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Visiting the House of Bad's Mother: Queering Saadat Hasan Manto's "Thanda Gosht"

By Namita Goswami¹

Abstract

This essay reads Saadat Hasan Manto's short story, "Thanda Gosht" (1950), depicting women's experience of sectarian brutality during the 1947 partition of India and Pakistan, to delineate the postcolonial significance Gayatri Spivak's concept of originary queerness. Manto's synecdoche ("cold meat") for an unnamed and raped female corpse, her Sikh abductor and violator, *as well as* for the story's readers, (re)figures reproductive heteronormativity as a process of unknowing that emplaces a gendered taxonomy, even when its victims are silent. Rather than reinforce sexual difference as a *finished* itinerary, however, Kulwant Kaur's repeatedly piercing question—*who she is*—queers "Thanda Gosht" by taking us to a "she" who we cannot imagine but *seem* to know. *This* tarrying with originary queerness "*in its place*" (Spivak, "Gender" 817, emphases added) docket an unpredictable futurity made especially resonant by the chill that asseverates from Ishar's Singh's use of a peculiar affective idiom to describe his encounter with the unnamed and raped corpse, whose originary queerness inverts a teleological trajectory to manifest (the fight for) Nation as (visiting) "burre ki ma ka ghar" (बुरे की माँ के घर; the house of Bad's mother). *This* place, far from patriarchal honor and protection, makes a "zaalim" (ज़ालिम; bloodthirsty) of ("us") all, such that we cannot say what happened.

Keywords: Spivak, Originary Queerness, Manto, Thanda Gosht, Subaltern, Postcolonial, Sexual Difference

Introduction

When the subaltern speaks, the world of knowing is moved. (Josie Arnold, "The Unnamed" 19)

Women's story is not the substance of great narratives. But women are curious, they have a knack for asking the outsider's uncanny questions, even though they are not encouraged to take credit for what follows. (Gayatri Spivak, *Outside* 72)

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I. Subalternity→Heterogeneity→Originary Queerness

For Gayatri Spivak, the concept of originary queerness is one she cannot yet theorize. Such an inveterate dearth of aptitude seemingly reverses the course of critical inquiry. Although concepts are those concentrations of understanding that convey and uphold lived experience, originary queerness nonetheless divulges a palpable maladroitness. In a spot paradoxically mapped by an *incapacity* to refurbish a backstory, lives the heterogeneity that stays undecipherable, albeit while located in an assiduously interpellated lifeworld. Because lived experience cathects reproductive heteronormativity as a naturalized cultural logic (father, daughter, mother, son, etc.), originary queerness, in missing a commensurate “what happened,” affects a curious freedom: “one cannot imagine what one seems to know” (Spivak, “Gender” 826). This essay reads Saadat Hasan Manto’s short story, “Thanda Gosht” (1950), which depicts the sectarian brutality visited upon women during the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, to delineate the postcolonial significance of originary queerness. I suggest that Manto’s synecdoche (“cold meat”), for an unnamed and raped female corpse, her Sikh abductor and violator, *as well as* for the story’s readers, (re)figures reproductive heteronormativity as a process of unknowing that emplaces a gendered taxonomy, even when its victims are silent.² In lieu of reinforcing sexual difference as a *finished* itinerary for the story’s speaking parts, Kulwant’s repeatedly piercing question—*who she is*—to Ishar Singh (much like the “kirpan” [किरण; sword] she appends to kill her lover) queers “Thanda Gosht” by taking us full circle outside a suburban hotel room, where we encounter a “she” who we cannot imagine but *seem* to know. *This* tarrying with originary queerness “*in its place*” (817, emphases added) docket an unpredictable futurity made especially resonant by the chill that asseverates from the story’s “beginning”/“before” to its equally ignominious “end”/“after”³

In the following, I provide a few examples to show that Spivak’s concept of the subaltern is conventionally grasped as a generalized negativity without a standpoint.⁴ Due to the subaltern’s irretrievable heterogeneity, our inevitably palimpsestic attempts at retrofitting a moot ventriloquism are only made possible by (once again) assuming a role in her gendering.⁵ As such,

² In a previous reading of “Thanda Gosht,” I emphasized that the abducted corpse crosses the sexual differential that emplaces women in overdetermined narratives of honor and sacrifice because of Ishar’s necrophilia. It is Kulwant’s culminating action, however, that pivots our understanding of women as passive victims toward forms of complicity with which partition history has yet to grapple. Ishar’s affective idiom, in that context, suggested an ironically secular grappling with nationalism as a consummate *opportunity* for sexual violence. See “Crossing the Sexual Differential Into Utopia: The Subaltern is (Better Off) Dead,” *theory@buffalo*, Vol. 19, Winter 2016, pp. 129-152.

³ When I first examined originary queerness in Salman Rushdie’s *Shame*, I focused on how Rushdie’s marvelous and voluminous amount of storytelling precluded the novel’s female characters from reductive interpretations. Highlighting the novel’s raucous funniness, its dialogue meant to be read out loud, I suggested that what we *hear* is an originary queerness that turns everydayness into a melodramatic Bollywood scene. See “Raddi, Phisaddi, and Bekar: Locating Spivak’s Originary Queerness in Salman Rushdie’s *Shame*,” *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, Vol. 26, No. 5, 2021, pp. 38-56.

⁴ See, for example: Sangeeta Ray, “Reading Singularity, Reading Difference: An Ethics of the Impossible,” *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: In Other Words*, Wiley Blackwell, 2009, pp. 67–106; J. Maggio, “Can the Subaltern Be Heard?: Political Theory, Translation, Representation, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak,” *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, Vol. 32, No. 4, Oct.-Dec. 2007, pp. 419-443; Jane Krishnadas, “The Sexual Subaltern in Conversations ‘Somewhere in Between’: Law and the Old Politics of Colonialism,” *Feminist Legal Studies*, Vol. 14, 2006, pp. 53–77; Celia Lury, “From Diversity to Heterogeneity: A Feminist Analysis of the Making of Kinds,” *Economy and Society*, Vol. 31, No. 4, Nov. 2002, pp. 588-605; Forest Pyle, “‘By a Certain Subreption’: Gayatri Spivak and the ‘Lever’ of the Aesthetic,” *Interventions*, No. 4, 2002, pp. 186-190; Benita Perry, “Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse,” *Oxford Literary Review*, Vol. 9, No. 1, pp. 27-58.

⁵ See Spivak’s discussion of this appropriation in the “History” section of *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (pp. 198-311). I discuss how this appropriation often takes the guise of a retroactive search for the subaltern’s “free will”

if we understand this irretrievable heterogeneity as originary queerness, then, as Spivak contends, “what had seemed the historical predicament of the colonial subaltern can be made to become the allegory of the predicament of *all* thought, *all* deliberative consciousness” (Spivak, *Other* 204).

Secondly, I contest the reduction of subalternity to a deconstructive reading practice that offers inconclusiveness as a panacea, an ideological compensation for the overdetermined episteme of Europe and Its Others. Precisely because originary queerness cannot be circumscribed as merely an oppositional diagnostic and/or corrective stance, we may posit a heuristic metonymy: if proper postcoloniality is not native informancy but an excavation of foreclosure, then “writ[ing] the theoretically impossible ... self that is no more than an effect of a structural resistance to irreducible heterogeneity” (Spivak, *Other* 16) may yield an affective idiom that belies (a) *relationship* at ground level. In other words, originary queerness—what is diverse, dissonant, multiplicitous, manifold—stakes a claim to the constructive frame by conveying and upholding a non-antagonistic understanding of difference and, hence, enables “a modest shift from negation and interdiction to imagination” (Varadharajan, “Figure and Ground” 742).

