

## Sex Between Women and Indianness: Vulnerable Casted Bodies

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**Antonia Navarro-Tejero,**

**"Sex Between Women and Indianness: Vulnerable Casted Bodies"**

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Special Issue ***Gendered Bodies in Transit: Between Vulnerability and Resistance***. Ed. **Manuela Coppola and Maria Isabel Romero Ruiz**

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**Abstract:** In her essay, "Sex Between Women and Indianness: Vulnerable Casted Bodies," Antonia Navarro-Tejero examines the lesbian experience, using two heterosexual voices representing the lesbian abject: Shobha Dé's popular bestseller novel *Strange Obsession* (1992) and Karan Razdan's Bollywood film *Girlfriend* (2004), as they espouse the dominant ideology of heteronormativity, rendering homosexuality as a western illness that taints the Indian culture. First, the author provides an overview of the history of lesbian desire in India, and how it is rendered by Hindu nationalists. Then, following the postulates of Michel Foucault, she analyzes both cultural texts with respect to how same-sex desire is represented in relation to religious morality. Both works deploy, and manipulate for dramatic effect, a repertoire of visual/textual stereotypes that have long been associated in misogynist and patriarchal imagination with perceptions of lesbian (Christian) women as sexually abject and heterosexual (Hindu) partners as victims of their insanity. She concludes that, because women's sexuality is deployed in the services of reproducing the nation, lesbianism symbolizes a threat to the Hindu family.

## Antonia NAVARRO-TEJERO

### Sex Between Women and Indianness: Vulnerable Casted Bodies

In this essay, we examine the lesbian experience, narrated by two heterosexual voices as they represent the lesbian subject: Shobha Dé's popular bestseller novel *Strange Obsession* (1992) and Karan Razdan's Bollywood film *Girlfriend* (2004). Providing overview of the history of lesbian desire in India, and how it is rendered by Hindu nationalists, we analyze both cultural texts regarding how same-sex desire is represented in relation to religious morality, following the postulates of Michel Foucault. Shobha Dé's novel and Karan Razdan's film *Girlfriend* (from now on references to *Strange Obsession* and *Girlfriend* are given in abbreviations SO and G) deploy, and manipulate for dramatic effect, a repertoire of visual/textual stereotypes that have long been associated in misogynist and patriarchal imagination with perceptions of lesbian (Christian) women as sexual objects and heterosexual (Hindu) partners as victims of their insanity. We conclude by stating that as women's sexuality is deployed in the service of reproducing the nation, lesbianism symbolizes a threat to the Hindu family that needs to be eradicated, as both authors espouse the dominant ideology of heteronormativity, rendering homosexuality as a western illness that taints the Indian culture.

After July 2009, slogans at the Queer Pride March such as "Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Isai; Hetero, Homo *bhai bhai*" (we are brothers) functioned as open celebrations of diversity and solidarity, as Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code was declared overdue by the Delhi High Court, decriminalizing consensual sex among gay adults for being unconstitutional. It is important to notice that this anti-sodomy law was introduced into the Indian Penal Code on October 6, 1860, by the Indian Law Commission, presided over by Lord Macaulay. Such celebrations have lasted only a few years as that decision was overturned by the Supreme Court in December 2013. It is usual at the Queer Pride parades in several parts of India that people of different sexual orientations demand equal legal, social and medical rights for the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Queer, Intersex, and Hijra community (LGBTQIH). The term LGBTQIH has been proposed to encompass the *hijra* third gender identity (transgender individual who was assigned male at birth). In April 2014 The Supreme Court recognized *hijra* as a third gender in law, including an option for them on passports and certain official documents. On January 30, 2017, Mumbai witnessed the biggest Queer Pride March, supporting *Dalits*, Muslims, women, disabled, Kashmiris, North-Eastern people, *Adivasis*, academics, filmmakers and students for the state censorship and discrimination suffered in the last few years in the secular Republic of India, a democracy which supposedly fosters freedom of expression. They not only demand to get rid of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, but also to repeal Karnataka Police Act 36A and Hyderabad Eunuch Act, anti-beggary, anti-Hijra laws, sedition laws, Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) and Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA). They also demanded the removal of the marital rape exception for rape laws which should offer redressal to all victims and survivors of sexual assault irrespective of gender. We need to clarify that the UAPA is a law aimed to prevent unlawful activities in India directed against the integrity and sovereignty of the country. The act has received criticism, since it enables the government to annihilate fundamental rights such as free speech and association. On the other hand, the AFSPA grants special powers to the armed forces in what the act calls 'disturbed areas' in the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Jammu and Kashmir. The Act has received criticism for human rights violations in the regions of its enforcement.

