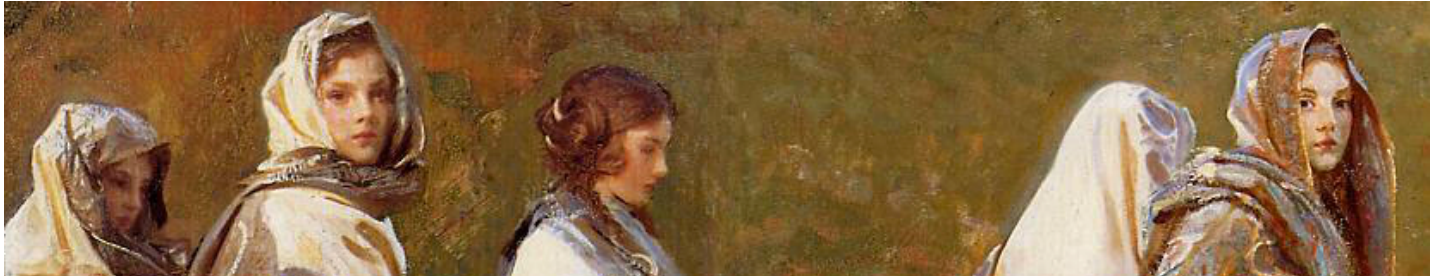


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About

Gender forum is an online, peer reviewed academic journal dedicated to the discussion of gender issues. As an electronic journal, *gender forum* offers a free-of-charge platform for the discussion of gender-related topics in the fields of literary and cultural production, media and the arts as well as politics, the natural sciences, medicine, the law, religion and philosophy. Inaugurated by Prof. Dr. Beate Neumeier in 2002, the quarterly issues of the journal have focused on a multitude of questions from different theoretical perspectives of feminist criticism, queer theory, and masculinity studies. *gender forum* also includes reviews and occasionally interviews, fictional pieces and poetry with a gender studies angle.

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Target articles should conform to current MLA Style (8th edition) and should be between 5,000 and 8,000 words in length. Please make sure to number your paragraphs and include a bio-blurb and an abstract of roughly 300 words. Files should be sent as email attachments in Word format. Please send your manuscripts to gender-forum@uni-koeln.de.

We always welcome reviews on recent releases in Gender Studies! Submitted reviews should conform to current MLA Style (8th edition), have numbered paragraphs, and should be between 750 and 1,000 words in length. Please note that the reviewed releases ought to be no older than 24 months. In most cases, we are able to secure a review copy for contributors.

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Editorial

1 **Mediating Gender** is the second issue of the new electronic journal **gender forum**. The articles and reviews in this issue highlight the interacting and diversifying fields of interest and theoretical approaches within gender and cultural studies. Professor Bharucha's essay "Of Devis, Devdaasis and Daayins: The Image of Women in Postcolonial Indian Cinema" presents a feminist analysis of women's representation in postcolonial Indian cinema. Here, the categories of *Devi* (the goddess), *Devdaasi* (the fallen woman) and *Daayin* (the witch) are the prevailing female screen types indicating male dominated Indian society's attempts to defy the threat of female authority by continuous labeling and stereotypification.

2 Prof. Berressem's contribution, "Matter that Bodies. Philosophy in the Age of a Complex Materialism," takes issue with the poststructuralist logic of the "always already" inherent in much contemporary feminist thought, most prominently in the theories of Judith Butler. With examples from film and the media, the article argues for a breaking up of the discourse of representation by reconceptualising the body as machine in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's sense and shows how this results in the necessity to rethink the notions of discursivity, the body, and gender.

3 Finally, Dirk Schulz, in his essay, "Where Do We Go From Queer? The Question of Naturalness and Normality in Contemporary Literature, Film, and the Media" looks at various portrayals of non-straight relationships and characters in different contemporary cultural representations. He argues that these always have to be clearly marked as lesbian or gay against the backdrop of a non-representational straight body within the heteronormative matrix (cf. Judith Butler).

4 The fiction section of this issue contains an excerpt from Atima Srivastava's acclaimed novel *Looking for Maya* (1999).

Matter that Bodies. Philosophy in the Age of a Complex Materialism

By Hanjo Berressem, University of Cologne

Abstract:

If there is one formula that has characterized most of poststructuralism|cultural studies it has been the formula 'always already.' Its Freudian logic [Nachträglichkeit] has been a favourite of writers as diverse as Lacan, Derrida, Baudrillard, Butler or Bhabha. Often unspoken, but therefore all the more powerful, has been the qualification 'text|discourse|culture. Most branches of gender studies, especially those that operate at the interface between poststructuralism and cultural studies, have embraced this logic, which has caused many crucial insights into the logic of cultural productions and positionings. In the last years, however, a number of scholars, many coming from within gender studies themselves, have noted a certain blindness in and of this logic.

There are three ways to read this essay: The 'play' version [111 kb] provides the complete text of the essay, including digressions and detailed discussions.

<http://www.genderforum.org/fileadmin/archiv/genderforum/mediating/btm/btm.html>

The 'fastforward' version [60 kb] provides the text without these digressions and detailed discussions. The 'search' version [117 kb] provides the complete text with the option of jumping over the digressions and detailed discussions. All texts contain intratextual links and a set of randomised blinks.

Of Devis, Devdaasis and Daayins: The Image of Women in Postcolonial Indian Cinema

By Nilufer E. Bharucha, Mumbai University

Abstract:

This paper will attempt to analyse the different images of women in Indian (Hindi) cinema from a broadly feminist perspective - 'broadly feminist' as there is no real feminist cinema theory in India. Nor is there a Feminist cinema. There are a few stray women film makers but they do not necessarily make feminist or even women oriented films. So at the best what may be essayed is a feminist viewing method.

Introduction

1 Cinema in India is a very powerful medium and influences image formation in the minds of the viewers. Although films are made in many Indian languages, it is films made in Hindi that have, for reasons historical and commercial, appropriated the label of 'Indian' cinema.

2 Although there is some alternative or art cinema in Hindi and most other Indian languages, it is marginal and commercially unviable. Hence the majority of films produced in India are mainstream and belong to the *masala* ('spicy'/commercial) genre. These films therefore generally reflect conservative social views. This is also true in the case of the image of women. Indian cinema has usually misrepresented women and imaged them in stereotypical terms of binary oppositions - the *devis* and the *devdaasis*. Additionally there are also the *daayins*.

3 In the *devi* - the goddess - category are the revered mothers, the demure sisters, the romanticized girlfriends and the devoted wives. In the *Devdaasi* - the fallen woman - group are the sensuous vamps, the courtesans and the common prostitutes. *Daayin* literally means a witch. Labeling wise, powerful women witches is a trait the male dominated Indian society shares with other societies where such women are/were feared too. More generally such a term could also be applied to any transgressive woman who flouts male dictated societal norms and charts her own trajectories, both personal and public. Almost inevitably she has to suffer for this independence and is penalized by society.

4 Among these stereotypes and demonisations, the 'real' Indian woman is often lost or ignored. However, some Indian films have sought to present a more realistic view of the Indian woman. Some of these films have actually represented women in a radical mode and even explored the question of female sexuality and lesbianism.

5 This paper will attempt to analyse the different images of women in Indian (Hindi) cinema from a broadly feminist perspective - 'broadly feminist' as there is no real feminist cinema theory in India. Nor is there a Feminist cinema. There are a few stray women film makers but they do not necessarily make feminist or even women oriented films. So at the best what may be essayed is a feminist viewing method.

6 Indian cinema has a long history that goes back to the late Nineteenth Century and the first feature film made in India was *Raja Harishchandra* by Dada Saheb Phalke in 1913. However, the focus of this paper is Postcolonial Indian cinema from the 1950s to the end of the 1990s. India became a free nation in the year 1947 and became a republic with the adoption of a constitution in 1950. The first general elections were held in 1952. Hence the 50's decade became the definitive years for the marking out of the parameters of Postcolonial Indian cinema. These were the years when the major film-makers of independent India first began to make films - Raj Kapoor, Bimal Roy, Guru Dutt and Satyajit Ray.

7 These were also the years in which the newly independent nation was seeking to image itself in its own mould rather than in the Orientalist mode of the West. These were then also the years of the imaging of the nation. During the Nationalist period the nation had already been imaged as a mother-goddess - the benevolent Durga, as well as the militant Shakti. These are some of the manifestations of the Indian god of destruction, Shiva's spouse, Paravati.

I

8 The mythification of the nation was given an enduring iconic image in the 1957 film *Mother India* (Producer and Director: Mehboob Khan) . This film also confirmed the nation-mother pairing. Made in the aftermath of the bloody partitioning of colonial India into India and Pakistan along Hindu and Muslim lines - a binary opposition rejected by Indian nationalists - this film also reasserted the essentially secular nature of Indian cinema. The director and producer of this film Mehboob Khan was a Muslim, as were the script and dialogue writers. Even more importantly the titular heroine - Mother India - herself was a Muslim. Nargis was then at the end of her career as a romantic star and *Mother India* gave her the opportunity of proving herself as an actress. This film, however, not only enabled Nargis to prove her histrionic talents but also gave her a husband in the form of the debutant actor Sunil Dutt - a Hindu - who played her younger son in the film. This added an intriguing angle of 'incest' to the intense relationship between the on-screen mother and son. A fact that was not lost on the audience and provided a certain 'frisson' that added to the tremendous box-

office success of this film.

9 ***Mother India*** is the story of Radha, who is first presented to the audience as a very old woman and the entire film then folds back in a long flashback. This film had impressed the new-born Indian nation across the body of Radha. She is an intriguing metaphor for a Gandhian-Nehruvian India. Gandhi, the London trained barrister, had envisioned an India that lived in her villages and looked suspiciously upon modern technology. Nehru, who had a science degree from the University of Cambridge, on the other hand, nurtured dreams of a technologically advanced India. For Nehru the temples of Modern India were her new dams and hydro-electric projects that would irrigate the water parched Indian earth and feed her hungry millions.

10 ***Mother India*** opens with the titles superimposed against the background of tractors and dams. Nehru's dream of dams that took water to India's villages is about to come true and it is Radha who is persuaded by the villagers to pull the switch that turns the water on. The reluctant woman does this and then muses upon the long journey she and her village had undertaken to reach that state of technological advancement and imminent self-sufficiency.

11 Radha had come to the village as a breathtakingly beautiful young bride. Her smitten husband had flouted conservative norms to openly woo his wife. Radha proved to be an ideal wife in the mould of the mythical goddess Sita, the wife of the Hindu god Rama. She had none of the coquettish qualities of the beloved Radha, of the other Hindu god Krishna - a later incarnation of Vishnu. Radha's stint as a young beloved ended very quickly as she gave birth in quick succession to two sons and a daughter. Famine stalked the village as the rains failed and Radha's husband who was already indebted to the usurious village money-lender gets deeper and deeper into debt. This rural indebtedness and the resultant bonded labour was portrayed by many Indian film makers of early postcolonial India, including Bimal Roy in his internationally acclaimed ***Do Bheega Zamin*** (*Two Acres of Land*, 1953). To pay off the moneylender, Radha and her husband take on the task of clearing a fallow piece of land that belonged to the family. It is from this point in the film that Radha properly begins to metamorphose into a Brechtian Mother Courage type of figure. In the Indian context she ceases to be the docile Sita - the spouse of Ram, a manifestation of the Hindu god Vishnu - and takes on the indomitable qualities of the Hindu god of destruction, Shiva's, spouse Durga.

12 Since the family's bullocks have already been impounded by the money-lender, She yokes herself to the plough with her husband as they try to break the rocky soil of the fallow field. The film maker, Mehboob Khan, has here deliberately created iconic images linking Radha to the soil, as an earth goddess. This image is then repeated at important points in the

film. The clearing of the field ends in tragedy and the husband loses both his arms when a huge boulder they were trying to shift, falls on him.

13 The woes of Radha are now increased and she has to look after a helpless husband and tend the fields. As she grows in strength and stature, though still beautiful, she is increasingly imaged in desexed mother terms. As Shoma Chatterji has put it, when a woman is at the center of the narrative she is generally desexed.¹ As a mother she has power but this is at the cost of her femininity. In fact, being a mother is not really a position of power in Indian society, it is instead used to debar a woman from responsibility in the public sphere. The ideology of motherhood justifies a woman's existence only in the context of her producing children and that too of the male gender.

14 As Radha tries to survive and feed her children, the money lender, now that her husband has disappeared, tries to lure her into his arms with promises of waiving her debts. Radha the still upright wife is enraged and in an almost melodramatic scene, covered with mud from the flooding river, upbraids the lecherous man. Here once more Radha is the earth goddess figure and also the avenging Kali, the more dangerous incarnation of Durga.

15 In scenes of epic endeavour Radha stops the villagers from leaving the flood-devastated village. She urges them not to abandon the mother earth, thereby herself becomes associated in their minds with it. Under her care the earth now flourishes and she raises her sons to manhood - the daughter having died in the floods. Now the narrative takes an interesting twist and Radha is called upon to make one more sacrifice for the greater good. Her elder son is an epitome of the new educated, Indian youth but the younger one is a rebel. Birju, rejects education and refuses to meld into the new India where the old injustices of rural indebtedness continued unabated. The money lender is still the serpent in the postcolonial Eden of India. Birju is also unabashedly cast in the mould of the god Krishna - yet another manifestation of Vishnu - who was the love object of thousands of *gopikas*, milkmaids. Birju is also fiercely protective of his mother and the off-screen romance of the mother-son pair added, as mentioned earlier, a further edge to their on-screen portrayal.

16 Notwithstanding her intense love for Birju, Radha, in her image as Mother of the village, cannot stand by and see her son kidnap and ravish a village girl. In a frenzied rage she shoots him down thereby once again displaying great courage and Kali-like qualities.

17 This iconic image of Mother India created by Mehboob Khan and brought to life by Nargis has continued to haunt the Devi-obsessed film makers of later decades and countless

¹ Shoma Chatterji. *Subject: Cinema, Object: Woman, The Study of the Portrayal of Women in Indian Cinema*. Parumita Publications, Calcutta, 1998.