Third, I suggest that the hermeneutic homology established here between subalternity, heterogeneity, and originary queerness calls forth a dexterity to mind a gap. Whereas cathecting the sanctioned descriptions allocated via reproductive heteronormativity turns an unnamed and raped female corpse into Kulwant's “sautan” (सौतन; the other woman), a “chudel” (चुड़ैल; demon-vamp), a “haramzadi” (हरामज़ादी; despicable, unholy, female bastard of a prostitute), a “bhadvi” (भड़वी; lady-pimp), “teri ma” (तेरी माँ; a beholden, emasculated Ishar's mother), or “meva” (मेवा; fruit), then Ishar's affective idiom as a not-yet-storied emergent—he calls the unnamed and raped female corpse “insaan kudiya” (इंसान कुड़िया; human-girl) before he, too, turns into, and turns “us” into, “thanda gosht” (ठंडा गोश्त; cold meat)—can perhaps “cross identity” (Spivak, “Gender” 824) to secure some room to breathe. Specifically, the dearth of “what happened”—that is, the originary queerness of the “she” that is (now) “thanda gosht” (ठंडा गोश्त; cold meat), living beyond the *scene* of “life”—empowers the very “zinda lahu” (ज़िंदा लहू; alive-blood), “ang” (अंग; organs), and “boti boti” (बोटी-बोटी; fleshy bones) that bespeak an effortful “storying of the vanishing present” (820). Such a proleptic act of attrition, however, as absurdly predicated on deficiency and lack, can *only* manifest for “an impossible readership” (824), for when we (or once we) get to originary queerness *in its place*, rather than to (different) places already mapped, it will (always) have been.

In the fourth section, I suggest that Manto's “Thanda Gosht” figures *how* originary queerness differs from meticulous information retrieval expressly by dint of the dismal fate of the unnamed and raped corpse. As an aperture for the irretrievable heterogeneity (that lives) apart from the story's “beginning” and “end” and, hence, *in* an illocutionary “before” and “after” (to be) perennially possessively memorialized as Ishar and *his* victim, “thanda gosht” (ठंडा गोश्त; cold meat) inverts a clandestine hotel room (in which we are also trapped) to stage an ubiquitous originary queerness that does not *queer* places. In fact, *places* queer it. Drained of apposite manhood by necrophilia even prior to dying by his own “kirpan” (किरण; sword), a prosthetic left in Kulwant's hands at the “end,” Ishar's *lived* failure as his “baap ka tukham” (बाप का तुखम; created from his father's sperm) ruptures the identity-based matrix of reproductive heteronormativity. The affective idiom of “Thanda Gosht's” vernacular (originally written in

in “De-Liberating Traditions: The Female Bodies of *Sati* and Slavery,” *Asian and Feminist Philosophies in Dialogue: Liberating Traditions*, edited by Ashby Butnor and Jen McWeeny, Columbia University Press, 2014. Pp. 247-270.

Urdu, I read a Hindi translation) drains reproductive heteronormativity of its symbolic force to convey and uphold those snippets of undifferentiated experience (“what happened?”) by which we are borne across as a “person among persons” (Spivak, “Touched” 102). And so, (our) “zinda lahu” (ज़िन्दा लहू; alive-blood) becomes less congruent with the nationalist parlance that writes us into place, and more conducive to a postcolonial narrativization that looks (out) for originary queerness *in its place*.

II. Ghosts and Spirits

In her examination of subalternity, Priyamvada Gopal maintains that Spivak endeavors to nudge the unwitting anti-humanists of the Subaltern Studies group towards a more formalized association with deconstruction⁶ When critiquing Spivak’s essay, “Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography,” which introduces the volume *Selected Subaltern Studies* (1988), she enjoins that Spivak brings “quite different constituencies and philosophical resonances ... into such close proximity that they can be folded into each other” (“Reading” 147). Gopal’s circumspection about conflating positivism, metaphysics, essentialism, and humanism may be merited, but the criticism itself recognizes that Spivak’s project goes beyond its *merely* socio-political dimension. This implicit concession is further evident in Gopal’s eschewal of “crises of self-representation and self-knowledge [as] the stuff of generalizable proclamation” (149) and her tongue-in-cheek query whether the subaltern would be “subaltern (enough)” if she “told us of things other than ghosts and spirits” (158).

According to Gopal, Spivak’s deconstructive emphasis promulgates a “false choice” (Gopal, “Reading” 149) between text (discursive) and essence (identity) at the expense of appreciable histories that discomfit easily digestible binaries. Instead, we must espouse “the far more difficult ... work of examining the complicated engagement of selves, societies, bodies, histories, events, memories, interests, and desires that goes into the making of both consciousness and action” (148). By asserting that in principle “almost anything” (149) may be regarded as a “displacing gesture” (149), she observes of Spivak’s analysis of Bhubaneswari’s *sati*/suicide,

What is remarkable ... is the complete elision of [her] life and agency *as a nationalist revolutionary* with an anguished relationship to the assassination mission she was asked—and found herself unable—to carry out ... [T]he young woman’s consciousness and interests are reduced ... to a ... *singular* discourse of female sexuality. (150)

Gopal correctly states that Spivak mentions the cause of Bhubaneswari’s deliberated act—her inability to commit a political assassination—almost parenthetically. If considered alongside the scene of her death “in her father’s modest apartment” (Spivak, *Critique* 306), however, the seeming diminution of Bhubaneswari’s public role, insofar as Spivak’s reading exceeds the socio-political as an ablative case, suggests that she rebuts the terms of making history.

Indeed, quite a few years later, we become aware of her familial relationship with Bhubaneswari, as Spivak reveals that Bhubaneswari is “my foremother” (“Response” 235); she is her grandmother’s sister. In fact, Spivak situates Bhubaneswari *in* a women’s genealogy: “I inserted the singular suicide of my foremother into that gap between the reasonableness of theory and the urgency of the revolutionary moment ... She made me read situations where no response happens” (235). When speaking of these family women in “If Only” (2006)—that is, her mother,

⁶ A clear articulation of what Spivak learned from deconstruction is “Touched by Deconstruction,” *Grey Room* 20, Summer 2005, pp. 95-104.

great grandmother, paternal grandmother, and her mother's aunts—Spivak affirms, “These are the women who bred me. I am nobody's mother” (“If Only”) Invoking her mother's demise, Spivak mourns the loss of a very particular (“that”) archive, of women *in* life, at the margins of reproductive heteronormativity: “That is my relationship with these women. I am their repetition, with a difference” (“If Only”).

A statement (negatively) docketing futurity via a women's genealogy is abruptly followed by a matter-of-fact denouement: “I am nobody's mother.” Such a stipulated conclusion, pronounced after a stirring evocation of “the women who bred me,” underscores Spivak's concern with the pathos of her exquisite grief.⁷ In *this* figuration of a historical archive, when Spivak bluntly breaks the continuity of motherhood, being nobody's mother (like Bhubaneswari) extols the repetition, with a difference, that is a singular life. It is this originary queerness that is double crossed by an insidious historical logic that cinches culture into place. Following the trace of this foreclosure, therefore, summons a *forfeited* history of family women who are nobody's mother, an apocryphal genealogy written with whatever life can be squeezed (out) from our cultural saturation—Bhubaneswari's menstrual blood, Ishar's necrophilia and exsanguination—to expropriate reproductive heteronormativity. *This* genealogy of family women engenders *that* archive that can frame the headings decreed by either public nationalism or private domesticity as *machineries* that “ruse over” (Spivak, *Other* 15) what is diverse, dissonant, multiplicitous, manifold—that is, originally queer—to impel seamless commensurability.

