Kaleidoscopic (Re)belongings: An Analysis of Desire in Personal Narratives by Queer Indian Womxn.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how Indian queer womxn chose to write about their desires in autobiographical writings published between 1999-2006. This was a time when homosexuality was criminalised by the Indian nation-state and lesbian cultural and activist movements were in their nascent stages after the release of Deepa Mehta's controversial lesbian film, Fire (1998). I analyse three primary texts: Ashwini Sukthankar's anthology, *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing from India* (1999); Maya Sharma's ethnographic memoir, *Loving Women: Being Lesbian in Unprivileged India* (2006); and Suniti Namjoshi's *Goja: An Autobiographical Myth* (2000). Unlike Namjoshi (who is the sole author of her text), the contributors of the anthologies edited by Sukthankar and Sharma are non-literary, relatively anonymous writers and the majority of the anthologies' authors are also publishing for the first time. All three texts have been previously analysed separately as literary fiction but their contributions to the tradition of Indian queer life writing have not been previously evaluated together. This project highlights the unconventional manner in which these womxn articulate their outlawed desire and sexuality. I use the term personal narratives to refer to these autobiographical writings because they depart from convention not just in terms of their form but also in terms of their content.

Whether it is the deconstruction of the normative autobiographical 'I' or the unconventionally Indian metaphors used to express queer desire between womxn, the narratives challenge dominant representations. I argue that queer desires 'unbelong' in society and these narratives are an example of how queer womxn renegotiate and (re)belong in varying degrees based on their identities and positionalities. I term this emerging queer consciousness and (re)belonging as being kaleidoscopic and examine it through a decolonial and feminist lens to better understand how these womxn reclaim and renegotiate their tabooed desires.

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For Maa and Reva.

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work, and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented, in whole or in part, for an award at this, or any other, university. No part of the thesis is published anywhere else. All primary and secondary sources used in the thesis have been fully cited.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Indian LGBTQ politics and activism in the 1990s

India decriminalised homosexuality in its constitution under the anti-sodomy law, Section 377, after its Independence from the British colonial empire in 1947. The law is a remnant of an archaic colonial legacy that was based on Victorian missionary morality. The law was a part of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) drafted by Thomas Babbington Macaulay in 1835 (Gupta, 2006: 4815). The law, in terms of its text, overtly criminalises penetrative gay sex, bestiality and sodomy as being "punishable" and "unnatural". Though there is a reference to "unnatural" sex with regard to women yet there is no direct explanation as to what constitutes "unnatural" sexual activity apart from sodomy. There is no overt mention of non-penetrative homosexual activities and sexual activities such as those between two women, yet lesbians are criminalised by the law collaterally and indirectly. Suparna Bhaskaran writes about how despite "the structural and cultural relegation of women to the private sphere (where maintaining honour and purity, preventing shame, and reproducing national culture is valued)" and no overt mention of lesbianism in Section 377, the statute is still used to "intimidate" and threaten women who wish to marry or live with each one another (2002: 26).

Historically, Saleem Kidwai and Ruth Vanita refer to the nineteenth century as the "crucial period of transition" when the minor Biblical colonial homophobic morality of colonial India started transitioning to become the major legal purview of postcolonial Independent India (2000: 191-217). Indian minds gradually internalised a colonial morality as their own. Thereby, suppressing evidence of homosexuality found in ancient and mediaeval India. Scholars like Kidwai and Vanita (2000) and Giti Thadani (1996) have worked extensively to record, reclaim and bring forth this forgotten Indian homosexual history in

their works. Thadani's (1996) work looks at mythology, cosmology, and ancient temple architecture in India to trace a history of female kinship and desire while Saleem and Vanita (2000) examine and translate several literary texts and scriptures from Pali, Sanskrit, Hindi and Urdu (as well as several other Indian languages) ranging from the ancient, mediaeval and modern times to build a cultural literary history of same-sex love.

The LGBTQ activist resistance to criminalisation in India began in the 1990s. The term activist resistance is a reference to the collective community action and movement towards the scrapping of Section 377 resulting in the decriminalisation of homosexuality. The first challenge to the law was made in 1991, by the AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan (ABVA), an organisation working for HIV AIDS survivors. ABVA (1991) in their report listed a charter of 19 demands including advocating equality for all genders and sexual orientations. In 1994, ABVA filed a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) in the Delhi High Court demanding the removal of Section 377 from the Indian constitution (Joseph, 1996: 2231, Bhaskaran, 2002: 27). Since then a plethora of activists and cultural organisations such as the Naz Foundation have joined the anti-Section 377 resistance movement. The Indian government first decriminalised homosexuality in 2009 but then re-implemented Section 377 in 2013. The section was finally removed and homosexuality was decriminalised on September 6, 2018, by the Supreme Court of India, the apex ruling body of the country. This long and arduous battle with the Indian legal system as well as its social and political implications has been analysed by several lawyers, academics as well as critics. Some of the notable works and responses to the litigation movement are by lawyer and playwright Danish Sheikh (2013, 2021), academic Jyoti Puri (2016) and Arvind Narrain and Gautam Bhan (2005).

I shall not go into the details of the legal battle but it is very important to be aware of this social and legal context of the 1990s because the three key literary and autobiographical

texts in English, analysed in this thesis were published between 1999-2006. The key texts: Ashwini Sukthankar's *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing from India* (1999), Suniti Namjoshi's *Goja: An Autobiographical Myth* (2000) and Maya Sharma's *Loving Women: Being Lesbian in Unprivileged India (*2006) are all products of a time when LGBTQ activist movements were in their nascent stages and homosexual identities were criminalised. The 1990s were not just a crucial time for LGBTQ activism but also for lesbians and women overall. Culturally, Indian women have been relegated to domestic and private spaces with patriarchal notions of purity, motherhood and chastity enforced on their bodies (Puri, 1999, Bhaskaran, 2002). Partha Chatterjee (1989) elaborates that one of the main anxieties of the modern Indian postcolonial nation was around the new social role of its independent women and that at the "heart of South Asian invocations is the domesticated, homely body of a woman, a body produced as a biological truism that enacts debates around tradition and modernity" (Patel, 2004: 135). Women's bodies became the symbols of the nation and their domestication became the central focus of aggressive Hindu national expansion post-independence in 1947 (Ghosal, 2005).

The 1990s were the main "turning point" (Tharu and Niranjana, 1994) for the Indian feminist movement due to the economic liberalisation of India which resulted in open markets, globalisation and neo-liberal economic reforms. This led to two major impacts on the feminist movements- the first was the increased involvement of the feminists in state governance and women's development and the second was the "NGO-ization" of the feminist movement where several autonomous women's groups turned into non-governmental organisations (NGO's) with funding and state-level grassroots training (Roy, 2018: 4-5). Together, this increased feminist presence began challenging the hegemonic nationalist discourses around women. Yet, lesbians were still excluded from the larger feminist movements in the 1990s due to the fear of alienating heterosexual women from the larger

cause (Sharma, 2006). The secondary social position of women in Indian society also affected how lesbian women participated in the LGBTQ activist resistance. Their presence was limited and the resistance was largely male-dominated due to this cultural patriarchal imbalance (Joseph, 1996: 2229). Yet, it's not as if lesbian women were not active prior to the 1990s; it's just that they were relegated to private spaces. Paola Bacchetta (2002) refers to the 1980s when middle-class lesbians living in Delhi began meeting at each other's homes to facilitate a sense of community. The result of these community meetings was the formation of Sakhi, India's first lesbian support group (Bacchetta, 2002: 960) followed by the formation of Sangini, a far more accessible support group with its own helpline, PO box and archive. Several Indian women would write letters to Sangini (who safeguarded their anonymity) about their longing for companionship and their concerns regarding lesbianism (Dave, 2012: 72-73).

The Indian lesbian presence drastically altered in 1998 with the release of Deepa Mehta's controversial lesbian film, *Fire.* The movie depicts a lesbian relationship between two sisters-in-law living in a staunch Hindu middle-class household. The film caused an uproar of homophobia. Militant right-wing political parties like the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS) caused riots, burnt cinema halls and movie posters and called for a complete boycott of the film. In response, lesbian activist groups like CALERI (Campaign for Lesbian Rights), came out in favour of the film and launched a public campaign in support of Indian lesbianism (Ghosh, 2010). It was also the first time lesbianism was interpellated within an Indian public context. Dave (2011) discusses how the presence of CALERI protestors holding protest signs in bold letters reading 'INDIAN AND LESBIAN' affirmed the mutual coexistence of these identities. Lesbianism was no longer a private matter but a part of the Indian public national imagination. The *Fire* debates were an important moment in Indian lesbian history because lesbians were no longer only covertly meeting in each other's homes

but were out on the streets in large numbers. The *Fire* debates also permeate two of my key texts. Both Sukthankar (1999) and Sharma (2006) discuss this moment in their introductions which I shall discuss later. Thus, *Fire* can be seen as a seminal landmark in Indian lesbian resistance.

This social and political context of the 1990s with regard to the lesbian identity is important to highlight because it shows us that the lesbian identity was scattered between its public and private halves while struggling for acceptance and validation. Each personal narrative analysed in this thesis bears a trace of the impact of this oppression, invisibilization, criminality and exclusion. The main aim of this thesis is to analyse how womxn in these personal narratives choose to express their queer subjectivities and desires. I am using the term womxn collectively to refer to the writers of all key texts because even though the majority of the contributors are women; two of them are Assigned Female at Birth (AFAB) individuals who identify as gender-questioning individuals who do not prescribe to any specific gender identity within their narratives. In this regard, womxn seemed to be the most inclusive term to use and I use it to refer to AFAB individuals who do not identify as women but are on the trans, gender-nonconforming and non-binary spectrum. Kunz (2019) uses the term womxn intersectionally to refer to all those identities who don't identify as women but are subjected equally to the tyrannies of patriarchal oppression.

In the next few sections of the introduction, I will set the context about why I refer to these autobiographical texts as personal narratives and why I choose to refer to these womxn not as lesbians but as queer. I will also elaborate on my definition of queer desire and expound on the larger scope and focus of this project.

Autobiography and Personal Narratives: A Queer Practice

To understand my use of the term personal narratives it is essential to elaborate upon my conception of the autobiography as a literary genre. This involves foregrounding two

things. The first is that the word ‘genre’ itself implies the existence of a set of rules and conventions that must be upheld to maintain the purity and validity of the genre. Jacques Derrida states, “As soon as the word ‘genre’ is sounded, as soon as it is heard, as soon as one attempts to conceive it, a limit is drawn. And when a limit is established, norms and interdictions are not far behind” (2017: 56). This drawing of limits, while it may be done to differentiate one genre from another, also often becomes the basis of exclusion of any text that deviates significantly from the rules. For instance, a singular canonistic privileging of a sovereign and autonomous self, championed by the autobiographies of the Enlightenment era excluded cultures such as India as the Indian consciousness was deemed as being too ‘collectivist’ and community-oriented to produce an authentic autobiography marked by a certain confessional mode of self-awareness. Indian literary culture was posited as being rooted in oral storytelling and not in producing any significant written literary material (Arnold and Blackburn, 2004: 2-3). Early scholars of autobiography such as Georges Gusdorf (1980) and Roy Pascal (1960) also attempt to locate the genesis of the genre of autobiography in Western cultures, claiming that the West alone could produce an “authentic autobiography” usually of an “isolated individual” who mostly expressed a “concern peculiar to Western man; a concern that has been of good use in his systematic conquest of the universe and that he has communicated to men of other cultures” (Gusdorf, 1980: 29). Gusdorf’s work involves setting limits on the genre of autobiography as only being by and for the Western colonizing autonomous male and his global conquests. The recognition of the limitation of genre limits in autobiography theory is essential especially to challenge them.

The second thing to foreground in my conception of autobiography is the idea of a non-male perspective. Using Kimberlé Crenshaw’s (1991) concept of intersectionality, it is essential to note that exclusion from the autobiographical canon has depended heavily on the interconnected oppressions deriving from a writer’s gender, racial, cultural and class

positions. Since the writings included in this project are written by womxn, gender becomes the first prominent point of departure from the canon. Historically, Domna C. Stanton's (1987) efforts to unearth female autobiographical writings from the Global North led to her coinage of the term and genre 'autogynography' used to refer to a woman's first-person perspective within a narrative. The genre was also used to refer to all writings by the female "I" which had been ignored by scholars of autobiography. Stanton's work is seminal because it elaborated how the patriarchal valorisation of men's lives, public conquests and experiences in the Western world led to a dominance of male autobiographical narratives, while the female autobiographical narratives were neglected and relegated to the private domain and constructed as being concerned only with emotions and personal matters which were not worthy of the canon. This binary division of male-female perspectives was perpetuated by the limits put on the female "I" by the genre of autobiography which posited women's texts as only talking about themselves in relation to others, especially regarding their roles as wives and mothers (Stanton, 1987: 11-12). Stanton's analysis of these 'autogynographies' reclaims the personal as being equally political and shows that the female "I" was, in fact, complex, challenged conventional binary gender divisions, and often depicted tensions between women's private and public selves.

Stanton also interrogates the term personal when used as a canonical binary reference which degrades women's writing because of its supposed concern with intimate, private and non-worldly matters (1984: 11). Stanton deconstructs this notion by citing the work of several feminists who use the personal in an empowering and positive manner as a method of introspective or affective analysis effectively while dealing with taboo subjects such as sexual violence and trauma (1987: 12-13). Stanton's concept of autogynographies, though useful in historically understanding gender-based exclusion in autobiography, is currently outdated and

limiting as it reinforces the essentialist male-female gender binary leaving no room for womxn perspectives.

Postcolonial and feminist scholars such as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2010) use the term autobiography only to refer to Western narratives in written form as defined by the likes of Gusdorf (1980) and Pascal (1960). They claim that the terms "life writing and life narrative" are more "inclusive of the heterogeneity of self-referential practices" (2010: 4). While life writing, according to Smith and Watson, refers to only written self-referential acts, life narrative includes a diversity of self-referential acts which can be written, oral, visual, or digital (2010: 4). Hence, the terms life writing and life narrative are far more inclusive of the contexts of the Global South such as oral traditions in India. Stuart Arnold and David Blackburn also point to the limitations of using terms like autobiography and biography, especially in the Indian context since they indicate a privileging of "print over orality" (2004: 9). The term life narrative, then, comes the closest to encompassing the ethos of my project which includes a significant number of oral narratives, interviews, and poems. But since the term 'life' in life narrative suggests that the whole 'life' of an individual will be the subject of discussion, I choose to not use this term for my thesis since the narratives in my key texts are far too short to encompass the entire life of the narrator. Instead, the narratives are more like snippets that offer a brief glimpse into the narrator's life.

To continue the work of making my conception of autobiographical writing more inclusive, especially in South Asian contexts, I focus on Anshu Malhotra and Siobhan Lambert-Hurley (2015) who mobilise the term personal narratives, as used by several Indian women's studies scholars such as Malavika Karlekar (1993) since the term includes "the more formal, full-length, structured autobiography" but also diaries, letters, interviews, poems, stories, essays and memoirs (Karlekar, 1993: 12). The term personal narratives is hence the term most applicable to my thesis as my key texts contain a mixture of a variety of

such genres. However, Karlerkar (1993) wasn't the only one to use this term. Smith and Watson (1998) in their attempt to build a history of women's autobiography have discovered that the term personal narratives has also been used by several other scholars such as Leonore Hoffmann and Margo Culley (1985) and The Personal Narratives Group (1989)- a group of ten scholars from the different literary and social science backgrounds that offer a "multidisciplinary perspectives" on personal narratives (Smith and Watson, 1998: 11). Culley defines the foundation of the term personal narratives as "women's personal literature of the self" inclusive of women's letters, letters, and oral histories (1985, 13) while The Personal Narratives groups refer to personal narratives a departure from the genre of autobiography which can "provide immediate, diverse and rich sources for feminist revisions of knowledge" (The Personal Narratives Group, 1989: 263).

My usage of the term personal narratives is inclusive of all these definitions- it is an examination of a variety of first-person genres from an interdisciplinary perspective and it offers a hopeful and inclusive framework to look at texts that do not fit the conventional mould of an autobiography. It is very essential to foreground that by using the term personal narratives, I do not wish to create a separate genre for my texts as that would mean reinstating the Derridean limits of a genre. My usage aims to simply highlight the exclusion and destabilisation of the limited scope of the term autobiography while simultaneously creating space for unconventional narratives. My major departure from the personal narrative scholars listed above is that the 'I' examined in my thesis is not always feminine since I am also looking at narratives by womxn. Hence, my personal narratives are queer- in an identarian sense since they refer to identities on the LGBTQ spectrum. But my personal narratives are also queering the genre of the autobiography and the autobiographical process and practice by introducing a writing process that disrupts the norm, challenges heteronormativity without replacing it with another set of norms hence making it inherently queer in nature (Rao, 2017:

90-91). I will elaborate on this queer autobiographical process but it is essential to deconstruct the autobiography as a practice first.

Autobiographical practice involves writing in the first-person which leads to the creation of a fixed autobiographical contract. Queering autobiographical practice involves destabilising and disrupting this contract. Philippe Lejeune's (1989) well-known conceptualization of an "autobiographical pact" whereby the identity of the author, narrator and protagonist must be the same to produce a "historically variable *contractual effect*" (30) further puts restrictions on what can be termed as autobiographical writing. According to Lejeune, the credibility of an autobiography lies in how well it captures an individual and his personality in prose form (1989: 4). Lejeune's work is about pinpointing the 'exactness' of an autobiography while also conceding that an exact capturing of an individual is difficult to achieve.

This paradoxical definition of autobiography leads me to the work of Paul De Man (1979) who denounces autobiography as a genre entirely and instead recognises it as "a figure of reading or understanding" which leads to the creation of autobiographical moments that occur through the process of "mutual reflexive substitution" (1979: 921) between two subjects in almost all autobiographies. The autobiographical author according to De Man understands his own self during autobiographical practice. De Man, it seems to me, takes Lejuene's idea of a fixed contract and turns it into a mutually reflexive and flexible exchange, hence viewing autobiography not as a genre but as a practice. I agree with De Man's conception and view my personal narratives, not as a genre, but as a writing practice and manner of understanding that queers the self. Here the queer self is an 'I' that is "plural and tautological, simultaneous and devoid of meaning" which "refuses the binary oppositions constructed by the "I"-spoken/silenced, subject/abject, symbolic/unrepresentable" while also "ensuring the exclusions of the symbolic order" (Loftus, 1997: 32). Queering

autobiographical practice involves disrupting the stable 'I', rejecting binaries and recognising the futility of enforcing limits on first-person narratives. The queer 'I' subverts "symbolic categories by inhabiting them and forcing them to signal simultaneously precisely what they silence" (Loftus, 1997: 32). For instance, in my personal narratives, the first-person narrator and the author and not necessarily always the same person hence womxn writers subvert what it means to be an autobiographical subject while simultaneously breaking the mould of the autobiographical pact.

Scholars like Malhotra and Lambert-Hurley (2015) have productively used De Man's definition of autobiography as practice in the context of theorising South Asian women's narratives. As they maintain, it helped them "reject autobiography's politics of exclusion by which South Asian forms may be judged against a Western ideal by assuming an expanded, if simplified, definition replete with global and temporal resonances" (2015: 7). A rejection of the term and concept of autobiography, then, helps Malhotra and Lambert-Hurley to move beyond South Asian versus Western, and linear versus fragmented narratives. Constructing personal narratives as a queer practice rather than a genre allows me, as a feminist scholar, to theorise complex and diverse South Asian queer subjectivities without having to worry about falling into the trap of creating yet another category of the 'Other' set against comparisons with the Western origins of autobiography.

With reference to Nancy K. Miller's idea of "turning the theory back on itself" (Miller, 1991: 5) a queer reclamation of autobiographical theory, writing back to theory can only happen when the impact of generic conventions and limits is fully explored. Judith Butler (1990) refers to agency as being located within the repetition of rule-bound discourses and conventions and not outside of them. For Butler, the process of signification of an Other is "not a founding act but rather a regulated process of repetition" where the subject is not "determined through the rules by which it is created" (1990: 145). The possibility of

subversion lies in a variation within this process of repetition. Similarly, autobiographical agency occurs within the rules and conventions of the genre as well as its practice. The limits of autobiography help us understand and hence subvert its exclusion rather than simply be defined by it. This is also where the work of several feminist scholars comes in. Their work shows that it is not about entirely discarding the limits but queering them.

Leigh Gilmore's (2001) work on trauma and the limits of autobiography is a prime example of this Butlerian understanding of power. Instead of seeing language and self-representation as inimical to trauma, Gilmore focuses on how trauma pushes and queers the central limits of autobiography while positing that trauma itself can be considered a valid theoretical framework. This understanding of autobiography is also useful in deconstructing the autonomous and coherent autobiographical "I". Butler refers to gender "as being performatively constituted by its expression" (1990: 24-25). This implies that gender does not exist as a pre-defined category prior to its expression and analysis.

The expression of gender creates gender itself. Sidonie Smith (1998) takes Butler's concept of performativity and applies it to what she calls "autobiographical performativity" where there is "no unified interior psychic 'I' that exists before the narration of an autobiographical experience and the 'I' is constituted performatively by its narration" (1998: 109). Thus, a queer feminist autobiographical practice itself constitutes subjectivity. If we delve deeper into this, we can see that autobiographical practice[1] is connected to generic autobiographical limits. De Man's exchange based on "mutual reflexive substitution" (1979: 921) during autobiographical practice fails to explain fully the origin and occurrence of this reflexivity among autobiographical subjects. How exactly do repressed and marginalised Indian queer womxn subjectivities become reflexive and realize their subjectivity? If

[1] When I say autobiographical practice in my thesis, I refer to the process of writing in first-person and not the conventional genre of autobiography.

autobiographical subjectivity is constituted by its practice, how do marginalised Indian queer womxn subjects navigate generic limits which obstruct their autobiographical practice in the first place? These are the questions that my research is interested in exploring.

For this reflexive exchange to occur, many simultaneous processes are at work both during the conception and the reading of a queer autobiographical narrative. The first is a change in the perception of what counts as knowledge. Joan W. Scott (1991) locates the origin of knowledge in seeing. What is visible is then put into writing which then becomes knowledge (1991: 58). Experience, which is often the basis of empiricism, is a category that is questioned by Scott who claims that experience shouldn't be looked at as being authoritative or as a final proof but should also be historicised and challenged (1991: 60). This view along with the Butlerian performative view of gender identity helps to question dominant perceptions over time. Since identities are not fixed, people " are not unified autonomous individuals exercising free will, but rather subjects whose agency is created through situations and statuses conferred on them" (Scott, 1991: 66). This quotation is especially helpful for theorising marginalized identities as it gives us a better understanding of the gaps, silences, and incongruities in subaltern narratives. With this approach, there can be an equal focus not only on what is said but also on what is not said in a queer personal narrative.

