

January 2017

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Recommended Citation

Craven, Sri (2017). Challenging Queer as "Neoliberal": the Radical Politics of South Asian Diasporic Lesbian Representational Culture. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 18(2), 45-58.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol18/iss2/3>

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Challenging Queer as “Neoliberal”: the Radical Politics of South Asian Diasporic Lesbian Representational Culture

Sri Craven¹

Abstract

This essay contributes to transnational feminist and queer interests in neoliberalism, sexual politics and representational cultures that all circulate globally today. It reads Deepa Mehta's film, *Fire* (1996), and Suniti Namjoshi's literary venture, *Goja: An Autobiographical Myth* (2000). Each processes the question of lesbian visibility as a question of female labor and class relations among women. By analyzing representations of lesbian life in the context of laboring female bodies, the article challenges the dismissal of queer politics as neoliberal in India. Sexual identity politics, as critics argue, often dovetails with neoliberalism's project of protecting elite and bourgeois subjects' interests at the expense the working and the poor. Deploying western and transnational feminist/queer theories, cultural studies and literary critical methods, this essay spotlights two representational forms that enact and provide useful frameworks for radical queer political engagements.

Key Words: Neoliberalism, Transnationalism, Lesbian, India

Introduction

In both scholarly and everyday understandings, queer politics in India is, at times, dubbed “neoliberal” because such politics show undeniable influences of western models of engagement. Such interpretations come from both right and left, with right-wing nationalists and critical scholars, and activists both bemoaning western queer politics as rooted in neoliberal philosophies that center the elite/bourgeois subject. Despite feminist scholarly caution to not throw the baby of queer political rigor out with the bathwater of skepticism about western influences (Menon, 2007; Dave, 2012; Shah, 2014), scholars have critiqued queer politics' basis in identity. The turn to identity produces the queer subject as a juridical category, which remains problematic for its ignoring of the law as a repressive and violent system in the context of India. Further, queer politics in India, based on identity, has also been critiqued for its English language politics (Cohen, 2005; Gupta, 2005), because queer subjectivities are named and queer political rhetoric framed in English, which has a more limited reach than is commonly believed.

The Indian critique of queer politics echoes the work of U.S. American scholars who have has long problematized the turn toward identity, legality and citizenship through three main lines of critique. First, through the concept of “homonormativity,” or the phenomenon of queer cultures “anchored in domesticity and consumption” in a manner that thwarts state-led assumptions of family and other institutional structures (Duggan, 2003). Second, through the concept of

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“homonationalism”, which refers to queer policing of racialized and sexualized peoples in the U.S. imperialist “war on terror” (Puar, 2007). Third, through the concept of citizenship, which takes three angles: 1) The production of queer life as privatized, responsible life, grounded in the capitalist state in return for the benefits of such a state system. This includes healthcare, marriage, and investments at the cost of the welfare state (Cossman, 2007); 2) The domestication of the “stranger” identity of queers, which causes lesbians and gays to marginalize bisexuals, trans, and the intersexed to gain the benefits of a narrowly defined citizenship (Phelan, 2001); 3) The earliest articulation of the idea that citizenship itself is defined by a series of “responsibilities” that precede any “rights”, and hence worthy of queer skepticism rather than celebration (Bell and Binnie, 2000). These critiques are, of course, preceded by canonical ones that problematize the drive toward assuming gender’s stability in sexual identity politics (Butler, 1999), or of the un-naturalization of homosexuality and the naturalization of heterosexuality (Jagose, 2002).

Through a reading of lesbian representations in two texts by diasporic Indians—Deepa Mehta’s film, *Fire* (1996; released in India in 1998) and Suniti Namjoshi’s *Goja: An Autobiographical Myth* (2000)—this paper complicates Indian queer politics as necessarily focused on the elite or bourgeois body and warns against not evacuating sexual subjectivity and identity as possible forms of political engagement. Each text brings in critical/analytical proximity to the sexualized body of the lesbian and the laboring class-marked female body that attest to the inevitable transnational traces of social justice politics. These representations thwart the neoliberal tendency to disperse and depoliticize desire and its expressions within a consumer ethos and individualistic drives rather than collective social justice action.

Queer as Neoliberalism

Referring to queer politics, Nishant Shahani problematizes radical postcolonial feminist discourses that “marginalize[s] any voice that represents a mode of [queer] counterculture [by] conveniently couch[ing] in a rhetoric that dismisses these voices as ‘western,’ ‘elitist’ and ‘anti-Indian’” (“Resisting” 2003). Shahani interrogates indigenous radical feminist critiques that cast queer politics as “western” without duly analyzing their own convenient effacements of heteropatriarchal and androcentric gender and sexual ideologies. Equally, argues Shahani, both right wing *and* liberal feminist approaches overlook “the connections between patriarchy and compulsory heterosexuality,” and, thereby “provide a framework for dominant discourse to appropriate the language of feminism and offer a watered-down version that is not only intensely homophobic, but also counter-productive to the formation of a more sophisticated feminist praxis” (2003). Shahani’s comment points out that the postcolonial critiques of queer politics risk thwarting the possibility of radical feminist political visions. Radical feminist visions understand sexuality as *central* to patriarchal ideologies because they not only sustain gender hierarchies between women and men through control of reproduction, inequities of marriage, or of sexual violence, but also keep intact hierarchies among women. In the Indian context, feminist scholars have explained the latter through critical engagements with middle-class and elite women’s complicity and collusion with men against other women in exchange for various protections and/or power that wealth brings in the context of colonial and early postcolonial contexts (Sangari and Vaid, 1990) and of contemporary diaspora (Bhatt, Murthy, Ramamurthy, 2010).