Consequently, Gopal's suspicions of deconstruction may be well-founded but, as Spivak emphasizes, to “read no more than allegories of unreadability ... [is to] ignore the heterogeneity of the ‘material’” (*Other* 29), which is ceaselessly *excised* from the frame of the encounter for the normalization of silence. In other words, excavating the foreclosure of originary queerness, through which we are situated *in* the field of inquiry, is not a phantasmagoric palliative but the very *possibility* for mobilizing difference. Since subalternity is engendered by a “deliberately fragmentary record produced elsewhere” (287), *for* resistance to be conceived (at all), we must chart the artifices that effectuate antithetical dramatis personae (to be) cathected for a specific kind of story to be told, *as if* these functions were the sum total of all possible deliberations.⁸ Spivak thereby proffers subalternity as the “absolute limit of the place where history is narrativized into logic” (207) because originary queerness countermands how appended *logical predicates*—Bhubaneswari's alleged unrequited love, Ishar's “kirpan” (किरण; sword)—supplant “specific historical conditions” (Gopal, “Reading” 149) for a *purposed* transcription that consolidates our utterly contingent lifeworlds. Accordingly, if institutionally validated forms of subjectivity and agency further perpetuate our instrumentalization, then disclosing their historical provenance, rather than ennobling symbolic vagaries and abstruse neologisms such as radical alterity, perforce demands looking (out) for originary queerness *in its place* for a cosmogonic peek at how a world is (un)made.

⁷ Upon learning of Bhubaneswari's death through family rumors, Spivak asked a female relative for more details, but this philosopher and Sanskritist critiqued Spivak's interest in the “hapless” (*Critique* 308) Bhubaneswari, not her accomplished sisters or liberated descendants. Waiting for menstruation could be construed as a remonstrance of this physiological destiny, her brother-in-law's taunts that at the age of seventeen she is “not-yet-a-wife” (307) could be precipitous, as could her failed mourning for her dead father, not to mention the letter (found ten years after her *sati*/suicide in 1926) confesses her inability to commit a political assassination (307). Spivak laments these prodigiously legible scripts, which contrast her with allegedly more empowered women of post-independence India (311).

⁸ Spivak states, “[I]f ... our ontological commitments are dependent on various forms of coding, we can presuppose a variety of general catachrestic names as grounding” (*Other* 16).

III. The Subaltern (*is*) Dead

Victor Li, when scrutinizing the Subaltern Studies collective, similarly objects to the subaltern's representation as a "utopian ideal" ("Necroidealism" 276): if the subaltern marks a categorical threshold for culturally hegemonic knowledge production, then the most true-to-life example of subalternity is the dead subaltern. The collective, moreover, for Li, spiritualizes this dead subaltern as a portal to "a utopian ... mode of life" (276). As Li avers, "precisely this 'absence' ... results in the paradoxical condition in which utopia and death are linked ... [T]he subaltern's death or disappearance enables [her] to fulfill the ideal role of the ... inappropriable other" (277). Counter to such "cryptonymy" (280), Li figures the subaltern as the keeper of secrets and protector of singularities. (He does not, however, elaborate on *how* the subaltern fulfills this responsibility.)⁹

By casting the subaltern as incontrovertibly unrepresentable, moreover, Spivak marshals a "sacrificial logic" (Li, "Necroidealism" 280) that accedes to an emblematic scapegoat for the "reassurance of a political ideal" (280), which, in turn, occludes extant subaltern struggles: first, the ambivalence and range of subaltern resistance is measured by "an empirically emptied alterity" (280); second, subaltern insurgency is not necessarily native informancy or ventriloquism but may mark aspirational efforts for mainstream insertion¹⁰; third, instead of tragic heroism, subaltern dissent perhaps establishes a transitional space between abjection and inclusion. By synonymizing the aesthetic with the aporetic, therefore, Spivak's necroidealism (Li's titular neologism) ignores the subaltern's "dense and throbbing lifeworld" (284) to epitomize a tautology: the subaltern (*is*) dead; the dead (*is*) subaltern

But, in Li's rendition of this rather dismal *fort/da*—it is the very nature of the subaltern (to be) dead to be continuously summoned, the subaltern is first equated with the dead, and then equated with utopia; utopia, in turn, is equated with the aesthetic, which is equated with the political; and, finally, Li posits this metonymic chain—the dead subaltern is a utopic ideal whose aesthetic figuration constitutes political protest—as how Spivak understands the work of historiography. As a result, Li appears to render (the question of) subalternity moot: if the subaltern *must* die to be worthwhile, then real life referents are superfluous. Why would Spivak refer to Bhubaneswari Bhaduri's *sati*/suicide, or any other confounding situation, at all? This gratuitousness would relinquish the very "dense and throbbing lifeworlds" (Li, "Necroidealism" 284) that Li appropriately insists we must strive to recuperate. In other words, permissible accounts of subaltern death impede an encounter with originary queerness—(to be) deciphered in *how* the subaltern dies, today, on *this* side of being, and not by way of her ineluctably anonymized, virtually prismatic presence.¹¹

The prominence Rajeswari Sunder Rajan also gives to death in subaltern resistance avoids such disproportional metaphysical footholds by focusing on the quandary that subalternity poses to knowledge production. Death ought to include the subaltern in our common humanity, but subalternity as a structural exigency prescribes attentiveness to "the *meaning* of ... a particular

⁹ Li introduces "cryptonymy" but does not develop it further. For an excellent analysis of subaltern secrets see Sandhya Shetty and Elizabeth Bellamy, "Postcolonialism's Archive Fever," *Diacritics*, Vol. 30, No. 1, 2000, pp. 25-48.

¹⁰ Here, Li ignores, for example, Spivak's statement, "You don't give the subaltern a voice. You work ... against subalternity" (de Kock, "Interview" 46).

¹¹ I allude here to Theodor Adorno's critique of metaphysics that perpetuate dehumanization and functionalism when they conflate the absolute abstraction of experience with transcendence of cultural determinism. See *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems*, Stanford University Press, 2000.

death [as it] traverses the boundary between the living and the dead" (Sunder Rajan, "Death" 117, emphasis added). Against anointing a consummate paragon of exploitation, Spivak instead probes the "affective and ethical responses" (119) that Bhubaneswari's *sati*/suicide instigates. In abjuring the quest for a backdated authentic voice or motive will, subalternity figures the failure of a speech-act rather than its absence altogether. In fact, Spivak unequivocally chooses an "imperfect" (121) example of subalternity: Bhubaneswari is a middle-class Bengali girl; she is a participant in the nationalist struggle for independence; and she not only writes a letter, but waits for the onset of menstruation, before she hangs herself.

Sunder Rajan thereby underscores that "while the nonidentity of Bhubaneswari as subaltern might remain ... at the level of the individual or historical anecdote, there is no mystification ... at the structural level ... Bhubaneswari's subalternity is produced" (Sunder Rajan, "Death" 123). She concludes, "There is no necessary syllogism here: x, y, and z die; they are all (produced as) subaltern; therefore subalterns (must) die" (130). Attending to a particular death's meaning, we inescapably probe the "specific historical conditions" (Gopal, "Reading" 149), to return to Gopal's prerogative, that mount a governing logic whereby difference is inherently oppositional. At that moment, whence (recalling Li) a "dense and throbbing lifeworld" (Li, "Necroidealism" 284) disappears into a taxonomical placeholder *meant* to understand the living, originary queerness may evince an affective idiom that belies (a) *relationship* at ground level to subvert the foreclosure that miraculates *place* and thereby procure a glimpse, as mentioned earlier, of a "person among persons" (Spivak, "Touched" 102).