The second is Teresa De Laurentis' idea of "dis-identification" which occurs when there is a break or disruption in the process of an identification with femininity that does not necessarily always entail an identification with the masculine but is an identification that exceeds this binary (1990: 126). Though Laurentis speaks more in psychoanalytic terms, this process of "dis-identification" can be useful to understand the autobiographical performativity in my personal narratives. Smith (1998) states that when a performative autobiographical subject simultaneously occupies multiple categories, and challenges binaries

or ‘queers’ methods of fixed identification, a linear alignment of these multiplicities is not a possibility. Hence, “spaces or gaps, ruptures and unstable boundaries” are created (Smith, 1998: 20). For Smith (2010), these gaps can be better understood through Laurentis’s (1990) idea of “dis-identification” since for Smith the concept of “dis-identification” is useful in bringing forth all the unconsciousness desires and experiences with femininity that do not fit into the realm of a conscious symbolic reality (1998: 20). This understanding of Laurentis’s (1990) is extremely useful as it helps me to articulate the unconscious breaks with femininity that the queer women and womxn in my personal narrative experience. Smith’s take makes disruptions function not like a lack or absence but more like a surplus “repository of that which is not speakable” overtly in the text (1998: 20). This notion of “dis-identification” also further ‘queers’ Scott’s (1991) idea of experience by re-framing experience as something that is both conscious as well as unconscious.

In conclusion, in my engagement with autobiography so far, I have discussed how and why I have chosen the term personal narratives for my key texts. These personal narratives are not a genre but a queer autobiographical practice that is rooted in an understanding of genre-based limitations. My thesis aims to understand how marginalised queer womxn subjectivities in 1990s India navigated their queer desires in their writings. This will be done by foregrounding the constantly evolving and inherently disruptive nature of conscious and unconscious experiences with normative ideas of femininity.

Varied and Seminal Personal Narratives: An explanation of my three key texts.

I have categorised my three key texts collectively as personal narratives, yet all three texts are drastically different from one another in terms of their formats and writing style. This thesis focuses on the following three texts: Maya Sharma’s *Loving Women: Being Lesbian in Unprivileged India* (2006), Ashwini Sukthankar’s *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing in India* (1999) and Suniti Namjoshi’s *Goja: An Autobiographical Myth* (2000). All

three texts are examples of unconventional and innovative personal narratives by queer Indian womxn. All three texts are also seminal in their own way. Sukthankar's (1999) was one of the first Indian English literary texts dedicated entirely to works by queer Indian womxn. To date, no other such anthology has been published in the Indian context. Several Indian gay (Merchant, 1999), Indian queer/ LGBTQ (Hajratwala, 2012), gay and lesbian Indian diaspora (Ratti, 1995) literary anthologies, as well as essay collections by queer and trans-Indian diaspora (Duttachoudhury and Hartman, 2015) with personal narratives and interviews compilations of Indian queer activists (Rao and Sharma, 2008), have been published in the contemporary Indian context, but none apart from Sukthankar (1999) are dedicated entirely to women and womxn. These however can function as a useful resource for the wider study of Indian LGBTQ personal narratives in general. Sharma's (2006) text is the only detailed record of the lives of working-class queer womxn in India. The only other text that is dedicated entirely to the working-class and chronicles working-class Indian lesbian women and queer womxn's lives is by Sharma herself (2022). Sharma's (2022) recently released second ethnographic memoir chronicles the lives of transmen living in the state of Gujrat in India. I will discuss this text briefly later in my thesis during my analysis of womxn narratives from my key Sharma (2006) text. Namjoshi's *Goja* (2000) uniquely intertwines myth and lesbian desire thus creating a new style of autobiographical writing. Hence, in terms of literary resources, I am working with important contemporary literary and feminist texts that were the first to chronicle queer desire between womxn in a personal narrative format within the Indian context.

Maya Sharma's *Loving Women* (2006) can be best described as an ethnographic memoir. The *Encyclopaedia of Research Methods* defines an Ethnographic Memoir as "a non-fiction text that recounts past individual experience as representative of a particular sociocultural group. These narrative constructions convey history through a personal lens and

are subject to interpretation of viewpoint by the audience and sometimes by a self-conscious author" (Mills et al, 2010: 2). Sharma's text is a non-fictional recollection of her feminist activism as a self-identifying lesbian woman. In a long introduction, Sharma discusses not only her involvement in the feminist movement but also offers her own interpretation of the Indian feminist movement's attitude towards queer womxn. Thus, Sharma writes a "history through a personal lens" (Mills et al, 2010). While the basic premise of the book is Sharma collecting data via interviews with queer rural Indian womxn, the interviews have not been transcribed to appear in a traditional question-answer format.

Instead, Sharma writes an ethnographic personal account of these interviews in her own words where she often comments on the respondents' answers and silences. She even shares her own journey with lesbian desire in the introduction, as discussed above, to remain "committed to transparency" and to be "more conscious, allow room for interrogation and confront my own silences" (2006: 155). This opens Sharma's text to reader interrogation as well as posits Sharma as a self-reflexive researcher. The text is interspersed with information about the respondents as well as Sharma's notes and experiences while conducting the interviews. Sharma also includes her own story to "politicize the personal" and to acknowledge that her research isn't based on "hard facts" and shouldn't be read as "an objective form of knowledge" (156). I believe that Sharma intends her readers to see her research as a sociological inquiry that is rooted in personal experiences. Hence, I am referring to her text as an ethnographic memoir since it is as much about Sharma as it is about the womxn about whom she is writing. Sharma conducts ten separate interviews, some of the interviews include two participants (who are usually a couple). Out of all the participants, two single-participant interviews were given by AFAB individuals named Vimlesh and Shiela, whom I refer to as womxn while the rest identify as women. Sharma however views all her interviewees as women. I express my detailed disagreement with Sharma's cis-normative

language during my analysis of Shiela's narrative later in the thesis. Sharma also writes as a "representative of a particular social group" (Mills et al, 2010) being a lesbian woman herself, but there is an 'insider-outsider' paradox which exists in Sharma's case as she is cis-normative and privileged. This class gap and the subsequent tension caused by it are often the subject of her personal notes. Margaret Mead states that the ethnographer should be able "to interpose between my statement and the reader's consideration of that statement a pause, a realization not of what authoritative right I have to make this statement I make, but instead of how it was arrived at, of what the anthropological process is" (1974: 13). This "pause" is the self-reflexive space where Sharma needs to ponder over the statements she is making about her participants. It is up to us as readers and researchers to analyse her observations as just one of the versions of reality. Sharma then exists constantly in this liminal, 'in-between' place within these narratives.

Ten rural interviews were recorded by Sharma. Among them, "two stories emerged from fact-finding visits to the subjects' homes after their relationship had been exposed in the newspapers and had become a cause for public scandal" (2006: 426-427). Fact-finding missions are a very important aspect of the structure of this text. Unlike the other contributors who chose willingly to share their stories and open their homes to Sharma, the stories of two queer couples (Rekha and Dolly, Menaka and Payal) were reluctantly narrated by traumatized subjects who had already been harassed by the media, the police, and the state, deemed criminals within their locality, and put under house arrest by their families. Their narratives are reluctant, since Sharma visits their home after reading about them in paper, without making any prior contact with them (425). Sharma's visit to their homes is, then, no doubt viewed with suspicion. Sharma refers to her visits as "fact-finding missions" and not as instances of recording life stories (425). The main purpose behind these visits was to check

up on these women and attempt to offer any help possible (431). Hence, it is important to contextualise the background of such narratives in the text.

Due to working-class conditions in the text such as congested housing, lack of rooms in the house and several interruptions and disruptions by family and community members, "the issues of sexual choice and the larger questions of sexuality often remained sub-textual, tacit, circuitous, and we had to work intuitively, hoping and sometimes praying that our gestures and signals were being correctly decoded" (Sharma, 2006: 461-471). Sharma develops a "sub-textual and tacit" (471) code language and body gestures to overcome and transgress family disruptions and surveillance. A limitation of this code is that it is solely an interpretation and observation on the part of Sharma as a researcher since we have no way of confirming if the participants intended the meanings that Sharma induced during her interactions with them. In addition, on several occasions, Sharma does not have the resources or time to do a follow-up interview (in case of an interruption) with all her participants, which is a limitation of the text.

Sharma elaborates on the irony of a project written with the aim of "lesbian" visibility and articulation relies heavily on "various modes and layers and textures of personalised silence, within the wider, omniscient parameters of cultural/social/political silence around the taboo subject of female homosexuality" (2006: 498-500). This forces us to interrogate our normative definitions of visibility. There is meaning behind silences and resistances and re-negotiations may not always be captured through language or verbal articulation. There are several silences in the text and "like the zero in mathematics, silence is an absence with a function, and a rhetorical one at that" (Glenn, 2004: 4). These silences, then, do not indicate a lack of information but are in fact information in themselves. The function of each silence is subjective and depends on the context of the narrative of which it is a part. Some silences in this text are identified by me as researcher and others are drawn attention to by Sharma as the

ethnographer. In approaching silences, I analyse both my and Sharma's interpretations of these. A lack of language speaks volumes about why this project is so important to foreground with regard to the oppression queer womxn in the rural Indian context, as Sharma states: "Our lack of success in this regard itself rendered the contours of our project more precisely visible" (2006: 515-516). There is a need to do a lot more nuanced work on rural queer womxn lives.

In approaching Sharma's text, I analyse both the information provided by the participants as well as Sharma's personal commentary in the text. Sharma liberally uses "I" and "We" (when she is assisted by her local guides) to put forth her opinion. There are several local working-class women in the text who function as guides who provide a middle-class Sharma, access to working-class womxn and their housing colonies. One of the main guides is named Shanti. There is both an "I" and "We" in the text. The "I" is Sharma's voice whereas the "We" is the collaborative voice of Sharma belongs predominantly to Shanti who also functions as Sharma's interview assistant. Out of all the guides mentioned in the text very briefly, only Shanti is given a proper acknowledgement in Sharma's text (3000). The rest for example Shalini and Pushpa are not acknowledged at the end. This is problematic since this text wouldn't have been possible without these local rural women.

Sharma is a middle-class woman attempting to collect data from marginalised rural women, including several runaways living in very homophobic households under the control of their heterosexual families. The class gap between her and her participants makes Sharma uncomfortable, and she can conduct the research only due to the support of Shanti and other local guides. While the details of the other local guides are not mentioned in the text, Shanti is a working-class activist for the Indian women's movement. She, as an insider, makes Sharma aware of her class privileges and provides Sharma the access to these women. Sharma, in the acknowledgements of the book, states, "Without Shanti the door to the inner

aangans [courtyards] of working-class women would never have opened for me" (2006: 3000-3001). This is true as Shanti was usually the first individual participants interacted with or gave consent to. For instance, the first set of interviewees, Guddi and Aasu met Sharma through Shanti (650) and another couple Sabo and Razia and womxn such as Shiela were all introduced through Shanti (2998). The project is built on the contacts of these working-class guides. Sharma does give credit to Shanti's efforts through the use of "we" in the text, stating, "Writing, transcribing, translating and thinking through issues was always a joint effort" but "there were times when circumstances compelled me to work individually" (2006: 64-65). It is never elaborated upon as to what these circumstances are, but it is safe to presume that Sharma had the upper hand in this project. Even though Shanti is given credit at the end of the book in the form of an acknowledgement, Sharma is listed as the sole writer of the book on its front cover, relegating Shanti to the status of an assistant. This context of the text is essential for a consideration of use because even though the text credits "we" as being responsible for the success of the book on many occasions, it is the "we" in this text represents an unequal class and creative dynamic between Sharma and Shanti. This focuses my analysis of this text on the central question- *who* gets to be included and *how*? Since Sharma has been established as the dominant voice in the text I will from here on replace the "we" with Sharma during the analysis of this text.

Ashwini Sukhthankar's (1999) anthology, *Facing the Mirror*, is a collection of "lesbian" "writing" curated and edited by Sukthankar herself. The anthology is 400 pages plus and includes an entire corpus of writing apart from personal narratives which include memoirs, letters, oral narratives, diary extracts etc. Apart from these, the book also includes fictional narratives in the form of poems, stories, erotica, and fantasy storytelling. The book is divided into six sections namely: "Passages", "Home", "Worlds", "Differences", "Connections" and "Love". Each section contains a mix of personal and fictional narratives.

The division of the book into sections is based entirely on the editorial discretion of Sukthankar who did not provide any specific writing brief to any of the contributors. The contributions speak solely for themselves (xxi). All the contributions analysed from this text in this thesis are by self-identified women, but I am still using the term womxn to collectively refer to all the contributors of the text since I do not want to assume the gender identity of the contributors whom I have not analysed in this project. Sukthankar however views all her contributors collectively as women. Since the non-first-person, fiction narratives are not the focus of my research I have not focused on them in Sukthankar's anthology. Even within the personal narratives in the text, it is impossible to analyse them all with regards to their expression of queer desire, within the scope of one project. Hence, my project makes no claims about exhaustively covering the entire Sukthankar text. The same also applies to the Sharma text since I do not have the space to analyse all the ethnographic interviews in detail. The process of how narratives are chosen with regard to my project from these two texts will be discussed in the next section of the introduction.

The terms "lesbian" and "writing" are in scare quotes because they are used and defined by Sukthankar in a particular context with reference to her anthology based on her editorial and curatorial choices. For Sukthankar the term "lesbian" is problematic due to its Western origins and negative public image, but she still decides to use it as a collective political term for all her womxn writers precisely because the term is so "uncompromising" and intimidating in the Indian context (1999: xix-xx). The reason behind Sukthankar attributing a certain intimidating status to Indian lesbians was because the anthology was published only a year after the 1998 violent protests against Deepa Mehta's film *Fire*. Sukthankar states that she wants to lay a "claim" to this term because "review after review" of *Fire* failed to acknowledge the "lesbian" desire in the film, focusing only on the "emotional bonding" and "loneliness" of the women (1999: xx). While I do not agree with

Sukthankar's universal use of the term "lesbian" for all contributors I will elaborate on my disagreement in the last section of my introduction where I examine the sexual identity categories and signifiers used in my personal narratives in detail.

The term "writing" used by Sukthankar is a fluid term which "signifies the gritty imperfect media through which the body, with its yearning and its suffering, spoke out" (1999: xxi). For Sukthankar, the written word is "imperfect" for these womxn as writing about "lesbian" desire after years of silence and repression did not come naturally to all of them to an equal extent (xxi). An example of this "imperfect" writing is Supriya's "Tired of the Broom" narrative. Supriya is a female domestic servant who cannot write but orally narrates her story to an unnamed translator in the Marathi language. The translation of this narrative is done in a grammatical syntax which deviates from the normative standard of British and American English. For example, in one instance Supriya's abusive husband shouts, "Be careful, my head is heating up" (123). Though this phrase was originally narrated by Supriya in Marathi, the translated phrase is similar to the Hindi phrase "*dimaag garaam hona*" (head heating up) which indicates extreme anger.[2] No effort has been made on the part of the translator or Sukthankar as the editor to grammatically 'correct' this idiom into standard English. At the same time, this narrative contains several examples of Indian English, such as "She was not having any children" (121) instead of the standard "She didn't have any children". Sukthankar doesn't aim to condense the "writing" into a hegemonic neat canonical literary syntax in English. These 'imperfections' are important to retain in my analysis because they make this text unique and multicultural.

[2] Both the Hindi and Marathi languages are derived from Sanskrit and are written in the same script. Although they have differences, they are similar in syntax and sentence structure, so my examples of Hindi translations can give us a close idea of what Supriya might have wanted to convey orally to the translator. See Dolmanic and Savoy (2010) for more details about these languages and their similarities.

Furthermore, as a postcolonial queer researcher who is endeavouring to unlearn and avoid imperialistic forms of knowledge reproduction, it is important for me to not smoothen out these 'imperfections' to make them fit into rigid and hegemonic systems of knowledge (Spivak, 2003: 92). "Tired of the Broom" is the only working-class narrative in this anthology, a fact that is acknowledged by Sukthankar herself in the introduction when she alludes to the "almost complete absence of working-class women" as well as rural women, which renders the anthology "incomplete" (xxvii). Supriya's narrative is important to include in my analysis as it raises issues around class, authorship (who gets to write and who gets written about?) and privilege[3].

Sukthankar states that some womxn "could not and did not write" because they could not articulate "themselves as lesbians" since it was beyond their consideration (xxv). Certain womxn could not write in English or were illiterate while sometimes the transcriber couldn't grasp the full nuances of a native oral language. Some womxn also identified as celibates or single womxn and hence couldn't relate with the term "lesbian" (xxv). Several contributors use pseudonyms due to the fear of social ostracization while several others do not. Some womxn saw pseudonyms as a kind of "ironic freedom" (xxvi) which allowed them the freedom to talk about any topic. Sukthankar makes the editorial choice of not making a distinction between the real names and the pseudonyms of the authors. This is done to avoid any valorisation or creation of a hierarchy between the women who had the privilege to be 'out' and between those who did not (xxvi). All "writing" is deemed as being equally valid. The "writing" of the anthology is not meant be a fixed and stable category. The choice of using the author's real name, the form and writing style of the narrative is dependent on the positionality of the womxn authoring it. Sukthankar encourages the notion of fluidity within

[3] I have analysed Supriya's narrative in detail in Chapter 4 of this thesis.

the "writing". She states that because the "writing" of the anthology exists "between several categories" and "is impossible to classify", the text is, therefore, a lot more than just the sum of its parts (xxi). In this sense, the "writing" of this anthology is truly queer as it disrupts normative notions of writing without attempting to replace them with another fixed set of norms regarding writing (Rao, 2017: 90).

The "writing" of Sukthankar's anthology also manages to include the otherwise 'unwritten' in the form of transcribed oral narratives by illiterate women like Supriya who could not have written on their own. In some cases, however, unfortunate events befell some of the contributors who are still closeted or unable to escape forced marriages. Seema, the disabled wheelchair-bound author of "Towards a Lesbian World", attempts suicide and lands in a coma while attempting to escape her restrictive life and forced marriage in the Middle East. Hence, while the anthology is ground-breaking, Sukthankar states that it is also "a grieving, for the women who did not have the freedom to write" as in the end no text can be a substitute for the perils of real life (xxxix). Sukthankar acknowledges that sometimes certain silences are "too immense for words to bridge" and in other cases, only "silence" can speak our truth (1999: xxxix).

Suniti Namjoshi's *Goja: An autobiographical myth* (2000) is a carefully crafted personal narrative which narrates the story of an upper-class Indian lesbian woman. Part one is titled "Once in India" and is based on the narrator's childhood, her school years and her first job in the Indian Administrative Service (IAS). The first part ends with the narrator's decision to immigrate to Canada to pursue her PhD in English Literature. Part two chronicles her life and struggles with racism in Canada while Part three describes her move to England with her current partner, Gillan Hanscombe. The text is dedicated to Goldie, Namjoshi's grandmother and Goja, her maidservant; the two women that she loves the most. In her Preface Namjoshi states, "But the 'facts' in this narrative are not reliable, I have chosen

some, left out others" (ix). The scare quotes around "facts" are intended to signal that Namjoshi is aware of the subjectivity of her personal experiences and intends to make no universal claims.

The text is autobiographical (it is written in the first person) text with fictive elements, making it a form of autobiographical fiction that relies heavily on the use of myths. It is important to note that when I view the text as autobiographical fiction, I do not consider it an autobiography. The text is a personal narrative which is written as an autobiographical fiction. Robert McGill (2013) in his analysis of autobiographical fiction, perceives a difference between the terms fictive and fictional. Technically all autobiography is fictional since it is subjective and referential only to the author's life and viewpoint (McGill: 2013: 6). Yet *Goja* contains fictive elements which are imagined and constructed and non-referential to the author's life. This is precisely the reason why the author, Namjoshi is not necessarily always the narrator in the text. Hence, I use the term narrator while analysing incidents from the text and Namjoshi while referring to the author outside of the text. The majority of the text is based on Namjoshi's real-life experiences.

Namjoshi is aware of the subjectivity of her autobiographical experience and hence she refers to her text as being "fictional". However, she also uses the term "mythical". For Namjoshi myths are a way to create patterns and discover meaning. Namjoshi claims that it is only by "making patterns" that can she make sense of her life experiences (ix). The subtitle of *Goja,* "autobiographical myth", is not a reference to any existing genre of life writing but is an invention by Namjoshi herself. Similar to Audre Lorde (another lesbian feminist of colour) in her "biomythography", *Zami* (1982), Namjoshi invents a new type of personal narrative in *Goja* (2000). It is essential to foreground my understanding of how the term "myth" is used in *Goja*. The term "myth" has three different usages. The first conception of myth in the text is a direct reference to classical Greek, Roman and Biblical myths found in epic texts. In such

a mythical reference within the text, the original world created by the myth isn't altered. It also includes references to other epic texts from various cultures such as the Indian Sanskrit epics, the Ramayana, and the Mahabharata.

The second use of myth in the text is in the form of a literary trope. According to Northrop Frye, the world of myth is "an abstract or purely literary world of fictional and thematic design, unaffected by canons of plausible adaptation to familiar experience" (1957: 136). Frye implies that a myth by itself has its own set of rules that do not adhere to any literary canon. Rather a use of myth in literary texts is a deliberate strategy where generally those myths are chosen that closely resemble patterns associated with human behaviour and experiences (Frye, 1957: 139). This use of myth can be in the form of symbols, archetypes, and metaphors. An example of this is the widespread use of the Oedipal myth across several genres of literary texts. For Frye, myths are "unaffected" by limitations of plausibility since they come from a world that lies outside realist canonical restrictions (136).

In literary plots, myths might be used in their original unaltered form, or they might be "displaced" to a certain degree. According to Frye, the process of displacement is the degree to which a myth is altered to fit into a plausible reality. That degree of displacement depends on the amount of realism imbibed by a text (136-37). The third usage of myth is in its colloquial sense where a myth stands for the obfuscation of 'facts' and reality. Michael Benton defines myths as "notions that either lack a factual basis or have evolved and left it behind" (2005: 207). The latter part of this quotation is interesting as it implies that after a myth alters reality it has a potential to evolve, move beyond it and create something new. Benton refers to this as putting a particular spin on things. This newness highlights the queer subversive and resistive potential of myths. I will elaborate more on the subversive potential of myths and their three usages when I analyse the text later in detail.