Indian actresses have essayed the roles of ideal, inspirational mothers. Such films have generally been lapped up by the patriarchal Indian society that salves its conscience on the count of gender injustice by deifying its mothers and sisters.

18 Two of the other more remarkable and successful larger-than-life Mother roles were played by the superstar of the 1970s Sharmila Tagore and the character artiste Nirupa Roy in the 1980s in *Aradhana* (*The Prayer*, 1970), and *Deewar* (*The Wall*, 1975) respectively. When *Aradhana* was made in 1970, Sharmila Tagore was already a star but her male lead, Rajesh Khanna, had still to become the Super star that he did after this film.

19 Tagore played the role of Vandana in *Aradhana* from the time she was the beautiful young sweetheart of an air force officer, to the time she became an old woman, the mother of a son who also becomes an air force pilot. Her saga is one of courage and sacrifice but she does not have the iconic, historical and political dimensions of a Radha. History is not written across her body. She is objectified and her iconisation in the later half of the film is at the level of the personal and not the political.

20 The mother in *Deewar* is a more political figure. This 1975 film starred the Superstar of the 1980s Amitabh Bachhan. But Nirupa Roy as the mother had a very powerful, pivotal role. This film was made when Mrs. Indira Gandhi the then Prime Minister of India had declared a state of internal Emergency and suspended the Indian Constitution and the Fundamental Rights of all Indian citizens. Mrs. Gandhi was at that time being imaged in iconic terms as Mother India and the all-powerful Goddess Durga, by the media and even artists and writers.

21 Nirupa Roy is the archetypal Mother, Sumitra Devi, in this film. Like Radha in *Mother India*, she is left alone by an absconding husband to raise her two sons. Like the sons in that earlier film, Ravi (played by Shashi Kapoor) and Vijay (played by Amitabh Bachhan) are two sides of the dark and light opposition. Sumitra loves Vijay more than she loves Ravi but in her social role as the upholder of values she gives up the beloved son. Vijay becomes an underworld don and Ravi a police officer. Like *Mother India*, *Deewar* too is narrated in a flashback and is framed by the award-ceremony at which Ravi is decorated for bringing the criminal Vijay to justice. It was Sumitra who had encouraged Ravi to hunt down Vijay. Having done this, however, she had resumed the role of the loving mother and gone to keep her rendezvous with her erring son at a temple. It is there that a wounded Vijay finally died in his mother's lap. M.Madhava Prasad has observed that '*Deewar* dramatizes the relations between the contractual, law-abiding society and its subterranean, criminal obverse, through a masochistic scenario in which the hero's movement towards death becomes a fantasy

resolution of the impossible desire for reunion with the mother's body'.²

22 While the mother figure predominates in the *Devi* stakes in the Indian cinema, other *Devi*-figures such as the demure sister and the dutiful wife also find ample representation. The Indian actresses most intimately associated with the sister figure were the actresses Nanda in the 1950s, Naaz and Farida Jalal in the 1960-70s. With the advent of action-packed films in the 1980s with anti-heroes, the sister figure has gone into an eclipse. But Nanda is still linked in the popular imagination with her titular role of *Choti Bahen* (*The Younger Sister*) a mid-fifties film in which she had played the sister who is doted upon by the brother. Though the films of the later decades did not iconise the sister a 'rakhi-song'³ was almost de rigueur in most films of this period. If Nanda epitomized Indian sisters, the wives were most ably imaged by Meena Kumari and Nutan.

23 As the dutiful wife these women silently bore the injustices and infidelities of their husbands and emerged in patriarchal eyes as ideal wives. In *Sahib, Bibi aur Ghulam* (*Master, Mistress and Slave*) produced in 1962, Meena Kumari played the role of the *Choti Bahu*, the younger daughter-in-law, of a feudal family in Bengal. Her debauched husband ignores her and spends most of his time at the house of a prostitute. To win him back she employs the most extreme ploys and even agrees to drink alcohol with him - taboo to the traditional Hindu woman. Soon she becomes an alcoholic and her husband turns away from her in horror and disgust - a classic case of double standards. Ultimately she commits suicide.

24 Nutan was the other archetypal wife who suffered the most unimaginable horrors but did not utter a word against her husband - her lord. A versatile actor who had in the 1950s portrayed more realistic women, Nutan in the 1970s and 80s did a series of almost reactionary films such as *Devi* (1970) which were big hits with the audience. The men applauding the ideal wife and women empathizing with the suffering of the celluloid *devi*.

II

25 The power of cinema to create images that hold audiences in thrall is even more evident in the case of the stereotype of the *devdaasi* - the woman dedicated to the service of the lord. In earlier times these women had a certain status in Indian society and were

² M. Madhava Prasad. *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction*. Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1998.

³ A *rakhi* is a symbolic silken thread tied by sisters on the right wrists of their real or adopted brothers. Through this gesture the sister seeks the 'protection' of the brother, who by letting her tie the *rakhi* on his hand promises to protect her. This protection continues even after the sisters have been married and leave their parental homes. In a social system where a woman used to have no legal rights to the property of either her father or her husband, this was a good method of providing some degree of security to the woman.

dedicated to the temples where they performed dances in honour of the presiding deity. They thus became the custodians of the societal heritage of dance and music. Today however their position has degenerated and they are no more than glorified prostitutes who live shadowy lives in the courtyards of the big temples - at the beck and call of powerful head priests and secular patrons of the temple.

26 The Indian cinema has been fascinated by the figure of the *devdaasi* - used as an umbrella term for all kinds of courtesans and prostitutes - from its early years. This is possibly because as Maithili Rao has put it, the film maker has total control over the body of such a woman. He can even more easily eroticise her and reduce her to a passive sex object than he can the other categories: 'The space in which [such a woman] is filmed, the way her body is fractured and is commodified into an object for the overwhelmingly male gaze, all thrust her even more irrevocably into depths of involuntary thralldom'.⁴

27 Indian cinema's date with the *devdaasi* first took place in the year 1924, when Dadasaheb Phalke, the pioneer Indian film maker, made *Kanya Vikray* (*Selling of Girls*). There were several other silent films too on the subject of prostitution such as *Devdasi* (1925) and *Midnight Girl* (1929).

28 Postcolonial Indian cinema generally sympathized with the whore figure and there were a spate of films in the 1950s and 1960s that revolved around the central character of a prostitute. Prominent among them are Guru Dutt's *Pyaasa* (*The Thirsty One*, 1957) and Kamal Amrohi's *Paakheeza* (*The Pure One*, 1971). A more recent film in this genre is Muzaffar Ali's *Umrao Jaan*, (1981), which was a splendidly mounted film in which the title role of the legendary courtesan of Nineteenth Century Lucknow, was played by the then reigning queen of the Hindi cinema, Rekha.

29 Guru Dutt's *Pyaasa* is a film that is critical of the exploitation of the prostitute. Waheeda Rehman, for whom Dutt nursed a grand passion in real life, played the role of the young prostitute Gulabo. The role of the hero Vijay was played by Dutt himself. Dutt had also cast his real-life wife, Geeta, an extremely talented playback singer⁵ in Hindi films, in a cameo role of a traveling street singer in this film. In a very intriguing and erotic scene in this film, Geeta Dutt, sings a song about the divine love of the Hindu God Krishna and his beloved Radha. The love of Radha and Krishna is an example of the metaphysical union of the temporal and the divine. As Gulabo listens to the song her face and body reveal her

⁴ From 'To be a Woman', Maithili Rao, in *Frames of Mind: Reflections on Indian Cinema*, edited by Aruna Vasudev, UBSPD, Delhi, 1995.

⁵ Most main-stream Indian films have at least 6-8 songs each. In the early days of Indian cinema these songs were sung by the actors themselves. However, by the 1940s, playback singers became the norm and the songs were recorded by these trained and talented singers and the actors merely lip-synced the numbers on screen.

intense desire for Vijay and the cinematic sub-text of the real-life romantic triangle of Waheeda-Guru-Geeta was not lost on the then audience. This sub-text is further intensified in the film where Vijay loves Meena a college girl who marries a rich publisher and Gulabo the street-prostitute loves Vijay.

30 Vijay's interest in Gulabo is more intellectual and social than physical and his sensitive soul rebels against the manner in which society treats prostitutes. In yet another famous scene from this film, Vijay and his friends visit another prostitute and as she dances her sick baby begins crying from an inside room. The dilemma of the woman as she listens to her baby's screams and its juxtaposition against the frenzied beat of the *tabla* to which she dances, becomes a comment on the hapless state of such women. However, neither Gulabo nor the other prostitutes have agency in this film. They are mere bodies over which the male dominant society writes its own narratives.

31 Umrao Jaan on the other hand is a woman who grew in stature and became a legend. Although equally shunned by a moralistic society she ultimately wrested control of her life from the pimps who controlled her earnings and wrote herself into history and culture. Her narrative is written against the backdrop of India's first war of independence - what British historians called The Indian Mutiny of 1857.

32 Lucknow was the seat of the Nawabs of Avadh and its rich syncretic culture - a blend of the Hindu and the Muslim - was typified by its last ruler Wajid Ali Shah. Shah was deposed by the British and during the battles of 1857, much of Lucknow was destroyed. Ali's film has traced the life of its eponymous heroine, Umrao Jaan, against this backdrop. The film is partly based on the novel, *Memories of Umrao Jaan Ada*, by the Urdu novelist Mohammed Hadi Ruswa.

33 Umrao is kidnapped as a little girl and sold into prostitution. The woman who owns her, trains her as a dancer and singer. Gradually Umrao also begins composing poetry and soon becomes a famous courtesan. Her earnings and her life are however still not under her own control. Umrao makes several abortive to escape the *Kotha* - the House of Dancing Girls - with the help of different male admirers. Finally it is the chaotic conditions of the revolt against British rule that help Umrao get away from Lucknow. She goes back to her native village but it is too late to reclaim her old life. In a beautifully etched scene her mother watches her from a distance but is reluctant to claim her, fearing social ostracism. Umrao then decides to strike out on her own and on the strength of her reputation as a poet, she draws men to her *mehfils* - soirees. She is finally to some extent at least, an independent woman in control of her self and her money.

34 In spite of having a certain degree of agency, the depiction of Umrao Jaan is rooted in materiality rather than ideology. For the film maker whether he is a Guru Dutt or a Muzaffar Ali, a prostitute-oriented film is for the predominantly male Indian audience an opportunity for vicarious erotic satisfaction. This makes the box office registers tinkle all the louder.

III

35 As for the *Daayins*, the transgressive women, most Indian films are rather ambivalent about them. In a male-oriented world, the binary opposition of Madonna-whore is clear enough. You worship the one and exploit the other. But what do you do with the woman who refuses to play these roles? It is the *Daayins*, the independent minded, rebellious women with traditional and new knowledge, who threaten the social order where women have occupied certain men ordained positions and been re-presented and imaged through the prism of the male gaze.

36 Since a woman has been traditionally imaged in Indian cinema as a wife, the transgressive woman generally splits herself away from this image and is then in the main penalized for this act of rebellion. The earliest imaging of the transgressive woman was V. Shantaram's *Duyniya Na Maane* (*The World Does Not Approve*, 1937). Here the woman Nirmala is the wife-turned-rebel, but her transgressions against the image of the dutiful, husband right or wrong kind of woman, are framed within the male-approved schema of wifely duties and societal expectations. However, critics have also read Nirmala's willing participation in rituals for the well-being of her no-good husband as a double edged sword.⁶ These rituals become empowering as they give women an opportunity to develop a sisterhood and provide the succor of woman-talk and advice to desperate women.

37 In more recent years, the Canada-based woman film-maker Deepa Mehta's film *Fire* (1996) has tackled the theme of lesbianism among dissatisfied urban Indian wives. This film won several international awards but caused a furor at screenings in India. The Hindu fundamentalist political parties organized demonstrations against the film and what they considered a blot on Indian culture and womanhood. The objections though were centred on how could the women in the film turn away from their husbands. The sub-text was also clearly focused on why should women neglected by their husbands look for sexual satisfaction. The male nurtured mythos of Indian womanhood has always elided female sexuality.

⁶ See Maithili Rao, 'The Woman as Rebel', *Indian Film Scene*, The Journal of Federation of Film Societies of India, May 1993, pp 19-20.

38 So the two women in the film *Radha and Nita*, according to the guardians of Indian culture, had no right to seek physical satisfaction with one another. These women were married to two brothers. Radha the elder woman's husband deprived his wife of sex on the pretext of being a spiritual person above such physical concerns. Nita's husband had a mistress and had no time for his wife. Gradually the women seek solace in one another's arms. The film sees the women's turning towards lesbianism as a natural corollary of male neglect. Being cloistered at home by a conservative society they had no other outlet for their sexual desires. This is also a deliberate turning away from men and seeking of autonomy in the world of women. At the end of the film the two women leave their home and attempt to make a life for themselves on their own. The woman film-maker leaves the ending wide open but there is a ray of hope for the women who just might succeed in their endeavour in the urban anonymity of Delhi, where the film is set.

39 Prakash Jha's *Mrityudand* (1997) is, however, set in the badlands of rural Bihar. The state of Bihar is in North India and is notoriously conservative in its treatment of women. In the last couple of decades it has also acquired a reputation for political and social lawlessness and caste wars. The transgressions of the two sisters-in-law in this film are thus played out against a very different and more threatening backdrop. The elder sister-in-law Chandravati (Shabana Azmi plays this role as she does the role of the elder sister-in-law Radha in *Fire*) is unjustly accused of being a barren woman, with all the stigma attached to such a state in rural India. In reality this is a mask to protect her impotent husband. The husband Abhay Singh to overcome the trauma and sorrow of his childless (read sonless) condition, becomes more and more involved in matters spiritual and finally becomes the head of the village temple and monastery. This naturally upsets Chandravati tremendously and she becomes seriously ill. The family sends her to the city for medical treatment. She is escorted there by the former lower caste family retainer, Rambharan, who is now a successful businessman in his own right. Rambharan has always nurtured a passion for Chandravati and in the more liberal atmosphere of the city, where nobody knows their antecedents, the couple become lovers and Chandravati conceives a child. She is overjoyed at proof that she is after all not a barren woman.