Asha Varadharajan, similarly, to Sunder Rajan, attempts to "illuminate not only the singularity, but also [the subaltern's] remarkable prescience, continuing relevance, and abiding significance" ("Figure and Ground" 731). In using various rhetorical figures such as aporia, catachresis, metalepsis, etc., Spivak does not retroactively ferret out a perspicacious subjectivity that abuts an enforced silence (733) because subalternity "limns a predicament rather than names an identity" (734). Varadharajan's own prioritization of class consciousness and subaltern insurgency coheres with Spivak's more productive approach to bring colonial knowledge production to crisis, for the relentless shuttle between object- and subject-status as launched by the imperialist ("she was forced to die") and nationalist ("she wanted to die") sentences reinforces the widow's good wifehood. Pursuant to Varadharajan's insistence on the "vitality and dynamism [of] a figure ... thought only in terms of ... limits" (734), therefore, I suggest that subalternity's—that is, the subaltern's irretrievable heterogeneity's—heuristic homology with originary queerness may avoid the pitfalls of adequate representation allegedly gained via the epistemic strategy of particularization, whereby essentially historical categories of identity (race, class, gender, etc.) dispense a purportedly more tortuously acquired adequate representation.

If "[w]e are a part of the records we keep" (Spivak, "Explanation" 22), then Manto's ironic and melancholic transpositions of originary queerness—"insaan" (इंसान; human), "insaan - kudiya" (इंसान कुड़ियाँ; human-girls), "zinda lahu" (ज़िन्दा लहू; alive blood), "ang" (अंग; organs), "boti boti" (बोटी-बोटी; fleshy bones), and "thanda gosht" (ठंडा गोश्त; cold meat)—figure a vital and dynamic entity trapped in the vicissitudes of a system's logic, for nationalist history *should* merely recapitulate male honor, valor, and enlightenment; they are, after all, their "baap ka tukham" (बाप का तुखम; created from father's sperm). Instead, on *that* fateful night, we *all* visit "bure ki ma ka ghar" (बुरे की माँ के घर; the house of Bad's mother)—that is, (another) Mother India. *Here* are: hotel rooms, not marital bedrooms; lovers, not spouses; looters, abductors, and rapists, not patriots; promiscuity, not chastity; intrigue and abeyance, not principled war; a spurned woman, not devoted wife; necrophilia, not conquest and acquisition; jealous female murderers, not

sacrificed women; emasculation, not virility; banal evil, not righteous good; sexual arousal, not patriotic fervor; and, a card game, not history. *These* are the ingredients of a not-yet-storied emergent that, as stated above, can “cross identity” (Spivak, “Gender” 824) to docket an unpredictable futurity, for by the time we get to this hotel room, at the margins of reproductive heteronormativity, rather than to Mother India already mapped, it will (always) have been. This is how Mother India becomes less congruent with the nationalist con-text that writes us into place, and more conducive to a postcolonial narrativization that looks (out) for the inhabitants of “burre ki ma ka ghar” (बुरे की माँ के घर; the house of Bad’s mother) *in its place*.

V. Originary Queerness

Because originary queerness is “a position without identity” (Spivak, “They” 2), it cannot be adduced by feminist varieties of neoliberalism (nationalism, democracy, rights, etc.). Neither is this non-position derived from “straight,” nor does it signify feminine excess; indeed, as per Spivak, sexual difference qua humanism “nestles” *in* originary queerness (2). Inasmuch as originary queerness is disclosed by forms of cultural evidence appreciable only via a non-antagonistic understanding of difference, its difference from reproductive heteronormativity is “continuous” (3).¹² Furthermore, this irretrievable heterogeneity is neither reasonable nor unreasonable but (lives as) the heuristic yet perennially anachronistic “before” and “after,” “beginning” and “end,” of the standpoint, whose cartographic specificity incarnates the bounds of the known. Whereas the determinants of knowledge production rely upon a generalized form of gender coding, as animated by institutionally validated forms of subjectivity and agency, the effort to look (out) for the heterogeneous avouches (a) relationship at ground level and, hence, (a) responsibility *in* originary queerness.

Susceptibility to the irretrievably heterogeneous *in its place*, therefore, in contravention of rationalized lived experience, is an imaginative endeavor to be borne across sanctioned registers, which promulgate Woman as a semiotic resource *par excellence*, the tangible undifferentiatedness of “the diversity of daily life” (Spivak, “Gender” 816) forming a wishful disclaimer to the “peopled impersonality of an inherited record” (816). In order to enervate a heedlessly didactic yet dramatized logical sequence—sex, gender, marriage, reproduction—as Spivak notes, “the question of gender ... *must be felt*” (816, emphases added). Altering all (else) that follows, originary queerness *in its place* conveys and upholds an inability to capture the fundamentals in which (as it happens) we *actually* live. For this recounting, futurity is geo-graphed by our deficiency and lack, which thereby “stance the negotiation in directions of greater virtuality” (818); in other words, we forego the claim to identity for “the bottom layers” (819), where (all) failures are honorable.¹³ *Here*, a negotiation’s polymorphic consanguinity does not warrant discretionary yet globalized lifestyle options: “sautan” (सौतन; the other woman), a “chudel” (चुड़ैल; demon-vamp), a “haramzadi” (हरामज़ादी; despicable, unholy, female bastard of a prostitute), a “bhadvi” (भड़वी; lady-pimp), “teri ma” (तेरी माँ; a beholden, emasculated Ishar’s mother), or “meva” (मेवा;

¹² Spivak contends, “[S]ubjectship ... is different from ... originary queerness ... [O]ratures ... can make visible that self-elaboration as such is not necessarily a historical question in the sense in which we understand history. And the originary queerness ... supposed upon such terrain is no secret origin ... Self-elaboration ... temporize[s] a life as a person among persons ... I don’t mean ‘individual’ ... [O]ratures [...] [are not] in locatable archives [, which] does not make them ‘without history’” (“Touched” 102).

¹³ I am drawing here on Spivak’s characterization of Rushdie’s *Shame* as an “honorable failure” (*Outside* 223) insofar as the intangible undifferentiatedness of our everydayness that constitutes “the bottom layers” (Spivak, “Gender” 819) cannot not (in *Shame*’s case, spectacularly) fail to cathect identity.

fruit), which endorse the frame of a cultural logic; alternatively, we recognize, *in* (our) originary queerness, that “a decision ... makes us rather than we it” (818).