As the Constitution prohibits anything that might offend religious sensitivities, those who push the boundaries in sexual or religious morality are banned by Hindu nationalists as anti-Indian. This obsession to criminalize "carnal intercourse against the order of nature" is encouraged by various social and religious organizations in India, which filed appeals challenging the Delhi High Court verdict on the ground that "gay sex" is against the cultural and religious values of the country. The Sangh Parivar (a Hindu nationalist group started by members of the Rashtriya Svayamsevak Sangh - RSS) champions the ideology of Hindutva, and is favored by the right-wing political party Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Organizations such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Bajrang Dal, Sri Ram Sena and Shiv Sena are part of the Sangh Parivar. They all claim that being homosexual is un-Indian, appealing to cultural beliefs where same-sex desire is alleged to be a Western phenomenon and therefore against Indian values. Many conservatives see it as an attack on the traditions of extended families and arranged marriages by a queer invasion from the West. We should not forget that Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1996) was the first lesbian-themed film in India, which was violently condemned by Hindu nationalists as evidence of the corruption of Indian culture by the West. The women's wing of the right-wing nationalist Group Shiv Sena, Mahila Aghadi, filed a petition to ban *Fire* on the grounds that if "women's physical needs get fulfilled through lesbian acts, the institution of marriage will collapse" and that the "reproduction of human beings will

stop." (Praveen). It is interesting to note that this group is based in Maharashtra, in which both Dé and Razdan are located. They criticized the filmmaker's diasporic status (Canadian) and the western funding of the movie, claiming that lesbians do not exist in India and any representation of a lesbian is an inauthentic Indian. Gayatri Gopinath addresses the prehistory of *Fire* (in its nationalist logic of casting lesbianism as un-Indian) as a western epistemological issue and focuses on its rootedness in the Indian context in her *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*.

An official with the Hindu right-wing BJP, Navin Sinha, when asked about gays and lesbians in 2008, declared that for "one thousand years in our culture, those two things you mentioned — I don't even want to say the words — they have not been there" (Harvey, qtd in Hunt 324), stating that the gay rights movement is an abysmal, absurd thing. Another politician, Vishnu Hari Dalmiya, former President of the Hindu nationalist Vishwa Hindu Parishad party, claimed that "Making homosexuality legal will be an attack on Indian society. For Hindus, this kind of behavior is not just against nature, it is against our culture" (Williams). Current Prime Minister Narendra Modi's favorite Guru, Baba Ramdev, likened homosexuality to drug addiction and said it could be cured through yoga, as covered in the Deccan Chronicle ("Homosexuality") and Livemint (Pradhan). Furthermore, a leader of the conservative Hindu nationalist group Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, general secretary Dattatreya Hosabale, stated in the *Hindustan Times* that homosexuality is a socially immoral act that should be treated as a psychological case ("RSS"). According to the *Washington Post*, since the 2013 ruling by Modi (BJP), anti-gay violence has tripled and hundreds have been arrested (Gowen).