40 In a gesture of tremendous defiance she decides to keep the child and returns to the village. When asked by her younger sister-in-law, Ketaki (played by the superstar of the 1980s Madhuri Dixit) about whose child it was, the older woman simply says: mine. Chandravati's rebellion had initially been inspired by the brash courage of the young, educated Ketaki. But she soon overtakes her younger sister-in-law in the breaking of social taboos.

41 The rebellious women have to also deal with the criminalisation of Bihari society/politics and lose their husband and lover to criminal, political elements in the village. The end of the film finds both of them pregnant and alone but courageous and positive of the future.

42 At one level this seems to be a very bold film where transgressive women are allowed to survive but a closer viewing makes it apparent that Jha, in spite of his credentials as a revolutionary film maker, has slyly played up to the conservative sentiments of his audience. *Mrityudand* was a box-office success and this was due to the Madonna like image of the two women at the end of the film. By virtue of their impending motherhood their earlier transgressions are almost forgiven them and even their father-in-law gives them his blessings and approval.

Conclusion

43 This paper has attempted to give an overview of the principal stereotypical images of women that govern Indian cinema. It is not a complete survey as there are many other films in which the female protagonists fit into the categories of *Devis*, *Devdaasis* and *Daayins*, however the films focused upon in each category are fairly representative of their kind and should lead the reader into investigating further into the imaging and re-presenting of women in the Indian celluloid world.

Where Do We Go from Queer? The Question of Naturalness and Normality in Literature, Film and the Media

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Abstract:

Looking at contemporary portrayals of non-straight relationships and characters in literature, film and/or TV shows, it becomes apparent that these always have to be clearly marked as lesbian or gay in order to avoid gender and sexual confusions within the heteronormative matrix (a word borrowed from Judith Butler) [...] by defining them as legible and identifiable against the backdrop of a non-representational straight body.

What constitutes a problem is not the thing, or the environment where we find the thing, but the conjunction of the two; something unexpected in an usual place (our favourite aunt in our favourite poker parlour) or something usual in an unexpected place (our favourite poker in our favourite aunt). (Winterson: 1996a, 44)

1 When I taught a seminar on queer literature, one of the first things I asked was: "What do you think is Lesbian and Gay Literature?" One student answered: "Literature on certain shelves in bookstores, marked: Lesbian and Gay literature." I had never even thought of this as a possible answer, but it then hit me as a very fitting metaphor for the general contemporary (re)presentation of non-heteronormative sexualities. Marking is a popular means of maintaining order, a seemingly reliable status quo in our times of postmodernism versus political correctness.

2 Looking at contemporary portrayals of non-straight relationships and characters in literature, film and/or TV shows, it becomes apparent that these always have to be clearly marked as lesbian or gay in order to avoid gender and sexual confusions within the heteronormative matrix (a word borrowed from Judith Butler)

which, throughout the twentieth century, has insisted on the necessity of "reading" the body as a signifier of sexual orientation. Heterosexuality has thus been able to reinforce the status of its own authority as natural (i.e. unmarked, authentic, and non-representational) by defining the straight body against the threat of an unnatural homosexuality [...]. Homosexuality is constituted as a category, then, to name a condition that must be represented as determinate, as legibly identifiable, precisely insofar as it threatens to undo the determinacy of identity itself; it must be metaphorized as an essential condition, a sexual orientation, in order to contain the disturbance it effects as a force of dis-orientation. (Edelmann: 1994, 4, 14)

The increasing number of depictions of non-straight identities in the media can be seen as both an indication of liberating politics, granting space and time for presenting alternative sexual conceptions. Simultaneously though, this change can be perceived as limiting since in

most cases the challenging potential is minimised by defining them as legible and identifiable against the backdrop of a non-representational straight body. In *The History Of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault points out that our concept of homosexual identity and its manifestations are, historically speaking, a fairly new construct of scientific discourse:

The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology. Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions because it was their insidious and indefinitely active principle; written immodestly on his face and body because it was a secret that always gave itself away. It was consubstantial with him, less as a habitual sin than as a singular nature. [...] The sodomite had been a temporary aberration, the homosexual was now a species. (Foucault: 1978, 43)

3 For a long time, Lesbian and Gay politics have seemed to welcome scientific theories of homosexuality as an inborn, essential condition because if it was nothing to be cured of, it would just have been a matter of perverse, unnatural playfulness. Thus, there was a ground from which to claim equal human rights and the abolishing of juridical sanctions. In the case of western politics, the understanding of homosexuality as an essential part of identity, even though concerning a minority of the population, has resulted in the removal of criminal persecutions and also in contemporary discussions about and conceptions of lesbian and gay marriage. However, the discourse thus constituted has at the same time also helped to maintain, even reinforce dichotomies which otherwise could have been put into question, such as man/woman, heterosexuality/homosexuality, natural/unnatural, normal/ab-normal. (Please note that in the following terms such as "normal," "natural," etc. should be read as enclosed by inverted commas). As Anne Fausto Sterling points out:

In most public and most scientific discussions, sex and nature are thought to be real, while gender and culture are seen as constructed. But these are false dichotomies. [...] Surgeons remove parts and use plastic to create appropriate genitalia for people born with body parts that are not as easily identifiable as male or female. [...] We literally, not just discursively (that is through language and cultural practices) construct our bodies, incorporating experiences into our flesh. To understand this claim, we must erode the distinctions between the physical and the social body. (Fausto-Sterling: 2000, 20)

Inside a discursive system which links sex, gender, desire and reproduction with the help of a cultural matrix, the concept of heterosexuality promises symmetry and reliability. Sexual identities which do not conform to these norms of cultural rationality therefore appear as developmental abnormalities.

4 The different approaches and strategies of conceptualising sex- and gender identity

within lesbian, gay and queer theory not only mirror, but are deeply interconnected with the antagonisms of essentialist or constructivist positions inherent in contemporary feminist and gender studies. Judith Butler's analysis of the heteronormative matrix illuminates the different discursive practices of gender regulation and demonstrates that "the association of a natural sex with a discrete gender and with an ostensibly natural 'attraction' to the opposing sex/gender is an unnatural conjunction of cultural constructs in the service of reproductive interests" (Butler: 1997, 406). Butler's theories have been as passionately embraced as attacked since much feminist thinking is grounded on the differentiation of (natural) sex and (social) gender that her work constantly undermines as socially constructed presumptions.

5 As Foucault furthermore states:

Power acts by laying down the rule: power's hold on sex is maintained through language, or rather through the act of discourse that creates, from the very fact that it is articulated, a rule of law. It speaks and that is the rule. The pure form of power resides in the function of the legislator; and its mode of action with regard to sex is of a juridico-discursive character. (Foucault: 1978: 83)

Since the categories of homosexuality and subsequently heterosexuality have been invented, human sexuality has mostly been conceptualised from the point of view of an assumed original, normal, heterosexual libido. Those sexualities which did not conform were conceived as ab-normal. Currently, queer theories are trying to even the score within the gender debate. Their deconstruction of traditional body and gender conceptions stresses "the unknowability that is sexuality as such: its always displaced and displacing relations to categories that include, but also exceed those of sex, gender, class, nationality, ethnicity, and race" (Edelmann: 1994, xv). It thereby contests the claim of any original or natural sexual identity.

6 The contemporary method of dealing with this threat of sexuality's unknowability is to create a special place, a niche of self-reflexive discourse for those who do not conform to the sexual standard, thus clearly separated from an assumed self-evident heterosexuality. Hence the "Gay and Lesbian Literature" shelf in bookstores, special programmes on gay lifestyle, talk shows on coming out, the gay couple from a German food commercial or the convention of having one gay or lesbian character in a film or soap etc. Of course, these representations hint at an acknowledgement of non-straight identities and therefore possibly help young people in coming to terms with non-straight desires, but in the last consequence the strategy of marking does not seriously call the concept of heterosexuality as original, natural norm into question. A few examples from the realms of literature, cinema and other media shall demonstrate contemporary ways of conceptualising and (re)presenting homosexuality.

7 Both *Rubyfruit Jungle* (1973) by Rita Mae Brown and *The Lost Language of Cranes* (1986) by David Leavitt reached a "must-read-status" among lesbian and gay readers at the time of their releases. Both titles also enjoyed extensive media coverage, gaining the two authors cult status. Although quite different in many aspects, both novels stress authenticity, naturalness and normality. In the case of the two narratives, however, these categories are applied to their respective queer protagonists, Molly Bolt and Philip Benjamin. "Power acts by laying down the rule," Foucault says, "the power's hold on sex is maintained through language, or rather through the act of discourse that creates, from the very fact that it is articulated, a rule of law. It speaks and that is the rule" (Foucault: 1978, 83). *Rubyfruit Jungle* as well as *The Lost Language of Cranes* seem to exemplify this as both novels create a homonormative matrix within their narrations, thus countering the omnipresent norm of heterosexuality as the natural. By opposing the selves of both protagonists which are presented as authentic, natural with the secrecy, bigotry and perversity of overtly heterosexual characters, the rule laid down here is: Being gay is good and natural. Both novels, however, define homosexual identity by contrasting it with heterosexuality, therefore remaining inside the prevailing paradigm of the binary thought system. While Rita Mae Brown's coming out narrative at times succeeds in challenging and undermining racial, sexual and gender conceptions, she frequently evokes them by insisting on Molly Bolt's own un-corruptedness, by depicting her point of view as being unaffected and untainted by social definitions of normality.

8 In its focus on sexuality as the most important factor in the shaping of one's identity, *The Lost Language of Cranes* even goes a step further: "Being gay isn't just gratifying some urge. It's a matter of your life. My sexuality, my attraction to men, is the most crucial, most elemental force in my life, and to deny it [...] would be a tragedy" (Leavitt: 1987, 174). The plot of this narrative affirms this as a rule to be applied to all of its characters. The notion of true, essential sexuality becomes the novel's main topic and the cause for all action. The climax of this is the revelation of all secrets and lies that are based on sexual pretension and denial. Philip's father is a closeted homosexual who regularly lives out his sexual fantasies in porn cinemas. His mother, sexually dissatisfied, consequently has affairs. In the end of the narrative when the "true" sexuality of her husband is revealed, she admits that all through her marriage she had been missing the sexual desire of a "real man." In *The Lost Language of Cranes*, sexuality is clearly not conceptualised as excessively performative, a socially defined and constrained choice, but as a fundamental truth and force. The novel affirms the binary way of thinking gender and sexed bodies, not only on a solely sexual level, but extending this

logic to a socio-psychological level:

I don't think that everyone is fundamentally bisexual. I think some people are, and a whole lot more are basically one way or the other- either homosexual or heterosexual. [...] The point is, you're basically heterosexual, and that should be what defines your lifestyle. (Leavitt: 1987, 232)

9 Basing the plot of a so-called lesbian or gay novel on the coming out of a protagonist is still a popular way of narrating and representing homosexual life and counterbalancing the oppressive compulsion of heteronormativity. However, these days, one becomes more and more aware that

if it is already true that "lesbians" and "gay men" have been traditionally designated as impossible identities, errors of classification, unnatural disasters within juridico-medical discourses, or, what perhaps amounts to the same, the very paradigm of what calls to be classified, regulated, and controlled, then perhaps these sites of disruption, error, confusion, and trouble can be the very rallying points for a certain resistance to classification and to identity as such. (Butler: 1991, 16)

Written On the Body (1993) by Jeannette Winterson and *Could It Be Magic?* (1999) by Paul Magrs exemplify such literary sites of disruption which undermine either-or oppositions by questioning our notions of natural and normal sexuality in fundamental ways. It is interesting to note that just a few years earlier Winterson made her entry into the literary scene with *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, a rather conventional coming out narrative. In *Written on the Body*, a simple narratologic device helps to create a "logic of a queer postmodern which collapses binarisms and creates a space not just for homosexual readings but for productive, dynamic, and fluid gender pluralities and sexual positionings" (Doan: 1994, 153). Concealing the narrator's biological sex makes it possible to narrate a love story beyond linguistically structured gender and sexual binarisms. The novel in fact highlights the linguistic constructedness of sexual difference and confirms language to be the site of producing discourses that later materialise as points of natural, biological reference. With a small rhetorical trick, the narrator recounts her/his own self outside an either/or position. Through ambiguous wording, the homodiegetic narrator of the novel plays a "gender guessing game" with the reader, continuously evoking feminist, psychoanalytic and medical tropes only leading to zero. *Written On the Body* remains undecided with regard to what appears to be the main point of cultural reference, thus rendering visible the constructivist function of language in the understanding of gender/sex:

It is not that (s/he) claims there is no materiality to bodies or sex; the representation of other characters besides the narrator suggests as much. Rather, the text makes it possible to consider the materiality of language through the representation of the narrator. The materiality of names does not totalize the materiality of bodies and sex,

and the materiality of bodies and sex is not totalizable under names. (Gilmore: 1997, 243)

By alternately calling upon and dismissing traditional models for desire, they become exposed as generalising theories, mostly grounded on phallogocentric ideas, apparently unfit to clarify the question of what draws people sexually to each other or which body parts exactly define human sexuality: "I had idolised [her breasts] simply and unequivocally, not as a mother substitute nor a womb trauma, but for themselves. Freud didn't always get it right. Sometimes a breast is a breast is a breast" (Winterson: 1996, 24). Winterson's narrative about the body and about desiring a body therefore disrupts the assumption of a two sex model, in which bodies are thought to be drawn to each other because of their genital differences, as well as any understanding of homosexuality as either psychosexual inversion or narcissistically desiring sameness.