Spivak thereby calls “queer” (“Gender” 818) *this* irretrievable heterogeneity *in its place*—that is, those rudiments wherein we can bear witness to an essentially historical double bind because *here* difference is not intrinsically functional. Contrary to an overdetermined historical billing made possible under the auspices of reproductive heteronormativity, irrespective of what will (always) have happened at ground level, stancing identity *in* originary queerness, in the direction of *greater* virtuality, releases the “unmaking of the negotiation ... a virtualization of the virtuality of the queer” (824). Thus, identity may be indispensable to have (a) predictable place, but this identity is (to be) unpredictably stanced as virtual. By projecting the “queer” as virtual, however, identity’s virtuality, disavowed by a foreclosure of (a) relationship at ground level, secures its ill-begotten mandate. What ensues is an irresolvable “nonpassage” (826) between virtual and nonvirtual, or predictable and unpredictable, as (autochthonous) identity and (virtual) “queer” are not antonymic but aporetic. As a result, the unpredictability of moments of *crossing* identity serves as an “imperfect analogy” (824) for *how* “something that engages as sexual difference plays, marking time, defining and activating space” (Spivak, “Touched” 101). In these imaginary homelands, “one never stops (not) translating” (Spivak, “Translating” 39) originary queerness because irretrievable heterogeneity *in its place* requires articulation to get anywhere (at all).

Like Ishar Singh’s primevally bloodied “kirpan” (किरण)—bloodied not just by his victims or even by his own murder, but by millennia-old palimpsestic piercings of flesh—Spivak’s double negative “stake[s] a claim to be *une forme tachée*” (“Touched” 103) to putatively finished itineraries. In granting a crucial role to the indefiniteness of our most intimate but eventually unsayable materialities (hence the onus on the “zinda lahu” [ज़िन्दा लहू; alive blood] of affective idiom), which registers history as turning (our) originary queerness into “thanda gosht” (ठंडा गोश्त; cold meat), Spivak asks us to imagine the cuts required for (an) “us” to be written. Recalling “that from which sexual difference differs” (101)—that is, the heuristic yet perennially anachronistic “beginning” and “end,” “before” and “after,” of our intoned parts—puts “the question of Being in drag” (Spivak, “Touched” 102): as such, we may *be* men and women (irretrievable heterogeneity in drag), but the *dearth* of a backstory is how we are borne across identity, whose originary queerness will (always) have been.

While an “interminable conversation” (Spivak, “Gender” 98) ensnares this queer everydayness into an abyssal regime of “sexual sameness [as] sexual difference” (102), I suggest that the world about the hotel room, as refracted by the unnamed and raped female corpse’s “thanda gosht” (ठंडा गोश्त; cold meat), which is also (like us) not, in fact, *there*, but left in some bushes, turns Mother India into a joke on “us.” When the question of gender is felt in *this* chimerical place, we may recognize that the critical force of subalternity emerges precisely from “being the ... limit of the epistemic project of [information] retrieval” (Chowdhury, “Post-deconstructive” 165).¹⁴ In the context of post-independence failures of decolonization, therefore, originary queerness, as “shared *in* the rhythm of working together” (Spivak, “Gender” 821n21), may “dheere dheere”

¹⁴ Aniruddha Chowdhury contests Benita Perry’s assertion that Spivak’s subaltern is thoroughly mediated. Not only does Spivak’s career-long ethico-political project move her to the heterogeneous subaltern margins of authorizing discourse, but she also characterizes the gendered subaltern “as the space of sheer heterogeneity” (“Post-deconstructive” 164, 154). Given post-independence failures of decolonization in the global South, strategically deploying subaltern heterogeneity “can make visible the phantasmatic nature of a merely hegemonic nationalism” (Spivak, *Other* 79)

(धीरे-धीरे; slowly-slowly) (the repetition is an “Indian” affective idiom) lead to “ek baat” (एक बात; one telling, or one thing to tell) about “insaan kudiya” (इंसान कुड़ियाँ; human-girls) as indeed strange things.

IV. The Scene

To recall Li’s neologism “necroidealism,” it seems that the subaltern in “Thanda Gosht” (ठंडा गोश्त) is (a) subaltern in every possible way: *she* is dead; *she* does not speak; she is (not) *there*; she has no name, no family, no religion; she *is* “thanda gosht” (ठंडा गोश्त; cold meat), left to rot in some bushes. If colonialism and nationalism both buttress good wifedom as Hindu women’s aggregate ontology, then partition narratives posit their rape-ability as an intransigent *is*. In *this* hotel room, where the entire story takes place, rape is like a lover cheating or tasting fruit, a happenstance, an entitlement, or cause of murderous jealousy due to a “chudel’s” (चुड़ेल; vampish and demon-like) seduction. Consequently, a full-blooded Punjabi woman is also her father’s daughter *when* she exacts revenge, because her lover fell prey to another woman’s charm—a patriarchal glossing of violence that dovetails with historical scripts of defended rectitude and concomitantly conferred status.

The confines of the hotel room, which segregates a visible interior world from an unseen exterior one, contain only two characters—Ishar Singh and Kulwant Kaur—who are Sikh Punjabi lovers. We immediately come upon Kulwant as she waits for Ishar. When he arrives, she uses her “tej tej nazron” (तेज़-तेज़ नज़रों; quick-sharp-expressive eyes) to look at him “ghoorkar” (घूरकर; a hard and hostile stare). She moves forward to lock the door. It is twelve o’clock at night (resonant of the midnight hour of India’s independence, which Jawaharlal Nehru will have just described as India awakening while the world sleeps) and a “rahasyapur” (रहस्यपूर्ण; mystery-imbued) silence saturates the “chaya(s)” (छाया; shadows) of the locked enclosure. (The use of a high Hindi word to describe the silence adds an epochal tension to a run of the mill situation of a woman waiting for a man.) Not only is the tumult of the exterior held at bay by the locked door, but even the hotel room is not fully perceptible—the shadows outside are also present inside.

Kulwant returns to sitting cross-legged on the bed with an air of miffed expectation and entitled hurt. And *here*, Manto begins the steady process of undressing Ishar Singh, albeit in private quarters. At first, Kulwant leaves Ishar alone as he unravels the tangled threads of his disparate thoughts. Still holding his “kirpan” (किरण; sword), he stands in a corner.¹⁵ That Ishar does not stride into and thereby command this space, as well as his continued silence, further shroud the already darkness-filled room. Ishar seems hesitant, as though ashamed of having committed a misdeed, even when Kulwant shifts positions and starts to swing her legs.

Manto describes Kulwant as “bhari bhari” (भरे-भरे; full-full). (Punjabi Sikh women per stereotype are “fair” and “healthy.” “Healthy” is a euphemism often used for not “slim.”) The pregnant pause during which this vernacular is used will later birth Ishar’s exsanguinated corpse, itself an inversion of Kulwant’s affectively embossed fullness. In lieu of Ishar’s manly presence, Manto directs our imaginative gaze to Kulwant’s muscles, which ripple as they are “gosht se bhare hue” (गोश्त से भरे हुए; filled with meat). Using the Urdu word “gosht” instead of the Hindi word “maans” (मांस) renders Kulwant less weighty or obese and more a meaty bone to be chomped on. Her breasts raised very high on her chest, and her “tej tej nazre” (तेज़-तेज़ नज़रों; quick-sharp-eyes),

¹⁵ Sikh practice centralizes what are known as the 5 k’s: *kesh* (hair), *kach* (undergarment), *kirpan* (sword), *kanga* (a wooden comb), and *kada* (a steel bangle).

alert for predators, augment her animalesque irruption in suspended time. Having waited for a while, her upper lip shows signs of her “gubar” (गुबार; pent up feelings), as though this swollen lip announces her swollen emotions. When gussied up, Manto confirms that she is a “dharledar” (धड़लेदार; impressive, larger-than-life) woman. (The use of “daar” [दार] after the adjective renders this formidableness synecdochic.) Unlike Kulwant’s andean aspect, Ishar’s diminution proceeds apace, despite his manly features and muscular body, but this incremental shrinkage does not obviate Ishar as “yogyatar” (योग्यतार; capable and deserving) of Kulwant. (The use of “daar” [दार] after the adjective renders this deservingness synecdochic.) Still quiet in the corner, Ishar’s kirpan-bearing hand starts to shake whilst his tightly bound turban disassembles.