Unlike Lorde's (1982) *Zami,* a sense of collective identity isn't the goal of Namjoshi's "autobiographical myth" *Goja*. The text is named after Namjoshi's servant, Goja, and the first chapter begins with a mythical hyperbolic account of Goja's birth. Goja is depicted as a fierce warrior rooted to the soil of the earth and grounded in her adverse conditions (3). Here I am using the term mythical in a colloquial and exaggerated sense where Namjoshi, the author, alters reality and makes it her own especially with regards to Goja's birth (Benton, 2005). Since "servant lives go unrecorded" (7), the narrator isn't aware of Goja's exact birth year. She only knows that Goja is very old and poor and hence she must have been very resilient to survive (3).

In the preface, Namjoshi explains her use of the term autobiographical (relating to the experience she has) and mythical (the process of making patterns to make sense of her experience) (ix). She explains the two words separately but doesn't explain the combined subtitle of the book, "an autobiographical myth", anywhere in the text. This is perhaps the first indication of how literary and complex meaning in *Goja* can be. Namjoshi equates the term myth with "making patterns" (2000: ix). This is an interesting choice of words as it alludes to Frye's (1957) concept of the use of displaced myth as a literary trope which resembles patterns associated with human behaviour. This is the foundation of Namjoshi's text. She continually 'displaces'[4] both Classical Greek myths as well as Biblical myths to

[4] Examples of some myths displaced in the text.
1. p.31- Namjoshi refers to herself as "little Golilocks"
2. p.24- In chapter 2, called "Fairy Tale" she refers to her mother as the "Queen of Spades" borrowing from Alice in Wonderland
3. p.21- Namjoshi reworks the tale of the 'Emperors' New Clothes' to talk about the status of a poet in society
4. p.54- Chapter 6, Namjoshi compares two school girls in love to Adam and Eve in Paradise

5. P.44- Namjoshi articulates a childhood ordeal by quoting directly from the Shakesperian tragedy King Lear. The use of the Lear quote by Namjoshi is very pertinent. In Lear, the lines (see p.44) are spoken when the pitiful elderly monarch is flailing as a result of all the political machinations against him. In the full monologue, King Lear is so enraged at the betrayal of his daughters that he is incoherent with anger. Similarly, Namjoshi too bears a deep sense of resentment and abandonment by her family at the boarding school. For her King Lear is a tragedy of "a powerless person" (44) and at this point in her life Namjoshi identifies with King Lear's sense of powerlessness against the cruel actions of his family members. Interestingly, the Shakespearean quote also talks about a call to action, of doing things that are the "terrors of the earth".

narrate events in her life. There are hardly any Indian mythical references in the text. This arguably points to Namjoshi's status as a colonised subject and to her missionary school education both of which I will address later. It is important to note that when I use Frye's concept of a "displacement of myth" (1957: 136), I define "displacement" as an authorial adaptation of various myths. This adaptation can be an alteration, a subversion or a complete re-telling of the myth depending on the text.

In a June 2020 interview with Namjoshi was asked whether the use of fables and myth suggested a certain apolitical tone when it comes to issues of identity and sexuality. The author replied, "I haven't chosen these forms consciously. By temperament all I want to do is try to write a good poem or a good fable and hide behind a book. I didn't want to engage in lesbian feminist politics" (Agents of Ishq, 2020). These lines are telling since they reveal that at heart Namjoshi is a poet and creator. But I disagree with a conflation of a-politicalness with the use of fables and myths. Myths can be political. An ideal example of this is Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (2016), which is a feminist re-interpretation of classic fairy tale myths. While Namjoshi does "hide behind a book", this does not make her text apolitical. The writing in *Goja* is "hidden" because it can be deciphered only if one understands the myriad of intertextual mythical references. While this might make the text somewhat elitist to some audiences, it does not affect the political potential of the text. I argue that Namjoshi's choice of using mythic language is also a political act.

An example of the political use of myths is seen in the Preface of the text itself. Namjoshi dedicates her text to the quest for Charity. But instead of connecting the notion of Charity only to God (as is the case in Christianity), Namjoshi extends the idea of Charity to conflate

both a pantheon of gods and humans (often in the text Namjoshi anthropomorphizes Charity as Goja and her grandmother) together with a self-admittedly Hindu "insouciance", which might be alarming to someone from a religiously purist background (ix). The reference to Hinduism is almost audacious as Hindu mythology contains several million avatars of God unlike Christianity which believes in relatively fewer deities. She also self-reflexively acknowledges her position as a postcolonial subject by stating that given the history of the English language "Christian overtones are inevitable in what I write" (ix). This construction of Charity is an example of how Namjoshi displaces a religious mythical concept to make not only a political statement but also to make sense of the love she has received from Goja and Goldie.

Research focus: Queer desire between Indian womxn within the home and the world

As I have briefly stated in the beginning my focus while examining these personal narratives is how queer desire is expressed between Indian womxn. When I say Indian womxn I do not refer to womxn living within the geographical boundaries of India but womxn who have a social, cultural and political knowledge of the Indian context and are affected by its restrictions, cultural values, and social norms (Sukthankar, 1999: xix). According to Maggie Huum, desire is "an essential need whose social construction is sexuality" (2003: 61), whereas sexuality is the "social process which creates, organises, expresses and directs desire" (2003: 262). Just like the Butlerian notion of gender being the social construction of sex, sexuality is the social regulation of desire. Desire by itself is free, limitless feeling which is inclusive of passionate romantic love (Menon, 2018: 21) and other erotic forms of attachment such as crushes, lust or infatuation which are not contaminated by heteronormativity or limited to sexual behaviour. My conception of desire does not include non-romantic and platonic forms of love. Here I want to clarify the difference between my use of the term queer desire and queer intimacy. Both are drawn from Lauren Berlant's

works. She views desire as the "state of attachment to something or someone" where desire is an affective response to external stimuli or individual" (2012: 6). Berlant's definition of desire can then translate into intimacy which is a "form of attachment" that is expressed or communicated through gestures and behaviours depending on the conventionality of that desire. The more repressed the desire the more non-linguistic the expressions of its intimacy (1998: 286). In my thesis I will examine both expressions of queer desire and intimacy. In simpler terms we can view intimacy as an extension of desire or 'desire in action'. I focus both on desires enacted in the form of intimacies, desires not enacted upon and subconscious or unconscious desires that leave their traces within the texts. The desire expressed in these personal narratives is queer (not just in the identarian sense because it is expressed between lesbian and queer womxn) but is it is queer because it disrupts ideas of heteronormative desires and intimacies as well as dominant notions of belonging. I define belonging as a "personal feeling or perception of an individual" when they relate to or interact with "others, a group, or a system that was separate from an individual's actions, behaviour or social participation" (Mahar et al, 2012: 4). Thus, belonging is an affective response while making connections with other individuals or communities.

As discussed previously, during the time these personal narratives were written, queer identities were criminalised and ostracised in India. In such a situation, to express queer desire and to "be publicly visible as gender and sexually non-normative is to be exposed to cultural persecution" (Singh, 2015, 133–134). This coupled with the drastic shifts in the Indian feminist movements in the 1990's meant that queer womxn had to navigate through a lot of challenges and oppression. How does this oppression impact the expressions of queer womxn desire within personal narrative? I argue that desires are not expressed in a social vacuum, they impact an individual's overall perception of belonging as well and are expressed depending on the caste, class, and other social positionalities of the desiring

subject. How do these womxn from various positionalities express their ideas regarding an overall sense of belonging?

Queer desire and its expression within these personal narratives is very wide focus since desire in the Indian context can be expressed in "infinite varieties" consisting of multiple cultural contexts (Menon, 2018: 12). Hence, to sharpen my research focus, I will only focus solely on the expression of queer desire from the purview of two major themes. The first major theme is the idea of the home. My analysis of home includes not just the physical space and structure of the home but all private discourses related to the ideas of family, domesticity, and the household. Home is an important theme to focus on as in the Indian context as home and the family are the biggest regulators of Indian female sexuality and autonomy (Puri, 2009). In a detailed report on the nature of the violence faced by lesbian women in India, (Fernandez and Gomathy, 2003) stated that, family caused the maximum amount of violence to lesbian women. The form of control by the family lay "in a continuum between silent and punitive" tactics and depended "on the degree of disclosure and the nature of the existing relationship" (Fernandez and Gomathy, 2003: 111). This was corroborated by my close readings of the personal narratives; in most of the narratives the discourses of the home were one of the first oppressors of queer womxn and their desires. This combined with the overall cultural hegemonic relegation of Indian women into the private spheres of domesticity, heterosexual marriage, and motherhood (Patel, 2004) made it very essential that I foreground my discussion of queer womxn desire through the lens of the home.

As I have state before, one cannot discuss queer desire without contextualising its oppression. The second set of discourses responsible for the control of queer desires are the discourses of the world hence the world forms the second theme of project. The world includes references to all public cultures and discourses such as the law, the police, the nation-state machinery, the media, and community groups. Analysing the impact of these

public world discourses on the expression of queer desire is also essential as the criminalisation, social ostracization of queer identities as well as their persecution is enforced by this world machinery (Puri, 2016). I argue that it is important to analyse the impact of the home and the world on queer desire in separate sections to do justice to the nuances of both. While the home (private) and the world (public) are as defined as two separate categories, the aim of my research is not to propagate a binary, rigid, fixed boundary between the home and the world. The discourses of the home and the world often permeate into one another (since neither can exist in a vacuum) but their complex effects on queer womxn desire in these personal narratives need to be studied separately. It is also very important to reiterate that due to the massive volume of narratives (especially in the Sharma and Sukthankar texts) and the large number of overall references to the home and the world in my key texts, I am only analysing those personal narratives in which the home and the world figure predominantly especially with regards to the oppression of queer womxn desires. This will become clearer once I begin analysing my texts. Thus, I make no exhaustive claims about covering all references to the home and the world in my key texts.

The main analysis for my thesis will cover how queer womxn express their desires through the lens and oppression of the world and the home while simultaneously subversively reclaiming and re-negotiating their desires within the home and the world. The main inspiration of the nomenclature of my themes as the home and the world came from Sukthankar's (1999) editorial choice of diving her anthology into sections. Two of her sections are titled "Home" and "Worlds". In my main analysis I will explicate further in detail how Sukthankar's definitions of the "home" and "worlds" are related to my argument. Unfortunately, Sukthankar (1999) does not explain her rationale behind the division of her anthology into the previously mentioned sections.

I also use the term queer desire because queer is an inclusive term which accommodates the variety of gender, and sexual identities as well as all modes of relationships such as polyamory expressed by the writers in these personal narratives without privileging one over the other. Several scholars such as Kidwai and Vanita (2000) have used the terms "same-sex love" and "same-sex desire" to create a literary history of desire in fictional and mythological texts within the Indian context. Similarly, Hannah Roche (2019) uses the term "women desiring women" while analysing desire in lesbian romance novels from the Global South. Yet, both these terms are limiting since they are cis-normative and gender essentialist for my womxn contributors. I also discard the term lesbian desire (unless a contributor self-identifies as one) since that excludes bisexual, pansexual and several other womxn contributors.

A Kaleidoscopic (Re)-Belonging of Queer Desire between Womxn: Research Scope

Queer desire in contemporary India has been extensively analysed from the purview of film and media and culture (Gopinath, 2005, Ghosh, 2010, Vanita 2002, 2005), historical archives and ancient and medieval texts and scriptures (Thadani, 1996, Kidwai and Vanita, 2000), legal and marriage rights (Vanita, 2005b, Puri, 2016), community activism and anthropology (Dave, 2012), inter-caste queer love (Kang, 2023), digital technologies (Nanditha, 2020) and literature (Singh, 2022, Nair, 2009, Rajendran, 2015).

Queer desire in India has been historically marginalised, criminalised and shunned. Hence, a lot of discourse around this desire has justifiably been about its politics, its decriminalisation, and the struggle for equal human rights. Queer womxn are also doubly marginalised- firstly as biological women in a patriarchal society and secondly as queer individuals. Sukthankar demands in the Introduction of her anthology that, "Lesbian existence cannot be confined with a discourse of catastrophe" (1999: xv). Sukthankar laments the existence of a "lesbian" desire that is invoked only in relation to its abuse, negation, and

public persecution. Whether it is the protests and ban on Deepa Mehta's film *Fire* (1998), the extensive and sensationalist media coverage of the Indian lesbian suicides in the 1990s (Ghosh, 2022), the detailed reports explaining the nature of violence faced by Indian lesbians (Fernandez and Gomathy, 2003) or the recent extensive media coverage on the legal battle between an Indian lesbian couple from Kerela and their families who wanted to separate the couple (Mathew, 2022); most mentions of queer desire between womxn paint a grim picture of the violence done to them. What remains unexplored are the "infinite varieties" (Menon, 2018), the erotic potentials, and the alternative possibilities of queer desires and intimacies outside of a "discourse of catastrophe" (Sukthankar, 1999: xv). This isn't to state violence done to queer bodies shouldn't be theorized but to assert that there is a need to look beyond the historical anti-socialness of queerness (Brenkman, 2022: 180). Despite that, developing an innovative, hopeful, and productive framework for queer desire is anything but a simplistic and straightforward (pun intended) process.

Several approaches to queer theory helped me ground my theoretical framework. Sara Ahmed's embodied understanding of queer phenomenology situates queerness not as an inherent failure to belong but as a failure to reproduce hegemonic cis-heterosexual social orders (2006: 91). For Ahmed all sexual orientations are performative; implying that all bodies gradually arrive at their orientations by being drawn to objects available to them (2006: 86). Since the world is dominated by heterosexual traces of intimacy, queer bodies initially experience an 'out of placeness' and a failure to belong (Ahmed, 2006: 11-12). This 'out of placeness' is corroborated by repeated close readings of all my key texts (as will become evident during my analysis of the texts in the later chapters). For Ahmed, this 'out of placeness' can be made sense of through the process of reorientation of queer bodies which in turn makes out-of-reach objects accessible (2006: 100). Reorientation is an affective political hopeful possibility that can foster a sense of queer belonging by making hostile spaces

habitable. For Jack Halberstam the "Queer art of failure turns on the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely, and the unremarkable. It quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being" (2011: 88). For Halberstam, queer failure contains the possibility of alternative and hopeful re-imagination of belonging. It is important to note that Halberstam's hopeful understanding of queer failure is an antithesis to conventional notions of capitalist success and positivity. Inspired by Ahmed and Halberstam's theorisations, I apply their approach to a larger alternative politics of desire and belonging that is rooted in an initial failure to belong. As discussed before, if belonging is posited as an affective response of an individual, to connections they make with other individuals and communities (Mahar et al, 2012:4)- how do these queer womxn and their desires belong (both within the home and the world)? Given that they are situated in an initial queer un-belongingness and in a failure to belong? To understand this further, I propose the idea of (re)belonging- an affective queer state of womxn and their desires that is rooted in queer failure. To (re)belong one must first unbelong and fail and then re-make and re-negotiate a space for their desires. I argue that these personal narratives are a dynamic intersectional repository of alternative (re)belonged queer desires and intimacies.

This (re)belonging is kaleidoscopic in nature. The analogy of the kaleidoscope was born out of an initial framework of despair, chaos, mess, dejection, and fragmentation. In 2021, I wrote 12 discarded drafts on the form of Namjoshi's (2000) *Goja*. Engaging with the text was an arduous experience. The dense, mythical, and subversive nature of the text eluded me for months. There was a sense of pain, fragmentation, loss in the text that co-existed alongside a cleverly crafted playful wordplay that subtly glimmered with hope while resisting conformation to an ideal. Thus, after much deliberation, emerging from the ashes like a phoenix, was the term kaleidoscopic. A term that simultaneously conveyed the fragmentation and chaos as well as the crafted-ness of a narrative, the hopeful as well as the despondent

nature of a text. I soon realized that this term applied not just to *Goja* but to the nature of belonging and desire in all the texts. Often multiple close reading sessions of my three key texts ended in confounding and confusing challenges. The texts had a visceral impact on me, but it was hard to articulate why. The texts, though written in simple Indian English, are overwhelming in form, and meaning. Each personal narrative varies vastly in terms of its content and use of the autobiographical form. Whether it is Namjoshi's (2000) layered use of autobiographical myths and fiction or Sharma's (2006) ethnographic memoir interspersed with working-class voices or Sukthankar's (1999) multi-genre lesbian anthology- all three texts are pluralistic in ways that I had not previously encountered. Sufficient work hasn't been done with regard to autobiographical practice, life-stories, personal narratives and queer womxn desire in the Indian context. Nair's (2009) work analyses both the Sukthankar and the Namjoshi key texts as important contributions to Indian postcolonial lesbian literature. But the study of desire between queer womxn in Indian personal narratives and autobiographical writing (especially with regard to my three key texts) has not been attempted previously. Indian autobiographical theory and scholarship has largely been focused on the struggles and challenges faced by upper-caste cis-heterosexual women (Harish, 2002, Karlekar, 1993, Loomba, 2018, Devenish, 2013). The life-stories of queer women and womxn have not received sufficient critical attention. Within the Indian context, Marangoly George's (2000) queer re-reading of Kamala Das's autobiography and outside of the Indian context, Baderoon's (2015) work on lesbian Muslim women autobiographies and the several works of lesbian feminists of colour such as Audre Lorde (1982, 1984) and Gloria Anzaldua (1987) have served as major inspirations for this project.

My texts are *truly queer* as they reject binary thinking at every level of their formation. Gradually, I theorized that desire between womxn in these texts was also presented in an unconventional queer kaleidoscopic framework and form. The alternative and

erotic potential of this desire is difficult to grasp because it is interspersed with violence, punishment and cloaked under various layers of compulsory heterosexuality. Several womxn contributors express their desires in the presence of husbands and children, in abusive homes and families often without any social or political support system. There is no 'together forever' universalism in the expressions of such desires and intimacies and yet they thrive and exist within these narratives. Hence, to make sense of these desires one must unlearn and look beyond the conventional vocabularies of desire and the "discourse of catastrophe" (Sukthankar, 1999: xv) surrounding queerness and don a kaleidoscopic lens. A kaleidoscopic approach, like the structure of a kaleidoscope, recognises the existence of complex and multi-layered concepts and hues that can be understood or viewed properly only when one zooms out and observes at a particular angle. A kaleidoscopic approach to desires and (re)belonging is apt for the plurality and complexity found these in these texts which subvert all universalised notions of intimacies and belonging.

This kaleidoscopic conception is echoed by scholars like Akhil Katyal who state that sexuality is marked by a "doubleness" which can be defined as a "constant tension between the way it is conceptualised and the way it is lived out" where the "actual experience" of sexuality is "always open-ended and contested, always forming and unforming" (2016: 1). Katyal alludes to the pluralistic and non-universal kaleidoscopic experience of sexuality through what he defines as various "idioms of same-sex desire" where idioms are described as the various genealogies of same-sex desire within the Indian context (2016: 1-2). For Katyal one idiom/ expression of queer desire isn't superior to the other, instead, all idioms and iterations of same-sex desire are "constantly interacting with each other and producing situations both of convergence and incompatibility" (2016: 26). This is in line with the kaleidoscopic nature of queer (re)belongings and desires that often co-exist alongside violent heteronormative systems in the texts such as caste, class, and marriage. Katyal borrows

heavily from the work of his contemporary, akshay khanna, who rejects the ontological identarian subject-based nature of the term sexuality for a more fluid term like "sexualness" (2010: 15-16) which refers to wider forms of eroticisms, erotic behaviours and idioms that are not rooted in an identity politics. khanna asks his readers not for "the replacement of the politics of identity" but to constantly see sexual politics in all its "various lights" (2010: 253) which as Katyal concurs is very similar to his idea of the "doubleness" of sexuality (2016: 19). For both Katyal and khanna, queer sexual behaviours, desires, eroticisms, and sexual practices are far beyond identarian politics, legality, and labels of queerness. For a deeper understanding, one must go beyond the obvious markers of sexuality and desire. Both the ideas of "doubleness" and "sexualness" of queer desire are in alignment with my idea of the kaleidoscope. Through my theorization of kaleidoscopic (re)belongings in these texts, I aim to bring forth the dizzying variety of queer desire and intimate expressions between womxn that go beyond the neatly arranged categories of identity markers and dominant notions of queer politics. Herein, lies the original scope of my project.

Before I begin the main analysis of queer womxn desire in the home and the world, I will explain in the last section of my introduction, why I reject the term lesbian which has been universally adopted for all personal narrative contributors both by Sukthankar (1999) as well as Sharma (2006). I will discuss this rejection with regards to a brief history of the terminology of queer desire and sexual identity categories in India. Since, Namjoshi (2000) is the sole author of her personal narrative and autobiographical fiction, which is based primarily on her life, her use of the terms Indian lesbian for her narrator is a valid choice and not a cis-normative generalization.

Call me by many names: Terminology for queer desire between Indian womxn.

In Deepa Mehta's controversial lesbian film *Fire* (1998), one of the protagonists, Sita remarks to her lover Radha, "There is no word in our language which describes what we are

or what we feel for each other". This is a reference to the Indian language, Hindi, which contains no exact word which describes lesbian or desire between two women and womxn (Vanita, 2005a). India is a vast, culturally rich country with an immense cultural history used to express desire. Madhavi Menon (2018) traces alternate histories of desire expressed through everyday objects and practices such as food, architecture, hair, and make-up. A diverse cultural history combined with the effect of British colonisation also implies that the terminology used to refer to queer desire has also changed drastically with time. This part of the introduction will give a brief history of terminology for queer desire between womxn in India followed by an account of how terminology is used in my key texts. Queer desire between two womxn as discussed in this thesis is located on a broad continuum of feminine experiences (and experiences with femineity for womxn) that include a range of connections which can be emotional or physical or both. Here one kind of desire isn't privileged over the other.

The dominant language of ancient Indian texts was primarily Sanskrit and Urdu. Vanita and Saleem Kidwai (2000) have uncovered several Sanskrit and Urdu terms denoting same-sex desire. Vanita and Kidwai discuss an 11th century Sanskrit story collection of Indian fairy and folk tales called *Kathasaritasagara,* where a young woman narrates her instantaneous attraction to a married woman and refers to their relationship as one between *swayamvara sakhis* (self-chosen female friends) while providing evidence of many such relationships existing at that time (2000: 67-68). The first part of the term *sayamvara* (literal meaning self-chosen) denotes an ancient Indian ceremonial practice where the bride chooses a bridegroom from an array of potential suitors. This ritualistic practice is referenced in ancient epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The second part of the term *sakhi* refers to a female friend in Sanskrit. Vanita and Kidwai (2000) also discuss the Urdu poetry genre of *Rekhti,* where a female poetic persona often lovingly addresses an intimate female

friend through terms such as *dogana (*double, two together, an inseparable pair, two intimate friends), *zanakhi* (intimate female friend) and *iliachi* (literal meaning cardamom).[5] Some *Rekhti* poetry even makes explicit mention of sexual acts between two women, for example through practices such as *chapat, chapti* or *chapat bazi* which derive from the word *chiptana* (spelt *chaptana* in Urdu) which means to stick or cling to, pertaining to the sexual act of rubbing and clinging. The suffix *baz* meanwhile means a player, fancier, or agent (such as *shatranj baz* (chess player)). Hence a *chapat baz* is a woman who is an agent of lesbian sexual activity.[6] Michael J. Sweet and Leonard Zwilling's analysis of Indian Jain and Hindu texts from the sixth century BC reveals that the Sanskrit word *narisandha* was used to refer to the "masculine female lesbian" (1993: 593). The nineteenth-century colonization of India under the British empire led to the introduction of the English language and the death of ancient languages such as Sanskrit and Urdu and the suppression and erasure of classical art forms such as *Rekhti* poetry (Vanita, 2005a) hence none of the terminology discussed above is used in the modern postcolonial texts discussed in this thesis. Colonisation also led to the introduction of homophobic anti-sodomy laws which criminalised same-sex desire (Vanita, 2005a). The combined effect of this erasure and criminalization over time informs the Indian postcolonial linguistic experience where some terms have been completely erased while others such as 'gay' and 'lesbian' have been introduced. This violent intrusion of the English language is now a part of the modern Indian experience.