10 *Could It Be Magic?* by Paul Magrs reverses, relativises and problematises notions of the normal and the natural by presenting characters in a small town in Yorkshire all marked by certain psychophysical oddities. The alternating moments of social and magic realism within the novel serve to naturalise cultural oddities, monstrosities, abnormalities and conformities. The focalisers change constantly without any obvious preference of a particular point of view so that Andy's ambiguous struggling with his sexuality and physical conspicuousness becomes only one aspect of the novel's mediation of psychophysical self definitions. Instead of the usual "Coming Out as Bildungsroman" pattern, mostly ending in either the successful assertion of a gay/lesbian identity or in suicide, Andy's own felt and experienced queerness rather leads to a gradual awareness of the symbolic order's pretence which is unable to guarantee him any kind of security about himself. Andy's homosexuality thus becomes a matter of continuously searching for and struggling with identity, never arriving at a stable definition of a self, which is opposed to any heterosexual perspective on the world. Therefore, communalities and differences of the characters can be identified beyond their sexual self formations.

11 With its multiperspectivity and elements of magic and social realism, *Could It Be Magic?* on the one hand presents and validates the characters' longing for normality and stable identities while on the other hand it highlights the fragile constructedness of this same normality: "We're all travesties. It's all a bloody travesty" (Magrs: 1999 320) says one of the characters to Liz, who, because of her transgender identity, can be seen as the central symbolic character within the narrative, testifying to the fact that "the body has no essential existence of its own which gives us a 'true' identity as essentially male, really female, truly

lesbian, genuinely bisexual" (Ramazanoglu, Holland: 1993, 249). All main characters of *Could It Be Magic?* are marked by attributive queerness whereby a unified, coherent social system of signification inside the narrated world is undermined. Traditional assumptions of sexual identity are confounded as well:

Mark's a family man, thought Andy. And what does that mean? It means that usually he's straight and tonight was just a branching out - but was that true? Andy couldn't believe it was his first time with a bloke. [...] No, Mark had known exactly what he'd been about. [...] Whatever was in Mark was in Andy now. (Magrs: 1999,84-85)

Dualistic conceptions, such as reality/fiction, natural/un-natural, man/woman, hetero-/homosexuality, normal/ab-normal, no longer serve as guiding concepts within the narrative. Herein differences are not categorically opposed to each other but intermingled, resulting in a narrative rectification of the supposedly subordinated entities. Andy's need for orientation and attachment confirms the human search for criteria of differentiation and subjectivation, but the plot of *Could It Be Magic?* points to the social constructedness of all ideas of identity. Because of the ambiguity of traditional discursive dichotomies presented in the novel, its fictionalised world denies any possibilities of clear exclusion and placement.

12 When we take a look at contemporary films, the modes of dealing with non-straight characters are not quite as unpredictable and challenging, at least with regard to Hollywood productions, the representation machinery of western culture. In his remarkable work on Hollywood's treatment of homosexuality in film *The Celluloid Closet* (1981, revised '87), Vito Russo already points to the problematic representation of queer characters in movies. He convincingly argues that in most cases homosexual characters are either presented as tragically doomed or as butch dykes and silly sissies, the laughing stock for the audience. These days, one can see a shift towards a more "politically correct" portrayal of queers, even evoking momentary pleasure arising from moments of gender transgression and confusion. "[H]owever, by films end, any suggestion of sexual or gender indeterminacy is eventually negated, stopped and corrected through the reconstitution of gender difference and heterosexual preference" (Sandler: 2001, 131). Obviously, in a film, where the body is the main spectacle, it becomes more difficult to challenge sexed and gendered bodies without turning towards utopia, as might be the case in literature. *Written on the Body* and *Could It Be Magic?* are definitely hard to translate into film without giving away the sexual indeterminacies in the first case, and its magic social realist atmosphere in the second. As John Sakeris remarks, however:

The potential of same sex love to challenge dominant sexist ideas and structure, including the traditional family, is diverted by the "new" gay films. In fact, they too,

like their more obviously homophobic historical counterparts, serve a reinforcing function for traditional sex roles and class divisions. While the "new" gay films do represent a step forward in the advancement of human rights for gays and lesbians, what they do not represent is any significant challenge to traditional sexist ideology. (Sakeris: 2001, 229)

It is interesting to see how, in numerous productions, Hollywood has grappled with the inclusion of non-straight narratives and characters only to finally mark them as "outside" the norm by linking heterosexuality to the natural, the healthy, the living and life-giving and homosexuality to the unnatural, the sick, the dead and deadly. It is the Law of the Father, in the guise of juridical law, that non-straight characters have to avoid throughout the narratives of films such as *Bound* (1996), *The Next Best Thing* (2000), *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999), *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), *In & Out* (1997) etc. And even though the viewers are invited to sympathise with the queer protagonists, a triumph of some sort, the characters are nevertheless clearly posited outside the norm and outside of natural law. Notions of the third sex and of homosexuality as a minor copy of original heterosexuality still seem to haunt those films as they do not seriously challenge the structure of sexual interrelations in Western culture, where "men are men and women are women, and we are all not gay and heterosexuality, in its patriarchal sense, is still reigning" (Sakeris: 2001, 226).

13 In *The Next Best Thing*, straight and single Abby and her best friend Robert, single and gay, played by the two queer icons Madonna and Rupert Everett, decide to move in together and raise a child, which we are made to believe is the outcome of a one night stand of the two. We see the two of them having a few drinks and then kissing, and in the next cut waking up the following day with the awkward feeling of having overstepped the boundaries on which their friendship is based. After Abby has told Robert that she is pregnant with his baby, they move in together and everything is wonderful until Abby falls in love with a straight man. From this moment on, their alternative family starts to crumble and in the end all the transgressive potential with which the film begins is corrected. It is not only juridical law, but natural law which takes the child away from Robert, since, we learn, he is not the biological father after all. It is due to his biological disempowerment that he does not have a chance to win the subsequent court battle about the custody of their son which turns the light-hearted comedy into a drama, and friends into foes. Although the viewer is invited to feel sorry for Robert, who is literally crushed by the loss of his authority and is being pushed back to his proper status as the impotent victim, the film undermines all subversive moments which have made it interesting from the point of view of sexual and/or gender ambiguity. In addition to this main plot there are other moments which make this film disturbingly reactionary.

"Homosexual life," in *The Next Best Thing*, is primarily referred to as hedonistic, consisting of clubbing, drugging and casual sex whilst heterosexuality stands for monogamy, family and life:

Life/death becomes the binary of the natural limits of Being: the organic is natural. [...] Queer desire, as unnatural, breaks with this life/death binary of Being through same sex desire [...] mandated as sterile - an unlive practice [...] consequently unnatural, or queer, and, as that which was unlive, without the right to life. (Case: 1997, 383)

At one point in the film, after having decided to flee the 'unnatural' world of the gay scene, Robert suspects a gay friend, who just lost his lover to AIDS, of being jealous about his new life perspective. The "converted queer" is tired and worn out by drugs, parties and stylised bodies so that the chances offered by a "normal" family life leave no room for doubt about his choice.

14 Although Robert does have a relationship with another man after having become a father, it is his dedication to his family that ends the affair since his partner is not satisfied with being "the next best thing." When Abby meets Benjamin, she does not even confer with Robert about the possible effects this new situation might have for their "queer" relationship, but rather follows her new lover unquestioningly. It seems as if, finally, she had found her proper, natural place as a woman, at the side of a true, normal, straight man. From that moment on, both Robert and Abby have lost all power to control, and the straight characters take over the action with the literal Law of the Father on their side. Abby, in one of the most dramatic court scenes, screams at Robert that he did have a choice. However, what his choice was or could have been, especially since the plot undermines any "choice" with regard to the heteronormative matrix, is a question the film unfortunately leaves unanswered.

15 *Boys Don't Cry*, based on the real life story of Teena Brandon (Brandon Teena), is another film that starts out with transgressive potential ending on a tragical note of correction, with the heteronormative, phallogocentric order reigning. Here the "gender police" in the guise of the literal police are responsible for the discovery of the natural sex of Teena/Brandon. This eventually leads to his/her rape and murder. In this case, the outcome of the narrative obviously was not the choice of any director or studio, but rather a matter of staying as close as possible to the actual incidents. Still the movie fits with the conventions of what Hollywood allows or even supports to be presented, as it does not threaten any gender or sexual standards due to the violent punishment of Teena/Brandon at the end of the film. Rather, it warns every viewer to acknowledge one's natural sexual location and to act according to one's natural body. Current theoretical debates about "nature vs. culture"

resonate in many comments on this film and the tragic death of Teena: Why did she/he choose to stay in that small town in the middle of nowhere (where natural law prevails) rather than move to a big city (where culture resides) like many queers do? Such comments not only point to an understanding of transgender identities as unnatural but also reverberate in some people's reaction to rape, namely when suggesting that women encourage men by wearing "provocative" clothes. This creates the impression of rape as a natural act of reinstalling the phallogocentric order, thus disregarding everybody's right to self expression.

16 *The Talented Mr. Ripley* can be termed a postmodern film with regard to the employed notions of physical and sexual identity. "Questa e mia face" is the Italian phrase Tom Ripley learns when he arrives in Italy to follow Dicky Greenleaf's tracks. What is my face? A question which is left unanswered throughout the movie. Tom Ripley's identity is excessively performative and his queerness leads to his mimicking and twisting of available, presumably normal and natural concepts of maleness and femaleness, upper and lower class, hetero- and homosexuality:

To be situated or to situate oneself as a homosexual in or against a compulsory heterosexuality that sets itself up as the original, the true, the authentic, never seems so much about being a homosexual, but about dealing with, stumbling over, or mimicking the being of what others are. To be queer means looking for and finding ways of being queer, it means turning ontology into performance. (Milde: 2001, 141)

Tom Ripley desires Dickie Greenleaf. His actions are motivated by his wish to remain outside the symbolic order which would forbid his desires as unnatural and abnormal. Therefore, he perpetually imagines himself as remaining in a state of semiotic jouissance with Dickie Greenleaf, both of them melting into one. Tom becomes violently aware of their difference with regard to their subject-, gender-, sexual- and social privileges when Dickie gets bored with Tom and tells him so. In a rush of anger and helplessness, he kills Dickie and takes on the other's identity, thereby not only maintaining the social privileges of the white, upper class male, but also remaining in an imagined semiotic with his object of desire. Questa e mia face? He erases the face on Dickie's ID, so that quite literally he becomes a man without a face, without any identity at all. He then goes on to kill everyone who threatens this state of continuous mimicry, the only available option of symbolic survival and authority for Tom.

17 The Law of the Father, in this movie again in the shape of the juridical law, does not manage to catch Tom Ripley. This is due to the fact that because the prosecutors assume themselves to be inside the supposedly normal or natural order, thus lacking the awareness of both the power and the fallacies of representation and identity categories and therefore taking the simulacra for the substantial, the fiction for the truth, the queer for the straight, Tom

Ripley for Dickie Greenleaf. It is interesting to see that Marge, Dickie Greenleaf's girlfriend, is the only character to first suspect and later know that Tom Ripley is her lover's murderer. As a woman she seems to be able to see through his disguise, even relate to it. This might be due to the fact that she too knows that peculiar double consciousness of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others. As Butler states:

To be female is [...] a facticity which has no meaning, but to be a woman is to have become a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of woman, to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize one's self in obedience to an historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project. (Butler: 1993, 404-5)

In the case of this movie then, the performativity of the (sexed) body and a sexed identity becomes obvious. But unlike Tom Ripley, who defies subjection by subverting, literally undoing the codes of the symbolic order, Marge obediently conforms to the "idea of woman" and therefore remains powerless, without agency, authority and voice in the oppressive phallogocentric discourse.

18 My last example of the questionable state of queer and gender representations in contemporary western media concerns the sitcom *Ellen* and the stir this sitcom caused in the United States. I believe that the media frenzy which accompanied the coming out of both the protagonist of the sitcom and the actress Ellen Degeneres had to do with a sudden, traumatic recognition of the invisibility of homosexuality posing a threat to heteronormative culture's persistence to marginalize, typify and present the queer body as an opposition to a dominant and stable form of sexuality. I would like to refer back to the introductory quote of Jeanette Winterson, saying that "what constitutes a problem is the conjunction of the thing and the environment where we find the thing." In the case of *Ellen*, the social regulations according to which the sexed body has to be identifiable had been circumvented, resulting in a troubling uncertainty:

As a sedimented effect of a reiterative or ritual practice, sex acquires its naturalised effect, and yet, it is also by virtue of this reiteration that gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities in such constructions, as that which escapes or exceeds the norm, as that which cannot wholly be defined or fixed by the repetitive labor of that norm. This instability is the deconstituting possibility in the very process of repetition, the power that undoes the very effects by which sex is stabilised, the possibility to put the consolidation of the norms of sex into a potentially productive crisis. (Butler: 1993, 10)

Throughout the series, Ellen Morgan was depicted as the nice girl from next door. In the eyes of millions of viewers she was a straight woman. For several years she was the leading character in a production which had always held its place in the top five of the most

successful American sitcoms. Her character invited sympathy and identification, she was never as daring and strong-minded, as, for example, Roseanne. She was presented as a woman riddled with doubts and worries about her perspectives on life, her future, her career, her looks and, last but not least about finding the right guy. She was funny, witty and a woman longing to be loved, but she was never outrageous, challenging or politically charged.