At this point, the two have not exchanged a single word, the expectant lull also imbued in Kulwant and Ishar’s physicality and full-bloodedness. That this quiet hotel room is a sanctuary is refuted by their awkward bodies: Kulwant’s grows more impatient, Ishar’s steadily decomposes. Kulwant suddenly leaps up but, regardless of her by now vituperative “tej tej nazren” (तेज-तेज नज़रों; quick-sharp-expressive eyes), can only sputter his name. Ishar’s eyes refuse to meet Kulwant’s gaze; he turns his face away and looks at the floor. (Punjabi Sikh men per stereotype are “aggressive” and “virile.” “Virile” is the euphemism for well-endowed manly men whose sperm produces well-endowed manly sons.) Upon spewing his name once more, Kulwant immediately suppresses her tone, seeming to concede how far she can goad him. Her query about his whereabouts, however, uncovers his disappearance for several days. And here, Manto also commences to let Ishar run dry.

Moistening his cracked lips with his tongue, a dryness that will eventually reach its physical *and* logical conclusion, Ishar tells Kulwant that he cannot provide his whereabouts. Ishar’s unknowingness not only marks his seeming trauma but also gestures to (another) Mother India wherein independence is impetuous pillage. Kulwant is angry, accusatory, and disquieted with his “ma ya jawab” (माँ-या जवाब; non-answer). (माँ means “mother”; Ishar’s non-committal response is like a naughty child’s upon getting caught.) To distract from his obfuscation, Ishar throws his “kirpan” (किरण; sword) to the side and lies down. His girth still fills the bed, but he has been sick for some time. Seeing her lover in such straits further fills an already “bhari bhari” (भरे-भरे; full-full) Kulwant with “sahenbhuti” (साहानुभूती; forbearance and sympathy). (Throughout, Kulwant’s and Ishar’s coarse eroticism is counterbalanced by high Hindi words such that her “normal” reactions become noble, magnanimous, or supernal, whilst the extremity of Ishar’s transgressions precipitates mawkish self-pity. As such, the cleavage between anatomy and senses peculiarly sheaths their final acts with vindication and comeuppance at once.) For now, Kulwant strokes his forehead whereas he stares at the ceiling. His chronic reticence, gradual feminization, contracting posture, and desiccated lips (the obverse of the “gubar” [गुबार; pent up feelings] of Kulwant’s upper lip), suggest something truly horrific. He is still only able to say Kulwant’s name in a voice filled with “pida” (पीड़ा; pain and sorrow), another high Hindi word that sublates Ishar’s opportunistic savagery as the generic kernel of “life.”

Despite the “gubar” [गुबार; pent up feelings] of Kulwant’s upper lip, or perhaps because of it, Kulwant begins to playfully bite him. *Now* begins their foreplay, which seems misplaced given Ishar’s demeanor. (Perhaps Kulwant tries to distract him.) Manto portrays Kulwant as relentless in her pursuit of sexual satisfaction and Ishar as a man up to the task. At this moment, however, Ishar removes his turban and gazes beseechingly into Kulwant’s eyes. He does spank her “gosht bhare kulhe” (गोशत-भरे कूल्हे; meat-filled hips), another descriptor synonymizing sex, violence,

and gorging of animal flesh. After he snaps his head back to express incredulity at women's crazy minds (he may be amused at Kulwant's inappropriate unseriousness, but later revelations suggest this utterance displaces responsibility for *his* deliberated actions onto the unnamed and raped female corpse), his hair comes undone. In a further role-reversal, Kulwant, the sexual aggressor, runs her fingers through his long tresses. She again lovingly asks him where he went for all these days. He again deflects by saying he was at "bure ki ma ke ghar" (बुरे की माँ के घर; Bad's mother's house). (This domestic idiom personifies "bad[ness]" by giving it a mother and a natal home.) Manto's gendered morphology induces dread, for this familiar proverb is at once insult and warning. It tells the reader that what Ishar witnessed was seriously awful (not just "regular" awful) because he visited the *origin* of badness, a sacrosanct site of being and belonging transfigured into hell, as though where he was before this "visit," remarkably, were a prelapsarian dwelling, even as the affective idiom used reinforces the primeval and autochthonic nature of *that* place, where all badness is birthed and bred.

He swears to god that Kulwant is a "jaandaar" woman (जानदार; full of life) when he starts rubbing her ample chest. Knowing that she has him where she wants him, she gracefully shakes his off hand. We learn that they are in a suburban hotel room because Kulwant tells him to swear on her head before enquiring whether he went into the city's commercial districts, where the looting is taking place. Due to the cocoon-like quality of the hotel room, which is also the site of an illicit dalliance, the mayhem outside seems far removed. Ishar impulsively fastens his bun in one swoop, as though trying to put himself back together. He responds negatively. Kulwant now appears womanish in her constant nagging. Convinced that he won't share his looted bounty, she refuses to believe him. Ishar curses anyone who lies to her: "voh apne baap ka tukham na ho" (वह अपने बाप का तुखम न हो; not created from his father's sperm). (Mothers give birth to "bad," but fathers' sperm-filled scrotums breed "honesty.")

Although momentarily reassured by this fealty, she blurts out that she still does not understand what happened. He was totally fine that night when he lay next to her, after dressing her in pilfered ornaments, receiving her caresses. Suddenly, he got dressed and left. Either because of her persistence or his triggered memory, Ishar's face falls. Kulwant notes he is turning yellow. At this juncture, she indeed knows that "daal mein kuch kaala hai" (दाल में कुछ काला है; there is something black in the lentils). Again, the affective idiom is domestic: an almost daily staple, lentils symbolize antediluvian motherly care, an unvarnished maternalism that turns rotten by something black (an inauspicious and sinister color). Kulwant is rightly suspicious. He tries to lie with his lifeless voice. She presses on her upper lip as her suspicions grow stronger. Forcefully enunciating every word, she taunts his manliness (we also learn he has been missing for eight days). Ishar sits up straight as if assaulted. To reassure her that he is the same man, he embraces her forcefully with his "shishali" (शिशाली; formidable and mighty) arms; she must suffocate from his squeezing so that the heat leaves her bones. Kulwant may not interfere, but she sticks to her complaints. He repeats, he went to "Bad's mother's house" (बुरे की माँ के घर; bure ki ma ke ghar). But, then again, there is "kuch nahin" (कुछ नहीं; really nothing) to tell (her).