Brinda Bose, in her article "Gay For More Than A Day Of Rage" reminds us that this Indian Penal Code section was framed in British colonial times, but was accepted and legitimized by Jawaharlal Nehru and B.R. Ambedkar when power transferred back to native hands, as they both worked on the Constitution of the Republic of India, which came into force on 26 January 1950, after 3 years of drafting and discussions in the Constituent Assembly. She believes that the Supreme Court's failure to uphold Delhi High Court verdict "damns not just the LGBTQI+ community which we belong to or support, but just about each and every one of us in our politics, philosophies, agentic actions, dreams and fantasies, as it also damns our first nation-builders whom we invoke in all our incantations of freedom and glory." That, because it was the founding fathers of India who did not think it necessary to delete what the British had imposed on the subcontinent, though they did not just replicate 377, but several other colonial laws. According to Mayur Suresh, quoted in Yuvraj Joshi in *The Guardian*, the challenge posed by Voices Against 377 does not only concern the right to life, due process or non-discrimination, but it calls into question what it means to live and love in a democratic society. Suresh represents Voices Against 377, a coalition of 12 non-governmental organizations and progressive groups based in Delhi, where a united voice is being articulated against Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. He likens discrimination against homosexuals to the practice of untouchability, which was made illegal when India adopted its constitution in 1950. Section 377 was enacted by the British colonial regime to criminalize "carnal intercourse against the order of nature." This law concerning homosexuality was rooted in the Judeo-Christian religious morality of the Victorian era that, with its notions of chastity, abhorred non-procreative sex. One of the examples Ashwini Sukthankar provides to prove the invisibility of lesbians in India is the story of Queen Victoria, who refused to believe that female homosexuality existed (Castle 67), proving the heterosexual model as the only possible one, and centuries of Christian denial of lesbianism. Ronald Hyam in his *Empire and Sexuality* suggests that the British had sexual relationships with Indian native women, which helped spread diseases. That led to the project of racial and sexual purity. As the soldiers claimed they needed women, they created official brothels. In the mid-1850s these native women went through regular medical tests in the *lal bazaars* (red markets). They were created exclusively for the whites, although Indians could use them when the soldiers were on duty. This system was created to prevent sexual activity "against nature," so that prostitutes became the cure of unnatural crimes. In 1888 brothels were banned by the purity campaign in England with the Contagious Diseases Act of the 1860s. These campaigns exported categories of masculinity and femininity and asked native people to get free from prostitution and from the "special Oriental vice," which was homosexual activity.

However, the diverse representation of same-sex love can be found not only in contemporary Indian culture, but also in Ancient texts in vernacular languages, as professors Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai, among other critics, have been demonstrating since the late 1990s. Scholarship of the twenty-first-century, which emerged after lesbian activism in India, indicates a focus on recovering the indigenous lesbian subject. This should be seen as a response to nationalist claims that the lesbian is inherently Western and that lesbians do not exist in India—some examples are the work of Vanita and Kidwai, and Vanita, Fernandez, and Thadani. In their book *Same-Sex Love in India*, Vanita and Kidwai use the Sanskrit story "The Embrace of Shiva and Vishnu" found in the *Bhagvata Purana* to illustrate the

historical existence of homosexuality in India. These tales from Hindu mythology illustrate that instances and narratives of homosexuality have existed in the past and provide a corrective to claims which deny the existence of homosexuality in India. Same-sex relationships are described in ancient Indian texts such as the fourth-century *Kamasutra*, the classic Hindu saga, the *Ramayana*, and in the medieval Persian and Urdu poetry. According to Giti Thadani, lesbianism in the Indian social context is portrayed to the audience as a product "of 'Western liberalization,' rather than associating [it] with older pre-patriarchal cosmological figures or with the later autonomous Kali spectrum of goddesses" (93). This suggests that there is a refusal to even acknowledge the inherent presence of non-heterosexual sexualities in the Indian society. She continues arguing that sculptures that depict lesbian love have been mutilated and that texts describing them have been deliberately misinterpreted.