Against the backdrop of stalling queer politics as western without seeking alternates, Mehta’s widely known film, *Fire*, and lesbian writer Namjoshi’s less well-known autobiography, *Goja: An Autobiographical Myth*, conjure the possibility of radical feminist politics centered on

queer sexuality. Mehta's film, as well documented by scholars, is unarguably the event that launched queer politics as a viable political movement in India. It showed up the nexus of right-wing nationalism, sexism and misogyny, as well as called attention to a new bourgeois culture, within which questions of sexuality and sexual subjectivity were becoming key (Gopinath 1998; Kapur 2000; Patel, 2001; Patel 2004). These scholars attribute the right-wing attacks over screenings of the film as "un-Indian" to stereotypical nationalist homophobia couched under religious rhetoric. The subsequent protest by feminist groups was framed under the slogan "Indian and lesbian," which effectively brought queer rights to the public realm in a nationalist culture that, as Mary John and Janaki Nair point out, took shape through proliferating discourses that police sexuality in general, and, female sexuality in particular ("A Question" 1998, 18-19). On the other hand, Namjoshi's autobiography has bypassed scholarly scrutiny, although Namjoshi holds the distinction of being the earliest out lesbian writer on the postcolonial Indian literary scene. The scholar Harveen Mann reads Namjoshi's queer female sensibilities as reaching back to the late 1960s with her early autobiographical poetry. Although not explicitly lesbian, it nevertheless indicates queer strategies and sensibilities by which lesbianism comes to literary life in a context of postcolonial nationalist silence and ostracism, which Namjoshi processes through accounts of familial homophobia ("Suniti" 1997, 97). Scholars have focused explicitly on Mehta's film as an exploration and vindication of queer female desire in a notoriously hetero-patriarchal nationalist culture in which lesbian desire is deemed, in Gayatri Gopinath's words, "impossible" (2005). Mann reads Namjoshi's literary oeuvre in the context of homophobic exclusion in India and the intersection of race and sexuality in the west. The scholarly terrain, relating to *Fire* and Namjoshi, thus explore the issue of lesbian desire from the perspective of the homophobia that underlies nationalisms of any kind and, particularly, of postcolonial nationalism. For, within postcolonial nationalist rhetoric, it is easy to find support for homophobia by dismissing homoeroticism as "elite" on the one hand, or "colonial" and/or "colonizing" of culture on the other. Mann's reading of Namjoshi draws attention to the two distinct conceptual and geographical locations in which Indian queer politics take place: the diasporic space in the west and the national space of India.

I want to introduce here the ways in which, as cultural texts, both *Fire* and *Goja*, following so soon after one another, occupy a transnational space that is often correlated with neoliberalism at work. Mehta is Indian-Canadian, and Namjoshi is Indian-British. But, the logic behind the correlation of the "transnational" with the neoliberal takes shape in the presumption that diasporics are suspect by nature of their very location in the west. Along with western location come ideas that social justice based political forms, whose geneses are in western contexts, must be entrenched in identity politics. This is, of course, often seen as tied to questions of class and privilege. Thus, any representation of lesbianism correlates with, on the one hand, ideas about economic and class privilege that enables a life based on sexuality, and on the other, the "sexual" as somehow "western," and the non-sexual/chaste as "Indian," that postcolonial theorists of anticolonial (Chatterjee, *The Nation* 1993) and postcolonial nationalisms (John and Niranjana 1999) theorize. Both *Fire* and *Goja* resolutely challenge these simplistic correlations in two key ways: one, in their representations of gendered labor as a central concern within the possible sexual liberation of women; and, two, in their representations of the question of lesbian recognition as one that requires also the awareness of class and caste differences that exacerbate any political solidarity for marginalized subjects (lesbian, women) in India.

Lesbianism and the Economies and Politics of Gendered Labor

Fire depicts two women, Radha and Sita, who are married to two brothers from a middle-class urban family, falling in love with each other. The film ends with the women leaving their marriages and joint family to go make a life with each other, marking it as the first instance in Indian cinema of a public avowal of lesbian relationships. As Ashwini Sukthankar puts it, it is obscured by the presumption that women's relationships are, by definition, non-sexual ("Introduction" 1999, xiii). The film undoubtedly engages in clichés about hetero-patriarchal sexual right, which is rendered through the women's suffering at the hands of their husbands. Radha, the older sister-in-law is expected to help her husband, a religious man, maintain his vow of celibacy because he believes that sex without reproduction, which Radha is incapable of, is a sin. Meanwhile, Sita, the younger, is expected to submit to her husband's sexual needs, although he has an ongoing relationship with a female lover.