19 When the actress Ellen Degeneres decided to come out as gay both in real life and in the sitcom all hell broke loose. One of the main rules of a successful sitcom is that the characters are not supposed to change throughout the series. As Christopher Walker, himself a producer of situation comedies, notes:

The audience becomes familiar with characters and gets to know them really well. Much of the humour, thus, stems from the anticipation of how the characters will react in a given situation, based on their, and the audiences, previous experience [...] The character network in a situation comedy is a kind of solar system with the characters like planets in specific and unchanging orbits. (Walker: 2000, 96)

According to this, the audience's main source of entertainment resides in their ability to apprehend the character's motivations and actions. The audience imagines the living room of the TV production as an extension of their own living room. Sitcoms (and soaps for that matter) work by giving an impression of familiarity: the main feeling is that of sameness and identification, not of difference and disorientation. When Ellen came out she broke with all these rules,

not by affirming the cognitive stability of gay identity as a category, but rather endorsing gay identity as a signifier of resistance to the often exclusionary logic of identity that nonetheless makes possible at given moments for different constituencies, an identity of resistance. (Edelmann: 1994, xvi)

Official punishment was the answer, although the coming out episode ranged among one of the ten top rankings in American TV history, with 42 million viewers tuning in despite or perhaps even because of numerous calls to boycott the show. People were even sending in merchandising items to Walt Disney Productions, the production company of the series, accompanied with letters saying that these objects were the work of the devil, and although these examples might be extreme and might not represent the average reaction to the decision to air this controversial show, they show what an outrage one single episode, in one single show, on one single network in a country with hundreds of programmes can cause.

20 In the following season the rankings of *Ellen* dropped dramatically and the network introduced each episode with a warning: "This programme contains adult content. Parental discretion is advised." So finally there was the belated marking, a warning for the audience that this show, or rather Ellen, its main character, had to be perceived as different. At last,

everyone realised that because of portraying a female homosexual played by a lesbian, this sitcom needed to be conceived of as abnormal, even though other shows depicting violence and explicit sexuality were allowed to carry on without any kind of such caution. Due to its subsequent loss of popularity and because of the pressure exerted by conservative executives, the sitcom *Ellen* had to be taken off the air. Ironically, even some lesbian and gay organisations blamed the show for becoming too gay in the end, thus excluding a huge audience due to its focus on the main character's love interest. The show did not change in any other significant aspect, with the minor exception that Ellen no longer was dating men but a woman. However, this seemed to be too much to take.

21 There are several sitcoms now which feature queer characters (*Will & Grace*, *Queer as Folk* etc.), however, the characters in question have been marked as such right from the beginning and therefore do not question the dichotomies of gay vs. straight, male vs. female etc., but rather perpetuate binary thinking and give their audience a feeling of safety and predictability.

22 The question of representation remains a socio-politically as well as emotionally charged field of theoretical discourse, where each personal history of readers and viewers creates different expectations and frustrations. Especially when it comes to those sexual models which the heteronormative matrix conceptualises as oppositional to the norm, the wish for encouraging and challenging portrayals in the realms of different media is often countered by the prevailing use of stereotypical markings. But, as Butler notes: "Can sexuality even remain sexuality once it submits to a criterion of transparency and disclosure, or does it perhaps cease to be sexuality precisely when the semblance of full explicitness is achieved?" (Butler: 1991, 15). Examples such as *Written on the Body*, *Could It Be Magic?* and *The Talented Mr. Ripley* point to the social constructedness of sexual identity and locations, but their deconstructive potential is a rare instance within an exhaustingly conventionalised discourse of different media forms. I would therefore like to end this essay by referring back to Franz Kafka's infamous saying "It is like it is". But I'd rather say: "It is like it seems," and, looking at the sexist and homophobic representations surrounding us, I'd like to add: "It is not like it should be."

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**Wisker, Gina. *Post-Colonial and African American Women's Writing: A
Critical Introduction*. Houndmills: Macmillan, 2000**

By Carmen Birkle, University of Mainz

1 In this book, Gina Wisker attempts to bring together two areas of criticism and fiction which have by now been widely but separately discussed, namely African-American and Post-Colonial women's writing. Their juxtaposition and analysis along the lines of gender and patriarchal oppression have encountered strong opposition. This criticism points to the dangers of erasing the differences existing between, for example, ethnic groups in the United States and Great Britain and people in formerly colonized regions such as the Caribbean, India, or Australia. Therefore, it is no surprise that Gina Wisker uses much of her introduction to justify this "bringing together [of] overlapping areas of study - post-colonialism and African American, with the focus on women" (1) by arguing that "[s]ilencing and subordination have been a shared experience for colonial and African American peoples, and for women in particular. Speaking out and back in one's own terms is a shared development" (3). Wisker identifies as common interests the exploration of "family relationships, mothering, and motherhood, the role of women in family and economic life, and a search for identity with all the complexities of race, religion, sexual choice, myth, family position, unique experiences" (32).

2 Three major sections follow her introduction which explains aims, methods, terms, critical contexts, and choice of authors and cultural and geographical areas. Part I discusses African-American women's writing with a particular emphasis on Toni Morrison and Alice Walker; part II focuses on writing in English by women from post-colonial contexts, including the Caribbean, Africa, India, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and Great Britain; part III presents emergent women's writing in English from South-East Asia, Oceania, and Cyprus. Wisker explains that this vast array of authors and contexts is motivated by "a mixture of the personal and the academic, as well as space" (3). Wisker rightfully names as problems in her juxtaposition an unintentionally imperialist point of view (7), the danger of appropriation (9), "essentialising and Otherising" (9), and of misrepresentation and misreading by "relying solely on discourse and text for interpretations of the daily realities, historical and contemporary, of colonization, and the post-colonial" (25), but emphasizes that "silencing and absence are no solutions . . ." (9). Instead, she suggests "the tactics of cultural studies," which for her means "looking at images, artefacts, visiting, interviewing, etc." in order to "situate the textual more usefully as a crucial historical element of control" (25).

3 Unfortunately, space is always limited so that all Gina Wisker can do in her chapter on African-American women's writing is to give a short overview of its development beginning with Anne Lucy Terry, Phillis Wheatley, Harriet Jacobs, and Harriet Wilson, continuing with short biographical sketches of writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, Ann Petry, Gwendolyn Brooks, Gloria Naylor, Paule Marshall, Maya Angelou, Ntozake Shange, and Jewelle Gomez, and finishing with brief presentations of the works of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker. What I find missing here and in subsequent chapters is a more intensive and fruitful engagement in a dialogue between Wisker's introduction to theories and theoretical parameters and her actual analysis of authors and texts.

4 By far the largest of the sections, part II concentrates on women's post-colonial writing in English, setting side by side writers from highly different cultural contexts. After locating some common concerns of each group, Wisker proceeds again by briefly introducing biographies and works of selected women writers and by pointing at similarities, for example, between the long-neglected "Caribbean oral performance poetry" and "the oral literatures of other countries such as Africa . . . and the Aboriginal culture of Australia . . ." (106). By appropriating, deconstructing, and redefining in their writing patriarchally and colonially constructed concepts such as "Mother Africa," "motherhood," "mother tongues," and "mothering," women writers succeeded in creating voices of their own. Wisker focuses on writers such as Louise Bennett, Jean Rhys, Buchi Emecheta, Bessie Head, Arundhati Roy, Bharati Mukherjee, Meena Alexander, Janet Frame, Keri Hulme, Margaret Atwood, Joy Kogawa, Merle Collins, Joan Riley, and, in part III, on Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Catherine Lim, and many others.

5 Wisker's book turns out to be more a reference book than an in-depth analysis of any particular writers or works. But it is a literary history of its own unusual kind bringing together well-known, unknown, and emerging women writers from and situated within an impressive variety of cultural contexts. Never, at least to my knowledge, has anyone juxtaposed African-American, Canadian, British, Caribbean, Asian, African, Australian, New Zealand, Malaysian, Samoan, Cypriot, etc. women's writing in such a skillful way. Gina Wisker manages to single out common denominators but never ignores decisive differences among these authors and their works.

Adams, Kimberly VanEsveld. *Our Lady of Victorian Feminism: The Madonna in the Work of Anna Jameson, Margaret Fuller, and George Eliot.*

Athens: Ohio University Press, 2001

Monika Müller, University of Cologne

1 As Kimberly VanEsveld Adams states in *Our Lady of Victorian Feminism: The Madonna in the Work of Anna Jameson, Margaret Fuller, and George Eliot*, nineteenth-century feminism and feminist movements have received relatively little critical attention. Her book, which combines the critical insights of feminist religious studies and literary criticism, presents a good attempt at reversing this trend. Focusing on the works of Jameson, Fuller, and Eliot, Adams evaluates the Madonna in nineteenth-century art history and literature as a representative of female empowerment made possible by means of the sexual and psychic freedoms of the virgin state.

2 Following a short introduction and a chapter on intellectual and cultural contexts that situates the three Protestant writers' Madonnas in the context of (Protestant reactions to) Catholic art and Marian scholarship, Adams divides her book into three sections dealing with the Madonna in the works of Anna Jameson, the British art historian, Margaret Fuller, the American journalist and transcendentalist feminist philosopher, and George Eliot, the famous British novelist. Adams devotes three chapters to the Madonna in Jameson and Eliot, respectively, but only one to Fuller's conception of the Madonna. According to her New Historical approach, she juxtaposes her analyses of the three authors' representations of the Virgin with sections that supply cultural contexts. This method works well in many instances - for example, when she traces a direct line of descent from the meek and domestic version of the Catholic Madonna (and some of her Protestant incarnations) to Coventry Patmore's ideal of the Victorian woman as the domestic "Angel in the House." But at times it also leads to less auspicious results. Thus, in the section on Anna Jameson, for example, Adams fails to sufficiently elaborate the connection between statues of mythical queens rendered by the American sculptor Harriet Hosmer (who lived and worked in Rome) and Jameson's endorsement of Mary's "spiritual queenship."

3 Deliberately disregarding the more progressive, de-essentializing elements in the nineteenth-century feminisms of Jameson, Fuller, and Eliot, Adams defines them as "essentialist feminists" because - according to her - they adhere to a belief in the equality of the fundamentally different sexes. In the first section of her book, she thus draws attention to the essentialist feminist quality of Jameson's sketches in *Legends of the Madonna* (1852),

which in four out of six instances depict Mary and Jesus as equals, sitting side by side. Adams stresses Jameson's matrifocal vision, according to which Jesus has to bear his mother's likeness since she is his only human parent. She furthermore claims that Jameson empowers the figure of Jesus by means of his feminine traits that are derived from his mother: Jameson's Jesus thus represents "perfect manhood" because unlike his father, the "warlike" God of the Old Testament, he is tempered by the female element and does not exhibit any "masculine" capacity for violence. In addition to pointing out Jameson's essentialist feminism that promotes essentially "female" qualities such as nurturing and forgiveness, Adams commends her for her humanistic approach towards the figure of the Madonna: Jameson's Madonnas sometimes exhibit ethnic traits and are allowed to show their advancing age in some of her drawings.

4 In her short section on Fuller, Adams claims that Fuller's female ideal is the Madonna rather than the solitary self-reliant goddess figure that she champions in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) and that has often been identified as her ideal conception of womanhood. According to Adams, Fuller aims at empowering women by having them think of themselves as "Virgins," as "self-reliant thinkers who are uncontaminated by social mores and live always in awareness of the divine" (139). These virgins are set in opposition to the dependent True Woman or Angel in the House. Keeping the self-reliant and relational aspects of female identity in perfect balance, the Madonna serves as role model for all women, and her type of virginity also applies to married women, or "Virgin Wives."

5 George Eliot, as Adams argues in the book's final section, followed Fuller in making the Madonna as Virgin and mother a symbol of female potential. Thus, in *Adam Bede* (1859), she empowers Dinah, a young working class Methodist acting as a minister to the fellow poor, in the manner of a Fullerian virgin. Dinah, however, is divested of her power when she marries Adam and when the Wesleyan Conferences bar women from preaching. This leads Adams to the significant insight that "[t]he important difference between Fuller's and Eliot's transforming visions for woman is the latter's sense of the intractability of material conditions. For Fuller, the idea creates the historical reality. For Eliot, historical reality might not be ready for the idea" (161-62). In *Romola* (1863), set in Renaissance Florence, Eliot presents her eponymous learned heroine (who adopts her untrue husband's "second wife" and children) in accordance with Fuller's ideal of the "Virgin Mother" who exhibits the essentially female quality of "maternal leadership." As Adams notes, the Madonna becomes less and less prominent in Eliot's subsequent writing. In *Middlemarch* (1871-72), where she is represented by Dorothea Brooke, she is framed by the male gaze and does not realize her female power;

and she is entirely absent from *Daniel Deronda* (1876). Adams speculates that the elision of the Madonna in Eliot's last work might be due to the fact that Eliot did not want to project a potentially oppressive Christian symbol onto a people historically victimized by Christianity.

6 *Our Lady of Victorian Feminism* is a thought-provoking contribution to studies in nineteenth-century feminism. Its weaknesses are mainly structural; Adams complements her main argument about the Madonna figure in cultural representations with rather lengthy digressions into nineteenth-century cultural contexts - in the process she at times seems to lose track of her main argument. Moreover, her methodological approach also invites criticism because she focuses only on the similarities between British and American cultural discourses, almost entirely disregarding whatever potentially important differences there obviously are - as for example, between Fuller's and Eliot's attitude towards class strictures that might preclude possible female empowerment through meaningful employment. But *Our Lady of Victorian Feminism*, nevertheless, gives an enlightening overview of the Protestant feminist uses of the Catholic Madonna figure. Most importantly, it adds to gender studies approaches to nineteenth-century literature and art by providing an additional perspective from the field of religious studies.

Shannon Sullivan. *Living Across and Through Skins. Transactional Bodies, Pragmatism, and Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001

By Astrid Recker, University of Cologne

1 Sullivan's *Living Across and Through Skins* is dedicated to an investigation of Dewey's concept of transactional bodies and the implications this concept has in various philosophical fields (such as ethics and epistemology) as well as in the cultural, social, and political realms. In her reading of pragmatist, phenomenological, feminist and poststructuralist philosophers such as Dewey, Merleau-Ponty, Nietzsche, Harding and Butler, Sullivan presents us with an intricate analysis "of corporeal existence as transactional" (1), emphasizing the benefits as well as some of the dangers of this concept for theories concerned with gender, race, and the subject.