*SO* and *G* deploy the urban setting of Bombay, not as a tolerant place in which individual liberties are maintained, but as Sukthankar puts it, a cityscape decadent enough for women to love other women (xxiv). The first queer magazine, *Bombay Dost*, was published in Mumbai in 1991 (for more on the relation of queerness to the city, see Shahani). Lesbianism is, thus, associated with the modeling world of Bombay, where luxury, wealth and access to the West can corrupt an innocent's mind and body. >> Against the backdrop of this exotic locale, representations of the lesbian bodies circulate in both works as commodities available for commercial exploitation for its exoticism and eroticism, but with a huge load of morality in that the voyeurism and sensationalism of lesbian erotica is predominantly exercised by and for a heterosexual male gaze. They fall into the stereotype that heterosexual authors use lesbian sexual encounters for commercial pornography. Sukthankar says about lesbian representation in the media that they "were fetishized, made the symbol of Western debauchery, of feminist independence. (...) Again and again, our lives were boiled down to pornography or caricature" (xxii). Tarun Mansukhani's *Dostana* (friendship) is a Bollywood film set in Miami in 2008, which tells the story of two womanisers who pretend to be gay in order to share an apartment with a girl whom they both fall in love with. Sohomyjit Ray explains, when discussing film, that in a neoliberal narrative same-sex desire becomes another aspect of urban life that the neoliberal consumer-subject may encounter while trying to achieve the dream of making it in the big city and living a luxurious life marked by conspicuous consumption (160). *SO* and *G* warn young women against lesbians in particular, and against evil in general, as the first "evil condition" is simply a consequence of wandering around a big metropolitan city like Bombay, and mingling with Anglos without the protection of the traditional extended family. The implicit message underlying both works is a warning against the insanity of a non-familial relationship produced by a westernized, urban and modern setting, showing that the consequences of deviating from the heterosexuality are harsh.

A prejudice both *G* and *SO* share is that of the dyad: pure and innocent Hindu woman (from a 'good' family – Sapna in *G* and Amrita in *SO*) versus the evil Christian woman with "loose" morals (Tanya in *G* and Minx in *SO*). No explicit references to religion are made in either of the two texts, but there are certain allusions that make the reader/viewer understand the moral context of the urban setting of Bombay. In *G*, at the end of the film, there is a sequence in which the happy heterosexual couple visits Tanya in her graveyard, so that the audience is left with the clarification that the maniac lesbian is Christian. In *SO*, Minx tries to force Amrita (the daughter of the Aggarwals, an influential and prosperous community in North India) into a symbolic marriage at a church where Minx "prostrated herself in front of the altar" (109), and her father, Mr Iyengar, says "God Almighty knows the truth" (296). Amrita's co-worker, the photographer Karan, seems to be Christian too, as when they leave the church and hear the bells pealing, "Minx crossed herself as they got back into the car and Karan whispered 'Amen' into Amrita's ear" (110). He previously warned Amrita "remember that we are in the house of God. I wouldn't lie to you in His presence" (108), so the reader knows he is not the proper suitor for her. The reader learns later that only the Hindu Rakesh, a wealthy Non Resident Indian (NRI), is the ideal option. Regarding secondary characters, Sheila, Amrita's roommate, is another stereotype for Anglo girls, those who date boyfriends (as opposed to traditional arranged marriages) and betray friends, as when for instance she forces Amrita to leave the apartment and also refuses to declare at the police station about Lola's incident (122). On the other hand, Minx Iyengar's friends, Kallu, Kaniya, Albert and Pagla, a bunch of "sleazy drug dealers" (9), have low caste Hindi and Anglo nicknames.

The sexual intercourse passages/scenes between the two women in the film and in the novel offer a display of eroticism and guilty joy—Tanya and Minx take the traditional role of the man, being the active partner in bed, while Sapna and Amrita are not only passive, but also sleepy and sometimes drunk. This means that Sapna and Amrita did not play an active role, as they are mere victims of their friends' seduction. Expressions of disgust and sickness are associated with the sexual encounters Amrita has with Minx for which she is continuously regretful, realizing

what a terrible mistake had been committed. There was no way she could undo it now. No way she could reverse what had transpired between Minx and her. Silently she cursed herself for surrendering to Minx's advances. Minx had not forced her and Amrita could not—did not—want to fool herself into believing that she had. But she also knew she would have to live with that one big regret for the rest of her life and pay for the temporary suspension of her senses. (153)