Despite the several aims it takes at patriarchal sexual control, which have been critiqued as exaggerated representations (Kishwar, "Naïve" 1998), it is the film's non-sexual scenes of gendered labor that make crucial comments on what constitutes sexuality-based choices within a homophobic nationalism that continues to mark a national culture that claims itself as "globalized." This globalization has meant several neoliberal economic practices that coopt, primarily, the middle-classes into forms of individual enterprise, welfare and consumption at the expense of any collective thinking. The film's central theme—the women's love affair—takes shape around their labors within the domestic space of the middle-class joint family home. Both women are shown working in the kitchen to keep the family catering business profitable, while the patriarch—the older brother—is shown controlling the proceeds from all sales. The women are also partially responsible for the care of the disabled matriarch, their widowed mother-in-law, whose care they share with a male domestic servant, Mundu. The servant is often derelict in his duties, preferring to masturbate to pornography before the incapacitated elderly lady, until Radha catches him in the act. As an act of revenge, the servant subsequently tells on the two women to the brothers, which leads to the men reasserting patriarchal control. The older forbids the women's relationship; the younger slaps his wife, who in turn responds by slapping him back. The scene sets up the viewer for the correlation between the control of female sexuality, the control of female labor and the ways perhaps the latter needs to be liberated for the former to take shape. For, way before the women are involved in a romantic and sexual relationship, as they are working in the kitchen on a business order, Sita tells Radha, "I wish we could be together forever. I'm serious. Let's leave!" Radha, not dismissing the idea outright, but not actively pursuing it either, asks laughingly, "And, how will we survive?" Sita's earnest answer, "We'll start our own take-out, of course!", effectively references how labor power can translate to choices for women in a notoriously patriarchal culture rooted in the idea that a woman's life is tied to marriage and childbearing, an idea that no matter how often challenged, remains, to this day, the dominant narrative of socio-cultural life in India. At the end of the film, when the two women meet at a pre-arranged venue, with their emancipation from hetero-patriarchal family life having been achieved, the audiences are already cued to recognizing that a romantic and sexual life between two women is not only possible, but realistically also achievable with economic independence.

In *Goja*, Namjoshi ties the question of gendered labor to the question of coming out from/in the diasporic space in the west. We learn that Namjoshi left India in "my mid-twenties, because by then, it was clear that two women who loved one another could not live honorably in India" (*Goja* 66). Namjoshi tells us that her family saw her lesbianism as a "scandal" that would "tarnish" the family name (75; 126). Now, finally, she says, she wants to come out to the "people I loved"

(85), after having done so repeatedly in the west through her writings, because she wants, “if not reconciliation, then, at least a degree of straightforwardness” (85). However, as we discover, these two women—Goja, her childhood servant, and, Goldie, her maternal grandmother—have long been dead. Namjoshi is writing in postmodern autobiographical vein, as she has consistently done throughout her literary career, to interrogate and formulate a lesbian political position that reaches beyond mere recognition and reinstatement for the (autobiographical) lesbian.

Written as a long dialogue between the three women that spans several chapters, the autobiography is framed by other stories—written in the style of fables, poetry, and first person narrative—of dark details from her childhood in India, and, later, from her early days as an immigrant in North America. We learn of sexual abuse at the hands of a male servant, delegated to take care of children in the nursery at the home of her maternal grandparents, an upper-caste elite family with royal antecedents. We learn of her mother’s reaction to not speak of it, lest it bring shame. We learn of the suffering of a young adolescent, whose love affair with her best friend is betrayed, as in *Fire*, by a servant. The girls are forbidden to see each other, and Namjoshi is warned that such a relationship is a scandal. Leaving India for Canada, in her “mid-twenties” with her girlfriend, Namjoshi discovers that the girlfriend is no less homophobic, as she leaves Namjoshi for a man, complaining that Namjoshi had “forced” her to be in a lesbian relationship. In Canada, and, later, in the U.S., Namjoshi learns repeatedly what it is to be treated as a “second-class citizen” when she is subjected to racist patronizing. An older white woman takes her to lunch, and watches Namjoshi eating with a fork, while insisting that Namjoshi is “triple oppressed [...] lesbian, woman, brown-skinned” (16). A young “liberal” white man in Toronto assures her that she must face racism, although he himself is not racist (108). Through these incidents, Namjoshi herself can only marvel at the irony of being seen as oppressed, given her own elite upbringing. She recognizes the imperialist history that only sees her as “foreign/ exotic/ third world/ needy” even when she was dressed in a “gorgeous sari” indicative of her upper-class status (71, emphasis original).

