to patriarchal norms does not necessarily mean a lack of resistance. The kind of resistance that we encounter in these texts could be understood in terms of Kumkum Sangari's theorization of 'indirect agency':

Indirect agency, as I see it, also comprises of agency as it is ascribed to, conferred upon, and delegated to women within patriarchal structures, characteristically functions through 'feminized' agential modes such as convolution, disguise, displacement, deflection, surrogacy, and signals some degree of consent to the patriarchies (Sangari 366).

In her essay "Consent, Agency and the Rhetoric of Incitement," Sangari cautions against understanding agency only in terms of direct, organized political resistance without a corresponding understanding of the contextual specificities. Consent to patriarchy serves as an indirect mode of subversion in both Nair's and Kapur's novels: Marikolanthu's submission to the Chettiyar's sexual advances is her way of protecting and maintaining her relationship with Sujatha, and Astha's seeming submission to the mandates of marriage is a way to minimize conflict that she anticipates, a strategy that she admits to: "I shouldn't seem to want justice, it will create endless arguments, I must seem to want his compassion, his magnanimity. He is doing me a favour, but I must also be firm, he is not going to be compassionate and magnanimous if he has a choice" (248). This challenges a conventional understanding of the non-Western queer female subject: she is not the one without choices, instead, she knows how to limit the choices of patriarchy by

a show of consent to it. The three texts that I examine in the chapter represent queer subjects resorting to modes of indirect agency in establishing queer space, the kind of indirection that involves a degree of consent to patriarchy, consent that is used in challenging its ideological bases.

## AFTERWORD

The Underground is where you belong,  
 while the city buzzes overhead,  
 ghost-shit on your tongue.  
 You undress underground  
 and find your Garden of Eden,  
 Eden Gardens abounding in Adams and serpents:  
 Raju, 19, office boy at Bora Bazaar  
 Gulab, 22, waiter at Satkar  
 Pandu, 50, coolie at VT.                      R. Raj Rao, "Underground"

Rao's poetry anticipates the sub-terrain of queer culture that we encounter in *The Boyfriend* (2002): the erotic underground of paradoxes where ghostliness and corporeality overlap, where it is hard to tell Adams and serpents apart, a seemingly utopic space ("Garden of Eden") that is yet ruptured by reminders of age and class.<sup>1</sup> The identities of the subterranean Adams/serpents continue to be shaped by affiliations with actual "visible" spaces in the city that is situated "overhead." The differential locations of the imagined "underground" and the "city" reinforce the spatial split of the two loci, which are still inexorably connected. The duality of identities and the implied tension of terrain vs. sub-terrain further destabilize the possibility of a coherent, reclaimed space. Alterity produced through the intrusion of the scarcely forgotten realness of the city overhead fractures the potential of a sense of community. In short, "Underground" is a poetic statement that sums up the inherent paradox of queer existence in postcolonial India. In 1996, five years before *The Boyfriend* was published, Riyadh Vinci Wadia directed a short film called *BomGay*, a collection of six brief episodes/vignettes based on

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<sup>1</sup>First published in *Bombay Dost*, India's first LGBT publication. Re-published in *Yaraana: Gay Writing from India* (1999), a short anthology edited by Hoshang Merchant. The place names in the poem refer to actual physical locations: Bora Bazaar Street is a street in Mumbai, Satkar (meaning "hospitality") is a generic name for an Indian restaurant, and VT is Victoria Terminus, a historic railway station in Mumbai that is now known as Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus.

the poems of Rao, described by the producers as “part Genet, part Bollywood”.<sup>2</sup> The film underscores the same paradoxical logic of the queer subculture in modern Bombay by a perceptible accent on space. Besides real spaces of cruising located in Mumbai, the film also represents imagined/surreal spaces of desire, the most notable of which is a nude library which alternates as a cruising spot. The instability of this locus is reinforced by its shifting, dreamlike quality: scenes of explicit sexual encounters metamorphose, without warning, into a humdrum spectacle of fully-clothed readers sauntering among the books. The excessive space of the nude library, where impossibly endowed males eat egg yolks off each others’ nipples, is surreal and unstable and fades out into reality<sup>3</sup>. I read this duality as an apt cinematic (or literary, in the case of Rao) metaphor for the contested site that the queer subject occupies in postcolonial South Asia, where the desire for visible community and space of belonging is limited by social, legal and cultural perception of same-sex desire. Queer subcultures certainly exist, especially in urban loci, but they are defined by an inherent paranoia of detection, a sensibility that is underscored by the Adam/serpent image in Rao’s poem. This paranoia resurfaces in a comparable scene in *The Boyfriend*, where Yudi, upon walking into a public restroom in a Mumbai railway station, is eyed with suspicion by the men engaging in sexual activities: “A man was blowing another to an audience of two. As soon as Yudi stepped in, everyone straightened up and returned to their respective stalls. They wanted to determine whether