Amrita at the end of the novel confesses to Minx's father: "Please, forgive me, I'm so sorry... and so ashamed. (...) Your daughter and I (...) shared an unnatural relationship. She forced me into it ... blackmailed me ... tortured me ... scared me ... And then ... I began to enjoy it. To respond. I became dependent on her ... so dependent I thought we'd spend our life together till I met my husband. It was he who saved me from her clutches" (297). Sapna and Amrita feel guilty at having done something terrible "one night."

We note that in both the novel and the film it is the femmes' bodies which need to be freed from the soul, following Foucault suggestion in his *Discipline and Punish* that the soul was the prison of the body (30). In this sense, we can see how Sapna and Amrita are sexually satisfied by their female partners but at the same time, feel guilty and go through the encounter with closed eyes, since in this case identity is a prison. Intense pleasure, according to Foucault, coincides with complete loss of the sense of the self. This loss of control can be exemplified in many passages of the film and novel. When Rakesh is going to open a bottle of wine, the narrator says "Amrita hadn't touched anything even mildly alcoholic since her break with Minx—she could not trust herself not to lose control which she did quite easily and alarmingly soon" (231). This is a reminder of another sexual encounter with Minx associated with a religious sacrifice: "Amrita had nearly drained her glass and her head was beginning to feel light and giddy. (...) Minx pushed her back on to the dining-table crushing all the fresh flowers under her body" (185).

Whenever Minx initiates a sexual scene, Amrita has "her mind switched into a dream-like state. She shut her eyes and ceased to think or feel, surrendering to Minx who was over her (...) and she did not resist" (136). Once again, Amrita keeps her eyes shut the entire time, imagining other (male) lovers. This strategy works in two ways: firstly, Dé makes detailed description of sex between two women, which functions as a way to titillate the reader's imagination, and secondly, for Amrita (and the morality of the society) in essence and spirit it is as if it were a heterosexual encounter, so it cannot be considered inadequate. The fact that the reader is told that Amrita is never aware of the situation makes her a forgivable character. In *G*, Sapna has to be redeemed so that she ultimately ends up in a heterosexual relationship that eventually leads to marriage with the blessings of the elders. The excuse given for Sapna's indulgence in the intimate act is that she was drunk and therefore not in her senses, and was seduced by Tanya, where once again Tanya is made out to be the over-sexed immoral female who is set against the norms of convention.

It is also ironic that the love-making sequences are narrated using the imagination of the protagonists who claim to be straight, even homophobic, and not through the ones who are explicitly marked as "lesbian." Shohini Ghosh makes an interesting reading of these love-making sequences, explaining that Bollywood heroines have often been provided narrative "excuses" to indulge in transgressive behaviors, drunkenness being a common trope through which the heroine occupies, temporarily, the transgressive space of the vamp. Hence, homophobia becomes the alibi for homoeroticism (428). Female homosexuality is then used as an erotic device to attract voyeuristic moviegoers with the promise of skin-shows in the course of the film, and at best the explanation for lesbian sex is given as being motivated by experimentation. According to the movie review by Sarah Warn, Razdan manages to deliver "the titillating girly action his audience expects while still reinforcing the idea that a conscious, sober good girl like Sapna would never actually stray from straightness."