V. House (or Hotel Room) of Cards

By now, we've been *in* suspense for half the story, that is, the hotel room pumps this affective enervation in all directions—outwards, inside, towards us. The story *nestles* in suspense, a peculiar lover's foreplay that throbs with the potential to change everything. Indeed, Ishar's constant deflection suggests that we must witness what's not (actually) *there*. This (black,

inauspicious) something, on the other side of a locked door, exaggerates (like the “gubar” [गुबार] of Kulwant’s upper lip) Kulwant’s incredibly banal repartee; she is womanfully (भरी भरी [filled] like her) melodramatic—Ishar must set her on fire if he lies—yet also coquettishly curious. This potential combustion enhances the room’s already corpulence-induced erotic charge, which Ishar “manages” by encircling Kulwant’s neck with his hands and his lips crushing hers. Readers may anticipate this fluidity between sex and violence because Punjabi Sikhs are *expected* to be full-throttled: in their language, music, clothes, jewelry, dance, food, and it follows, in their lovemaking. As Ishar’s “kirpan” (किरण; sword) attests, they are a warrior people. Further catering to stereotype, Manto’s characters now use equally corny analogies for obstreperous copulation.¹⁶

The moment’s intensity breaks when Ishar’s facial hair gets into Kulwant’s nostrils, and she sneezes. Both laugh. Looking at her lustfully, Ishar invites her to play cards. Despite the beads of sweat above her upper lip, Kulwant rolls her eyes, professing “dafaan ho” (दफान हो; let the burial happen). (Sex and death, like phallus and “kirpan,” are predictably interchangeable.) He bites her hips; she suffers, pushes him away, halts him. Kulwant melts when his teeth catch her top lip. Taking off his kurta, Ishar announces the “turp chaal” (तुर्प चाल; card game).¹⁷ Like skinning a slaughtered goat, Ishar removes her *salwar kameez* over her head. Strenuously kissing her arm, he stares at her naked body, swearing she is a very “karaari aurat” (करारी औरत; spicy-hot woman). Kulwant’s upper lip trembles in arousal.

Seeing the red mark on her arm, she (foreshadowing her own consummation of this sexual interlude) calls him “zaalim” (ज़ालिम; bloodthirsty). Ishar smiles through his black moustache (which mirrors Kulwant’s cupid’s bow, itself a proxy for her vagina). Pursuant to his pronouncement that “julm” (जुल्म; oppression) should occur today, he inflicts them: he bites her earlobes, presses her “ubhre” (उभरे; heaving) chest, licks her hips with loud smacks, fills her cheek-filled face with kisses, sucks her all over, and wets her body with saliva. Notwithstanding Kulwant reaching a boiling point like a pot over “aanch” (आँच; high fire-heat), Ishar cannot get an erection. Whatever techniques he remembers, he tries as though a losing “pahlvaan” (पहलवान; athlete). Stretched like an instrument with chords at the highest pitch, Kulwant is irritated: it is time for this muscled and sinewed man to “putta faink” (पत्ता फेंक; throw his card, make a play).

Upon hearing her, the entire deck of cards slips from Ishar’s hand. Breathing heavily, he lies “pahlu” (पहलू; next, military flank) to Kulwant. She warms him up, for a layer of cold sweat covers his forehead. With her tense “ang” (अंग; organs) sorely disappointed, she leaps out of bed, “jaldi jaldi” (जल्दी-जल्दी quickly-quickly) covers herself with a sheet, flares her nostrils, and demands in a scattered voice *who* squelched him dry, *who* the “haramzadi” (हरामज़ादी; despicable, unholy, female bastard of a prostitute) *is*, *who* the “chudel” (चुड़ेल; vampish-demon) and card-thief

¹⁶ For specific discussions about sexuality, see Ayesha Jalal, *The Pity of Partition: Manto's Life, Times and Work Across the India-Pakistan Divide*, Princeton University Press, 2013; Navein Reet, “Capturing Obscenity: The Trials and Tribulations of Saadat Hasan Manto,” *Nordic Journal of Law & Social Research* (NNJLSR), No. 5, 2014, pp. 15-40; Saadat Hasan Manto, “Afsana Nigar Aur Jinsi Masail (The Short Story Writer and Sexual Matters),” *Manto Nama*, Sang-e-Meel, 1995; Saadat Hasan Manto, “Panchwan Muqadimah (The Fifth Trial),” *Manto Kahaniyan*, Sang-e-Meel, 1995; Aziz Ahmad, Manto Ka Muqaddama: Obscenity Trial-1,” *All Things Pakistan: Pakistan, Pakistani, Pakistaniat*, 29 September, 2009, pakistaniat.com/2009/09/29/saadat-manto-trial/.

¹⁷ Manto seems to be referring to a card game popular in Iran, India, and Pakistan.

is. A panting Ishar reassures her in a “nidhal” (निढाल; resigned and unenergetic) voice, but she boils with rage.

Placing her hands on her hips, Kulwant informs him with “dirta” (दड़ता; sternly-strongly) (her hardness a procurement of his erection) that she will find out, even after bitterly making him swear his fidelity, as she is Sardar Nihal Singh’s daughter. He lies and she will suck his “boti-boti” (बोटी-बोटी; fleshy bones) until desiccated (a role reversal given their foreplay). As soon as he shakes his head sorrowfully, she loses her mind. She springs for the “kirpan” (किरण; sword), removes its casing—as if peeling a banana (his undressing her was akin to skinning a goat), and a bloody fountain gushes from Ishar’s throat. Not yet satisfied, she scratches his hair like a jungle-wild cat, swearing at her “sautan” (सौतन; rival) with “moti moti” (मोटी-मोटी; fat-fat) curses. Ishar beseeches in a dolorously soft voice, and she backs off. As the blood flies into his moustache, we near the end of Ishar *and* of the story, but we *still* do not know what happened.

Although reproachful of her impetuosity, he thanks her. What happened, he says, happened for the better. Her jealousy awakening anew, Kulwant asks *who* “teri ma” (तेरी माँ; your mother) *is*. (He is an emasculated, beholden mama’s boy.) After tasting his blood, a ripple or current runs through Ishar’s body. His “dhundhlali” (धुंधलाली; murky) eyes get a slight “chamak” (चमक; shine-light) when confessing that he, a bastard, killed six people with that “kirpan” (किरण; sword). She needs to stop swearing at that “bhadvi” (भड़वी; lady-pimp), but Kulwant is obsessed, yelling that she’s asking him *who* she *is*. Spreading his hand on his neck, he smiles when he sees his “zinda lahu” (ज़िनदा लहू; alive blood). With a stifled voice and slit neck, he calls humans strange things. Kulwant interjects he focus on matters to hand.

Ishar’s broadening smile also broadens his moustache (a synecdochic expression of *another* [im]possible masculinity, somewhere else). A fresh layer of cold sweat covers his forehead. His pierced neck means that he can only tell her “saari baat” (सारी बात; whole telling, whole thing to tell) very “dheere dheere” (धीरे-धीरे; slowly-slowly), even as he cannot *actually* tell her what happened. Not only humans, but “insaan kudiya” (इंसान कुड़ियाँ; human-girls) are also really strange things. Looting in town like everyone else, he gave her all the filched jewelry, ornaments, and money. But he did not tell her “ek baat” (एक बात; one thing, one telling, one thing to tell). Howbeit he grimaces in torment, Kulwant declines to pay him any mind. Pitiless, she commands him to spill (the spilling of blood makes him spill the “truth”). In his rejoinder, Ishar blows the spurting blood upwards onto his moustache so that it flies in front of him.

The house he attacked contained seven people. He killed six, but the seventh was a very beautiful girl. Kulwant listens quietly. Planning to kill her, he then (referring to himself in third person) determined to taste this new “meva” (मेवा; fruit) since he enjoys Kulwant daily. Propping her on his shoulders, he went to the bushes alongside the railroad tracks. At this juncture in his “ek baat” (एक बात; one thing, one telling, one thing to tell), his tongue is arid. Kulwant swallows her spit, urging him to resume. With immense exertion, Ishar confesses he did “patta faink” (पत्ता फैंक; throw the card, make his play). Kulwant shakes him when his voice drowns out. Opening his eyes, he sees Kulwant’s every “boti boti” (बोटी- बोटी; morsel of meat) palpitating. The girl was dead, a “laash” (लाश; cadaver), completely “thanda gosht” (ठंडा गोश्त; cold meat). Acquiescing to his request for her hand, she realizes that Ishar’s is colder than ice.