But it is only when she recognizes what underlies imperialism—namely, power—that she begins to understand how to process what she has always thought of as her “exile” by her family. For, as she imagines coming out to Goja, she also imagines the elderly servant’s response, which is neither of homophobia, nor of acceptance, but, rather, of weariness and, later, anger that is tied to her “lot”. As Goja’s voice indicts, “one is a servant for twenty-four hours. [...] You should understand that we are a function. Not human beings, not women, not creatures—well, creatures perhaps. But for all practical purposes a function. Our purpose is to serve” (150). The autobiography is devoted—not the least in the Steinian move of its title—to exploring, via Namjoshi’s own family and herself, the moral culpability of India’s upper classes in allowing poverty to flourish. The autobiography opens with the “child Goja” going to work for the family of the “Ruler”/ “Herod” / “King” at “age five” and being considered “fortunate” (4). She sleeps on the floor as a child and her life is given to service. Years later, when she is “very, very old” and still working to “make herself useful,” a “plump aunt” watching her, ascribes Goja’s small body size to her “active” lifestyle (7). Nobody in the family knows Goja’s actual age or how she lost one eye, though she has been with them for so long (7). In Namjoshi’s memory, the contrast between Goja and Goldie is captured in very corporal terms: where her grandmother smelled of “roses, mogra [a variety of jasmine], cuddles, and comfort,” Goja smelled of “dried fish” (10-11). This corporeality is important, for, in displacing the suffering body of the lesbian onto the suffering body of the servant, Namjoshi remains deeply committed to the notion that freedom for the lesbian cannot exist unless accompanied by what the Chicana writer Cherie Moraga calls a refusal to “rank

oppression” (“La Güera” 1980, 189). But, it is the dried fish the child Namjoshi preferred, she recalls, for it was Goja who was the primary caregiver. Goja’s own exhaustion at having to nurse “yet another child” in the family nursery, which tells us that the child is not her own, and that she acts as a wet nurse (13) ultimately serve as explanation for Goja not being able to protect the young Namjoshi from the sexual abuse of a male servant. But, her own mother and grandmother don’t escape Namjoshi’s indictment, for, both women were more interested in keeping up appearances, in “cutting off the tail/tale” (25) of the “Black Piglet” as Namjoshi characterizes herself and that entire memory in a chapter by the same name.

The fairytale rendering of the question of culpability in relation to the fallout over Namjoshi’s experience of sexual abuse provides the means to articulate what a responsible political position that seeks the social and cultural avowal of lesbian life looks like. For, if a hetero-patriarchal culture can be exposed for how it maintains gendered/sexualized hierarchy through the expectation that the sexual abuse of a young girl must be kept silent to protect notions of “family honor,” then, Namjoshi asks, how and why is it important to render upper-class lesbians culpable for maintaining class hierarchies among women? In a central chapter called “What Goja Says,” Namjoshi imaginatively writes Goja’s response to Namjoshi’s own quest for an apology from her family for “not allowing me to live honorably in my own country and in my own home” (126). We hear Goja say: “Most of this is about you. Not me. There’s a reason for that. You were rich. I was poor. [...] I cannot, and may not, say all is forgotten and forgiven. I will not collude” (152). The issue of *not* forgiving—and *not* colluding in an imagined forgiveness of Namjoshi and her family—is important, for it allows Namjoshi to process the question of lesbian liberation in terms of the patriarchal control of women through the stabilization of hierarchies *among* women. She reminds Goldie that when the family tells her, “Why go abroad and be a third-class citizen?” (67), they are not being cognizant of the lives of the servants *in* their own home/India as third-class citizens, experiencing similar dislocations as Namjoshi does when she faces racism and ethnocentrism in the west. In asking, “If I had stayed at home, would you [Goja] and I have been truly family?” (109), Namjoshi emphasizes the class divides that help upper-class women at the expense of working-class and poor women. In confronting rather than condoning her family’s and her own classism, and not merely focusing on indicting her family for their homophobia, Namjoshi’s lesbian political project aims for more than the liberation of lesbians as an identity group that sexual politics often comes to mean in public cultures everywhere. Instead, in processing her own culpability as an upper-class Indian, Namjoshi writes a project of lesbian liberation that is intrinsically linked to the liberation of women who are poor, and whose labors are devalued, taken for granted, and exploited.