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<sup>2</sup> This combination of Genet’s filmic fantasy in *Un Chant d’Amour* and the stylized romances of Bollywood also emphasizes the essential hybridity of queer self-expression in South Asia, where identities are shaped by multiple artistic and cultural influences. *BomGay* might also have been inspired by Todd Haynes’s *Poison* (1991), a film partially inspired by Genet’s work.

<sup>3</sup> In my third chapter, I analyze R. Raj Rao’s use of spaces of excess, spaces that are exaggerated, campy or illusory in nature. This defamiliarization of the spaces makes them stand out in stark contrast with everyday spaces of reality.



he was a cat or a pigeon. Yudi gave them the Indian nod to indicate it was okay; he was a pigeon. Activity resumed instantly, with Yudi joining in as the audience” (Rao 3). Anticipation of surveillance transforms the nature of queer space here: with camouflage as a mode of survival, the erotic dynamic of the space changes in a matter of seconds. Not only is the queer *flaneur* Protean in his shifting identities, but the spaces of homoerotic desire are capable of assuming multiple identities that befuddle the outside observer and the ever-present panopticon. This camouflage, I argue, is the key to understanding the representation of queer spaces in the texts that I read in my dissertation. Simultaneously a literary/artistic strategy and a political statement, queer space in camouflage challenges the uniformly celebratory accent of the coming-out narrative and its insistence on a coherent, identifiable (that is, distinct from the spatial configuration of the metaphorical closet) reclaimed territory. The texts that I analyze not only use camouflage and connectedness (with heterosexually configured spaces) as strategies of survival, but also to demonstrate the limits on configuring queer space as a distinct territory. Queer space, in these texts, is portrayed as being contiguous to spaces of heteronormativity: Tagore, in his short stories, situates it within the hetero-patriarchal household by redefining masculinity in this framework, Rao represents it as a locus that is indistinguishable, at times, from “mainstream” spaces, with the figure of the *flaneur* suturing the loci together.

Spatial camouflage functions similarly but is constituted differently in the texts representing female homoerotics. The primary characteristic of the spaces of female same-sex desire that I analyze in my dissertation is, again, the element of unidentifiability. The eroticized spaces merge into visible everyday spaces, primarily because homosocial

practices obscure their identity. Deepa Mehta's *Fire* is not a text that I examine in this project, but it undeniably works as one of *ur*-texts of this genre. In the film, the spaces where actual erotic encounters are staged remain largely unseen— or at best partially visible— due to strategic use of light and darkness. However, every act of homosocial intimacy that defines the lives of the lovers becomes loaded with sexual meaning: massaging each other's hair with oil, feeding each other sweets, slipping bangles onto the lover's wrist.<sup>4</sup> The obvious sensuality of these acts are lost on the other members of the family (Ashok is naively gratified by these outward signs of the women in his family “getting along”), while the audience is privy to the fact of desire being encoded in these gestures. These apparently innocuous acts enable transgressive desire to spill beyond its space of concealment and (re)claim public space. In an open-air family outing, Sita offers to massage Radha's feet while the family relaxes post-lunch: now their audience consists of not just the immediate family members but onlookers ambling by. Yet, this act of deep intimacy and connection does not violate the mandate of appropriate comportment in public space.<sup>5</sup> This is the kind of queer spatial reclamation, I argue, that we encounter in “Lihaaf,” *Ladies Coupe* and *A Married Woman*: homosociality allows desire to exist within the space of a heterosexually structured household. In Kapur's novel, Astha and Pipee make a similar use of public space. Public space, in the novel, becomes the alternative both to the heterosexual home and the “impossible” idea of a stable,

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<sup>4</sup> Radha and Sita, the lovers in Mehta's film, are sisters-in-law: married to brothers Ashok and Jatin and living in the same joint domestic set-up. Their intimate relationship is partially an outcome of their loveless marriages, with Ashok absorbed in religious activities and Jatin still pursuing his liaison with Julie, the woman he was with before he married Sita. The traditional family home becomes the site that unknowingly conceals “inadmissible” desire.