VI. Human-girls (इंसान कड़ियाँ) in One Telling (एक बात)

When charged and tried for obscenity, Manto argued that Ishar represents hope even for evildoers—that is, a recuperable or redeemable humanity.¹⁸ Obviously, if necrophilia is what causes self-awareness, then our standards are incredibly low. Kulwant and Ishar's clichéd repartee and sexual foreplay is coupled with the equally clichéd continuity between sex, food, animality, and violence. Somewhere along the line, Kulwant is compared to a cat. Alongside military imagery, sex and rape are likened to a public card game played by men in teashops, parks, town squares, etc. Domestic imagery includes slaughtering and skinning goats, boiling water, spices, meat, bones, and peeling a banana as well as motifs such as daughtership, motherhood, and patronymy. Though part of a sexual dalliance in excess of traditional mores, Kulwant calls the victim her “sautan” (सौतन).

Phallogocentric irony (Kulwant penetrates Ishar; blood bursts from the neck, not semen from the phallus; Kulwant's back is erect, not Ishar's penis; Ishar's unravelling hair and clothing) as well as pedestrian swear words—“chudel” (चुड़ैल; demon-vamp), “haramzadi” (हरामज़ादी; despicable, unholy, female bastard of a prostitute), “bhadvi” (भड़वी; lady-pimp), demonize the victim to hold *her* responsible for Ishar's predation and Kulwant's jealousy. Both women are cast as vampire-like beings imbibing Ishar's life force: if the abducted woman shrivels Ishar's “kirpan” (किरण; sword) and blocks his “chaal” (चाल; move), Kulwant's possessiveness wizens his “boti boti” (बोटी-बोटी; morsel of meat) by exsanguinating him of “zinda lahu” (ज़िंदा लहू; alive blood).

The originary queerness of the unnamed and raped female corpse, her “thanda gosht” (ठंडा गोश्त; cold meat) a synecdoche for the incapacity to generate her backstory, despite her dismally overdetermined gendered fate, becomes appreciable by an affective idiom: “insaan kudiya” (इंसान कुड़ियाँ; human-girls) whose “zinda lahu” (ज़िंदा लहू; alive-blood) forms (lives as) the “before” and “after,” “beginning” and “end,” of the “ek baat” (एक बात; one thing to tell) overheard in the hotel room: *that is all* we know. As such, Kulwant's incessant, uncanny questions—*who* squelched him dry, *who* the “haramzadi” (हरामज़ादी despicable, unholy, female bastard of a prostitute) *is*, *who* the “chudel” vampish-demon (चुड़ैल) and card-thief *is*, evince that, heedless of our habitual systems of hatreds—she becomes “chudel” (चुड़ैल; demon-vamp), a “haramzadi” (हरामज़ादी; despicable, unholy, female bastard of a prostitute), “bhadvi” (भड़वी; lady-pimp), or “meva” (मेवा; fruit), “zinda lahu” (ज़िंदा लहू; alive-blood) moves inexorably into chaos, which experience *in its place* exsanguinates Ishar.

Ishar expects the ubiquitous, but something else happens, which he tries to revoke by using “insaan kudiya” (इंसान कुड़ियाँ; human-girl), the word “kudiya” (कुड़ियाँ; girl) reiterating his infantilization of women. *She* who is also “kuch nahin” (कुछ नहीं; really nothing) to tell, left in bushes by railroad tracks (an imperial mapping of India as [a] place), *crosses* identity with a “bhari bhari” (भरी भरी; full full) undifferentiatedness, even when not (in fact) there. Here, behind a locked door (Kulwant's first act when Ishar returns), therefore, which sunders *all* signs of life on one side but not the other—words used to describe Kulwant: “karaari” (करारी; spicy-hot), “aanch” (आँच; high fire-heat), “moti moti” (मोटी-मोटी; fat fat), “jaldi jaldi” (जल्दी-जल्दी; quickly quickly), “ubhri”

¹⁸ See Sarah Waheed, “Anatomy of an Obscenity Trial,” *Himal South Asian: A Review Magazine of Politics and Culture*, 1 July, 2013, himalmag.com/anatomy-obscenity-trial/. It is possible that they are married and seeking refuge in a hotel room. It is also unclear whether they are single or married to other people and having an affair.

(उभरी; heaving)—“the question of gender ... *must be felt*” (Spivak, “Gender” 816, emphases added).

As we remain ensconced in these quarters, the hotel room forms (for “us”) the aperture for a consummate unknowingness trapped in the vicissitudes of lovers’ logic. Exceeding the trappings of domestic, communal squabble and public, patriotic fervor, the unnamed and raped female corpse’s very impersonality captures the fundamentals in which (as it happens) the partition actually *takes* place. And so, condemned as we are to witness Ishar tortuously die and overhear Kulwant’s unanswerable question, (our) futurity must now be geo-graphed by our deficiency and lack. Since Ishar’s affective idiom momentarily breaches a foreclosure of *relationship*, we may stance the patronymic in the direction of *greater* virtuality. Because irretrievable heterogeneity *in its place* foils the predictability of rationalized itineraries of reproductive heteronormativity, we can never have “ek baat” (एक बात; tell one thing, have one thing to tell) about what happened. In other words, *her* originary queerness, despite her *being* cold brute matter (in drag), upends the entire card game.

The unnamed and raped female corpse thereby recalls for (“us”) “that from which sexual difference differs” (Spivak, “They” 101) because her *dearth* of a backstory generates an ethical crisis that sexual difference cannot ruse over for continuity and homogeneity. This backstory, whose originary queerness will (always) have been, must be ceaselessly *excised* from the frame of the encounter for “thanda gosht” (ठंडा गोश्त; cold meat) (human only in outline) to dispense with the very intransigent inconstancy (in this, Kulwant and the corpse are foils) that brings Ishar into (a) disavowed *relationship*: he is (dis)figured because he feels *responsible*. Thus, irrespective of a readily arrayed interminable conversation— hot/cold, suburb/city, fire/ice, kirpan/flesh, haven/peril, home/hotel, life/death, lover/wife, animal/human, vital/desiccated, ignorance/knowledge, animal/human, reality/game, and so on—we cannot bequeath “saari baat” (सारी बात; whole telling, tell whole thing, whole thing to tell) about this entropic encounter with a “strange thing” (now) called “insaan kudiya” (इंसान कुड़िया; human-girl).

Because (our) “before” and “after,” “beginning” and “end,” mark (an) unknowing, we may only “dheere dheere” (धीरे-धीरे; slowly-slowly) exsanguinate identity to perhaps become “jaandar” (जानदार; full of life) enough to have “ek baat” (एक बात; tell one thing, have one thing to tell). Who she *is* metamorphoses a vestibular space into a gland pumping dread into a “shishali” (शिशाली; formidable and mighty) nation’s “boti boti” (बोटी- बोटी; fleshy bones). Her originary queerness, therefore, inverts a teleological trajectory to manifest (the fight for) Nation as (visiting) “bure ki ma ka ghar” (बुरे की माँ के घर; the house of Bad’s mother). Here, in this place, far from honor and protection, like Kulwant we notice that “daal mein kuch kaala hai” (दाल में कुछ काला है; there is something black in the lentils): that “teri ma” (तेरी माँ; your mother) might, indeed, make a “zaalim” (ज़ालिम; bloodthirsty) of (“us”) all. Just the same, no one knows what happens next.

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