2 In opposition to interaction, in which static, atomistic substances existing apart from each other come into contact without being essentially changed by it, transaction denotes "an active and dynamic relationship between things such that those things are co-constitutive of each other" (12). Subject and object, self and world, are not seen as substantially separated but as mutually affecting and constituting one another continually. As Sullivan convincingly shows, the implications of this are (at least) twofold in that the concept of bodies as transactional, firstly, no longer conceives of body and mind as two separate and essentially different substances, and, secondly, does away with a notion of bodies as "lumps of passive matter" (2) that are inscribed by culture. Conceiving of bodies as transactional construes them "as patterns of behavior" (3, emphasis in original) that do not passively wait to be influenced by their environment, but that themselves exert an influence on this environment. This means that "culture does not just effect bodies, but bodies also effect culture" (3) and therefore have an (albeit small) power by which to imprint culture. Sullivan is anxious to point out, however, that by describing bodies as transactional she does not favor a process metaphysics in which the distinctions between things are erased completely. Instead, in the process of transaction, things "permeate one another in a constitutive way" (16). Thus perceiving bodies as transactional implies that stability is achieved through continual changes in which continuity is preserved.

3 As Sullivan describes bodies as activity rather than substance, she is in need of a unifying principle which neither turns the bodying (as Sullivan prefers designating the body) into a static substance nor causes it to turn into a fluid and ever-changing process. This unifying principle she

finds in Dewey's notion of habits, "an organism's acquired styles of activity that organize the energy of its impulses" (30) and thus supply one's bodying with a pattern. However, habits are not an order imposed on a body from the outside, but that which constitutes it as a self in the first place. Before acquiring habits through our transaction with our environment, a self does not exist - from the outset our bodying is organized by habit, and it is thus habit that provides us with "will and agency" (ibd.).

4 After expounding Dewey's concept of transactional bodies in the first chapter, Sullivan applies it to various fields and concepts of philosophy: the question of the existence of a nondiscursive body (Chapter 2); Merleau-Ponty's account of communication (Chapter 3); the relation between body, sex, and gender (Chapter 4); a concept of feminist somaesthetics (Chapter 5); the development of a pragmatist-feminist standpoint theory departing from Harding's feminist standpoint theory (Chapter 6) and, finally, the question of the constitution of races (Conclusion).

5 In Chapter 2, Sullivan applies the concept of transactional bodies to the problem of the existence of a non- or prediscursive body. Here, according to her, conflicting opinions between phenomenologists and poststructuralists arise with regard to the possibility of "resistance to oppressive cultural norms" (41), often using biological/anatomical differences for their justification. While phenomenologists, such as Gendlin, argue that without the existence of a nondiscursive body untouched by cultural inscriptions any resistance to oppressive cultural norms is rendered impossible, poststructuralists claim - in Sullivan's account - that the positing of a nondiscursive body can only ever result in a strengthening of the oppressive norms, since what is perceived as natural is perceived as such through the lens of the cultural. Therefore, positing a nondiscursive body does not help to undercut the oppressive norms but assigns them an even greater inscriptive power (cf. 41).

6 By reading discursivity along the lines of transaction, Sullivan provides convincing arguments for the rejection of the concept of the nondiscursive body, and succeeds in showing that this does not result in a need to renounce the possibility of "corporeal resistance to oppressive societal norms" (43). At the same time, Sullivan arrives at a decisive clarification and enrichment of Butler's thought by aligning Butler's concept of the discursive body and the concept of transactional bodies, and she thus provides a powerful tool for saving Butler from the reproach of attending to a linguistic monism. More specifically, Sullivan suggests that

when Butler insists that one cannot posit a nondiscursive body without that positing itself being a discursive practice that effects the body that is posited, she is [...] insisting [...]

that human beings are not passive spectators of a ready-made world who can observe and record it without making any impact upon it. (56-57)

Accordingly, bodies and their environments do not exist apart from each other but are always, from the beginning on, transacting. When referring to a natural body, this reference exerts an influence on the body thus evoked. As transactional, however, the body is also "actively constitutive of the [...] discourses that constitute [it]" (57). This brings us back to the question, how a body, in the transactional relationship to its environment, can effect a significant change rather than monotonously reiterating the oppressive norms. Sullivan addresses this latter question in Chapter 4 of *Living Across and Through Skins* where she reads Butler's notion of performativity, i.e. "the process of repetitive activity that constitutively stylizes one's being" (88), in alignment with Dewey's notion of habit. This implies a reworking and extension of Butler's concept, in order to not only include the linguistic but also the social in the notion of performativity. Through this reworking Sullivan is able to account for the possibility of an enactment against oppressive cultural norms without having to have recourse to a natural body.

7 According to Sullivan, just as habit denotes that which provides our bodying with a certain structure and stability, Butler conceives of a person's gender as a "domain of constraints without which a certain living and desiring being cannot make its way" (Judith Butler. *Bodies that Matter*. New York: Routledge, 1993: 94). Thus gender, as well as habit, is not something imposed onto a body from the outside, but that which constitutes it as a self in the first place, i.e. that which provides it with will and agency. However,

because individual habits are formed under conditions set by cultural configurations that precede the individual, cultural customs delimit the particular [...] options available to individuals. (92)

8 Thus, in their transaction with culture, bodies tend to reproduce and reinforce the norms in relation to which they are formed. It is this "force of sedimentation, which seems to make change improbable" (95). At the same time, however, the fact that every norm relies on its reiteration by the individual in order not to lose its impact on it is exactly that which Butler as well as Sullivan conceive of as an inherent weakness of all norms (cf. 97).

9 In the following Sullivan discusses two approaches to the change of oppressive cultural norms offered by Butler. Rejecting Butler's notion of bodily excess as adhering to the concept of a nondiscursive body, Sullivan shows that Butler's second approach, a modification of Derrida's account of iterability, is fully convincing - especially when understood in terms of transaction. In *Excitable Speech* Butler, according to Sullivan, "locates the transformative power of

performativity in its ability to function in contexts different from that in which it originated" (102). It is by (repeatedly) reiterating a norm in a different context that human bodying is able to effect a change in the norm. Of course, the dislocation of a norm into a different context cannot bring about abrupt and major changes that completely alter the environment with which one transacts. But in her reworking of Butler's concept of performativity Sullivan convincingly shows that in conceiving of corporeal existence as transactional, the enactment against oppressive cultural norms becomes possible without having to recede to the dubious concept of a prediscursive body. At the same time her account presents a significant enrichment of Butler's work, freeing it from the often issued reproach of pertaining to a linguistic monism, and thus allowing for an even more productive application of Butler's concepts to cultural, political, and societal questions, such as the reconfiguration of gender.

10 In the remaining chapters of *Living Across and Through Skins* Sullivan critically applies Dewey's notion of transactional bodies to philosophical concepts by Merleau-Ponty, Nietzsche and Harding. Thus, in Chapter 3, Sullivan directs her criticism at Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological account of communication. Even though valuing the attention paid to bodily lived experience, Sullivan - along with other feminists - criticizes Merleau-Ponty for his adhering to a non-gendered, anonymous body that reintroduces the solipsism it was meant to counteract. Sullivan argues that the common ground which Merleau-Ponty poses as the basis of all communication is exactly that which - by causing misunderstandings - keeps us from communicating with one another. Our bodying is very seldom unambiguous, and positing "an anonymous body [. . .] is merely to impose one person's way of understanding her world on another" (74).

11 In contrast to Merleau-Ponty's account of communication as "boomerang perception" (74), Sullivan proposes a model of communication based on "hypothetical construction," a process, in which I do not impose my own meaning on another but put forth a hypothesis, a possible meaning, which is then subject to negotiation. In the resulting transactional non-dominating process both I and the other are mutually affected, reworking the ideas we have of our own as well as the other's self.

12 In Chapter 5 Sullivan attempts to apply the concept of transactional bodies to Nietzsche's various remarks on the "correlation between 'little things' of the body and the condition of the spirit" (115) in order to arrive at a pragmatist-feminist transactional somaesthetics. The aim of this somaesthetics is an improvement of "women's somatic experience" which, in Sullivan's eyes,

can then provide women with "the knowledge and motivation needed to initiate social political changes" (ibid.). More particularly, Sullivan suggests that, because our bodying tends to be non-transparent, women should rely on the "help of others to determine whether particular changes to [...] somatic experience are desirable" (123). This determination by others, however, seems highly problematic and should induce further discussions resulting, eventually, in a reworking of the concept of somaesthetics.

13 However, Sullivan's criticism and pragmatist reworking of Harding's feminist standpoint theory in Chapter 6 is much more convincing. Sullivan describes Harding's theory as directed against a view which claims that "objectivity is attained when humans know the world as impartial, neutral observers" (133). In opposition to this, Harding proposes an objectivity in which not the cultural dominant perspective, but the perspective of the marginalized Other, i.e. the perspective of women, is taken into account when negotiating "knowledge claims" (135). Sullivan convincingly shows that Harding's account of the perspective of women as "less partial and distorted" (136) than the masculine perspective still implies that "accurate reflection" (137) of reality is, at least in principle, possible. Therefore Harding does not abandon the belief in impartial, neutral observation of the world enabling a true knowledge.

14 In applying the notion of transactional bodies to the concept of truth and the process of attaining knowledge, Sullivan arrives at a definition of knowing as "a dynamic activity by which organisms guide and are guided by their transactions with the world" (142). In consequence, a notion of truth as accurate reflection of reality can no longer be maintained - truth is something that cannot be stated but something that "occurs when humans and their environments respond to and transact with one another in such a way that flourishing is achieved for both" (144). Even though one would have to ask who decides what this flourishing is (especially in a male-dominated discourse), Sullivan's account of transactional knowing might present an alternative to traditional accounts of truth, successfully mediating between an objectivism, which can never be achieved, and a judgmental relativism in which anything goes.

15 In her conclusion, Sullivan applies the notion of transactional bodies to the concept of race. She shows that if race, like gender and habit, is transactionally constituted, the need to transform "the rigid binaries of white and nonwhite [...] into fluid categories that are open to ongoing reconfiguration" (167) will not result in an erasing of all differences between the races. Instead, an active co- and reconstitution of race, and Whiteness in particular, is made possible. According to Sullivan, in this dynamic and reciprocal process the concept of Whiteness can be

reworked to denote something non-racist, thus offering an "important opportunity for white people to address their past and current racism in productively antiracist ways" (169).

16 The strength, and also the novelty, of Sullivan's *Living Across and Through Skins* certainly lies in its aligning of Dewey's pragmatist concept of transactional bodies with the works of various theorists, such as Merleau-Ponty, Nietzsche, Harding, and Butler. By supplementing these with the concept of transactional bodies, Sullivan often arrives at interesting conclusions. This aligning of concepts is most convincing, and most rewarding, in the case of Butler's theory, whose concepts of discursivity and performativity Sullivan shows to be compatible with the pragmatist notions of transaction and habit. There are shortcomings concerning the theory of somaesthetics, in which the determination by others will have to be reconsidered. Furthermore, an in-depth analysis of Dewey's concept of body-mind would have to show whether it indeed does not, as Sullivan claims, conflate body and mind into one. These blind spots, however, should be viewed as points of departure for future works in the field of pragmatist-feminism, rather than subtracting from the study's success. In conclusion, *Living Across and Through Skins* certainly presents an interesting contribution to the exploration of the connections between feminism and pragmatism offering various starting points for future studies.

Sarita Malik. *Representing Black Britain. A History of Black and Asian Images on British Television*. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2002.

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1 Sarita Malik's *Representing Black Britain* is an important contribution to SAGE's series *Culture, Representation and Identities*¹ which is dedicated to a particular understanding of 'cultural studies' as an inherently interdisciplinary project critically concerned with the analysis of cultural meaning. *Representing Black Britain* focuses on the medium of British television as the site where primarily White cultural meanings are produced and circulated. Drawing on Stuart Hall's notion of a 'racialized regime of representation'² Malik not only aims at exploring key ways in which racial identities are constructed within British television representation, but also attempts to identify processes of organizing, producing, and communicating such representations of racial identities through the medium of television.

2 Throughout this study, traditional British television broadcasting is considered as the primary site where the British nation is imagined and imagines itself. As the process of 'televisualization' is concerned with the mobilization of ideologically (and culturally) charged symbols and signs, television in itself is to be perceived as part of a 'machinery of representation' in Britain. Thus, Malik is principally interested in

those ideologies that underpin how racial identities are constructed within television representation by arguing that aspects of process and power play an integral part in how meaning, difference, identity and subjectivity are formed to produce a 'racialized regime of representation' (p. 26).

Inasmuch as the meanings of 'race' are always changing and never fixed, and 'culture' itself is in a perpetual flux, Malik faces the difficulty of identifying a simple progress model in representations of 'Blackness' on British television. As an impact of a contemporary 'cultural shift', the term 'culture' is to be read as extended to a much wider, more inclusive range of institutions and practices, including those labelled 'political' and 'economic'. This also applies to the case of a former overtly racist culture. As a consequence, one cannot talk about a television society that is more or less racist now compared to then. Rather, "we are experiencing different approaches, languages and ideologies around race" (p. 174), yet ones

¹ As Malik puts it "'Black' is used as a collective political working term to refer to those of African, Caribbean and South Asian descent [...]", p. 3.