<sup>5</sup> The other public space that Radha and Sita “reclaim” is the shrine of the Sufi saint Nizamuddin Auliya. The shrine functions for them as a site of freedom in opposition to the oppressive domestic space, and becomes the chosen location for their final rendezvous when their relationship is “exposed” to the family.

autonomous, private space of homoerotic desire. Erotic (but non-sexual) intimacies transform the signification of public space in Kapur's novel; the non-erotic intimacy of shared confessions privatizes public space in Nair's.

None of the texts that I examine in my project envisions a utopic space of same-sex desire—and I argue that the refusal to do so underscores the writers' sensitivity to the postcolonial legacy of the literary tradition. In Nisha Ganatra's *Chutney Popcorn*, the desire for the queer utopia is ultimately redefined in terms of its connectedness with heterosexual spatiality. This does not signify a cooptation of queer desire by hetero-patriarchal ideology, but rather a transformation of mainstream spaces—either through the existence of unmapped loci of homoerotic desire within them, or through a resignification of public space by using it for homoerotic intimacy. The texts do not propose a glib “solution” to the marginalization of queer communities in India, but by highlighting the liminality of the queer subject make visible the fact of this marginalization. But the representation of queer space, in all its ambivalence, is ultimately positive because it embodies a strategy of survival within and subversion of normative hetero-patriarchal values. The texts also accomplish the important task of challenging the tradition of homophobia that had characterized literary tradition in India in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the preface to the compilation of “Modern Indian Material” in their work on homoeroticism in India, Ruth Vanita and Salim Kidwai identify this literary tendency as a direct outcome of the colonial vilification of the expressions of erotic desires in the Indian society.<sup>6</sup> Beginning with the heterosexualization of the Ghazal, homophobia, as Vanita and Kidwai point out,

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<sup>6</sup> In *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History*, Vanitha and Kidwai compile “queer” literary and artistic material from ancient, medieval and modern India, and through them trace the changes in the cultural reception of homoeroticism over time.

construct the queer subject as abnormal and demonic.<sup>7</sup> Vanita and Kidwai trace the continuation of this trend in modern-day, popular cultural texts in India, including Shobha De's *Strange Obsessions* (1992).<sup>8</sup> Neither celebratory nor judgmental in their tone, the texts I examine emphasize the reality of queer marginality. The restraint on an excessive valorization of queer separatism is, I believe, the expression of ambivalence about its realization.

The texts also emphasize the deep-rooted ambivalence about the visibility of queer spaces, an aspect that makes them essentially postcolonial. In an article on postcolonial and queer historiography, Howard Hseuh-Hao Chiang compares the trajectories of the two disciplines, and he points out the pitfalls inherent in the ellipsis of cultural specificities in either endeavor and problems with constructing either “postcolonial” or “queer” as transhistorical categories. He also cautions against the overly optimistic projects of giving “voice” to the marginalized that are the subject of these histories; he claims that:

...rather than characterizing the often disenfranchised historical subjects—such as of the subaltern group, of the queer community, or of the third world— as subjects whose “invisible” voices of the past need to be recuperated, it is more useful to think of them as comprising shifting historical positions under which their historical representations thus function as emerging sites of contest and possibility (Chiang 2).

I believe what Chiang prescribes—or suggests—as the parameters of useful and effective historiography, the texts that I examine in my dissertation achieve in terms of literary strategy. The ambivalence that shapes the representation of queer space in these texts is

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<sup>7</sup> Ghazal is a form of Urdu poetry that was once known to celebrate love between men, was later heterosexualized in response to the homophobia inherent in colonial perception of indigenous art forms.

<sup>8</sup> A novel of sensation, which portrays the Indian lesbian as abnormal, monstrous and predatory, modeled on fictional and cinematic psychopaths who stalk and attempt to kill the protagonists.

evidence of an awareness of the changing perception of same-sex desire over time in a specific postcolonial locus, transcending the problem constructing the queer subject as an ahistorical entity. The same ambivalence, I argue, is also the expression of the unwillingness to “make visible” the sexual minority, whose agency, in this particular case, lies in invisibility.

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