The use of Anglophone terminology exclusively for queer desire between women is a much-debated topic in scholarship within the Indian context. Bacchetta's (2002) case study of Indian queer women living in Delhi in the 1980s reveals that while several of those women chose to identify with the English word lesbian many who did not. Indian scholars such

[5] For a detailed discussion of these terms, see Chapter 8 in Vanita (2005b)
[6] This is similar to a notion of lesbian sex found in the the French term *tribade* (also used in English from the sixteenth-century onward) from Latin *tribas* and Greek *tribein* (rubbing) (Vanita, 2005b).

Thadani made use of the term lesbian as part of their transnational "symbolic continuum of female *aakarshan*" (erotic desire) inclusive of the Sapphic origins of the word (1996: 9). Bacchetta (2002) speaks to working-class women like Abha, a non-affluent rural activist for the Indian Women's Movement (IWM) who preferred to use the Hindi term *akeli aurat* (single woman) instead of lesbian. The term single woman, as Abha uses it, encompasses lesbians, asexual women, widows, unmarried women as well as any woman who are not in a heterosexual marriage. For Abha this term is more accessible and politically useful for her activism since most women in rural settings do not speak English and do not deploy the term lesbian. The term lesbian reductively erases bisexual, pansexual and gender non-conforming desires between women and womxn. Bacchetta states, that in a working-class rural context,

> Introducing the English term "lesbian" would unnecessarily impose diversionary debates about Westernization. It would mean grappling with the national/alien binary – with lesbophobic exile – instead of getting on with the work of construction of autonomous female collectivity (2002: 966).

This quotation points to a ground reality of patriarchal rural India where a xenophobic bias exists around Anglophone terminology as it is conflated with 'loose' Western morals that go against the traditional conservative grain of 'pure' Indian values. To conduct feminist activism in such an environment a range of terminology needs to be deployed to gain the trust of local non-English speaking communities. Maya Sharma's (2006) ethnographic rural memoir, one of the primary texts of my thesis, supports this idea.

According to Gayatri Spivak, a postcolonial intellectual who seeks not to re-produce imperialistic methods of knowledge production should, as a part of his/ her "unlearning process", proceed "to articulate that ideological formation – by measuring silences, if necessary – into the object of investigation" (1993: 92). This endeavour of "measuring silences" and gaps in the narrative constitutes a significant methodological technique in my

research on queer desire between Indian womxn. In several texts, as I will go on to discuss, there is a breakdown of language and a lack of fixed terminology due to the burden of the discourses of patriarchy, class, trauma, criminality, and repression. Unlike, Sukthankar (1999) and Sharma (2006) in their texts I will not attempt to smoothen out the terminology gaps and silences between these womxn by generally using the term lesbian. I do not use the term lesbian to refer to all writer/ contributors collectively since that would be cis-normative and exclusive to the womxn contributions. In cases where a writer/ contributor does not use an identitarian terminology I do not impose any. Since I do not wish to impose an identity category, I will use the capacious formulation 'queer desire between womxn' due to the wider inclusive reach of the term queer. It is important to note that I am not rejecting the term lesbian; rather, I only use it when the writer self-identifies as one. The term lesbian is just one of the terms used in these narratives. My aim is to identify, locate and analyse a broad range of terminology.

Terminology Used in my Primary Texts

Ashwini Sukthankar, the editor, and curator of the anthology *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing from India*, begins her introduction by stating that "putting our words" into the public space meant brutally manipulating the dimensions of our identity (1999: xiii). Here the "our" stands for the identity of the Indian "lesbian" and Sukthankar appoints herself as a representative of the collective voice of Indian "lesbians". Sukthankar devotes a large part of her introduction to making a case for the invisibility of the Indian "lesbian" in various discourses, such as in the text of the anti-sodomy law and in homophobic media reports. The main rationale for the anthology is captured in the following quotation: "We put pen to paper so that one less woman might have to experience the isolation we did" (1999: xvii). Here again, Sukthankar refers to herself in a first-person plural pronoun, aligning herself with the contributing writers of the anthology and subsuming everyone into the collective identity of

the Indian cis woman and "lesbian", who is attempting to make herself visible through the creation of a shared language.

Sukthankar's homogenous use of the "lesbian" terminology is problematic – something she addresses at a later part of the introduction where she acknowledges the white, Western connotations of the term lesbian as well as its exclusion of bisexual women. Like the previously discussed Sanskrit terminology analysed by Kidwai and Vanita (2000), Sukthankar attempts to decolonise the colonial phasing out of ancient Indian languages by reviving Sanskrit and inventing a new Sanskrit term for lesbian desire. Sukthankar states "we" even constructed another term deriving from Sanskrit meanings; "*samyonik* (*sam* = union and *yoni* = female genitalia)" (1999: xix). Sukthankar is never explicit on who the "we" stands for here and since she is sole writer and editor of the introduction and no co-editor is mentioned in the acknowledgements of the book, it is safe to say that Sukthankar speaks on behalf of all the writers in the anthology.

Despite the apparent collective invention of the new term *samyonik*, the term lesbian is chosen for the anthology's title and beyond. "[W]e name ourselves lesbian", she states, and "we want to claim it here particularly because it is so uncompromising" (1999: xix-xx). There are two things that are problematic with such assertions. The first is the use of the term lesbian given its Anglophone cis-normative origins, excludes womxn and imposes a label on several contributing writers in the anthology. For example, writer Gauri's narrative, titled "The Bi-line", discusses surviving as a bisexual woman in the copywriting business, while Supriya's working-class narrative, "Tired of the Broom", is a translated oral narrative about a domestic servant who doesn't know English and the term lesbian and hence uses the abstract phrase of "this thing" in order to refer to her affair with her husband's first wife (1999: 123). In several other narratives apart from Supriya's, no identitarian label is put on queer

encounters between womxn. Therefore, referring to all these narratives as "lesbian" writing erases a whole host of identities.

The second issue is the collective assertion of "we name" or "we want to claim it [the term lesbian]", which creates the impression that all the women in the anthology collectively decided to use and reclaim the term "lesbian". There is no evidence that Sukthankar asked her contributors' permission before using the word lesbian. Sukthankar's anthology was published in 1999, just a year after the release of Deepa Mehta's controversial lesbian film *Fire* and its violent protests and public visibilities of lesbians in a broader national context (Dave, 2011). As I discussed initially in the introduction, in the aftermath of such a major event, it makes sense why Sukthankar would want to build on that visibility and reclaim the cultural ostracization and invisibility around the term "lesbian" for her anthology.

Sukthankar repeatedly refers to the anthology's fluidity in terms of its content as it includes multiple personal narratives such as letters, diaries, essays, and several other formats. She even states that "Each of us speaks only for herself, never for lesbians in general" (1999: xxi). In an attempt at respecting the individuality of each writer, Sukthankar makes the error of labelling them all as "lesbians". While there is no doubt that Sukthankar's anthology is seminal in many ways, it is also essential to point out that its use of terminology can be made more contemporary, updated, and inclusive within the current Indian context.

Maya Sharma, of *Loving Women: Being Lesbian in Unprivileged India*, refers to her text as a documentation of the life of working-class "lesbians" in India, "rooted in a personal journey of emergence from a space fraught with such silences and half-truths" (2006: 35-36). The ethnographic memoir is personal as it begins with Sharma's own account of her desire for other women followed by interviews with critical observations about with rural queer womxn. I will first focus on how Sharma uses terminology for desire in her own story. In the middle of the introductory chapter, Sharma narrates her own story in the first-person form, in

a section titled, ‘My Story’. She recalls not fitting in anywhere and settling down into a heterosexual marriage and motherhood to please her family. Sharma’s primary job is that of an NGO worker and activist for several organisations under the Indian Women’s feminist movements (IWFM). Sharma’s feminist activism work, she tells us, began in 1983, with an accidental break from her “cloistered domesticity” and her involvement with an NGO in her neighbourhood called Saheli, which helps in rehabilitating riot-stricken women (120). In 1991, Sharma joins another women’s NGO called Jaogri, as a full-time employee. Sharma then narrates working with several rural women as a part of some slum development projects. It is here that she meets a 60-year-old widow named Bhavari, who openly discusses desiring other women. Sharma recalls feeling “an unexpected sensation of pleasure” at Bhavari’s touch mixed with feelings of “shock that I was experiencing arousal through the caress of a woman” (136-138). Repeated interactions with Bhavari, make Sharma help her overcome her internalised fear and homophobia and make her realise that she desires other women. Due to Bhavari, Sharma feels strengthened enough to leave her heterosexual marriage and have an affair with another woman (144). Nowhere in her account does she label her desire or call herself a lesbian. She only refers to herself as a feminist “committed to transparency” who tells her story to honour the courage of the other participants (154). While Sharma’s queer desire has its own graph that isn’t mapped out on any identitarian labels or categories, her theorisation of her participants’ queer desire is very different.

Sharma points out that most of her participants were non-English-speaking and were unaware of the term ‘lesbian’ and often asked which language the word belonged to (516). The women were even unaware, too, of the Hindi term *samlaingik* (literal meaning ‘same sex’) (516). Sharma points out that use of the term ‘lesbian’ for her project is “restrictive and unrepresentative of the complexities of queer relationships, as well as of the ground realities that intersected with caste, class and other factors (which often included marriage, husband

and children)" (2006: 68). This is very true since a majority of her participants were forcefully married off to heterosexual men while others like Vimlesh and Shiela did not identify as women. This put the term lesbian at odds with the content of the text.

Despite this Sharma uses the term 'lesbian' in the title, throughout the text and often for her participants during her critical observations. She does this (like Sukthnankar), to reclaim the awkwardness and homophobia around the term 'lesbian', to build a political rhetoric for gay and human rights. Sharma provides several examples of how the Indian feminist movement of the early 1990s removed the term 'lesbian' from their meeting pamphlets due to their internalised homophobia (374). While the exclusion of lesbian desire between women from the initial Indian feminist movement is a valid concern, which I have also discussed in the beginning of this introduction, Sharma's blanket use of the term "lesbian" needs to be updated in the contemporary context to include womxn and other desires between women. Sharma (2006) does, however, highlight some colloquial terms used to by her participants while expressing queer desire. She states:

> In their own contexts, the male form of address and gender-ambiguous plural forms in Hindi was used both by the masculinised subjects and by people around them. The words used were *Babu, Bhai*. These are generic male forms of address. Most often the same-sex partners referred to each other as *dost, saheli, sathin, sakhi*, terms which, like the term 'female friendship' itself, are general in nature, non-threatening to the heterosexist paradigm, and socioculturally acceptable. (2006: 519-524)

By the term "masculinised subjects" Sharma alludes to the terminology used for womxn and butch women in her text while the other terms are perceived as being used for femme queer women. This old-fashioned and essentialist use of masculine or heterosexual terminology for a masculine-feminine pair and friendship terminology for the feminine-feminine pair reinstates the dominant hegemonic and heterosexist social order. These womxn, it would

seem, have a great need to appear non-threatening to the norm because they are socially and economically disadvantaged women, forced to live with their families. Two of the participant couples (Rekha and Dolly, Menaka and Payal) are runaways who were tracked by police, hounded by the media, separated from each other, and forced to go back to their families. In most cases, the womxn live in congested houses with no privacy where a family member either speaks for them or is always present in the room when Sharma attempts to interview them and collect data. In such cases, Sharma forcing the womxn to use provocative terminology to describe their relationships might put their lives in danger. Some womxn participants, Sharma informs us, acknowledged their desire for other womxn but refused the publication of their stories due to the sexual aspect of the term 'lesbian' while two of the participants refused to accept that their female friendships had erotic dimensions (101). Sharma refers to these denials "as evasions and deceptions, yet these apparent lies are in fact the existential truth" (101). Here denial is not a reference to the refusal of these womxn to identity as lesbians, but it is a refusal to come to terms with the queer and erotic nature of their desires.

Several participants of Sharma's (2006) use their own innovative terminology to express their desires. Guddi and Aasu are two women in love who are separated by their families. Guddi refers to Aasu as her "intimate friend" (730). Vimlesh is a womxn who uses he/him pronouns. Vimlesh denies knowing the word 'lesbian' and states, "I consider myself a male. I am attracted to women. Why create categories, such deep differences between male and female?" (1182-85). Meeta and Manjula are two women who live together. Meeta refers to her relationship with Manjula as strictly friendship, but their close friends refer to them as *"miyan-biwi"* (husband-wife) (1126-27). Sabo and Razia are a couple who have been in love since their childhood. Both were forcefully married off to heterosexual men. Sabo refers to herself as a "single woman" (2155-57). For these womxn, labelling their desire is not an

active part of their day-to-day survival and politics. Ironically, when Sharma set out to recruit participants, she had to use phrases like ‘single woman’ or ‘woman who lives with another woman’ to get the womxn to respond to her since none of them would respond to the term ‘lesbian’ (468). Towards the end of the text Sharma states, “Our own ideological need to establish a single identity for our subjects in this [Indian working-class] context is countered by our interaction with such women, whose lives are proof that no one identity fully expresses even limited truths” (2006: 2773-2778). It is ironic that Sharma realises the full nuances of her participants’ lives by the end of her text despite her generalised use of “lesbian” terminology.

Suniti Namjoshi’s *Goja: An Autobiographical Myth* (2000) is the third and final primary text and the only full-length personal narrative by singular author who self- identifies as lesbian woman. Namjoshi is an established writer and professor of Literature; hence the politics of language are central to her writing. She currently lives in the diaspora but who grew up in a very elit*e zamindari* (feudal land-owning) family in Northern India. The blurb at the back of the text describes Namjoshi as located “between the East of experience and the West of the English language”. A great deal of Namjoshi’s text about her experiences of the English language in the East and West. She states the following reasons for leaving her homeland:

> it was clear that in India it would not be possible for two women, who loved one another, to live honourably together. There was another reason for going abroad. The English language had colonized my brain, but I had never seen the reality behind the words (2000: 66).

Namjoshi became aware of her lesbianism in her teens in the early 70s, a time when non-heterosexual sexualities and their visibility was very limited (Dave, 2012). Her awareness of her sexuality and her relationship with her partner were key reasons for leaving. Namjoshi

also articulates her colonisation and expresses her desire to be in an Anglophone context so that she can fully understand the meaning behind the English terminology that she uses and identifies with. It is also for this reason that she studies Ezra Pound's *Cantos* for her doctoral dissertation (77). There is an intrinsic need within Namjoshi to reconcile and accept the East and the West within herself. A large part of her text also deconstructs the racism that she faces in the West and how the dominant white order imposes a certain terminology upon her. A "kindly, Western, liberal woman" once told Namjoshi that she was "triply oppressed" due to her brown Indian lesbianism (71). *Goja* provides a post-colonial deconstruction of language politics which goes beyond the debates of queer terminology.

The use of terminology for queer desire between womxn in these narratives has been an exacting and overwhelming task for me personally. It made me realise my own privileges, it made me question my language assumptions and made me trace the meaning behind taken for granted terminology like 'lesbian' so that I avoid making some of the mistakes that some editors of these anthologies did. Prior to moving to the West and becoming comfortable with Anglophone queer terminology, there was a time when I was ashamed to identify with the term lesbian. In deconstructing the politics of my language and the language in these narratives, I have concluded that all terminology is transient, political, personal, and warrants contextualization. It is for this reason that I have settled on the term queer desire.

The aim this long introduction was to aptly set a context for queer in India in the 1990s with regards to womxn, define personal narratives, highlight the seminality and uniqueness of my key texts, expound on the scope of my thesis, to narrow down my focus of queer desire from the purview of the home and the world as well as to deconstruct the terminology of desire and identity categories used in this context. From hereon, the thesis is divided into two main sections of the home and the world. Section 1: Home contains- an introduction of my theorisation of home applied to all my three key texts followed by

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 which analyse home in the three key texts. Section 2: World contains- an introduction of my theorisation of world applied to all my three key texts followed by Chapters 5, 6 and 7 which analyse world in the three key texts. This is followed by a section of concluding remarks.

PART 1: HOME

A Theorisation of Home in all my personal narratives

Why does homosexuality have to be talked about so much and so openly when it is a private issue? (Caleri Report 1999: 27)

The above words were spoken during a discussion on lesbianism which took place at the office of CALERI (the Campaign for Lesbian Rights) in 1999. CALERI was formed in 1999 [7] in response to the political uproar around the ban of Deepa Mehta's *Fire*. CALERI was founded to increase lesbian visibility, dialogue, and activism. The organisation's most significant contribution to Indian lesbian activism was undoubtedly the production and dissemination of a lesbian manifesto titled "Lesbian Emergence" from which the above quotation is taken. In a report which contains the manifesto, CALERI members talk about several open discussions that they conducted across the country to raise awareness about lesbianism. The question above was posed to CALERI activists by a member of an audience full of students during one such discussion.

As discussed above, *Fire* and its aftermath were a seminal cultural event in India that became the perfect opportunity for women's groups like CALERI to create a conversation around lesbianism as lesbian protestors were covered by national media during the *Fire* protests (Dave, 2011). In the 1990's liberalised India, there were debates regarding the hegemonic private relegation of women to heterosexuality, domesticity, and motherhood (Patel, 2004, Bhaskaran, 2002). Queer and lesbian womxn were also parts of these debates. Feminist politics is rooted in the belief that the personal is political. Postcolonial India, burdened as it is with straddling a wide rural-urban gap while being steeped in patriarchy,

[7] CALERI eventually became defunct in 200I.

criminalised queer desire till 2018. Where do these queer womxn in my primary texts locate their identities in such an environment? This chapter places their criminalised identities in the context of a conventionally private space – the home – to establish a dialectical relationship between the public and the private, the home and the world.

Maya Sharma describes her rural ethnographic memoir, *Loving Women*, as located in "the contested sociocultural fissure between the private and the public domain" (2006: 35). As established above, the stories collected in this volume are about rural working-class womxn in India with queer desires. Ironically, even though most of the interviews were conducted in and around the homes of these women, as revealed to us through Sharma's descriptions, queer desire has no place or recognition within these homes; it tends to be repressed or clandestine. As discussed in my introductory chapter, at the time that this text was published queer desire was criminalised. Yet persecuted identities possess the ability to subvert and re-invent authoritarian structures and spaces. This idea is supported by postcolonial scholars like Homi K. Bhabha, who proposes that an effect of colonial hybridity is the creation of a continuous "double vision"/ duality of culture which does not trace back to the two originating cultures but from which a third hybrid culture/ space emerges. This "third space", which "displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives which are inadequately understood through received wisdom" (1990: 211). I will show home is one such authoritarian power structure that is hybridised in all these personal narratives to create new structures of home, domesticity, and family.

Ashwini Sukthankar refers to the home as both "a sanctuary and a prison" (1999: xxxi). Thus, while the home might sometimes function as a refuge from the public sphere, that space isn't always a safe, private haven for its inhabitants. The family is one private discourse which dictates the internal politics of the home defined by rigid gender roles,

gendered household labour and heterosexuality. Rosemary Marangoly George in her examination of postcolonial twentieth-century fiction states that home is "not a neutral place" but a community by itself which is based on "inclusions and exclusions" and "on ideas of kinship extended to those that are perceived to be of the same blood, religion, caste; where membership is maintained through bonds of love, power, fear and control" (Marangoly George, 1996: 9). Within my primary texts, I consider home to be a community based on membership, inclusions, and exclusions. This implies the existence of dominant hegemonic identities that occupy central positions (heterosexual family, flatmates, neighbours, distant relatives, local community workers) as well as the existence of liminal identities (queer womxn of different religious and class backgrounds) that occupy threshold positions. To my mind, it is impossible to separate the physical space of the home from its internal familial politics, especially when it comes to the oppression of female and queer sexuality. This is why I focus on the home as both physical space and an internal/ private microcosm made of hegemonic heteronormative ideas of family, domesticity, and households.

My main aim in Part 1 of this thesis is to analyse how people with such liminal identities navigate their relationship with dominant identities within the space of the home. What kind of Bhabhaian "third spaces" do these womxn create? It is important to note that for Bhabha, the third space is not a separate identity by itself but a process of identification – a way of defining oneself in relation to the world. When subjects define themselves in hybrid third spaces, the subject-object relationship isn't rigid but ambivalent (due to the interaction with the other) and always "bears the traces of the feelings and practices that inform it" (1990: 211). In simpler terms, in these narratives the womxn, while acting out their queer desires, do not create separate third identities for themselves but discover new modes of identification with home, family and ideas of domesticity. These new identifications lead to reorientations of the social order at home to varying degrees across different narratives. By

reorientation, I do not mean the reinstatement of the previous hierarchical order, but a new changed order. The degree of such a reorientation varies because it tends to depend on the social privileges of a subject. For example, working-class queer womxn face greater challenges than middle-class queer womxn due to their economic position.

Since these all the narratives analysed in this thesis are autobiographical (meaning they are written in the first-person narrative) in nature, we, as readers, can observe that queer desire causes friction and tension, not just between the subject and their family members but also within a subject's internal self. As I will discuss in the next chapter, Sharma's interviewees display varying degrees of internalised homophobia due to not being able to fit into conventional household roles. In the other two texts, in several narratives furthermore, womxn either articulate or enact their dissatisfaction with their present home environment. It is essential to analyse these articulations as they present to us the lived experiences of liminal identities in the space of the Indian home.

I have posited that queer desire occupies hybrid liminal spaces and how that can lead to a reorientation of the social order. In the Indian context, Geetanjali Singh Chanda's (2008) analysis of heterosexual women and home in contemporary Indian English literature, evokes the physical, social, and oppressive discourses of home in the Indian context. Chanda argues that women resist oppression, challenge hegemonic notions of domesticity to create- "womanspaces"- which are defined as spaces of sisterhood, friendship, and empathy between women, but they do not include sexual relationships between women (2008: 35). Chanda's (2008) idea of "womanspaces" is an example of reorientation of and renegotiation with the oppressive Indian home discourses even if it is exclusive of queer women and womxn desires. My conceptions of home and its reorientation are however rooted in queer identities and desires.