² Hall, Stuart. (ed.) 1997. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 245.

that are still dictated by "neoliberal ideologies". Following Hall, Malik claims that 'liberalism' provides the ground for struggles over cultural and ideological meanings. It can be shared by "apparently disparate thinkers: racists, anti-racists, conservatives, assimilationists, social pluralists and so on" (p. 174). Therefore the liberal consensus is said to be the linchpin of 'inferential racism', or 'institutional racism', keeping established racisms in process. Even the liberal concept of 'multiculturalism' does not remain unaffected by the effects of institutional racism:

But behind this panorama of ever more normalized multiculturalism lies a cycle of racial codes, preferred readings, blocked access, and a profoundly uneven multiculturalism, laced with a liberal claim to 'show it like it is'. The incontestability has intensified over the years, making new racist meanings increasingly difficult to pin down, as television confronts us with progressively more coded and yet seemingly neutral patterns of raced representation. (p. 174)

3 In addition to this critical reading of liberalism, the author then goes on to propose a model of 'social Whiteness' which has to be understood as a hegemonic racialized structure sustaining itself "through the medium's iterative discourses of family, nation and citizenship" (p. 179). According to Malik, the discourse of Whiteness hegemonizes itself "by assuming the racial (White) homogeneity of the British television nation" (p. 179), and by projecting 'difference' onto non-White / Black communities. Whereas Black people have been racialized in representation, White people do not seem to be represented in terms of 'race'. Whilst 'the Black presence' on British television is shown to cause 'race relations' such as racial political correctness, race riots, racist attitudes, or racial sensitivity, Whiteness is to be found *everywhere* and does not require to be 'marked'. Yet at the same time, it is presumed to be nowhere in particular, since it continuously sets itself up as the regulating prescriptive norm. Inasmuch as this "cultural territory of Whiteness" is said to maintain itself through this universalization and naturalization, it

processes Others' 'racial difference' through assorted cultural and ideological practices such as spectacle, objectification, desire, envy, fantasy, exclusion, nostalgia and selection. (p. 181)

4 In terms of the history of British television, the concept of 'social Whiteness' and its practices of representing 'Blackness' have manifested themselves within three chronological phases: 1. the formative years of television (up to the 1970s) that are characterized by a double marginalization of the 'problematic' Black subject - as the victim of racism on the one hand, and as the victim of alienation within the race-related narrative on the other hand; 2. the challenge of 'social Whiteness' within the framework of the emerging forces of 'multiculturalism' during the 1970s and 1980s (institutionalization of the Black voice); and 3.

the recent unsettling of 'social Whiteness' and signs of confident Black-British ethnicities playing out their influence on the nation, as well as "the resurgence of new forms of nationalist discourse which call upon the 'authenticity' of Britain as an 'essentially' White nation" (p. 182).

5 Therefore, the overall aim of Malik's study is not merely to identify overtly racist discourses on British television, but, above all, to lay bare the self-maintaining and racializing processes of 'social Whiteness', even within the ideological paradigm of 'liberalism'. Malik's thorough analysis of programme materials and forms covers a wide range of television genres such as documentary, news, comedy, light entertainment, sport, television drama, and film.³ Separate discussions of the respective genres in terms of a socio-historical overview of Black on-screen presence on the one hand, and in terms of a close analysis of strategies of representation with regard to particular formats on the other hand, constitute the main body of this critical history of the representation of Black and Asian images on British television.

6 Malik opens her close analysis of programme materials with the so-called 'truth genres' such as documentary and news. These work through codes of verisimilitude, realism and impartiality in order to represent 'Blackness' as a 'social problem' which needs to be 'solved'. Particularly in the news genre, the race riot becomes the main signifier of a 'social crisis' connected with 'Blackness', for it represents 'trouble' caused by the 'presence of Blackness'. Reports on race riots on different channels are shown to exhibit the same formulaic structure (images of chaotic riots, police efforts to manage the chaos, an emotive case study of an injured White policeman, the views of politicians, and finally the 'troubled past' of the riot area). As Malik puts it, there seems to be a "universal consensus about what news is and how it should be presented" (p.88).

7 In the 'body genres' such as comedy, light entertainment (including youth culture) and sport, the representational focus is turned to the 'performing body of the Black man'. Since comedy raises the question of whether the audience laughs with or at the performing comedian, especially the Black entertainer becomes the focal point of ambivalence:

the innermost workings of the comedy text when it touches on aspects of racial difference, is dependent [...] on a cultural politics of representation centred on ambivalence (p. 91).⁴

Similarly ambivalent is the treatment of the Black male body within the genre of television

³ The genres are almost entirely based on Britain's five major terrestrial, networked channels BBC1, BBC2, ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5.

⁴ Nevertheless, Malik mentions the exceptional comedy series "Goodness Gracious Me" (BBC2, 1998-2001) as a good example of how to challenge racial stereotypes.

sports that binds nation and race together. Television sports is particularly discriminatory in its system of marking difference when it touches upon 'race': "Black people are deemed Other, alien, different; on other occasions, they are embraced as British" (p. 124). The Black performer/athlete connotes 'to-be-looked-at-ness' (e.g. Black iconically powerful 'trophy-men'), but is rarely allowed to look, for instance in the function of a professional commentator. With regard to the genre of light entertainment which include 'the lived cultures' such as pop culture, Black youth culture (e.g. rap, hip-hop), or hybrid fusion culture (e.g. drum 'n' bass, house), Malik finds that they "largely maintain themselves on their own terms by remaining external to the formal [television] culture" (p. 121). The young culturally active produce and organize cultural practices themselves rather than wait to be 'represented'.

8 Whilst the 'truth genres' and the 'body genres' depend on representing and reproducing a pre-given 'reality', the 'mind genres', such as television drama and film, only have "a set of choices to make about whom, how and what to represent" (p. 135). With respect to drama, Malik - with a few exceptions - criticizes token inclusion or absence of Black characters in British soap operas, crime series, or social drama. The increasing success of Black-British filmmaking in the 1990s, due to important shifts in the institutional context of British broadcasting (e.g. Channel 4 funding), gave way to an attempt at representing Black characters more "accurately." As the author suggests, Black-British films visually work through official race narratives, challenging Black stereotypes, and thus they allow more than one way of representing 'Asianness', 'Blackness', or 'Britishness'.

9 As Stuart Hall puts it in his foreword to Sarita Malik's challenging study, the combination of concrete analysis and historical survey within each chapter enables the author to handle the mass of material circumspectively and, finally, to produce a coherent critical history. While chapter 1 and the final chapter 10 provide the theoretical framework for this book, the detailed genre-based case-studies of particular programmes (chapters 2-9) are not merely used to back up the theoretical framework, but are also situated in Britain's socio-historical context. The purpose of the study is not to propose a unitary concept of 'the accurate representation of Blackness'. It rather critically posits the counter-concept of 'social Whiteness' which provides the territory where overt and institutional racism are tolerated.

10 At times Malik runs the risk of going too far in her explorations of institutional racism: whereas there seems to be no doubt about the existence of a 'raced' language of sports coverage, it nevertheless remains questionable if the comment "Tyson's moment of

savagery"⁵, following the Holyfield ear-biting incident in 1997, refers to Tyson's 'raced status'. The comment primarily seems to refer to the act of 'ear-biting', and a White 'ear-biter' is likely to be commented on in the same way. Another weakness of Malik's study is that she almost exclusively focuses on how male 'Blackness' is constructed and produced in the discourse of 'social Whiteness'. The treatment of Black feminist and feminist issues could have widened the theoretical scope of the book in order to shed light on the interconnections between 'race', 'gender', and 'sexuality'. However, in any case this remarkably thorough study can be strongly recommended to every student and academic in cultural studies, postcolonial studies, media studies, and gender studies.

⁵ ITN *New at One*, ITV, tx: 9.7.197; (p. 127, 134); my emphasis.

Excerpt from Atima Srivastava's *Looking for Maya* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1999)

© By Atima Srivastava (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1999)

Excerpt from *Looking for Maya*. (Chapter One)

Sipping an espresso, I stretched out my legs in the sunlight. All around me, people were babbling in different languages, students, tourists. The waiter in his crisp apron carried precarious coffees to the tables set on the pavement. Behind me, I could hear the Italian football on the big screen, inside the café and I felt inexplicably happy. The final examinations were over, the long Summer: yawned before me and I had a feeling that I was going to live and live. There was another café opposite on Greek Street, where people in sunglasses were sitting sipping coffees, but Bar Italia was still the original café in Soho. It stayed open till three in the morning when people emerged from Ronnie Scott's jazz club across the road. They were served hot coffee and croissants and sweet cakes. Maison Bertaux, the old French *pâtisserie* was a hundred yards away, the black; hairdressers with old-fashioned chrome chairs and durex machine, the Pakistani newsagent that sold European papers, the Polish lunch bar full of old men in cravats. I'd told Luke all about the corners of London, full of different cultures, introduced him proudly to places that he had only heard about as he was growing up by the sea.

I felt his arm sliding around my shoulders. He nuzzled the side of his head lovingly against my neck and the newly cut hair bristled against my skin. And suddenly, it occurred to me that I hadn't been aware of Luke for these delicious minutes of knowing I was living in my beautiful city. I moved my head to take a look as he slipped easily into the chair next to mine.

'Looks great,' I smiled, rubbing my thumb against the side of his head, like the fur on a cat.

'It's an amazing place. Just like you said. A real barber's shop. Faded signed photographs from the fifties and everything,' he said generously, smiling at me.

I knew how much he loved me. I'd known it since we'd met at the beginning of our final year. We'd come together finally, having seen each other moving around campus with different groups, with other people, until at last, (we liked to say), met at the right time. Of all the places for students to meet, we had met in the library. Of course I had noticed him before, it was impossible not to. Luke had one of those faces that couldn't be described without the word honest slotted in somewhere. His smile was dazzling, his eyes clear and blue and twinkling. He was handsome like anything, serious and eager and keen. He had put down his books and asked me for a cigarette, our conversation easily staggering into the information:

what subject, where do you live, what sort of music. The lights had gone out and we'd said goodbye, almost immediately bumping into each other again in the coffee bar, and then again in the square. We couldn't stop smiling that day, soaking each other in, feeling exuberant, sitting in the Union bar till it closed too, and already knowing each other.

The university was in an old shipbuilding town with no romantic spots. We drove down in Luke's old Saab to the harbour to see the sunset, stayed till moonlight, unwilling to let each other out of sight. He liked old things, old cars and old ideas, despised Englishness and its restrictions, loved music and its egalitarianism. He held my hand and looked into my face. We had leaned into a kiss and the kiss had gone on for hours; a silent rushing journey through the stars. Lost in space. At the end of the kiss, we had come to the heart of each other, gasping for breath, exhilarated with the moon and the world and everything.

'I want to know all about you. Everything and still keep going, never get to the end of it,' he'd said, his bright blue eyes shining.

'I feel like I've known you for ever. And there's so much I want to show you,' I'd said, both of us so wrapped up in the deep romance of it, unaware that: people everywhere say such things and believe them to be unique.

Luke was my first real boyfriend. Almost immediately we had fallen into the patterns of a life together, enjoying the shopping, the cooking, the TV, essay writing. Friends who shared the same bed. The ease with which we spent the last stage of our formal education together, made it the best time of my life. He didn't know about the Kings Road or the Marquee in Wardour Street or about jumping the trains without a ticket and I had gleefully filled in his gaps of knowledge. We had hitched into London on weekends, bought leopardskin trousers and Spotlight hair dye, watched bands in dark smoky clubs and kissed on the last train back. Sometimes, Luke's open admiration for my fake cosmopolitan experience made me uneasy but I admired him too, for all he'd shown me: which knife in a restaurant, the recreational use of soft drugs, the window into his life at public school. We had become a couple on campus, a couple people liked to look at. I knew he liked it less than I, for him our relationship was beyond that, it was close and deep. Yet, it was enjoyable to be looked at together. We were lithe and attractive, my dark skin against his pale skin, his hair blond, mine dark. Our arms were always wrapped around each other making a creature which was IndianEnglish. Luke liked that phrase I had coined as my own, although I had stolen it from Indian cinema magazines which had gossip columns in that strange hybrid language full of Indian words written in English italics. We had given it another meaning, my white boyfriend and his dusky damsel.

Luke consulted his watch and grimaced. 'We'll have to go soon. I said I'd meet Ralph after lunch.'

I nodded, leaning my head back on the chair, feeling the sunshine pressing on my skin. Luke called both his parents by their first names and although I'd said RaviKavi in my head, and even for fun sometimes, I could never get used to calling my parents by the pet name their friends had for them.

'Ralph's having lunch with an old friend. From the old days. We won't stay long,' said Luke, pulling on a cigarette. We were both watching the street through our sunglasses. It amused me how Luke regarded family obligation as a chore, even though he only ever had to see his mum and dad at Christmas and birthdays and occasional times when one of them was in town. Even when I'd left home and started living sixty miles from London, RaviKavi expected full weekly reports and fortnightly meetings with me. Their eager questionnaires hadn't changed since I'd been at school, excavating the English world on their behalf. What did they give you to eat at dinner, my dad would ask, what do you mean they only seasoned the chops with salt and pepper?

'Excuse me,' said a woman with a camera in her hands, stopping by our table. 'Do you mind if I take a photograph of you?'

Luke and I looked at each other without taking off our sunglasses and smiled broadly.

'I'm from *Pinned* magazine, we're doing a photo spread of Londoners. Interesting looking people,' she smiled.

I felt a surge of love for Luke, at how beautiful he must look to her, and me next to him, beautiful by association. It had never been anything passionate, we had fitted together like spoons, admiring each other like complementary things. Horse and carriage, bread and cheese.

The photographer asked us both to lean towards the camera, and at the last minute Luke threw his arm around me and pulled me close. He wanted to say, 'It's not just a pose, it's incidental this superficial beauty, there's more to it than that.' For Luke the long kiss at the harbour was always a point of reference, a feeling he liked to revive between us, but it seemed to me that that heat, that white intensity had cooled to blood temperature, to a level where we now lived contentedly and peacefully. She took my address, as I was the one with an address in London and said she'd send us the magazine.

'We'll be late,' said Luke paying the waiter. Suddenly, I didn't want to meet Ralph or his friend, I wanted to push Luke into a doorway crowded with cardboard boxes and oil drums, kiss him long and hard on the lips against the barrage of noise and colour in my sweet City, in

my wonderful world.