The event of pleasure as de-subjectivization exceeds the structures of power, as if pleasure constituted an exteriority to power. Foucault thinks of identity as a political construction anchored in power, with clearly delineated borders and boundaries, and mechanisms to check what or who is able to enter its domain. But for him, pleasure does not recognize the boundaries of identity. This is the reason why, we could argue, the Urdu word *ishq* (desire) is used to describe obsessive fervent love in its passionate romantic form in popular Bollywood music in contrast to *kama*, which is a Hindi name for the obligation to offer sexual pleasure as part of a wife's general relationship of obedient service to her husband, the *dharma* (obligation) based on caste and patriarchal identity. Love is a "foreign" concept, obligation is not, which is why Amrita's romantic lifestyle in Bombay symbolizes the anarchy of self (against the moral definition of the Hindu Indian woman). It is interesting to note that in the final passage, when Minx forces the newlyweds to have sex so that she could film them, Rakesh manages to save himself and his new wife from the fire set by Minx. The hero, sent to hospital with serious injuries,

proves to be his wife's protector and also the protector of sanctified sex (*kama*) as nobody, much less a woman, should interfere in a private act forcing it in public. Minx's father steps in and assures Amrita that he took control of the visual material Minx collected while living with her. Consequently, the husband and the father are the saviors and protectors of the innocent and vulnerable victim, who has paid enough for her sins of not having committed to her *dharma* as a dutiful daughter. Order is restored, as sex from now on will only happen in privacy and between husband and wife, also with procreative purposes, as we learn that soon after the wedding, Amrita becomes happily pregnant. Dé proposes that freedom does not mean having sex with anyone (including both men and women), but getting rid of immoral behaviors and embodying the traditional patterns of womanhood.

From the point of view of Tanya and Minx, the discourse that reduces sexual pleasure to an object of consumption also reduces the person who is its source to an object of pleasure. But a relationship that reduces the other to an object is in effect a relationship of power, and as such an act of domination. With Minx, Amrita does not return pleasure to her. However, she does return pleasure to Rakesh: "What about your pleasure? (...) before Rakesh knew it, had got him on his back and was over him, her mouth eagerly taking him in" (234). All these sexual passages are a clear example of the male voyeur using the sexual commodities for his own entertainment. Judith Butler has problematized the self-evident nature of gender identity by exposing it as a historical and cultural construction grounded in relations and practices of power. *G* and *SO* reach a wide public, because at the same time that they display erotic scenes and passages of sex between two women, they do not threaten the status quo but rather strengthen and reinforce the morality of Hindu nationalism. Traditional society thus tries to make a monolith out of multi-faceted reality and histories. This antagonism dramatizes the fault lines in maintaining cohesiveness, a notionally average citizen constructed in dominant representations, a homogenous Indian family.

It is Mr. Iyengar, Minx's father in *SO*, who assures Amrita that she would be free from all kinds of torments in future because all the photographs, films, recording and the other things that are damaging to her image are already destroyed. Amrita then heaves a sigh of relief. Heroically, Rakesh guides Amrita from daughterhood into the safe realm of marriage and motherhood. In *G*, the "normal," macho hero makes his grand entry into Sapna's life and saves her from Tanya. Rahul is the model fiancé and son. In both works, the role of the male is to avenge the injured or dishonored woman. It is interesting to note that gender differentiation should not be complicated, as nationalism intervenes here by naturalizing biological difference to posit woman as nation, framed in the rhetoric of Mother India, and men as the protectors/sons of the mother nation. Ashis Nandy argues that since the late nineteenth-century, Hindu nationalists have imagined India as the Great Mother (92). In this formulation, women's sexuality is deployed in the services of reproducing the nation, both biologically and ideologically, as Muslims are excluded from goddess-worship (for an insight into how Islam is excluded in queer narratives, see Meghani "Atriculating"; *Queering*). Women are therefore celebrated as the very epitome of culture so that women's sexuality is exclusively posited within monogamous heterosexuality (motherhood comes attached to wifeness). In both works, the "Big Man" is economically wealthy and at the end, there is a happy couple confined within the values of heterosexual marriage, family, duty, piety. Only the action of the male character could stabilize the balance and resume order to society, the conversion of the hyper-feminine into an ideal typical femininity, through marriage and promised motherhood, and the disappearance of the hegemonic masculinity embodied in a woman. For this, the one who acted 'against nature' (as the Jude-Christian notion would direct) must die.