To better understand this re-orientation, it is crucial to first understand its orientation. Sara Ahmed (2006) highlights the link between sexuality and physical space. For her, sexual orientation should also be a "matter or residence; of how we might inhabit spaces as well as 'who' and 'what' we inhabit spaces with" (2006: 1). Ahmed works with an assumption that all physical spaces are sexualised and that this sexualisation can be re-theorized. Her aim is to study sexual orientation as a phenomenological question because it highlights the importance of lived experience. This emphasis on lived experience is reflected in the content of my personal narratives. Hence in the Home chapters of this thesis, it is important to analyse the space of the home as an embodied experience and not as something exterior to the body (2006: 9).

For Ahmed, a queer body moves through three embodied states while occupying space: orientation, dis-orientation, and reorientation. The state of orientation, as can be applied to my texts, is when these womxn learn what home means within their dominant cultural and social context; they are indoctrinated into occupying the space of the home in a hegemonic, gendered, and heterosexual manner through "homing devices"[8] (Ahmed, 2006: 9). In my analysis, I will refer to this state as being 'homed in' by the dominant discourses of home. When queer womxn are 'homed in' by dominant homing mechanisms, they are confined not only within the physical space of the home but also within oppressive discourses of domesticity.

The second stage, according to Ahmed, when a queer body begins to occupy space, this is a state of disorientation which, again as it pertains to my texts, begins when these womxn start reflecting on their lived experiences or start enacting their queer desires or begin to migrate to move away from oppressive home. Queer bodies, according to Ahmed, tend to

[8] For Ahmed, "homing devices" are about "findind your way" where we "learn what home means, or how we occupy space at home and as home, when we leave home" (2006: 9).

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"move away" (9) from hegemonic meanings of home and begin to feel "out of place" (11-12). This occurs because the family home is so full of "traces of heterosexual intimacy" (11-12) that queer individuals struggle to occupy such a space without experiencing a sense of anxiety and displacement.

Ahmed defines disorientation as follows:

> Disorientation can be a bodily feeling of losing one's place, and an effect of the loss of a place: it can be a violent feeling, and a feeling that is affected by violence, or shaped by violence directed toward the body. Disorientation involves failed orientations: bodies inhabit spaces that do not extend their shape, or use objects that do not extend their reach. (Ahmed, 2006: 160)

The majority of womxn in these personal narratives express feelings of unrest, anxiety, and dissatisfaction with various elements of their home life. Ahmed's description of disorientation as a "violent feeling" is reiterated by Ashwini Sukthankar (1999) in the introduction to her anthology, where she describes the feeling of inhabiting a "lesbian" body as being a kind of "violence from within – a schizoid dismembering, the self, ripped into its public parts and its private parts" (1999: xvi). The word dismembering here is apt in two contexts – both in terms of the violent feelings experienced by these womxn and in terms of them being 'dis-membered' (excluded from membership) from the hierarchical community that is home (see Marangoly George, 1996). In the above quotation, Ahmed also states that disorientation involves "failed orientations". This is not to imply that queerness is a failed orientation but that to achieve a truly queer orientation one must go through the failure of attempting to occupy space as a heterosexual. This is because "heterosexuality as a compulsory orientation" reproduces more than 'itself': it is a "mechanism for the

reproduction of culture" (Ahmed, 2006: 161-62). As heterosexuality creates a hegemonic culture, the failure to occupy that culture produces disorientating effects. If disorientation as a process can make a body feel "out of place", then it is safe to say that it *is* a liminal space, by itself, since bodies feel neither in nor out but "betwixt" (Turner, 1969: 359) when disorientated. This sense of in-betweenness experienced by these women in the context of the home, implying that the state of disorientation is one of the unique liminal spaces they occupy, hence its analysis becomes crucial to my analysis of home in all my key texts.

The third stage that a queer body goes through while attempting to occupy space, according to Ahmed, is that of reorientation. For Bhabha, this would be the "third space", a possibility for change, a new order. For Ahmed, it is about "arriving" and learning to re-inhabit spaces (2006: 9). For both Bhabha and Ahmed, reorientation is not about reproducing hegemonic ways of occupying space but about constantly learning new ways to make an oppressive space liveable. Just like hybridity, reorientation is a constantly evolving process, especially for queer subjects. Here the sense of failure caused by disorientation is overcome through the process of repetition. If "repetitive performances of hegemonic asymmetrical gender identities and heterosexual desires congeal over time to produce the appearance" that a normative space such as the home is "normally a heterosexual space" (Valentine, 1996: 160), we can apply Valentine's argument to Ahmed to posit that the same can be achieved through the enactment of queer desires even if "it takes work and time" (Ahmed, 2006: 102). For Sukthankar, a "lesbian" has to "claw her way into self-awareness in a society that insists upon heterosexuality" (1999: xvi). I imply that all these three Ahmedian states (orientation, disorientation, and reorientation), which occur when a queer body attempts to inhabit a space, are emotionally exhausting and keep recurring in a queer body over time to produce a constantly evolving but habitable order of the world. For the purposes of this thesis, I will refer to this process of reorientation as 'homing out'.

For the purposes of clarity, the following terms and definitions capture how I am understanding and applying these Ahmedian states with reference to home in this this thesis: 1) 'homing in' (orientation) – defined as the ideological indoctrination of these womxn into oppressive discourses of domesticity done via the family and domestic institutions; 2) disorientation – which in a sense is the antithesis to the feeling of being 'at home'; and 3) 'homing out' – (reorientation) – defined as the transgression and re-imagination of hegemonic home discourses and the possibility of feeling at home.

These womxn never have the privilege of feeling 'at home' in the conventional sense. They are homed in, disorientated, and then homed out, but these processes occur to varying degrees depending on the caste, class, and religious privileges of these womxn. Almost all the contributors in Sukthankar's anthology refer to an internal tension within the space of the home. While Sukthankar's contributors are dominantly urban, middle-class, and educated, Sharma's memoir brings in the perspective of a rural, working-class underprivileged womxn and Namjoshi's narrator belongs to an upper-class land-owning feudal family. Hence in all three key texts, major class differences are affecting how the home is charted and how queer desire between womxn is navigated.

Edward Said (2000), in his memoir *Out of Place,* describes the feeling of being 'out of place' as "never being quite right, but also never feeling at ease, always expecting to be interrupted or corrected, to have my privacy invaded and my unsure person set upon. Permanently out of place" (33). Said discusses a restless feeling of ill-ease that permeates his entire being because he is unable to play the parts that he is expected to play, referring also to being "permanently out of place". He attributes this permanence to the inevitability of his fate, asking, "Could 'Edward's' position ever be anything but out of place?" (34). Here "Edward's" is not a reference to Said himself but a persona that his parents have nurtured and created according to the rules of society. Constant migration, cultural clashes, and unpleasant

encounters with coloniality during his early years, result in Said moving further away from himself while acting out the ill-fated, out-of-place part of "Edward". Similarly queer womxn in my personal narratives, feel out of place while enacting out roles that society has imposed upon them. In several cases, these personal narratives are the first places where they have attempted to make sense of their 'out of placeness'. Bhabha (1994) also talks about this 'out of placeness' but he refers to it as "unhomeliness" where "the border between home and world becomes confused; and uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other" (9). I believe that this "unhomeliness" is an inevitable condition of queer womxn in these texts since it is impossible to separate the uncanny merging of the public and private discourses in their lives since they both contribute to their marginality by constantly interacting with each other. This deconstructs the romantic notion of home being a non-permeable safe and private haven. Like Bhabha, I view this "unhomeliness" not as something that needs to be resolved but as something that leads to hybrid ways of reorientations and re-negotiations which are a valid form of queer existence within themselves.

In seeking to explore the creation of these Bhabaian hybrid "third spaces" in the context of home and queer desire, through the processes of homing out and disorientation, my work complements Santesso's (2013) study on Muslim identity and religion. In her analysis of contemporary Muslim Anglophone literature, Santesso defines disorientation (independently from Ahmed's (2006) conception) as "a process through which women negotiate religious identity while attempting to recover their social and ethnic bearings. This experience […] often (but not always) leads to the establishment of a firmer sense of self" (2013: 116). Santesso's idea of disorientation is a study of migrant Muslim women and their religious identity is different from Ahmedian disorientation as discussed earlier. Ahmed (2006), with regards to the queer body, separates the two processes of 'out of placeness' (disorientation) and reclaiming and re-negotiation (reorientation) and claims that

disorientation always leads to a path/ end of reorientation. Santesso (2013), with regard to Muslim women, claims that disorientation may or may not lead to the process of re-negotiation or improvement. For Santesso this disorientating "stasis of confusion and doubt can become an opportunity for reinvention" yet it "does not guarantee successful integration" but always initiates "an introspective gaze that almost necessarily brings with it some level of new self-awareness for the displaced subject" (177). Ahmed's (2006) definition of queer disorientation is the foundation of my theorisation of home. But with regards to the end result of disorientation/ possibility of reorientation, I agree more with Santesso than Ahmed. Like Santesso, I propose that in the case of queer Indian womxn and home in my key texts, the result of the disorientation and homing out (reorientation) of each womxn may or may not always lead to reconciliation and acceptance at home but it always leads to a better understanding of the self and their "unhomeliness". This awareness itself is a positive, cathartic, and hopeful result. I also claim that the degree of reclamation/ reorientation is dependent on the privileges and social positionality of the womxn contributor or writer. For instance, working-class womxn have a harder time reorientating themselves as compared to middle-class womxn since they must also challenge several caste and class discourses alongside the normative discourses of the home.

In none of my primary texts does homing out result in fixed outcomes like 'coming out' or labelling oneself as a fixed identity category. For a lot of these womxn contributors, homing out is just a successful attempt at acting on some of their queer desire by indulging in brief or sporadic queer intimacies or a break away from heterosexual domesticity or making their abusive households liveable. Yet we as readers don't witness this breaking away in its entirety, mostly because these womxn only record a fragment of their lives in these personal narratives. It might take several cycles of homing in and out before these womxn can fully break away from oppressive homes discourses.

Chapter 2: Unhomely Bodies: Home and Queer Desires in Rural Indian Personal Narratives

Loving Women and Loving Oneself: Maya Sharma's Personal Homing Journey

Before writing about the lives of her rural interviewees, Sharma refers to her own experiences of home and sexuality. She states: "To the family's satisfaction, I 'settled down'. Even better, I soon had a son" (115-116). In the Indian context, the term 'settled down' refers to heterosexual marriage which is posited as a middle-class life goal that everyone must achieve after achieving success in their careers. Sharma puts the term in inverted commas because her intention is to interrogate it. For Indian women, even in the contemporary context, there is an age bracket within which they are expected to 'settle down'. If they exceed this age range their character is deemed questionable. Geeta Patel (2004) discusses how similar ideas about heterosexual marriage are expected from all ideal 'homely woman', defined as a woman suitable for marriage and ones who is fit to be brought into a 'good' home. The term 'homely woman' is often used in Indian matrimonial advertisements, as explored in detail by Patel (2004). In just one line, then, Sharma conveys to us how her life choices have been governed heavily by dominant patriarchal Indian discourses on domesticity, such as compulsory heterosexual marriage. Sharma checks all the relevant boxes meant for an ideal Indian woman, which in turn causes her family's satisfaction.

So far, then, Sharma has been effectively 'homed in'. As she further states, "As I deftly smoothed the creases out of bedspreads and linen and put in place pieces of my household, I began to feel unsettled. No matter what and how much I did to keep the house going, it was never enough, never entirely well done" (113-120). It is important to note that while Sharma is referring to chores and bedspreads which are some of the physical objects found in a home, her 'unsettledness' is caused due to her inability to fit into the ideal mould which she refers to as "cloistered domesticity" (113-120). Here her heteronormative sheltered

domestic life begins to bother Sharma. It is also ironic that, despite having 'settled down', Sharma feels unsettled. This cloistered domesticity can only be created through the combined impact of confinement within the home as physical space and within gendered discourses on domesticity and family. As a result, Sharma now feels "out of place" (Said, 2000) and, in Ahmed's terms, disorientated. Her account reveals how the physical space of the home, and its organisation are linked to an embodied feeling of oppression, in line with Ahmed's phenomenological argument on sexual orientation as a "matter of residence" (2006: 1).

For Sharma, as she explains it, the homing out process began with her witnessing a feminist group's protest on television which demanded an end to the violence against women. Sharma was enamoured by the boldness of these women and this was followed by her joining as a volunteer in a women's rights organisation. It is through this job that Sharma meets Bhavari, the widowed rural woman who makes her realize her feelings for other women (141). It is important to note that this homing out process doesn't happen overnight. It takes Sharma years to overcome her denial. She feels slightly empowered after her relationship with another woman, she informs the reader. Yet it is never revealed to us whether Sharma ever leaves her marriage or 'comes out'. For Sharma, all that matters is the support she receives from the women around her (149).

Sharma homes out and reorients herself with ideas of the home with regards to her desires yet this reorientation is partial. Sharma engages in queer relationships but still calls herself "half-hidden" and longs for an "outer, larger affirming space in which we [herself and other lesbians] could be ourselves without pretensions, disguises or evasions" (154). Sharma accepts her queer desire but cannot afford to declare or display her sexuality in public. The next section of this chapter will tease out some of these nuances by focusing on participant interviews in Sharma's ethnographic rural memoir.

Home and Queer Womxn Desire in Maya Sharma's *Loving Women*

Sharma writes her memoir due to her own growing resentment at the exclusion of issues of lesbian desire within local and regional feminist organisations in rural India in the late 1980s and early 1990s. As she explains, the rationale behind this exclusion was that lesbian issues might confuse allies of the feminist movement and divert public attention from 'real' issues such as poverty. "[T]he lesbian woman and the poor woman are two different categories of women", Sharma asserts. "And if by chance a lesbian woman is poor, it is her poverty that will be foregrounded and addressed, not her sexual orientation" (310-311). Even for feminist organizations, then, understanding the intersection of queer desire and class was impossible. Yet, immediately after this assertion Sharma cites one of her first interviewees, Preeti, who states: "I have only one dream, a house of my own and my lover living in it with me" (312-313). In a sense, Preeti proves the feminist organisations wrong by vocalising not only her queer desire but also for a house of her own. Home ownership for lower class womxn was an existing aspiration which signified economic mobility, independence, and success in society. Sharma's own homing journey also motivates her to write this ethnographic memoir. Having experienced a "cloistered domesticity" (113-120) and repressed her sexual desires in her own home, Sharma relates to these womxn on some level. But importantly, with this relatedness also comes a sense of major class difference.

In the introduction to the text Sharma states:

> We had to accept that frank, extended and honest communication would not always be possible with our subjects, for reasons other than cultural conditioning and self-censorship. It took a great deal of time and effort to locate the subjects, and follow-up meetings were not always feasible. Usually, no space was made available for us to have any private conversations with the subjects, as family members were invariably present in the congested living spaces, participating and often controlling the

> dialogue, and we had to try as hard to win their trust as to win the trust of the subjects. When we did manage to talk to them privately, there were time constraints and various kinds of disruptions (465-471).

There are two things that are important to note in this quotation. First, the idea of "no space". Even though most of these interviews were conducted inside the homes of these womxn, they often did not have a 'room of their own' since rural housing is often congested, and several family members occupy each household. Second, the majority of family members did not leave the room when Sharma spoke to the womxn. In fact, most family members either interrupted or supervised these conversations. Here family become active agents of confinement for these womxn.

The first narrative analysed from the Sharma text is of Guddi and Asau, two queer women neighbours who are separated from each other by their homophobic families. The following is Sharma's description of the colony in which Guddi and Aasu live, when she goes to visit these neighbourhood lovers for the first time:

> In Delhi's congested resettlement colonies, the houses, no more than 20 yards each, adjoin each other wall to wall. There is not enough space to knock in a small window so that a ray of light may find its way in (654-655).

These lines reek of a sense of physical congestion in rural housing colonies, though Sharma's words might also be taken as a metaphorical allusion to the bleak and dark circumstances of the women whom she is about to interview. We are told that the lovers have been separated by their families and that Guddi has been forcibly married off (666). Her in-laws and husband have since turned violent due to Aasu's frequent visits to their house. Guddi has now run

away from her marital home and is living in her one-room maternal home under the strict supervision of her elder brother. It is this elder brother who greets Sharma and her local contact Pushpa when they ring the doorbell. It is only when he leaves the room that Guddi is able to even begin talking about her relationship with Aasu.

Guddi is not just 'homed' inside the congested confines of her one-bedroom home, but she is also homed into violent interpersonal and familial relationships that keep a "strict eye" (682) on her. She tells Sharma how the entire small neighbourhood knows about the two women and mocks their relationship (677). Here it is not only her immediate family that homes her in but also her entire close-knit neighbourhood. Guddi's case also reveals that in some cases homing in can be a violent and abusive process. It should also be observed that at no point in her narrative does Guddi articulate any disorientating effects. Nor does Sharma observe any codified manifestation of her disorientation. This doesn't mean that Guddi does not go through any internal feelings of conflict; they just do not come up in any overt manner during her interview.

Despite a violent past and the overt oppression and surveillance she endures, Guddi is able to home out and rebel in her own way. During her conversation with Sharma, she reveals: "My house is next to hers [Aasu], if we are not able to talk, we go up to the terrace and communicate through gestures" (2006: 678-679). The women use the congestion of rural housing to their advantage by using their terrace spaces to interact with each other. Film studies scholars have discussed the use of terraces in the popular Hindi Bollywood filmic imagination as a clandestine space for two star-crossed lovers who take advantage of rural terraced housing by using either written notes or kite flying as a pretext to communicate with each other (see Kirpalani, 2001). Even though modern India has moved away to an extent from traditional forms of courtship such as arranged marriages and towards more hybridised versions of romance influenced by Western dating styles such as the use of dating apps, live-

in relationships and more (Netting, 2010), a large segment of the heterosexual rural and middle-class is still heavily rooted in the culture of no-dating before marriage and conventional caste-based arranged marriages. In such cases, a love-match is only flaunted publicly when societal and familial approval is given for marriage. Hence, mass films pandering to such audiences still use old-fashioned techniques of depicting courtship away from the prying eyes of the public, such as secret meetings between lovers and written notes. Kripalani (2001) analyses the Bollywood cult classic *Dilwaale Dulhaniya Le Jaayenge* (The Man with the Heart wins the Bride, 1995), where two lovers fight for familial approval amidst the forced arranged marriage of the heroine. In one scene, the hero secretly meets the heroine on the terrace of her house right after her wedding while the family sleeps. Terraces and rooftops often become a site for secret meetings since they lie outside the conventional layout of a home. The interior of the home, such as the living room and bedroom, are usually occupied by family members and are out of bounds for the couple since they do not have social approval. Terraces being external as well deserted after hours therefore become the perfect meeting point for secret lovers.

Even during the daytime, terraces become sites where one can silently gaze at one's neighbourhood lover while people nearby go about their daily business. For example, In the song 'Allah Hoo' from the movie *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* (Run Milkha Run, 2013) for example, the hero stands outside the heroine's house and silently gazes at her while she spends time with her mother on her terrace. To communicate with her clandestinely, he throws a hollow cricket ball filled with a love note towards her terrace which she replies to by throwing the ball back. Even in the heterosexual popular cultural imagination, then, terraces are a site for illicit love where non-verbal gestures can be used in order to avoid detection by neighbours. Guddi and Aasu 'queer' and reorient this space further by expressing their queer illicit love wordlessly despite the threat of overt violence. We are never told what these

gestures are, but the women seem to have developed their own love language and have created their own space under the watchful eyes of family members. I refer to all these hidden physical spaces in the text as clandestine spaces.

A clandestine space is, as I understand it, a reimagination or re-use of a conventional home space by queer womxn in these narratives in order to express their desires. A 'clandestine space' is a form of the Bhabhian "third space" where these womxn re-use actual physical spaces to re-identify with their homes. Another example of clandestine spaces in this text is found in Sabo and Razia's narrative[9] where the two childhood lovers become sexually intimate for the first time in the hidden paddy fields near their homes (2344). To continue their affair over the years, Sabo and Razia begin bathing together at night in the bathroom after all the family members went to sleep (2344). Thus, here both the paddy fields near the home and the bathroom serve as examples of clandestine spaces, hidden from the prying eyes of homophobic family members. As long as queer desire between womxn is not accepted or discussed within the space of the home, womxn will have to rely on these 'clandestine spaces'/ third spaces and "live off stolen moments...between this town and that town" (1276). The shows us that actualisation of queer desire in the space of the home requires a complex manoeuvring and reorientation of the home space.

In her ethnographic observations written during the interview, Sharma points out how astutely Guddi navigates the presence of her brother. At one point during her conversation with Sharma, Guddi stops abruptly mid-sentence and senses her brother's silent entry into the room despite having her back towards the door. Sharma observes that traumatic experiences built up over the years may have led Guddi to develop this "instinct of self-preservation" to the extent that she could almost "sniff out approaching dangers and had become an expert in

[9] I am not analysing Sabo and Razia's narrative in detail in this chapter. Unfortunately, due to the paucity of space it is impossible to go into each narrative which details with home in detail.

preparing her defences instantly" (2006: 684-685). While this is of course Sharma's observation and speculation rather than being based on Guddi's own words, it is safe to presume that Guddi is always in a state of hyper-vigilance and self-censorship around her abusive and homophobic family members. This is the only reference to any disorientating effects experienced by Guddi within the text.

It is important to note that Guddi's family has confined her within the home not only because of her queer desires but also because of her failure to stay in a heterosexual marriage. Guddi's forced marriage expenses and dowry were paid via a loan taken by her family members. She tells Sharma that if her marriage fails, her family will have to reimburse the loan with full interest. Due to the death of Guddi's father, there is no patriarch in the family apart from her brother. Traditionally, the patriarch is expected to take care of family debts and loans. In the absence of a patriarch and with her mother working only as a maid and her brother being unemployed there is severe financial anxiety in the household regarding Guddi's marriage loan (698). This is also why the brother has so much control over Guddi. While this does not justify the family's abusive behaviour in any manner, it does explain how domestic issues intersect with class and caste. Marriage is often a financial and social contract in these communities.