Recognizing the Lesbian: the Politics of Subjectivity

Made in (Indian) English, by a diasporic filmmaker, for an international and not just national audience, *Fire* may be said to occupy the terrain of post-liberalization era (1991 onwards) Indian film. Within India, *Fire*, along with other films made in English that stretch back to the 1980s films set in the colonial era, caters to what Anjali Gera Roy calls a “cosmopolitan global [Indian] audience” (2013) that speaks English and is of a markedly upper middle-class despite the variations of the English it speaks—Indian—from western English forms. *Fire* also plays with the family melodrama genre most commonly associated with Hindi and/or Bollywood films in its story of forbidden romance set in a middle class family, except, here, the romance is between two women. Its fantasy sequences, which include the servant Mundu’s fantasies of being Lord Ram to

Radha's demure and faithful Sita from the famous Hindu epic, the *Ramayana*, further locates the film firmly in the domain of Bollywood and Indian cinema. Audiences not only recognize the epic's use in entrenching the role of faithful wife, but also, the epic's deployment by nationalists to consolidate right-wing religious nationalism through the long-running television show in the 1980s and 1990s. Scholars read the resurgent nationalism generated by the television show against the backdrop of the economic and political precarity of a globalizing culture, where sexual piety and morality become the means to presumably alleviate the anxieties of globalization and the seeming westernization of Indian culture, and stand in opposition to women's liberation (Mankekar, 1999). *Fire's* melodramatic use of the *Ramayana* thwarts the nationalist project by invoking the epic's scene in a fantasy sequence about male sexual entitlement (even if the scene with Mundu does not quite unpack the class contours of a male servant's desire for his female employer) where the man is clearly positioned as an aggressor. Moreover, *Fire* also hijacks the hetero-patriarchal imperative of female chastity by placing the epic in the context of a lesbian love story, where the lead character shares the name of the epic's original wronged goddess-heroine, Sita. The scene easily invokes for Indian audiences a critique of the epic as the basis for hetero-patriarchal nationalist invoking of a national/Hindu past and tradition in the face of the 1990s seeming western/non-Hindu onslaught of liberalization, which nationalists also cast as the reason for Indian women's loss of morality as invoked in the charges of obscenity leveled against Mehta (Kapur, 2000).

Fire (re)turns to the melodramatic genre and the famous epic toward a related second goal. For, located in the era of liberalization and globalization, and made for a western audience first, and released in India later with a dubbed version in Hindi as well, *Fire* also appeals—as other Indian English films do—to post-liberalization Indian subjects, who carve out newer subjectivities as a result of the decidedly transnational turn of Indian life. Rather than the state/nation as the center of the film, the newer brand of Indian film has middle-class consumerism—in the form of lifestyle, travel, diaspora, fashion, body image and so on, at its heart. Located within this newer cinematic and cultural ethos, *Fire's* turn to the issue of sexuality and sexual expression—rendered as 'outside' of the cinematic frame by the culture of censorship, both of society and of the official Film Censor Board in India—should hardly be surprising, although its cultural fallout suggests that issues of female sexual subjectivity continue to be risky business in androcentric culture.

Visibility as a sign of recognition has long been central to queer theory's debates about sexual identity politics, and its efficacy in social and cultural transformation. The ways in which *Fire* engages with new forms of subjectivity, and with the question of female non-hetero sexuality, resist any easy correlation between lesbianism and westernization, and thus resist the dismissal of the lesbian as inherently neoliberal. The wealth of scholarship suggests that queer visibility, as 'difference' is contingent political strategy even as it may be a psychic necessity. Visibility has been studied for the ways it can be deployed to contain/discipline queerness in political and cultural life (Phelan, 2001); its channeling of certain bodies and acts in constituting an "imagined" queer community or public that reveals the normalization of 'the' public as heterosexual (Warner 2002); it is problematic as a political project in light of capitalism (Hennessy, 1994); its slide into sexual identity politics, which disciplines and normalizes gender (Butler, 1990), or, disciplines and normalizes race (Manalansan, 2003). More specific to my study of South Asian queer culture, South Asian scholarship has provoked analysis of queer visibility qua queer identity politics in light of racist and xenophobic oversights of identity politics. Gayatri Gopinath, for example, reads identity politics in relation to both white queer politics' privilege of white and western queer experiences in elisions of racial difference, and non-white subjectivities (2005). Jasbir Puar, on the

other hand, interrogates queer identity politics for its racist and xenophobic turns vis-à-vis U.S. queer patriotism and nationalism, whose language does not take into account U.S. imperialism in contexts like the “war on terror” (2007). Scholarly analyses, thus, leave us debating visibility’s ties to identity politics, and the resulting limitations of what is thought of as necessary and/or feasible political action, which is channeled through such politics.