Both works share the stereotype associated with lesbians, that if one is a lesbian then she is mentally unstable and in need of treatment and psychological counselling that can medically "cure" and "correct" the behavior (the Naz Foundation has reported many cases in contemporary India). Minx in *SO* is labeled as a dangerous person, a maniac and a psychopath (163). In *G*, Tanya is portrayed as a dangerous breach of nature and tradition that must ultimately be eradicated. Their overt sexualized nature is also a threat to the hetero-patriarchal order, and therefore they need to be put back in their "correct" place. Both characters accidentally die in the end, no one directly responsible, which implicates nature also opposes homosexuality. "Poetic justice" is meted out to them. The order of the day is then restored at the end with a happily-ever-after heterosexual union between Sapna and Rahul, in which the sanctity of the social order is preserved. In *SO* Amrita and Rakesh Bhatia celebrate an intimate ceremony for their engagement with little attention in the press, except for a few write-ups on the "'strangeness' of her relationship without actually calling her a lesbian" (228), a relief as she married into a quite "moderately conservative people (...) who had been living a suburban existence outside New York" (229). Amrita had not been able to "overcome her shame and guilt quite as easily. She still spends several sleepless nights agonizing over the events of the past year, wondering how she had allowed herself to fall into such an obvious trap" (229), wondering if Minx had "spoiled her for everyone else—particularly

men" (230): "the trauma of what she had experienced—the guilt that refused to go away—had instilled a new fear in her mind. She was certain she had gone off sex permanently. (...) she had asked herself whether she needed to consult a therapist" (231). The novel could not have had a more convenient ending, back home from New York, at her parents' household, pregnant, and with the news that Minx has died. Now, she is completely safe, as she now embodies the ideal Indian woman in a perfect Hindu home.

The two narratives analyzed in this essay are homophobic and racist in the sense that the innocent Hindu women are returned to their husbands at home, and soon expecting a child, which makes them faithful to the role of the devoted wife, like pure Sita in the *Ramayana*, while the malevolent Christian lesbians have been punished and removed from society as they are beyond restoration to a normative feminine role. Given that popular culture reaches a wide population and permeates the everyday lives of Indian society, the consensual message that these authors offer (also heavily influenced by mass media) is that of heteronormativity. They have popularized stereotypical images and mass commercialized prejudices the world (or at least India) is familiar with.

While there is a plethora of queer points of view concerning representations of lesbian women in cultural texts (film and literature in our case), and treatment of lesbians in India, these have been ignored by Razdan and Dé. Furthermore, in the debates on queerness as related to Indianness, these voices are too often represented in the media as the only honest one, while the more complex positions that have been developed and articulated by other queer activists, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and writers or filmmakers, who might be more critical than portraying stereotypes, are denied the attention they deserve.

The presentation of both the novel and the film is geared to attract the largest possible readership and audience and promote sales with a clear message: beware of the western lifestyle as it is evil. Both aim to tell Indians and Non-Resident Indians the dangers of a liberated life regarding the emancipation of young women, the instability of the institution of heterosexual marriage and the threat to the Hindu family that it conveys. These cultural productions do not problematize the coherence of indicators of Indianness in their engagement in ordering society.

The Bollywood film *Girlfriend*, and the pop novel *Strange Obsession* work on the same line in espousing the dominant ideology of heteronormativity and rendering homosexuality as an illness (we would add "Western") that taints the Indian culture, which does not recognize the possibility of same-sex desire as that would remove patriarchal control in its primacy of male desire, and seek greater parity in the nation. What is questioned in these narratives is Indianness in relation to womanhood. The heterosexual couplings that conclude the film and the novel fail to validate any serious possibility of queer life, and according to Lisa Duggan, do not forward the cause of equal rights (50). The gender binary is maintained because it has been challenged with no success. Razdan and Dé have portrayed lesbianism in terms of a binary gender system, whose masculine and feminine terms depend on the stability of the dichotomy homosexual/heterosexual, displaying thus a binary and heteronormative understanding of femininity and masculinity.

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