Sadly, homophobia is found at multiple levels within a tight-knit community such as this. Women from the local women's group that try to 'resolve' Guddi's situation also mock her relationship with Aasu and decide that since Guddi is an adult, she needs to take on responsibility and move back in with her in-laws (729). Shalini, one of the local community workers involved in this case, enquires: "How will two young girls live?" (753). Most people involved in this case cannot fathom the idea of two women managing a household and finding jobs together without society making their lives miserable. It is also interesting to note that Guddi's and Aasu's personal lives are treated as 'cases' or 'problems' that require

community interference to be 'solved' as though they were public property. This structure of problem solving, and surveillance is similar to *panchayat* governance in Indian villages. A *panchayat* is a group of five influential village elders that decide the fate of disputes in the village. Over the years *panchayats* have become more democratic and less patriarchal but problems still remain especially in terms of love and kinship. Inter-caste marriages and love marriages are still a taboo in several conservative villages.

Shalini Grover (2017) conducted an ethnographic study on the ideas of love, marriage and kinship in urban poor communities based in resettlement colonies in the city. According to her, resettlement colonies are "low-income housing estates with small plots allotted to the former residents of inner-city slums who were evicted and resettled on the outskirts of the city in the mid 1970s" (2009: 3). It is safe to presume that these resettlement colonies are made up of several generations of village migrants who are used to the *panchayati* form of justice. However, Grover (2017) states that it is unfair to presume that all resettlement colonies are homogeneously backward and traditional in their approach to relationships just like in the villages. She discusses the emergence of *mahila-panchayats* (women panchayats) in urban resettlement colonies, where the women of the community get together to solve neighbourhood disputes. These *panchayats,* she claims, have a "transformatory potential" (2017: 13) since they not only subvert the traditional male-led structure of a village *panchayat* but also give women a chance to assert their opinion in a domestic dispute. Yet despite the existence of these *mahila-panchayats,* in Guddi's case we see that the local caseworker from her community, named Shalini, advises her to go back to her abusive in-laws, as mentioned above. The existence of this caseworker implies that Guddi's story is a community matter which is being discussed by other members in local community meetings. Homophobia is so prevalent that even within feminist spaces like these women *panchayats* / council meetings that queer desire is not recognized as a valid form of existence.

Guddi's resilience finally pays off when her mother eventually gives up on her and marries off Guddi's younger sister to Guddi's husband instead, as a sort of barter exchange to avoid paying the loan. Here one woman earns her agency only after the sacrifice of another. This by no means provides a conventional happy ending but it points to the more unconventional ways in which women navigate their desire in small and poor communities. It also becomes clear to us that Sharma has limited access to rural and working-class settings since she is only able to interview Guddi briefly. According to Sharma's notes, Guddi only talks for a short while before they are interrupted by her brother. After this interruption Sharma is unable to find another private moment with Guddi. We do not hear Aasu's side of the story. In addition, a great deal of factual details about their 'case' is given to Sharma via a slew of local community workers in that area. In fact, when Sharma leaves after her initial interaction with Guddi, it is these local women guides that inform Sharma of Guddi's younger sister's barter marriage and how Guddi is waiting to reunite with Aasu as soon as this marriage takes place (787). This shows us how Sharma's access to these womxn is inconsistent, fragmented, and indirect. There is no way of identifying if the information given by the local women is in fact true since we do not hear from Guddi again. Guddi's account foregrounds the harsh reality of the blurred boundaries between the public and the private realms of unconventional desire as well as between the self and the family/community. Sharma due to her outsider position and limited resources cannot 'free' these womxn from their social constraints; she can only gather bits of information about them.

Sharma's second interview is based on a "fact-finding mission" alternating as a welfare check on a same-sex couple who are the accused in a legal runaway case. Rekha and Dolly, the reader learns, ran away from their hometown of Indore, got married and joined a Hindu religious sect which accepts women members. Rekha was a minor at the time when Sharma meets her for the first time. Their families filed a missing person's report which

resulted in the police forcibly separating the two women and bringing them back to their respective homes. It is interesting to note that whilst the women in this case were able to marry, it was the domestic unit of their own families, combined with the police state machinery[10], which was responsible for their criminalisation and resulting trauma.

Sharma was able to track these women down through media reports and through the help of local police (801). She informs us that, similar to Aasu and Guddi's case, these women were neighbours (801) in a congested illegal colony near old Indore where "goats, hens, *charpais* [charpoy] straddling the drains outside open doorways, crowded clotheslines, all blurred any divisions that may be known to exist between different social classes" (2006: 808-810). While this blurring of divisions may seem harmonious at first, it in fact points to a sense of congestion and claustrophobia, not just in terms of physical space but also in terms of the interference of neighbouring families in personal matters. However, it is also this 'tight knit' community closeness that allows neighbourhood couples like Aasu and Guddi or Rekha and Dolly to find each other and build romantic connections in the first place. Such women would otherwise have limited access to conventional urban spaces associated with queer romantic love such as bars, workplaces, and parks.

Since this neighbourhood had already been visited by the police, Sharma's "middle class appearance" was under "severe scrutiny" (808). Sharma reports feeling a "collective gaze" upon herself, stating that she could "almost have squeezed mistrust from the air" (814). This reinforces a sense of the collective, suffocating power of this small-town community and how in such areas Sharma's access and influence as a researcher are severely limited. Sharma feels the need to act swiftly and accomplish her goal of meeting the women before an "unforeseen obstacle" (815) blocks her path. Sharma attempts to make contact with Dolly,

[10] The oppression by the state machinery such as the police in with reagrds to this narrative, in the Sharma text, has been examined in detail in Part 2 of this thesis based on theme of the world.

who lives a few houses away from Rekha's, but she is shunned by Dolly's relatives and all attempts to call Dolly out of her house fail (903). Interestingly, Sharma later learns that the case against the two women was dismissed by the police, since they regarded the women as consenting adults who should be allowed to meet each other freely (919). This shows us that even the law doesn't deem these women criminals; the trauma caused by their homes and families speaks volumes about who the actual criminal is in this case.

Sharma finally gains access to Rekha's house but is blocked yet again by another imposing male patriarch: this time it is Rekha's maternal uncle who greets them with an enquiring "look of open hostility" (823). Sharma is only allowed inside the house after she claims that she is from a women's group that gives "erring women a word of advice" and "admonishes them to follow social codes" (823). Even Sharma's limited access to these women is based on a lie since she at no point can reveal her actual purpose behind the visit. In this case, the women that she is trying to interview are not aware of her true intentions either as she is not allowed even a minute of privacy with them.

Sharma's writing in this case is more like an undercover, ethnographic investigative report than a summary of a semi-structured interview due to these extreme circumstances. The following is how Sharma describes her initial arrival inside the house:

> On the right was a half doorway that one had to stoop to enter. Four or five women and various children were clustered there. Akhilesh [Sharma's local male guide] remained outside while the uncle led me through. As we approached the inner rooms I asked, "Where is Rekha?" He pointed to a tiny side room. "She is there, having a bath". The door was half open. I saw a woman in a petticoat and *kurta* sitting on her haunches, slowly washing the long hair that hung over her head all the way to the floor. (2006: 830-833)

The fact that Sharma had to "stoop" to enter a room that was already "clustered" with women and children, of which Rekha was just one, points to the underprivileged nature of the set-up whilst the male figure functioning as guard highlights the patriarchal nature of this household. The hidden and segregated presence of women resembles a *zenana* (an 'all woman' gender segregated space within the household that is only accessible to the men of the household) which is why Akhilesh is asked to remain outside. The women are so severely homed in that access to them is possible only under the pretext of a lie. Furthermore, with so many people sharing household space, bathing is not a ritual that is regarded as a private one. Rekha washes her hair with her clothes on in the presence of other people. Navigating this unconventional introduction into her private quarters, Sharma smiles at Rekha in a reassuring manner but Rekha does not return her smile. The approval and the physical presence of her maternal uncle, it would seem, prevents Rekha from trusting Sharma's intentions (831). It is safe to presume that since Rekha is unaware of and unable to decode Sharma's real motivations of supporting her, she assumes that Sharma is here to punish her for her runaway rebellion just like the rest of her family has. Sharma feels a "familiar chokehold of impossibility" (838) at the prospect of communicating with Rekha in such a hostile environment where her every move is being supervised.

Rekha's family attempts to put their best foot forward in their interaction with Sharma. This is evident in how they navigate and choose space within their household. All members of the family gather in "one room that was spotlessly clean" (838) to converse with Sharma to show her the best side of their home. Navigation of space also reveals caste politics here. Rekha's uncle pulls out a chair for Sharma to sit on, but she refuses and joins the rest of the family on the floor (839). Sharma, though a woman, is traditionally superior to Rekha's uncle in terms of caste. Conventionally, lower caste members do not sit with upper caste members on an equal footing or share vessels or utensils with each other as they are

considered to be impure or ‘untouchable’ due to their menial job status. The uncle’s gesture conveys how caste hierarchies have been “implanted in the environment” and can be phenomenologically experienced through gestures, residential layouts, body language and the physical senses (Lee, 2017: 273-274). The traditionalist uncle attempts to reinforce this caste boundary, but Sharma defies him by choosing to sit on the floor with the family. With this silent gesture, Sharma conveys her non-traditionalist views. By bridging the physical distance between herself and the women of the family, she disregards their ‘untouchable’ status in order, we might deduce, to silently convey to Rekha that she is on her side.

What follows is an intervention-like set up, where the family members surround Rekha and expect Sharma to impart an admonishing moral lecture to her. As soon as the aunts begin to speak about Dolly and Rekha’s relationship, the uncle rudely cuts them off for divulging non relevant details. It becomes clear to Sharma that no one, let alone Rekha, is allowed to speak at all in the presence of the uncle (846). The uncle does not let the women of the house speak in front of an outsider and at one point even asks some of them to leave the room to make tea for everyone (853). Within such a controlled and heavily patriarchal environment, Sharma cannot have a private conversation with Rekha who is silent throughout the entire exchange. Yet in her research notes and observations Sharma interprets Rekha’s silence as a “certain defiance” that “seemed to pervade her whole being as she stood within the circle of her keepers” (858-859). There is no way to gauge if Rekha’s silence was meant to be read as defiant since she simply stands in the room drying her washed hair with a towel while the family members speak about her in the third person. At one point, the uncle, like a typical tyrannical patriarch, states: “It violates our family honour when women run away” (831). This speaks to a discourse that connects women’s bodies with the idea of family ‘honour’ in South Asia which often leads to crimes such as honour killings. Women and womxn are killed in the name of this ‘honour’ that is supposed to reside in their chastity (see

Singhal, 2014). Sharma also alludes to this in her observation notes when she states that Rekha's family does not see her and Dolly as autonomous subjects with agency but instead as "possessions of their families" that need to be brought back home if they family commodities or possessions (876). It is not just Rekha's queer desire, but also this discourse that links honour with AFAB bodies and sexuality which is responsible for her confinement at home.

A slight breakthrough in the conversation is achieved only when the uncle briefly leaves the room. Since Sharma cannot bring up queer desire directly, she enquires about Rekha's tailoring skills and explains to her that she doesn't have to get married against her wishes. Rekha stitches her own clothes and wears her creations, we are told (876). Sharma tries to encourage this streak of self-sufficiency and independence since she cannot provide any more overt form of reassurance. She even writes down her address as a source of support on a piece of paper, but it is abruptly snatched up by the uncle who silently re-enters the room. Sharma seems to be a bit shaken by this sudden act of violence (884). Though welcoming initially, the uncle soon turns sinister, suspicious, controlling and hostile which makes any exchange impossible. In Rekha's case we can certainly gauge the extent to which she has been homed in, but it is impossible to comment on whether she attempts to home out since so little has been recorded about her in terms of speech. Yet, Sharma's reading of Rekha's silence as "defiant" can be considered a potential sign of Rekha's homing out. According to Richardson (1990), there is no 'right answer' when it comes to speaking for other people. There is a need to recognise that writing is always an intentional process and that "we can choose to write so that the voice of those we write about is respected, strong and true" (Richardson, 1990: 38). I argue that because Sharma writes her text with the hopes of uplifting and visiblizing marginalised rural queer womxn, she always views their actions in subversive and hopeful manner.

So far, I have analysed the narratives of queer womxn who desire each other but are forced to live separately. Another couple that Sharma managed to interview are Manjula and Meeta who serve as Home Guards for the Indian military[11]. Sharma met them, we learn, while attending a violence against women workshop where, "deliberately avoiding the mention of female friends", she asked her friend Nahgma if "she knew women who, though not related by blood, lived together" (2006: 1561-1562). Sharma's phrasing here might seem vague, but it evidently helped her locate queer womxn in a conservative rural context where no knowledge of English terminology around sexuality exists. By avoiding any reference to romantic relationships and through use of colloquial Hindi terms for female friends, such as *saheli* and *dost,* Sharma is able to rephrase her enquiries to only focus on non-platonic, non-familial womxn domestic couplings. The vagueness of the phrase puts the onus on the listener to fill in the blanks according to his/her understanding. This also adds a layer of security and protects Sharma from any potential homophobic backlash.

Before Sharma meets the two womxn, she is given the following brief description of them by their friends:

> They were known as the *miyan-bibi jodi* [husband-wife pair]. They always reported for their duty together, Meeta riding a bicycle with Manjula sitting behind on the carrier. People would say, Here arrives the couple at last! […] [B]ut no one seriously objects to their living arrangement. Everyone sees them as female friends (1576-1577).

[11] Home Guards are a voluntary and auxillary task force of the Indian Police that is responsible for settling local civil and communal disptues within their assigned area.

Meeta is perceived as the masculine husband who rides a bicycle while Manjula sits behind like a demure feminine wife. Clearly these two women are referred to as a 'couple' only because on some levels they can be seen to fulfil the heteronormative roles and behaviours of socially sanctioned coupledom. In this way, they are not seen as two women in love with each other but a husband-wife pair living together and aspiring to heteronormativity. Once we read the final sentence of the quotation above however, we realise that even this socially sanctioned model of husband-wife coupledom is just a mocking jibe at the closeness between the women since they are ultimately considered only to be "female friends". Their attempt at coupledom is, thus, first mocked for being aspirational then completely denied any sexual element. In the social imagination, a sexual coupling between two women simply cannot exist or occupy space. I argue that such a public negation of their sexuality is violent and severely impacts the way in which these women can live together. We are told that both Manjula and Meeta were married to men prior to living together and that Manjula remains married to her husband who lives back in the village. The local women inform Sharma that while Meeta separated from her husband.

The account opens with Manjula "crouching, beat[ing] clothes on a stone beneath the tap" (1538) as Meeta stands nearby conversing with Sharma. Manjula informs Sharma that she has been living in this shanty, with her daughter, her elderly mother and her aunt's daughter since 1997. It was much later that Meeta joined them and began sharing the space. In this household of women, both Meeta and Manjula earn a living, but it is only Manjula who does the domestic chores and household labour. She plays the traditional wifely role not only with her husband back in the village, when she goes to visit him but also with Meeta, as mockingly stated by their friends. In the following quotation, Sharma describes Manjula's physical appearance while doing chores at home:

> But to me the joint presence of the nightgown and the *mangalsutra* [an auspicious thread a Hindu bride wears around her neck post her marriage to signify her status as a wife] signified the split existence she had to ceaselessly negotiate. The first item was indicative of her life with Meeta, possible only in the relative anonymity of the city, with a paid job, some freedom and autonomy; the second item was indicative of the self she presented in the village, where she lived as the good daughter-in-law of the family she married into and covered her head with her saree in the typical manner of the obedient, subservient wife. (1672-1675)

At home, Manjula wears both a nightgown and a *mangalsurta.* Sharma understands the nightgown as a symbol of city life and "her life with Meeta" since wearing it in the village would have been culturally unacceptable and inappropriate: the nightgown represents her city freedom and a chance to wear Western clothing. A *mangalsutra* (*mangala* = holy and *sutra* = thread in Sanskrit) is an auspicious necklace that a groom ties around the bride's neck during a Hindu wedding ceremony, which marks her out as a married woman. Interestingly, Hindu grooms are not expected to wear any ornamental symbols to indicate their marital status. While it is not compulsory to wear the *mangalsutra* after the ceremony is over, most conservative women still wear it in contemporary India, either out of choice or due to societal pressure. The *mangalsutra*, then, becomes a symbol of Indian heterosexuality and patriarchy. And the fact that Manjula still wears hers indicates that she remains tied to her life as a heterosexual married woman. Manjula may have physically migrated away from her husband, citing better financial opportunities and her daughter's education as major reasons, but she is still financially dependent on her father's brothers back home who occasionally send her rice and grains, as well as on her mother who gives her some of her pension (1647).

Her Home Guard salary isn't sufficient to cover all expenses hence she cannot completely cut ties with her family back in the village.

Moreover, since Manjula's widowed mother lives with her, she is privy to and silently hostile towards her relationship with Meeta. Throughout Manjula's conversation with Sharma, the mother sits silently in the backdrop, ignoring any greetings and emanating a "disquieting sense" (1650) of resentment at her daughter's living situation. While Manjula may have homed out to a certain extent by moving away from her husband and his family, she is to a large degree also homed in due to her financial dependence, the burden of bringing up a daughter on her own, single-handedly doing all the domestic chores, and managing the constant hostility of her own mother. This causes major disorientating effects in her demeanour. Sharma writes in her personal observations, "There was no mention of Meeta in her list of reasons for staying in the city, but I respected the deliberate strategy of barricading herself into the tense corner of her unspoken choices" (1678-1680). At no point during her conversation with Sharma does Manjula verbally articulate her relationship with Meeta. Silence permeates throughout the narrative. I argue that Manjula's silence may be deliberate, but it is also an unavoidable effect of the multiple kinds of oppressions that she has had to endure. Family, friends, and society's negation of her queer relationship with Meeta produces a protective kind of silence that barricades her desires and makes her wary of strangers such as Sharma.

It is also due to the absence of verbal cues that Sharma resorts to analysing Manjula's clothing as well as her body language and demeanour to better understand her persona. Sharma reads Manjula's demeanour as an "overall seriousness, bordering on sorrow, [...] an effort to accommodate this marginality" (1686-1687). My understanding of this silence and marginality is layered. Manjula's marginality stems from being a queer woman. The first layer of silence is formed due to the compulsorily heterosexual nature of family and society

around her. Betty Sasaki talks about how silence can be read as a form of resistance against the "invasive gaze of those who have historically held the power to interpret both speech and silence of the other" (1998: 122). Still tied to a heterosexual marriage, Manjula has had to protect her queer desires from the prying eyes of her family and friends. Silence can be read as her resistance because it reduces the chances of homophobic scrutiny of her relationship with Meeta. Even Sharma, who visits their home as an outsider, is greeted with this silence. The second layer of Manjula's silence is due to her volatile personal relationship with Meeta.

When Sharma is first introduced to Meeta, she states that she and Manjula are "only friends. It is not what you understand it to be" (1537). When Sharma inquires further, we learn, "Meeta dug her hands deeper into her trouser pockets and looked towards her friend" (1545). This reveals two things. The first is that, unlike Manjula, Meeta does verbally articulate her relationship with Manjula even if it is in the language of denial. But when this articulation is probed further Sharma is met with silence. Meeta is unable or unwilling to go any further. The second revealing aspect is that when confronted with further enquiries, Meeta becomes uncomfortable and looks at "her friend" (Manjula) for answers. In a sense, both women are tied to each other through their silences, unwilling to reveal the non-platonic dimension of their relationship. This is confirmed later when Sharma's first visit to the women's house ends abruptly when Manjula wordlessly gets up and begins dressing for work. This becomes Meeta's cue to stop talking and Sharma's cue to leave (1697). Both women mask the nature of their relationship. Meeta's denial and masking is more speech-based whereas Manjula's is embodied through her gestures and clothing indicative of her heterosexual marriage. As discussed above, this masking silence is a protective tactic, a strategy of resistance (Sasaki, 1998) and a product of the sheer marginality and subaltern-ness of queer women and womxn which renders them voiceless and unable to speak (Spivak, 1993: 80).

Yet it is important to note that the locus for controlling this silence lies with Manjula as she has more to lose than Meeta. Manjula is still legally married to her husband, raising her daughter alone, living with her mother and dependent on handouts from her father and brothers, whereas Meeta is struggling financially but is free from the shackles of familial responsibilities. Sharma describes Meeta as the "odd one in this traditional context, standing out because of her masculine ways of dressing, speaking and presenting herself" (681-682). For Sharma, Meeta's masculinity makes her distinctive in a conservative rural setting while Manjula's "marital status and motherhood blunted the sharp edges of those revealing differences" (1682). It is true that Manjula's appearance of a traditional married woman protects her from scrutiny in normative public spaces, and Meeta's masculine look makes her a target and "twice as culpable, as she externally typified the one who had taken on a man's role and lived outside the institution of marriage" (1686).

Yet, I argue, that the cause of disagreements between the couple arise due to clashes of related to normative gender roles especially with regards to running a household. During Sharma's second meeting with the two women, there seems to have been an awkward tension between them. In the middle of their conversation, we are told, Manjula sternly informs Meeta that she doesn't have access to her mother's family jewels and asks Meeta to help her in stacking some utensils (1689). Sharma reads this as a sign of financial trouble and a clash over domestic labour and doesn't prod any further due to fear of alienating the couple.

When Sharma tries to follow up with the couple a few weeks later, she is informed by the pair's mutual friends that Manjula had accused Meeta of taking her for granted, not doing any housework, exploiting her house, and living off her earnings. This has resulted in Manjula throwing Meeta out of her house (1859-1861). While there is no way to accurately identify these claims since they were made by third parties, it is interesting to note that the issues all relate to household labour, traditional gender roles and questions of finance. Meeta,

who appears to be a in masculine role allegedly refuses to help with domestic labour thereby internalising toxic versions of masculinity. There is some evidence in the text to verify Manjula's purported claims. Traditionally in patriarchal societies women are expected to do household labour without expecting any reward. Manjula performs this dutiful heteronormative wife role, not just in her village but also in her relationship with Meeta. As previously observed, when Sharma visits for the first time it is only Manjula that washes the clothes, makes the tea, and bathes her daughter while Meeta stands by talking to Sharma. It becomes apparent to readers that the women do not share household jobs equally. Also, at no point in the account does Sharma interrogate Meeta's gender identity and masculine appearance any further, so we do not know if Meeta identifies as male or just chooses to appear masculine[12]. There is no space for household chores, it would seem, within Meeta's masculine self-understanding. She tells Sharma, "I do not like cooking or domestic chores. But I do my share, you have witnessed that" (1832-1833). In these sentences Meeta attempts to put up a defence of her household inaction even though we do not ever see her doing household chores in the text.