In taking on the question of queer visibility in terms of gendered labor as a point of departure for female life outside of the boundaries of heterosexual desire and marriage—cornerstones of female identity as constructed by nationalism—*Fire* redirects the relationship between visibility, recognition, and identity politics. In *Fire*, when the two women are discovered in bed by Radha’s husband as a result of Mundu’s betrayal, Sita, exhorting Radha to leave with her, tells Radha: “there is no word in our language to describe what we are, how we feel for each other.” Radha responds with, “Perhaps you are right; seeing is less complicated.” Rather than “name” oneself “lesbian,” as Sita’s statement might seem to inevitably lead up to, Radha’s comment neither negates nor validates the need to name. Instead, when Radha says, “seeing” is less complicated, she directly references the answer to that age-old question that Bidy Martin phrases so elegantly in relation to the “lesbian” as a social category: what does a lesbian look like? How does she make love? (1998). “Seeing” allows the viewer to know that the lesbian—a woman who desires another woman, who desires an erotic economy outside hetero-patriarchal right and control—exists. This knowing is in direct challenge to what nationalism teaches: that even when confronted by evidence of lesbianism, nationalism renders that life fictitious by deeming lesbianism “impossible” (Gopinath, 2005). In *Fire*, Radha’s husband’s “seeing” of the two women challenges his (Hindu) religiously motivated idea that a wife exists to “serve” her husband, especially by enduring the non-consummation of *her* desires to help maintain his vow of celibacy within marriage. Rather than follow protocols of naming oneself and seeking recognition based on that naming—as lesbian—Radha’s assertion that “seeing is less complicated” allows recognition outside the bounds of explanations about lesbianism within a patriarchal, heterosexual, and androcentric culture in which desire continues to be treated as the purview of men. When Radha states further that she wants to tell her husband directly that she is leaving him, not for Sita, not for anything she has done “wrong,” but for herself, she directly challenges understandings of female same-sex desire as requiring a name and a setting apart, which would make such desire what Annemarie Jagose calls “secondary an inconsequential” (*Inconsequence* x). Moreover, by saying that seeing is “less complicated,” Radha—and the film—speaks to India’s legal and social cultures where the presumption that women’s relationships are non-sexual underlies the moral code that encourages, allows, and, even enforces gender segregation (Sukthankar, xiv). In the film, the visual, however, is not staged toward a politics of identity, nor for rights based on the recognition that precedes identity political claims. Rather, it is toward liberation from a marriage in which desire outside procreation is seen as evil. When Radha proclaims to her husband that she “desires” (more generally) and “desires Sita” (more specifically), and that therefore she is leaving him, she is not just asserting lesbian life, but, importantly, a life that is possible outside of the reproductive and labor economies that heterosexual married life is either deemed to imply, or, deployed to actively and aggressively maintain. Radha’s and Sita’s relationship, despite not being named “lesbian,” exists on screen at a time when the idea of heterosexuality achieves in India a decided turn toward *heteronormativity* in and through consumer and popular cultures of liberalized economy that Suparna Bhaskaran documents (*Made* 2004). The film’s representation of lesbianism, which is not rooted in a transnational bourgeois ethos of identity politics, challenges neoliberal approaches to sexual freedoms as visible only through political actions rooted in identity

frameworks. I am not arguing here that women's sexual lives lived out within a cultural terrain within which sexual identity positions becomes available does not eventually produce such identity affiliations; rather, the film's staging of women's sexual lives outside of identity politics provides ways to imagine lives outside of subjections to culture's proscriptive tendencies, whether of radical or reactionary identity politics.

If *Fire* occupies the terrain of post-liberalization interests in subjectivity, Namjoshi's literary representations of the lesbian occur in a very different aesthetic and political context. The aesthetic context is an autobiography, for which Namjoshi has no precedent or successor in the Indian English literary tradition whose international fame and success rests on the genre of the novel. The political context is of postcoloniality and diaspora, where literature functions as a lens through which gender's relationship to the nation, nationalism, and national identity are processed. Fraught as the question of gender is to ideas of culture/nation, in Namjoshi's case, it is especially vexed, for she also started her literary career in the 1980s in the west, where her major works, complex autobiography-inflected fiction, poetry and personal essays, began being published, and in which she centralized the absent figure of the Indian lesbian. In Indian English literary culture, internationally renowned during this period, while novelists such as Salman Rushdie, Meenakshi Mukherjee, and Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni in the diaspora, and Shashi Deshpande and Arundhati Roy in India were being celebrated, Namjoshi's writings—much like the lesbian—remained unacknowledged.

Namjoshi's absence in the literary tradition of India, celebrated widely as evidence of India as "global superpower", is taken up poignantly—and critically—in the question of other absences in postcolonial and now, 'global' India. Absence, disappearance and exile figure prominently in the autobiography. There is a crucial memory that Namjoshi evokes when she remembers looking for photographs of Goja in the family archives and finds "not one" (7). Namoshi says, "the lives of servants go unrecorded" and "they disappear silently" (7), foregrounding the ways in which families and cultures memorialize only those they consider valuable. It is only her own exile, and the impossibility of return without a certain silence about her own sexuality and domestic life that teach Namjoshi to reflect upon other subjects, not just sexual ones, who remain unaccounted for, absent, in exile in India. Of her own quest for an apology from her family for her exile, Namjoshi says that it was not "until much later", after her life in the west, that she came to realize that "no one is someone in their own right. Recognition requires another pair of eyes" (64).