Ralph was sitting with his old friend at a table inside the cool elegance of a small restaurant in Meard Mews. Shadows passed over them from the large window facing the garrulous street. Ralph stood up as he saw us arrive, our frayed shorts and sandalled feet stepping upon the thick carpet. The chill of the air conditioning hit me like a slap and I shivered. I liked Ralph, I'd met him twice and I knew how well he approved of me. I realized with a shock that his friend at the table looking at us diligently, was Indian. He was wearing a pale linen jacket with an open shirt and his hair was thick and wavy, flopping over one bushy eyebrow, and he had a shaggy moustache which covered his top lip. On his nose rested thin metal-framed John Lennon - my father would have said: Gandhiji - glasses. How typical of Luke to have not mentioned it. English people never thought it quite correct to point out racial difference, thought it vulgar to assume that an Indian should be interested or even know another Indian in a big city. RaviKavi were obsessed with it, always nosing out connections, however tenuous, to mark their country and their long journey. Arrey, my dad would say to a complete stranger, are you related to the Mehtas in Allahabad, then you are almost my neighbour, you will be insulting me by not coming to my house for khaana.

Ralph shook Luke's hand and gave me a little hug and pulled out a chair for me. His friend was looking at me curiously and I remember thinking, he's old, but he's quite handsome. For a moment I wasn't sure that he was Indian, because his skin was so fair, the colour of pale golden tobacco and his eyes were grey more than brown. I didn't know Indians could have grey eyes.

'Amrit, this is Luke, I think you remember my errant son, and this is his lovely friend, Mira,' said Ralph expansively. 'Amrit Kaushik, Mira Chowdhary.'

'Hello,' said Amrit looking at both of us. 'So nice to see you.'

'Good grief!' said Ralph, taking in Luke's appearance. 'Is this a new fashion?'

Luke smiled and exhaled smoke. 'Yeah, it's a new fashion, Ralph.'

'Two earrings?' said Ralph doubtfully. 'One earring, alright, although in our day, that meant something else altogether.'

'In Indian villages, lots of men wear two earrings, It doesn't mean they're doubly homosexual,' said Luke and I sucked in my lips in order not to laugh. I noticed a smile creeping around Amrit's face. Ralph looked crushed.

'London is, after all, only a village,' smiled Amrit. 'And our days are over, Ralph.' We all laughed. 'Now,' he said, cleverly changing the subject, 'would you like something to drink? Or

perhaps a dessert. They're rather good here.'

We said we'd have some wine and coffee and Amrit looked at the menu and ordered a bottle of Chardonnay. I looked around the restaurant at the waiters standing in shadows and the murmuring diners and I crossed my legs underneath the weight of the thick damask tablecloth. His accent was Indian, but not like any Indian accent I had ever heard. It was Indian but it was posh, there was no confusion of Ws pronounced as Vs, a distinction that my father after spending twenty years in England still couldn't discern. His accent wasn't like my father's lumbering careful English, a language he always seemed to be getting over and done with before he could luxuriate in his perfectly modulated Hindi. It wasn't like Mr Ahmed the ticket collector at the station who had always had plenty to say in English and Urdu about the colours I had dyed my hair at the age of sixteen. Amrit's accent wasn't like the blacked-up Benny Hill, or Peter Sellers or the Sabu character in the old black and white movies. He didn't sound like the Visiting Gods who came to stay in their hordes with RaviKavi and pronounced Cambridge as Kambridge, snacks as snakes.

The waiter showed Amrit the bottle and poured a little into his glass. Amrit smiled and said softly, 'I'm sure it's fine,' and gestured towards my glass. It struck me as supremely sophisticated to not even bother to taste the wine, because if it wasn't very expensive, what did it matter? It was mere affectation. I thought with shame of how I had dragged Tash into a restaurant in London, to show off what I had learnt from Luke, sipped a glass of cheap wine with a serious expression on my face.

'Hmmm, yes I think I do remember you,' Luke was saying and so I looked at him and then at Amrit, as though legitimately. 'Once, in the holidays.'

'Kids,' said Ralph.

'I tried to teach you chess. You weren't terribly interested. But then you were a dreaded teenager,' smiled Amrit. He didn't look at me.

Luke began to smoke and smiled back at Amrit politely.

'Would you pass the ashtray, Ralph?' he said.

Within five seconds of meeting Ralph, Luke became formal, a little resentful at being his father's son. It seemed to be their way of relating to each other, this over-formality and I supposed it was how all boys who had been to public school sat with their fathers. There were no excited howls of 'hello' and 'ahh' on the phone between them, as there were between me and my parents who drove me mad the way they treated every word, every contact from me as a national holiday.

'And how are you, Mira? How are things with you?' said Ralph, leaning across to me with

a genial smile.

I shrugged. 'OK, I haven't done much about anything. I suppose I should think about getting a job.'

'You must talk to Amrit,' said Ralph suddenly. 'He's a writer too.'

I cringed. I had won a short story competition some months ago, won a hundred pounds, blown it on a weekend to Spain with Luke, who had boasted to everybody about his girlfriend the writer. RaviKavi had smiled knowingly on the phone. Of course I was going to be a writer eventually, despite the degree in History; it was in our genes. Never mind that RaviKavi hadn't written for twenty years, left their literary friends behind in Delhi and Bombay, lost all the books they had published, dismissed the mark they had each made on the landscape of Hindi poetry.

'Oh, god, it's nothing. Nothing really. Of no consequence,' I said with embarrassment as Luke and Ralph explained.

'All writers begin from no consequences,' grinned Amrit.

'Mira's parents are both poets,' said Ralph proudly, even though he had never met my parents, never heard them reciting their poems about rural India and democracy and open skies to the Visiting Gods who stayed in the house and belched their way through the London itineraries prepared by my parents.

'Really?' said Amrit turning towards me 'What are their names?'

I smiled. It was such an Indian question. English people asked your name out of politeness and necessity, but for an Indian your surname signified everything they needed to know about where you came from, what sort of background, even what your profession was. When I was growing up, the stubborn point in our little triangular family, I used to think Indian people walked about with maps rolled up under their arms, ready to pinpoint each other, label them and talk of them, in the stereotypes they had unearthed. Arrey, he is a Gujju, don't expect a discount . . . Delhi has full-eee degenerated under this pushy Punjabi culture . . . of course he is a scholar, Bengalis have always been . . .

Amrit hadn't heard of Ravi Chowdhary or Kavita Joshi, but he nodded just the same, and I was aware that I wanted to tell him, wanted him to know where I was from, which meant explaining where RaviKavi were from. He knew Lucknow, how civilized the people were in that small town where my parents had grown up speaking that gorgeous language referred to as Hindustani, the mix of Urdu and Hindi reminiscent of the Nawabs of Oudh.

'You know what they say about Kayastas?' said Amrit with a smile. 'This caste you belong to, the writers' caste. This odd fifth caste. They began as scribes in the Mughal empire and

imbibed the ways of, the Muslims. My father used to say, never trust a Kayasta, they are sharaabi kebabis. They drink and eat meat, they are nearly Muslims, themselves!"

We all burst out laughing and I felt an odd kinship with him because he knew these things.

'I thought Muslims didn't drink?' said Luke ingenuously.

'They're not supposed to drink,' I said shyly. 'But their music and literature...'

'Hindus are a pious lot,' declared Amrit and smiled.

'The fifth caste?' asked Luke in puzzlement.

'See, they are neither priests, nor warriors, nor merchants. Nor are they the "Children of God",' Amrit smiled. 'They are side-ys.'

I laughed out loud at his use of the euphemism for Untouchability, at his use of Bollywood slang for hooligans.

'But surely,' insisted Luke, 'the caste system isn't relevant any more? Not amongst educated, urban people?'

'Indeed, indeed,' said Amrit, with such a show of innocence, that I wanted to laugh again.

He didn't have intimate knowledge of the world of Hindi literature but he knew how I had learnt my language, from the privileged position of the daughter of poets amongst traders and clerks and bank managers. He knew in the way, I realized with a sudden shock, Luke or Ralph would never know. His Hindi pronunciation was accented. He must be an English writer, I remember thinking.

And your parents, do they live here too?' asked Amrit.

'They've gone back to India, because my granddad died and my dad had to sort out the house and then they went to Delhi because they're trying to build a house there on a plot they bought years ago,' I said in a rush.

I wondered if he knew automatically the freedom enshrined in those words. If he could imagine how my heart had soared at their worried faces at Terminal 3, when they were leaving me behind, all alone, unheard of, free as a bird. How I had reassured them that I would be fine, I would look in on their house regularly, I would manage very well in the flat they had recently purchased in an uncharacteristic burst of investment. I would thrive on the monthly allowance they had arranged with my bank. RaviKavi had never planned their lives, looked down their noses at money They had moved from their small town to big cities, but always lived frugally, enjoying their own community of two, never making any real friends in this country, inviting all the old ones to come and complete and redraw the circle of Delhi-Bombay-London.

'I've been living independently for nearly three years anyway, Dad, what's the problem?'

I'd said confidently and RaviKavi had frowned at each other.

'We'll speak every week You keep all your doors locked. We'll be back soon,' my dad had threatened me 'Soon' had turned into months, because land plots couldn't be abandoned, building work couldn't be left unsupervised in Delhi, which was lawless these days, so their blue aerogrammes had explained.

'Take as long as you want,' I'd said generously, already seeing my brilliant future spreading before me like a glittering universe.

'Don't be funny,' my mother had admonished.

RaviKavi hadn't any need to say don't do anything to excess, don't be a bad girl, don't make us ashamed of you. Lucknow people didn't speak directly, it was vulgar. In the Mughal times, the pattern of conversation had been full of incredible politenesses, delightfully archaic phrases that my father had often regaled me with. When the cultured Muslims went to enquire after a friend's health, they didn't rudely ask, 'Are you unwell?' They would say, 'I hear those who wish you ill, are unwell.'

'Ralph tells me you're off to foreign parts?' said Amrit, neatly changing the subject from me to Luke and I was glad of it.

'I'm planning a trip to India,' said Luke enthusiastically, absently slipping his hand across the table over mine. I couldn't help feeling a mixture of elation and embarrassment whenever Luke demonstrated affection towards me in front of either of his parents. They had thought nothing of Luke and me sleeping together in the spare room in their house in Brighton, twenty minutes from the front. Somehow, despite his Englishness, I was conscious of Amrit's eyes upon us, just like I had always been fearful of 'uncles' and 'aunties' roaming the Pizza Parades and Chix Chox of my childhood in North London. Any boys I knew then had been strictly instructed by me that kissing and cuddling was naff in public. I had yearned to snog on pavements, suck tongues at the bus, but the humiliation of my parents' certain disappointment had been too much to bear. University had been the site of permissiveness, safely sixty miles from uncles and aunties and Lucknow sensibilities.

'Luke's researching the musical influences of the East upon the Western tradition,' said Ralph, and Amrit raised his eyebrows.

'I'm waiting for a grant from the Arts Council, it should be enough for a few months,' said Luke. 'There's an international artists' community on the edge of Delhi. It's a sort of cultural centre, multi disciplined. I want to go and stay there.'

Amrit nodded and smiled. 'Yes, I met the fellow who runs it, Prem Nath, at the Royal Festival Hall last summer. I was doing a reading there. You remember, Ralph, when we saw

the Bach recital?'

I looked at Amrit talking so knowledgeably about so many things and I thought how clever he is, and then I looked into my wine.

'He's a really fascinating person,' said Luke, 'and actually an accomplished musician himself, a tabla player. He was extremely supportive and it's an area that hasn't really been touched upon. I'm interested in the wandering troubadours; they still practise their craft, in almost exactly the same way, the making of the instruments, the oral tradition, the movements, they're still intact.' Luke looked up sheepishly and I smiled at him because he reminded me of an absent minded professor whenever he talked about his work, oblivious to everyone around him. Ralph and Amrit were listening with serious faces.

'Luke's worked very hard,' said Ralph softly, looking at his watch. He was really proud of Luke, I knew that, but Luke never seemed to notice. They were so alike in many ways, so warm and tender to everyone and so diffident with each other. Two people who kept missing each other the whole time, substituting the loss of communication with barbed comments.

'Yeah,' I grinned and made a face. 'Luke's a real swot.'

Luke grinned back at me and held my stare. And I thought with a start, that my opinion was the only one at the table that interested him, that I was the person who mattered to him most. I looked away hurriedly and drank down the glass.

'Luke, you haven't forgotten Mum's birthday?' said Ralph. 'We're having a do. You'll bring Mira, of course?'

Luke clicked his tongue in exasperation. 'Of course I haven't forgotten. I thought I'd get her a line drawing of the Pier, I saw one in Charing Cross Road of all places. Pen and ink. It's quite old.'

'Yes, she'd like that,' said Ralph.

I leant my elbow on the table, cupping my chin, and 'thought how formal they were and how estranged I was from Luke's life. And I had an odd feeling of utter happiness as though one could always be free from another person's spleen and blood and manners. I was conscious of Amrit sitting opposite me and I wondered if he too felt like an outsider, an Indian amongst English people and happy to be there, intact in himself.

'I'm sorry,' said Ralph, reaching for his wallet, 'I really have to go. I have to make an auction by three and I'll be driving back. Luke, I did say two o'clock.'

'Never mind, Dad,' said Luke. 'Give my love to Mum. I'll phone her in the next couple of days.'

'Let me,' said Amrit, placing a finger on Ralph's sleeve.

'Ok,' said Ralph cheerfully. 'Sorry I can't make the launch. Too hectic.'

Amrit waved it off good naturedly and then he turned to us. 'If you're free, you're welcome to come along. It would be nice to have some young people there. There'll be some wine and some boring speeches but you might find it amusing,' he said.

'Amrit's new book is just about to come out,' explained Ralph. 'I hope at least, Luke, you can come up with some suitable...'

'Come as you are, both of you,' grinned Amrit. 'Don't be so stuffy, Ralph.'

They laughed like old friends. I looked at Luke who was smoking as he leant back in his chair, a resolute expression set on his face. Amrit smiled and pushed an invitation across the tablecloth towards me and as my fingers touched upon the slim card, I saw his eyes rising to look into mine.

'It would be nice to see you, Luke,' said Amrit. 'I'd like to hear some more about your obsessions. Both of you.'

List of Contributors

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