Manjula's homing out therefore has several layers. Her troubles with Meeta regarding finances and household are a reason for her masked silence. Manjula also admits that their home life is a violent and volatile space, and that the women openly fight, shout, hit and bite each other. Manjula's mother and daughter are silent witnesses to this violence (1835). This helps to explain why Manjula's mother emitted a silent hostility when Sharma visited for the first time. For Manjula's mother, all allies and friends supporting the couple's relationship are at fault. Manjula also admits that despite this violence she prefers city life over village life as

[12] As dicussed in my terminology and forms of my key texts sections in Chapter 1, Sharma's conflation of her all her participants as "lesbian" and "women" is problematic since hers is the only key text within which two participants overtly refuse to identity as women namely Vimlesh and Shiela. Despite this Sharma's (2006) text lacks a discussion on trans and gender non-conforming identities. This is the reason why I am using the term womxn to collectively refer to all the contributors of these narratives. This critique of Sharma will become clearer once I analyse Shiela's narrative in Part 2: World.

it provides her with the option of sharing her home with another woman (1835). The women seem to be in a problematic and unequal relationship. They also have to vehemently deny to the existence of their relationship and its abuse in front of outsiders due to their conservative surroundings. Lack of support from the outside world furthers silences the abuse in the relationship and pushes Manjula further into her silence. As G. Giorgio (2002) states, "Lesbians, battered or not, experience institutionalized homophobia as an epistemological closet of exclusion/inclusion and silence as a way of speaking" (1255). Hence, in this case, silence speaks volumes about the extent to which the women have been excluded from society. This silence and negation of their relationship in public, is the biggest marker of their disorientation. Examining the evidence in the text so far, it becomes clear that both Meeta and Manjula have homed out from their village homes yet they largely experience an overwhelming sense of disorientation when they attempt to live together since they are closeted and stuck in abusive relationship without any community support.

Sharma informs us that both women come from lower caste, financially deprived backgrounds where married women work because they have to (1778) and not because their families want them to. Traditionally, the "time allocation of married women to market work, especially in rural areas, is mediated by their family's desire to maintain 'status.' Rural families always aspire for a higher status and marriage is seen as a prospect to alleviate status. Working outside the home is deemed to be a low-status activity for married, rural women" (Eswaran et al, 2013: 311). Once a woman is married off, she is expected to have elevated her status from a working woman to a woman whose main role is to maintain her domesticity. Hence, the higher the caste and class aspirations the heavier the restrictions on its women's movements outside the home (Singhal, 2014). Yet compared to Meeta, Manjula is a double defaulter in her community. Manjula tells Sharma, "Because I was not to work, I was married off to a family settled in our village as soon as I entered my eighteenth year"

(1779-1780). We are told that for Manjula's father, getting his 18-year-old daughter married meant not only preserving her chastity but also alleviating her social status. For him "his daughter's not working was proof of his mental affiliation with higher-caste values and an economic status higher than the rest of his community" (1778-1779). As the quotation cited above makes clear, this represents her father's desire to "maintain status". When Manjula took her daughter and migrated to the city, she not only defied heterosexual marriage laws but also the patriarchal and casteist laws regarding attitudes to women's work.

Sharma describes the silence around the women's relationship as follows:

> As we stood there among the hay and mud and fly encrusted cattle, it struck me that just as the layer of dung softened the hard pavement for the animals, the appearance of a non-sexual bond invested Meeta and Manjula's relationship with an essential legitimacy, strength, protection, security, the licence to live together (1701-1704)

Sharma uses a rural village metaphor, symbolic of the women's village origins, to compare their silence to a layer of cow dung. Cow-dung is used as a vital energy resource in Indian rural communities. While used as fuel for cooking and heating, there is also an element of disgust and stench surrounding it, which can be tolerated only if one is used to domesticating cows. In a similar manner the silence surrounding Manjula and Meeta is essential for their security and protection, yet it also reeks of the stench of a certain brand of homophobia and repression situated in their rural domestic environment. Like cow-dung, the silence also hardens over time, enveloping the women in a state of disorientation and out-of-placeness. The women have no safe space where they can discuss their relationship problems, and they also have to put up with the hostility of Manjula's resident relatives all the while struggling with financial issues. There is no community support for their relationship, so

there is tension both inside and outside their home. Yet it is unfair to categorise this silence as homogeneously oppressive, as according to Sharma's quotation above, it does also empower these women by offering them safety, security, and protection by acting as a protective barrier that allows the women to tolerate the homophobia in their lives and enables them to live with each other. Just like cow-dung, then, even though the silence reeks of an unpleasantness, it is ultimately productive for the women. The couple's disorientating silence is a unique paradox which is best illustrated through an instance in the text. Sharma narrates how a domestic violence survivor, Marjeena, was rescued by the women in the couple's colony. The rescuers tried to convince Marjeena not to return to her abuser and posited Meeta and Manjula as "role models" who could survive without men (1767). It is "profoundly ironic" that these women are made "available as exemplars to people in the locality, while their presence and togetherness, the ambivalent references to 'friendship' and 'relationship' found no social space and support" (1767-68). The couple is simultaneously visible yet hidden in their community.

Sharma actively theorizes her presence within the couple's ambiguous silence. As discussed above, the couple's silence is protective, resisting the prying eyes of heterosexuality (Sasaki, 1998). The silence is subaltern and arises out of the subaltern status of the women as working-class women subjugated to hegemonic discourses and systems (Spivak, 1993) as well as related to the domestic violence that occurs between the women (Giorgio, 2002). Sharma consciously chooses not to interrogate this silence, stating, "If I was given only silence and ambiguity, then this was the material I would have to work with. If the silence could not be or were not to be broken, I could at least render that silence visible, acknowledge its presence, its power, its contradictions, and it's inevitable consequences" (1729-31). Sharma does not attempt to break or challenge this silence beyond a point, instead she simply records all she can gather and presents it to us within her text.

Manjula and Meetu's story is unique in this text as it shows us how queer women can be simultaneously homed in, homed out and disorientated. Both women are homed out of their marriages and villages and forge a relationship in the city. Yet they continuously struggle to manage a home, navigate their silence, and manage their volatile relationship. What is evident is that these women do not feel 'at home'. There is always a sense of temporariness and uncertainty in their narrative which recalls the Bhabhaian sense of "unhomeliness" (Bhabha, 1994: 9) where the boundaries between the public and the private, the home and the world become complicated. Home in some instances is located not in a fixed place but in temporary fleeting moments of discovery since a constant connection and follow up is impossible in some situations. Sharma is never able to find out if the couple reunited after Manjula threw Meeta out of her house, as "temporary jobs, with temporary addresses and the boundary of silence that surrounded us make little else possible" (1865-66). Here "us" is combined reference to the unpredictable lives of queer womxn especially in a rural context. Both Manjula and Meeta are drifting migrants with low-paying jobs and volatile interpersonal relationships without community support. Sharma's interaction with them is also temporary, since maintaining lasting bonds through such uncertainty and class distinctions proves difficult in the long run. All she can do is attempt to transcend these boundaries even if it is for a short while.

Conclusion

The narratives I have been analysing from Sharma's text (including her own) reveal that queer desire between womxn is unacceptable within the conventional discourses of home, especially in working-class rural Indian neighbourhoods. All womxn have gone through various stages of homing in, disorientation and homing out. In most cases, these three stages occur simultaneously since when these womxn home out they still tend to be tied to their family and their homes (in a social sense in Rekha's case or in a financial sense in

Guddi and Manjula's case), all the while feeling disorientated and out of place. The politics of caste, compulsory heterosexuality (in the form of marriage), and a lack of financial mobility further perpetuates these women's violent relationships with their homes and families.

Yet there is intriguing examples of resistance in these texts. First, the use of 'clandestine spaces', where these womxn have smartly and consciously navigated conventional rural and culturally heterosexual spaces, such as terraces, local village ponds, agricultural fields, by reorientating them for the purpose of expression of their queer desire. The second is the use of silence as a homing out mechanism. As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, I agree with Glenn's (2004) conceptualization of silence as an absence with a function as well as being a rhetorical strategy: "The main question isn't whether speech or silence is better but whether our use of silence is our choice (whether conscious or unconscious) or that of someone else" (13). While I agree with this point for the most part, it is important to recognize that silence is a historically marked condition of lesbian subjectivity (Munt, 1998). None of these womxn chose the systematic and institutional silence that surrounds their identity, on account of their criminalisation, their exclusion from feminist spaces and so on. The biggest sign of this systematic silence lies in the form of this text itself. These rural narratives were only published when a privileged middle-class woman in the form of Sharma decided to 'give voice' to them by means of *her* ethnographic memoir. We only get a brief glimpse of these womxn's lives. The majority meaning making in the text is based on Sharma's interpretations and observations, which highlights the class-based inequalities in the Indian context. While the origin of the silences in these narratives is not self-chosen, then, its subsequent usage sometimes is. Think of Manjula and Meeta who use their silence to maintain their position in their community. Or Rekha whose complete silence

is a sign of her defiance while being confined at her family home. These womxn use their silences to home out and make their hostile homes more habitable for themselves.

The third marker of these womxn's resistance is the navigation around actual family members. As Sharma informs us, certain interviews were interrupted (for example in Gudi's case) or supervised (for example in Rekha's case) by family members, because the cultural concept of privacy cannot not exist in rural congested households. The womxn also must handle the presence of hostile, potentially violent, male patriarchal family members such as Rekha's uncle and Guddi's brother. These womxn must deftly manage such interruptions and forms of supervision for Sharma to be able to record bits of their lives. In almost all cases, the true intention of Sharma's visit is never revealed to family members out of fear of ostracization and homophobic violence. In this context, then, the womxn's speech *and* silences give expression to their homing out and resistance.

The final marker of their resistance is the navigation of compulsory heterosexuality in the form of marriage. In almost all the narratives analysed above (apart from Rekha's who is a minor), the womxn have been forcefully married off. Queer desire is often navigated in the presence of husbands. All the participants analysed above have resisted in their own manner. They also force us to acknowledge the reality of rural domestic set-ups often crowded with family members and husbands where queer desire between womxn not only exists but blossoms.

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Chapter 3: A Series of (Un)belongings: Home in Suniti Namjoshi's *Goja*

Goja is subtitled an "autobiographical myth". In the Introductory chapter of my thesis, I described in detail how the text is a form of autobiographical fiction that relies heavily on myths to create meaning. I also discussed in the introduction, an element of construction in myths both as an abstract literary trope outside the canon that can be altered or displaced according to the will of the author (Frye, 1957) and as a means to obfuscate facts or reality to put a new spin on them (Benton, 2005). Namjoshi, the author is self-aware about this element of constructed-ness in her text, both in its fictional as well as mythical sense. It is important to foreground that Namjoshi, the author is not the same as Namjoshi, the narrator in the text. For example, Namjoshi crafts a narrator persona for herself called "the child" (2000: 9) to talk about her childhood days in her family home. In my analysis of the text, when I use the term Namjoshi, I am referring to Suniti Namjoshi, the well-known author of *Goja* whereas when using the term, the narrator I am alluding to a specific narrational incidents from within the text[13].

An element of construction also lies in the meaning of home in the text. Home in *Goja,* is not a fixed site or place. It is a feeling that the narrator constantly aspires to and attempts to create. Namjoshi's text follows Avtar Brah's "politics of dis/location" where a "homing desire" is inscribed "while simultaneously critiquing discourses of fixed origins" (Brah, 1996: 189). Home for the narrator can never be one fixed geographical site or a singular memory. Instead, it is a constant and largely disappointing and traumatic search for a sense of belonging. The narrator wants to belong/ feel 'at home' but cannot. She remains largely in states of (un)belongings. It is important to remember that this "homing desire" does

[13] See the section regarding the forms of the text within introduction chapter to see my detailed analysis of the difference between the author and the narrator in *Goja* (2000*),* with regards to autobiographical fiction.

not automatically mean the desire for a homeland (Brah, 1996). To further understand this series of (un)belongings in the text I will begin my analysis of Namjoshi's childhood.

As discussed in the theorisation of my home section, the idea of the home is not discussed as a "neutral place", but a community based on inclusions and exclusions where "membership is maintained through bonds of love, power, fear and control" (Marangoly George, 1996: 9). This is borne out in Namjoshi's text also. The central position of power in the family home is occupied by the narrator's upper-class heterosexual family members such as her powerful grandparents, whereas the marginalized positions are occupied by the narrator and the servants of the household, one of whom is Goja. The narrator's marginality arises out of her lesbianism whereas Goja's out of her poor working-class status. In fact, the narrator describes herself as being "triply oppressed" (16) as a lesbian and a woman (within her family home) and as a migrant (outside her homeland).

Born in 1941 in Mumbai, India, the narrator belongs to an elite and privileged land-owning family. At the time of her birth in 1941, India was still under British colonial rule and several of her family members worked for the British administrative service and were given titles. Interestingly, the narrator does not reveal to us the actual titles held by her family but instead chooses to mock and satirise them. She refers to her family as "Indian nobility" and "Princely Rulers" (6). In 1948, post-Indian independence, these princely landowning noble families were "amalgamated" with the democratic nation-state and their wealth and status considerably reduced due to the inroads made by Western capitalism and the British Raj (16). I argue that, because the narrator is revolted by her ostentatious privilege (60), rather than giving us spatial and material details of her family home, she mythically satirises her family's status. She nicknames her grandfather *Rajasaheb* (King-*saheb*) and her grandmother Goldie, as *Ranisaheb* (Queen-*saheb*) (5). Interestingly the term '*saheb*' was a suffix given to any officer commissioned by the Viceroy of India during British colonial rule, thereby connecting

the family's wealth and status to their affiliation with British rule in India. The narrator refers to her upper-class household as the Kingdom of Herod, where the King is "looking for sons, not killing them" (2000: 4). In the original Biblical myth, Kingdom of Herod is a reference to the King of Herod, Roman Jewish King, who, in an attempt to kill infant Jesus, murders and massacres innocent children around Bethlehem. This incident is called the Massacre of the Innocents (Mathew 2:16, New Testament). Northop Frye talks about the idea of a "displacement" of a myth where displacement is the degree to which a myth is altered to fit into plausible reality. That degree of displacement depends on the amount of realism imbibed by a text (1957: 136-37). The narrator displaces the myth of the Kingdom of Herod by making her great-grandfather the King of Herod who, instead of killing children, is looking for sons who can inherit his vast kingdom with Goja the "fortunate" child servant who is called to serve upon this house. In this context Goja is the innocent child servant who is massacred/ exploited by the narrator's family.

Eventually, the narrator's great-grandfather adopts a 'lucky' male child (narrator's grandfather) who then carries forward the elite family lineage. This displaced biblical myth also reveals that servant labour has been exploited by the family for generations, and even though Goja was the same age as the narrator's grandfather when adopted into the family by the great-grandfather as a child servant, she "of course doesn't count" (4) as worthy heir due to her marginal gender and lower-class and caste position. In keeping with her diverse use of myth in the text, the narrator displaces this Biblical myth of the "Kingdom of Herod" to comment on the casteist servant culture as well on the primogeniture-based patriarchal family laws in India. The use of the word "kingdom" is a symbolic indicator of the amount of wealth and privilege the narrator's family have long possessed. Despite the irrelevance of the *saheb* titles in the modern Indian context, the narrator still uses them for her family members to highlight the colonial origins of the family's wealth and status. Looking back at her

childhood, the narrator states that her family was "nice" despite having servants, which was simultaneously both glamorous and revolting (6). I argue that this revulsion with her family's complicit-ness with both the British Empire and servant exploitation fosters the germinating seed of an (un)belonging within the narrator who does not want to partake in her family's wealth and status. This is suggested by what is absent in the text. There is no physical description of the family home or of the material wealth owned by the family. The narrator is extremely sympathetic to the plight of other marginal identities (apart from herself) in her home, such as the servants. Indeed, the only physical descriptions of the house that are present in the text are in relation to Goja. The narrator refers to how servants' lives go unrecorded and how no photograph of her maidservant Goja exists in her house in contrast to the several hundred existing photographs of her grandmother, Goldie (7). The only spatial description of the family home in the text highlights the vast caste and class[14] disparity between herself, her family, and her maidservant, Goja. This spatial description is analysed in the next paragraph.

In order to further distance herself from her family's servant exploitation, the narrator creates a narrative persona for her childhood and refers to herself as "the child". "The child" is also indicative of how the narrator was too young to be culpable and complicit in Goja's exploitation as a servant in these instances within the text. Narrator writes: "In the dark the child and Goja sleep side by side, the child on the bed, Goja on the floor; and out of pity or charity, Goja slips the child dried fish…" (9). While the narrator (as "the child") and Goja may appear to be sleeping "side by side", Goja has to sleep on the floor due to her caste and class position, exposing the uncomfortable inequality within their relationship. Joel Lee

[14] Class in India is tied to caste. Historically, the well-paying jobs were meant for 'pure' upper castes, while the menial 'dirty', low-paying jobs were meant for 'impure' lower castes. It is only from the 1990's onwards, through government reforms like quotas and reservations, that an attempt has been made to equalise opportunities for all castes (Akella, 2012). Yet vast inequalities persist, and a lot of servants are still afflicted by their lower caste status.

describes caste as a phenomenological experience and as "a spatial-sensory order. It is experienced as an inscription into the environment – indeed, into the chemical and olfactory content of the air we breathe" (Lee, 2017: 470). Lee views caste as a uniquely Indian visceral experience that is often experienced through the environment spatially and sensorily. The impurity associated with lower castes is visible spatially in the narrator's household via Goja's and her sleeping arrangements. Goja also feeds "the child" version of the narrator dried fish (a non-vegetarian delicacy consumed by the lower castes) and the narrator, the upper-caste child, develops a taste for it. Years after while recalling her childhood the narrator still remembers the visceral memory of the lower-caste dried fish thereby cementing the embodied sensorial experience of caste in Indian homes as described by Lee (2017).

The puritanical attitude of the upper-caste members of the household to this incident adds another layer to the caste experience within the home. The vegetarian family members (given the satirical mythical title of the "Rulers") mock the child for developing an "incongruous" taste for an "impure" food item (8).[15] This further reinforces Marangoly-George's (1996) idea of home as a non-neutral place with its internal power dynamics that often decide who is worthy (or in this care 'pure') enough for familial love and inclusion. The narrator continues to build in a certain distance from her own childhood self to critically examine it, by calling herself "the child". She states that for Goja "the child" is "part of the landscape, therefore familiar, therefore loved" (9). Here, the narrator attempts to make sense of the love and attention that Goja offered her as a child while also implying that "the child" narrator did not have a choice in Goja's class exploitation. "The child" was helpless and born into this pre-existing power structure but the adult narrator version is consciously critiquing her family's class politics in her autobiographical writings. It is important to note that the

[15] Vegetarianism in Hindu families is often seen as a sign of upper-caste purity whereas most of the non-vegetarian items are sourced and eaten by lower-caste fishing and butchering families. See Gorringe and Karthikeyan (2014) for a detailed analysis of Hindu caste and food politics.

only spatial description of her family home further adds to this critique by exposing the family's casteist politics.

So far, I have discussed how home for the narrator is continuously changing and being reconstituted through memory especially in terms of caste, class, and her perception of her bond with Goja. Home then is an affective rather than spatial experience in *Goja*. This bespeaks the idea of home as being a journey and not a destination (Sinfield 2000, cited in Fortier, 2003, p. 3). In *Goja*, the narrator constantly seeks a feeling of belongingness which constantly eludes her everywhere she goes whether it is with her family in her childhood home, in America and Canada where she pursues her doctorate or in England where she currently resides with her partner, Gillian. When I use the term 'being at home/feeling at home' in my analysis I do not refer to a home as a "purified space of belonging in which the subject is too comfortable to question the limits or borders of her or his experience, indeed, where the subject is so at ease that she or he does not think" (Ahmed, 2013: 87). This conception of home is limiting as it depoliticizes Namjoshi's writing in *Goja*. I argue that the narrator interrogates any purified idea of home by constantly highlighting its power hierarchies and exclusions. Namjoshi, while writing, is always aware and self-aware of her own politics and the politics of exclusion and marginalization around her. By using Judeo-Christian biblical myths like the Kingdom of Herod to describe her family she not only satirises the family's power but also recognizes herself as a colonised subject inevitably influenced by a Christian mission school education (ix). While talking about all the members of the family that she loved, the narrator introspects, "I called my grandmother 'mother', but I called Goja 'Goja'. It was proper. I understand now that it was also deeply improper" (5). While writing the feelings associated with being loved and being at home, the narrator realizes how Goja was excluded from any maternal title of respect (despite being her primary caregiver) due to her inferior caste/class position. Similarly, when the narrator moves to

Canada, she is too afraid to enjoy her freedom from the familial Indian home as she feels "invisible and conspicuous" in her predominantly white environment (71). This is another example of how feelings of being at home, feeling safe and accepted tend to be accompanied by the realisation of borders, exclusions, and limits. The Canadian and English landscapes also bring with them the politics of the home and homeland, the nation, and the diaspora which I will discuss in my World section. Hence, home in the text is inclusive of the constant awareness of the Other.

It is important to further analyse the narrator's experiences within her family home as heterosexual families are the biggest regulators of female sexuality in India (Puri, 1999). My understanding of home in the text is based on Sara Ahmed's idea of home as a "second skin" where "being-at-home suggests that the subject and space leak into each other, inhabit each other" and home is about "how one feels or how one might fail to feel" (2013: 89). This implies that the narrator is affected viscerally by the power structures within her familial home; one being caste and class divisions as discussed above. A large part of *Goja* is also about how the narrator failed to feel at home in her childhood home. This feeling of being at home is a sense of safety, security and acceptance which evaded the narrator during her growing-up years.

At the age of ten, the narrator was sexually abused by an unnamed servant of her parents. The narrator describes the abuse as "a game" and admits that it was not until much later that she understood that she had been violated. She also realises that if she "said anything" she "would be the one to suffer disgrace" (13-14). The narrator as "the child" was unconsciously aware of society's victim-blaming discourse.[16] Shortly after the abuse the unnamed servant was dismissed by her mother. The narrator's mother never addressed the

[16] In India, child sexual abuse is still rooted in secrecy and silence. Families tend to protect their reputation instead of confronting the abuse. In terms of girl children, who are already discriminated against due to patriarchal mindsets, this leads to a vicious cycle of abuse and self-loathing (see Carson et al, 2013).

abuse explicitly with her, and nor did she offer the narrator any overt care or support. This resulted in a breakdown of the mother-daughter relationship. The narrator believes that her mother "colluded in the disgrace" and finds it hard even to articulate her "lack of protection" (14). The abuse laid a foundation of familial neglect and self-loathing within the narrator, and she often sees herself as a victim of parental oversight in the text. The narrator had limited access to her family and could never verbally address the abuse with parents. A further distance was created when she was also sent as a child to a boarding school away from her family home where she repeatedly wrote letters to her parents begging to be taken back. Her letters also expressed her wish that her parents (who were at that time living separately) would start living together again. The breakdown of the family further escalated while the narrator was at boarding school. Her father who was a test pilot suddenly died in a plane crash and she never got to see him again (41). For the narrator, after school, things were never the same as she stopped expecting the adults to make things better for her (51). From a broader viewpoint the abuse is a sign of how silence around matters of sexuality and its abuse is the de facto norm within her household. Prior to the familial silencing of the narrator's lesbianism, which I will discuss further, there is silencing of the narrator's sexual abuse.