This quest for reinstatement becomes especially critical when we realize that the literary, the sexual, the linguistic and the political are deeply connected in Namjoshi's autobiographical act. Coming at a political moment when Namjoshi can say in queer identity terms, "Yes, I'm lesbian. So what?" (85), as she says she has done "relatively eas[ily] in the West" (85), Namjoshi says that it was harder to say it to Goja and Goldie, and, by extension, to family in India. She says, "while you [Goja and Goldie] were alive, I tried to keep my books out of India so that you would never know, so there would be no scandal—you would not have to be ashamed and [...] I could continue to return year after year without too much difficulty or stress" (85). Yet, despite what amounts to a very artistically limiting decision for a writer, Namjoshi is ever aware that coming out in/through writing, as she does, is not such a simple project. She reminds us in the autobiography that Goja is illiterate and speaks no English (90), while Goldie speaks a little, but "can't read" English (91). Because she makes the power relations among women explicit by using the English language as a test case, Namjoshi complicates a literary project of the lesbian—whereby literature becomes the avenue for coming out, naming oneself and seeking liberation. In raising the issue of English in relation to lesbian liberation, Namjoshi effectively asks how we reach out,

build community and achieve change if Goja and Goldie (as stand-ins for family and culture) cannot apprehend the terms of queer politics couched in English vocabulary and western frames of reference.

Thus, it is that Namjoshi's lesbian feminist politics is undergirded by the idea that language is power. Rather than name herself "lesbian" to seek a specifically lesbian identity politics for the liberation of the lesbian, Namjoshi advocates the lesbian as a critical position for the deconstruction of the patriarchal language of female identities and female sexualities. Like the feminist fabulist Angela Carter and lesbian feminist autobiographical manipulator par excellence Jeannette Winterson in England, Namjoshi knows the patriarchal power of language to name and wound. So, she re-writes patriarchal words, among which is the rewriting of autobiography as a male and androcentric genre.² So, it is Goja, not Namjoshi, who becomes the center of Namjoshi's autobiography. It is class relations, not sexual preference or identity that makes possible the analysis of heterosexism, sexism, and homophobia. The lesbian is no longer invisible because the servant is no longer invisible. In the autobiography, the presence of fables and poetry, fiction and imaginary dialogue mingle with first-person narrative as one strategy that prevents the slide from an interrogation of power politics to one merely of a liberationist lesbian identity politics.

Yet, like Chicana writers Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherie Moraga, and Jamaican diasporic writer Michelle Cliff and the Caribbean American writers in the U.S., Namjoshi understands only too well the double-edged sword that is English for the colonized and marginalized. She says in *Goja* that it took her "politicization" to realize that language "mediate[]s everything," and that it "cloaked, altered, and even fashioned reality" (78-79). The idea that language shapes reality is not only central to linguistic theory, but to various colonized groups. As a third world diasporic lesbian, Namjoshi is intimately aware of just how dislocating the language of homophobia, sexism and racism can be. Her entry into the "new world" (71) of the west—first, in the U.S., and, then, Canada, where she pursued a "doctorate in English" (76) only brought with it a deep sense of dislocation that was at once cultural and linguistic. Her Indian English provided her with "words, but not the context" (80), and she is routinely dismissed by those who call themselves "native" speakers, much to Namjoshi's humorous observation that white settlers are "natives who say that they are not natives" (83), in recognition of indigenous Americans. This evoking of colonial history takes her back to her own elite postcolonial upbringing with the recognition that the powerlessness she feels in the west is a direct result of going from being her "grandfather's granddaughter" (66), well connected, wealthy and socially powerful, to being "nobody" (75). It leads her to the realization about recognition that must seek, above all, an ethical connection to the other. If Namjoshi writes her autobiography in English and uses it to discuss her "third-class" (67) status as a lesbian in India, it comes with the recognition of the privilege that the language unarguably indicates. Namjoshi's literary political aim remains cognizant that in the postcolonial context, the use of English is replete with the irony that postcolonial critics since Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o have noted (1986). As a tool of liberation via writing and voice, it becomes also a tool, which both indicates and exacerbates class differences among the colonized, and keeps culture

² For a critical reading of the genre's androcentric roots in western literary and cultural traditions, see Sidonie Smith, *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1987). There is a far too much scholarship theorizing the relationship between gender, genre, and literary criticism in the western context to include here, but any cursory search will return a number of valuable scholarly works, both single-author and edited collections. However, it is relevant to note in this context that no such scholarly productivity exists for the Anglophone Indian autobiography, perhaps due to the overwhelming scholarly attention given to fiction as the default and celebrated form of postcolonial identity, and, now, within globalization. My reading of Namjoshi is but one attempt to contribute to scholarship on Indian autobiographers.

subject to the ideologies of the colonizer with regard to subjectivity and identity. Namjoshi's writing addresses this irony directly in engaging with the seeking of recognition through great self-reflexivity—the hallmark, as Rosaura Sanchez argues, of critical approaches to subject formation and/via identity politics (2006). This is evident in Namjoshi's exploring and examining of power and culpability both abroad and at home so that her oppression at home can offer a moment for a *mea culpa*. She says that it is only when she was powerless in the west, as a third-world diasporic woman, that she learned to see and read the powerlessness of Goja and other servants in her family and in India (61). Such an ethical engagement with one's own power, in addition to one's oppression, offers hope for the kind of cultural change in which lesbians, poor women and women are not thrust from each other's interests, emphasizing, as the autobiography does throughout, to the idea that women's sexual freedoms cannot exist without considerations of the conflicting interests produced by class status.

Representation and/as Radical Queer Political Framework

As cultural texts, *Fire* and *Goja* are located within the landscape of critique of “globalization,” the term most frequently and commonly used to refer to the broader changes and developments of economic liberalization. A scrutiny of the political economies of liberalization makes apparent that the enormous divisions of class in India are not necessarily ameliorated by liberalization and India's globalization has not necessarily meant a “good life” for citizens as characterized in/by state politics. In fact, scholars argue that the upper-middle and elite classes, not the general “middle class” experience “globalization” in the sense of the signification of the term as contact between cultures, consumption, travel and economic advantages (Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase, 2009; Lukose, 2009). Arguments about the “neoliberal” nature of transnationalism are easily coopted by nationalist viewpoints, which tend to be hetero-patriarchal, when located within globalization's skewed economic and cultural advantages. Nationalist discourse is thus promulgated as welfare and socialist-oriented, and positioned antithetically to globalization, which is cast as neoliberal- and profit-oriented. In reality, the nationalist discourses of the economy continue to be premised on continued exploitation of gendered, class and caste hierarchies that have been at the heart of nationalist thinking since the early anti-colonial days (Fernandes, 2000; Lukose, 2009, Oza, 2012). Nationalist thinking, thus, finds one of its strongest purchases in attributing to globalization a neoliberal flavor, and such a message proliferates especially in relation to transnational cultural production. Transnationally located cultural production, in the nationalists' rhetoric, becomes a sign of the individualistic, economically advantageous lives of those who live outside the borders of the nation. Unfortunately, such nationalist rhetoric jives with the leftist ones of academics and activists for whom identity political forms, visible in representational culture, becomes suspect. For, if nationalists are rooted in ideas of blunt economics, leftists are rooted in the idea of postmodern deconstruction, which fails to emphasize concrete, viable action as it does radical and necessary critique. The confluence of the two creates a contemporary Indian public culture in which queerness becomes synonymous with identity politics and with western modes of life both of which bear little relevance to the local context.

Arriving in the context of nationalist castings of global cultural forms as examples of privilege and of intellectuals' critiques of queerness, as inevitably about neoliberal forms of subjectivity, *Fire* and *Goja* face the challenge of being taken seriously as representational forms that perform important political work. In engaging the question of lesbian life as viable and real through the question of the subjection of women's labor, both *Fire* and *Goja* show that it is possible

to mount a critique of nationalist story-telling that transnational ventures such as queer politics is necessarily “bad” as it benefits only a few via its identity concerns. These texts stall identity politics in favor of analyses of exploitations of gendered labor that sustain hetero-patriarchy by dividing women along class and caste lines. Such a strategy thwarts the neoliberal bent of much of globalization politics that is rooted, as scholarly critics and unscrupulous nationalists argue in different ways, in neoliberal state and economic practices. And, the strategy does more: it shows nationalism to be the devious fiction it always was in the Indian context, working by subduing the bodies, sexualities and lives of women, and doing so by dividing women from one another. This division is secured either through the force of patriarchal violence as when Radha and Sita are threatened by their husbands in *Fire*, or through the seduction of patriarchal protections as Namjoshi says about her grandmother and mother in *Goja*. As *Fire* and *Goja* demonstrate, the distance between threat and seduction is best countered by a history of remembering, which contextualizes the centrality of women’s labor to cultural and national life and, with a critical focus on labor, the possibility of sexual lives away from the fictions of culture and nation. Located in the current “global” postcolonial India, both texts remind us that women are indispensable to the economic order of families and nation. Foregrounding women’s labor enables both texts to promote a sexual politics, which, marked as it is by western and other non-western political and sexual cultures, can nevertheless remain anchored to the lived realities of women as a group within the national/cultural borders of Indian-ness. For, whether in India, or in its various diaspora, an explicit awareness of what may be termed ‘old’ Marxist and Marxist and/or socialist feminist critiques of class divides and labor inequities allows for the possibility of sexual agency in an important but often ignored way. Economic power, along with the awareness of the need for exposing and erasing economic disparities among women, and understanding the psychology behind class identities promotes sexual freedoms that are not synonymous with a named “lesbian” identity, which, for reasons such as language or geography, are rooted in elite class interests. Radha and Sita can live outside of the hetero-patriarchal family arrangements of much of India and its various diaspora through their financial self-sufficiency and perhaps from there engage with the various (necessary) legal and social possibilities of identity politics. *Goja* can say out aloud that lesbian politics does not matter to her, but without withdrawing support and understanding for lesbian lives. A history of remembering the centrality of women’s laboring bodies can become, as *Fire* and *Goja* enact, a space not only of agency, but also of a liberation from which no woman is excluded.

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