In *Goja*, the adult narrator expresses her feelings about the abuse and the resentment towards her family members through the use of myths and literary references. Chapter 2 entitled "FAIRY TALE" begins with the lines "Things happen in silence [...]. Those who should have protected you failed to protect you, and that makes them angry" (22). These lines refer to the silence around the sexual abuse. The chapter is dedicated to the narrator's deceased mother who is referred to as the Queen of Spades (only for the duration of this chapter). Here, the Queen of Spades is a re-interpretation of Alexander Pushkin's story "The Queen of Spades" (1834). In Pushkin's telling, Hermann is haunted by the ghost of the old countess. Similarly, the narrator is haunted by the metaphorical ghost of her mother.

The narrator christens herself the Black Piglet who is haunted by her dead mother's ghost. The Black Piglet is not a literary or mythical reference but alludes to Namjoshi being the 'black sheep' in the eyes of the mother – different and hence neglected. Instead of sheep, the narrator uses piglets to convey her status as a young and unloved child. The narrator writes that the Queen's (her mother's) favourite hobby was "chasing piglets" but Namjoshi, the Black Piglet, was "unloved" and not cared for by the Queen. The narrator refers to herself as the sacrificial pig who is offered by her mother to "the gods that be, to the fighting, fucking, powerful men – of whom she is afraid. Ma won't and didn't protect me! Let that go screeching down the corridors of fame" (26). The narrator sees her mother both as a victim (who is afraid of the men in the household) and enabler of patriarchal attitudes towards child sexual abuse. She believes that her mother chose not to confront the vicious culture of silence and victim-blaming and sacrificed her daughter in order to maintain the family's reputation. The chapter begins by stating that the Piglet is "still bleeding. Who will pick her up? Tell her it's, okay?" (29). These lines convey a deep sense of grief and a longing to feel at home (in terms of the need to feel safe and secure). Similar to the creation of the narrative persona of "the child" addressing servant culture within the family home, the narrator creates the narrative persona of "the Black Piglet" to navigate her sexual abuse trauma and complicated relationship with her mother.

In *Goja*, the adult narrator states that even years after the abuse, she still finds it hard to inhabit her body (30). She refers to her body as an "ark" where "the Mummy-monster, Daddy-monster, Goja-monster" and even the servant who molested her are "jostling one another, entering into me and living with me" (30-31). These lines convey the sheer violence done to the narrator's psyche and body during years of abuse and neglect. Instead of being a place of refuge like the biblical Noah's ark, the narrator's ark is forcefully occupied by her violent, neglecting caregivers whom she refers to as "monsters". The phrase "entering into

me" alludes to a penetrative aspect of her relationships with her family where boundaries and needs are not respected. The narrator also refers to Goja as a "monster" because as her primary caregiver as a child, the narrator did expect Goja to protect her from the abuser: "Shouldn't mothers and grandmothers and Goja as well care about what happened?" (13). Yet, the adult narrator doesn't fully blame Goja for not protecting her as she rationalizes that Goja was perhaps burdened with servant duties and the caregiving of other household children (13). Yet, there is no certain way to know if this was the case as the narrator does not give readers any further details of the abuse. This reveals the uncomfortable duality of the Goja-narrator relationship where Goja is simultaneously the primary caregiver and a victim of class/servant exploitation.

The family in the text is a source of deeply seated traumatic feelings. The use of myth aids the conception and expression of trauma in the text. The narrator states, "When those who should have protected you, failed to protect you [...] the tale can only be told as a fairy tale, as a long and impossibly tall story" (22). Here the narrator echoes Janice Haaken who believes that feminists should acknowledge the role that fantasy plays in resisting patriarchal control as well as in breaking the silence around women's abusive experiences (1998: 352). Haaken advocates the use of fantasy, fairy tales, role-playing and myth to recover traumatic and ambiguous memories in a psychotherapy clinical context (1998: 359). However, the narrator's text uses myth in a literary context to retrieve and re-write trauma memories. As discussed in the introduction, myths are free from the burdens of realism and objectivity (Frye, 1957). Hence, I argue that they can provide a framework and language for taboo subjects such as sexual abuse and queer desire. Alice Walker states, "I mean, if I find myself way off into an improbable tale, imagining it or telling it, then I can guess something horrible happened to me and that I can't bear to think about it" (1992: 130). Walker views myths as being both revelatory and a means for coping. Read alongside the above examples, the

narrator can be understood as using myth not only to hold her family accountable but also to make sense of her own feelings and experiences at home. Haaken believes that feminist fiction has explored "the ambiguity in chronicling mythopoetic and historical aspects of memory while clinical and political practice creates anxieties around such ambiguities" (1998: 1089). Here "mythopoetic" refers to the storied elements of a memory that are not necessarily based in concrete facts. Haaken believes that such storied and ambiguous aspects of trauma memory often find a place in feminist fiction but not in clinical and political spaces such as legal courts, which are heavily weighted towards proven data. Namjoshi's *Goja* is hence an example of feminist autobiographical mythical fiction that explores storied familial trauma memory.

One of the biggest examples of fantasy and role-playing as a coping mechanism is the narrator's imagined conversations with the imaginary in-text personas of Goja and Goldie as they appear in Part 3 of the text. In Part 1 of the text, the narrator recalls conversation with Goldie and Goja while they were still alive, and these become recollections of things they have actually said to the narrator as a child. We are not told when exactly the two women die but they pass away after the narrator migrates abroad. Therefore, when the women appear in Part 3, they are resurrected as fictive personas and as voices in the adult narrator's head. Instead of creating narrative personas for herself, the narrator invents a montage of 'what if' conversations with the two women she loved the most. It is thus important to make a distinction between the real and fictive appearances of Goja and Goldie in the text. Through fictionalized conversations with imagined Goja and Goldie, the narrator confronts her rage regarding the abuse and its silencing within the family. The narrator deduces the reason behind this anger: "I think I'm angry because they can hurt me, but I cannot hurt them" (128). This is an indication of unresolved issues, a lack of closure, support and reassurance from her family, something which the narrator deeply craves. In one such instance, when imagined

Goldie talks about the nurturing and protective element of her family, the narrator lashes out: "It didn't protect me! Where were you when that servant molested me?" (142). The narrator could never address the abuse with her family while they were living, but through the creation of an autobiographical-mythical textual universe, she is able to confront them even after death. A textual confrontation will outlive human life spans.

The narrator also experiences within her familial home the simultaneous punishment and rejection of her lesbianism. The narrator recalls being in love with one of her adolescent school mates and the danger involved in the discovery of their relationship. She writes, "We fell in love but had to work it out – how to have an affair" (56). The couple found privacy in some gardens (the text does not explicitly state whether these were home gardens or public garden) but they were the only place where the lovers could freely walk. Despite this, one day a servant saw the couple kissing and the "grown-ups" proceeded to punish and separate the girls. The girls were separated but continued to meet discreetly for a while until the relationship fizzled out due to the burdens of secrecy. The narrator chooses not to go into the detail of the extent of violence or details of the punishment, but we can presume that it was unpleasant and cemented a further sense of unbelonging. What does become evident is the fact that servants are central to the traumatic events in the narrator's life, whether it is the sexual abuse or the persecution of her first lesbian relationship. With regards to the narrator's sexuality, the servants become an extension of patriarchal and homophobic oppression within the home. The narrator, in turn, sees the servants as victims controlled by familial power structures. She states that "lesbians and gays" are denied their "self-respect" while poor people and servants are exploited. But what is the most "fiendish" is exploiting someone and then reassuring them that their self-respect and dignity lies in their exploitation itself (110). The narrator is alluding here to a patriarchal hegemonic power structure that benefits by keeping women, homosexuals, and servants (all marginal identities) in their place. In this

chapter, we can see how it operates within a familial space. Through this we can perhaps understand why Namjoshi's text is so heavily class-oriented and sympathetic towards the plight of servants.

After a string of failed lesbian relationships and becoming disillusioned with her job as an Indian Administrative Servant (IAS) officer, the narrator is disorientated in Ahmed's terms. Ahmed describes disorientation as "violent" and "bodily feeling of losing one's place" either due to violence done to the body or due to the failure of the homosexual body to occupy a normatively heterosexual space (2008: 160). The disorientation builds up over multiple instances. First the narrator feels dissociated from her own body after the sexual abuse and its silencing, and then she is punished and separated from her lesbian lover by her family. This disorientation increases exponentially when she constantly must hide her lesbianism from her family. She chooses foreign exile in a bid for freedom (79). The narrator uses the word exile because in the eyes of her family and society, she is guilty of a "fundamental crime": the "unwillingness to serve the family and to conform to society" (76). She also realizes later in the text that her familial home has an "illusion of coherence", where safety is guaranteed only when one excludes certain histories of oppression and represses the differences within oneself (Talpade Mohanty and Martin, 1986: 196). The narrator in retrospect states that if at that time she had named herself a lesbian and had asked to live honourably, her family would have said that she was being "*unreasonable*" (76, emphasis in original). The italics indicate the deep-seated homophobia of her family, giving her no choice but to leave. The narrator's association with her family and her home had also become "unhomely" in the Bhabhaian sense whereby "the recesses of the domestic space become sites for history's most intricate invasions" (Bhabha, 1994: 9). Both her sexual abuse and experiences with homophobia are severely traumatic embodied experiences that are tied to the family. The narrator states that she knew that to live as a lesbian she would have to move

not just from her home but from her homeland[17] (66). The narrator's feelings regarding her homeland and her reasons to migrate will be further explored in the World section on this text.

Due to her migration, the narrator is however able to home out to an extent. But homing out for the narrator is a slow process. It takes several years for the narrator to deal with the burden of her feelings originating from her familial home. Despite being far away from her family, the narrator's fears are still tied to them. In a fictionalized monologue with *imagined* Goja and Goldie as listeners, the narrator states:

> I cared about what they [the family] thought. What people thought about me, though, that mattered much less. Perhaps that's why eventually it was relatively easy to 'come out' in the West. To relative strangers I could say, "Yes, I'm a lesbian. So what?" But it troubled me that I couldn't say it to the people I loved... For a long time while you were still alive, I tried to keep my books out of India so that you would never know, so that there would be no scandal – you would not have to be ashamed and so that I could continue to return year after year without too much difficulty or distress. (2000: 85)

The above quotation reveals the amount of validation and approval the narrator seeks despite migrating to the West. Not being able to 'come out' to her family still "troubles" her. The term 'come out' is enclosed in single quotes because for an Indian lesbian in the 1970s, coming out was a rarity and luxury, especially to family members. 'Coming out' for Namjoshi then was an alien term and never a part of the plan since the society then was

[17] India in the 1970s was severely homophobic and lacked a semblance of any lesbian public culture which began as late as 1998 following the release of Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (Dave, 2011). The anti-gay law which made homosexuality punishable was also still in effect.

extremely homophobic. Silence or migration were the standard routes, both of which the narrator took during her life. It is also important to note that despite her subversive textual content the narrator is afraid to trespass outside of her textual space. She is fearful of her family reading her books in India. Preventing her family from feeling any 'shame' and 'distress' still takes priority for the narrator. Coming home translates into a complete invisibility of Namjoshi's lesbian existence. Gloria Anzaldua refers to this fear of going home as a lesbian as a form of homophobia where there is a "fear of going home and not being taken in (1987: 20).[18] Despite homing out to an extent, the traces of disorientation and trauma remain. It is only after the death of her family members that the narrator is able to confront her family about her lesbianism. This 'coming out' is textual and with the *imagined* personas of Goja and Goldie. Even this textual 'coming out' is riddled with confrontations and homophobia. Imagined Goldie asks the narrator to remain closeted and operate with a little "discrete" about her lesbianism to avoid "scandal" (111). The narrator then attempts to convince her of the amount of "courage" it takes to be oneself and remove the disgrace from lesbianism (111). By the end of the text, both women forgive each other but a complete verbal acceptance is never heard from imagined Goldie. For Goja, an imagined conversation between her and the narrator with regards to lesbianism leads Goja to state that it makes no difference as to what she thinks because she is just a servant with no real authority (112). Yet, for the narrator these confrontational conversations are cathartic since she states that imagined Goja and Goldie are her "auditors" forcing her to present her "true account of herself" (114). Through the creation of these imagined personas, the narrator can write her version of the truth.

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[18] Anzaldua analyses a sentiment shared by one of her lesbian students: "One of the students said, 'I thought homophobia meant fear of going home after a residency.'And I thought, how apt. Fear of going home. And of not being taken in. We're afraid of being abandoned by the mother, the culture, la Raza, for being unacceptable, faulty, damaged. Most of us unconsciously believe that if we reveal this unacceptable aspect of the self our mother/culture/race will totally reject us. To avoid rejection some of us conform to the values of the culture" (Anzaldua, 1987: 20).

So far, the narrator's familial home has been a failed promise in terms of the feeling of being at home due to the abuse and the conflicts with various forms of her otherness (Ahmed and Fortier, 2003: 251). Yet in *Goja*, I view home as not just the feelings associated with the familial home but also a general desire for acceptance, safety and belonging (the feeling of being at home). *Goja* is equally about belonging as about the politics of belonging. Belonging here is the feeling of safety and love whereas the politics of belonging, according to Nira Yuval-Davis, "comprises specific political projects aimed at constructing belonging in particular ways" (Yuval-Davis, 2006: 197). This implies that belonging as affective feeling does not begin and end with the home but extends to larger political projects such as nation, citizenship, and the community, thereby making it a politics of belonging. For Yuval-Davis, the politics of belonging also includes "struggles around the determination of what is involved in belonging, in being a member of a community, and of what roles specific social locations and specific narratives of identity play in this" (2006: 205). In short, this type of politics asks the questions who gets to belong, and how? In *Goja*, the narrator's quest for belonging does not end when she leaves her family home but becomes far more complex and political when she migrates, thereby raising questions of citizenship, community, and nation. These will be further expounded upon in the World section. Within the home however, the narrator's quest for belonging is simply a series of (un)belongings: a constant realisation that the feeling of being at home cannot be achieved while living at home. Home is temporary fleeting moments of belonging that coexist with a simultaneous and continuous (un)belonging and a "homing desire" of wanting to belong or be at home (Brah, 1996).

In conclusion, Goja is an exemplar of how an Indian lesbian woman uses literary skill to come to terms with her own desire, domestic trauma, and catharsis. In an interview when asked about how her family reacted to her lesbianism, Namjoshi states that their reaction is "best left unrecorded". In choosing not to narrate certain instances in her text, Namjoshi saves

herself from the devastation of certain events (Agents of Ishq, 2020: np.). Instead, Namjoshi creates a unique pastiche of myths out of her pain and suffering.

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Chapter 4: Facing the Mirror: Home in Personal Narratives from Ashwini Sukthankar's "Lesbian" Anthology

Ashwini Sukhthankar's (1999) anthology, *Facing the Mirror,* is divided into six sections and each section has several personal narratives that have an overarching theme connecting them with one another. "Home" is one such themed section. The anthology does not give us any details regarding how the themes are organized but Sukthankar does refer to advertising an open call for "lesbian writing" in a gay magazine to look for writers for her project (xxiii). Hence, we can assume that the themes emerged for Sukthankar as she engaged with the writing and set about curating the material. Sukthankar's definition of home, as stated in her introduction, refers to the sphere of the "household and family" which is an "unpredictable composite of sanctuary and prison" (1999: xxxi). I understand the term "household" as the microeconomic and social definition of the home as a unitary financial unit where resident members divide labour and costs (Singh and Pattanaik, 2020). In the Indian context, traditional patriarchal household roles for womxn involve arduous amounts of "unpaid domestic work" (Singh and Pattanaik, 2020: 4), limited access to land and property rights (Halder and Jaishankar, 2008) and limited participation in household finances as well as decision-making activities (Kishor and Gupta, 2004: 696). Sukthankar's conception of home includes this idea of households as a "coercive realm of financial dependence" (xxi) where womxn's agency is constricted. This coercive power based on the financial dependence of womxn in the household increases substantially when queer womxn subvert the "incessant pressure to marry" (1999: xxxii) and attempt to carve out their own life paths. The institution of heterosexual marriage can be seen as reproducing extant gender hierarchies and household financial disparities (Desai and Andrist, 2010: 681). In these narratives, the pressure to marry is exerted by the family unit. After the household, the family forms the second component in Sukthankar's definition of home. The heterosexual family performs a

dual function for Sukthankar: first, it nurtures and provides protection from the outside world (acting like a "sanctuary"); and second, it simultaneously polices female sexuality (functioning as a "prison") (1999: xxxi-xxxii).

My approach to home in this chapter includes Sukthankar's home conception as the sphere of household and family but is not limited to it. In addition to Sukthankar's conception of the family as a sanctuary-prison, Rosemary Marangoly George's (1996) analysis of home in twentieth-century Indian fiction is helpful. Marangoly George defines home as not a non-neutral space that grants inclusivity only to subjects from homogenous religious, caste and sexuality backgrounds. This space maintains its exclusivity through "bonds of love, power, fear and control" (Marangoly George, 1996: 9). Based on Marangoly George's understanding, within these personal narratives home functions as an exclusive, non-neutral community which suppresses queer desire. This definition of home implies the existence of dominant hegemonic identities that occupy central positions (heterosexual family, flatmates, neighbours, distant relatives, local community workers) as well as the existence of liminal identities (queer womxn of different religious and class backgrounds) that occupy liminal or threshold positions.

I define the term "liminal" identities in the Bhabhaian sense, whereby the liminality of these womxn is not a separate identity category from their existing ones but a process of identification: a way of defining oneself in relation to the world by occupying "third spaces". Through my analysis I will show that these womxn define themselves in terms of hybrid third spaces, where the subject-object relationship isn't rigid but ambivalent (due to the interaction with the other) and always bears "the traces of the feelings and practices that inform it" (Bhabha, 1990: 211). Historically, in the Indian context, queer womxn are hybrid as they bear the traces of both their colonial oppression and criminalization and their postcolonial

expression without fully being defined by either their pre- or postcolonial forms.[19] As Ruth Vanita states, there is no "one voice" regards to same-sex desire in India (2002: 9). While using the term hybrid I imply that there isn't one singular way of expressing queer desire in the modern Indian context. In simpler terms, in these narratives the womxn, while acting out their queer desires, do not create separate third identities for themselves but discover new modes of identification with home, family and ideas of domesticity. This will become clearer once I begin my analysis of the narratives in the text. The new identifications lead to a reorientation of the social order at home in varying degrees across different narratives, and in some narratives (such as Firoza's "Memory Feed"), it may not happen at all in the text. By reorientation, I do not mean the reinstatement of the previous hierarchical order, but a new changed hybrid order where queer desires are re-habituated. I will discuss not just the presence but also the absence of this reorientation.

So far, my definition of home for this anthology has included the conceptualisation from Sukthankar's home of the socio-structured politics of the household and family as well as the reorientative impact of the liminality of queer desire within the non-neutral home. Here the term home is inclusive of the physical space of the home as well as the interactions with the nexus of household and family. Sara Ahmed's (2006) queer phenomenological framework is useful for my home section as it provides the connecting link between household, family, the spatiality of the home and sexual experiences. As I have discussed in the introduction to of the home section, homing in (an orientation of women into dominant hegemonic discourses of home), disorientation (Ahmed's definition of the violent process of

[19] It is worth referring to Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai's *Same-Sex Love in India* (2000) for a detailed exploration of ancient and pre-colonial forms of Indian same-sex desire. For Vanita and Saleem, the nineteenth century is a turning point in Indian history of desire as that was when the British colonial homophobic voice transitioned to become independent India's national homophobic stance (2000: 191-217). In her later anthology *Queering India* (2002), Vanita curates a new corpus of work done on same-sex Indian desire from fiction, television and film. For Vanita, neither the writers of the past nor of the present ever spoke in "one voice" regarding the expressions of same-sex desire (2002: 9) making it a hybrid and liminal category.

'out of placeness' with regards to home) and homing out (a reorientation within and reconfiguration of the home). It is essential to foreground that, in the accounts chosen for this chapter from Sukthankar's text, these three processes can occur simultaneously, in no particular order and in varying degrees depending upon the individual author's social position, domestic trauma and ability to articulate her home experience.

In her introduction, Sukthankar briefly alludes to the reorientative aspect of the narratives. She states that in the "Home" section of her anthology "the 'traditional family' is constantly reshaped by lesbian reality" (1999: xxxii). It is this "reshaping" reorientation that I also focus on. This does not merely pertain to the 'traditional family' structure but also to financial household politics, the home's spatial organisation, alternative models of coupling and living together,[20] and coping with the trauma and abuse that attach to queer desire. The conception of home in this chapter extends to some narratives outside of the "Home" section as well. For instance, in narratives such as Julia's "Meeting Myself", even though they are part of the "Passages" section, we see the example of Julia who explores her first feeling of queer desire for another woman in within her Shillong home. The autobiographical narrative is primarily about her first love affair but home (including the unique topography of Shillong in India) feature very prominently in several parts of the narrative, making it very relevant for my chapter. Julia describes the houses in Shillong as being "primitive" where the bathing area is separate from the rest of the washroom. The commode is located outside the main house next to the "clothes washing area" (43). This layout allows Julia to lustily gaze at her lover Mem as "her buttocks moved back and forth, up and down as she squatted on the platform and bent over to rub and scrub the garments" (44). The rhythmic up-down description is erotic and indicative of Julia sexually fantasizing about Mem as she vigorously

[20] I will analyse queer partnerships, alternative modes of living together under subversive models of intimacy. My theorization of intimacy and desire will become clearer once I begin analysing the narratives in the next section. In accordance with the theme of this chapter, the intimacies and desires discussed in this chapter will be related to my idea of Home.

washes clothes. The layout of the primitive Shillong home plays an architectural role in this queer fantasy.

Similarly, "Destination: Us" written by M.G and collected in the "Passages" section is about M.G and her lesbian partner who made the painful decision to migrate outside India simply because they couldn't imagine a life together in their homeland. While this narrative is mostly about M. G's struggle with the Indian nation and her own lesbianism, the narrative does contain a strong yearning and description of the lesbian household and domesticity. All M.G wants in the end is to "read a book in bed" while her partner clatters about in the kitchen (51-52). These examples prove that in this 400-page anthology, ideas of home are not just contained within the Sukthankar-defined "Home" section but also overspill boundaries. The only main difference between the narratives in and outside of the "Home" section is that the narratives within the "Home" are predominantly about the idea of home as compared to those outside it. In narratives like "Destination: Us" and "Meeting Myself", home appears, but only in fragments. Hence, in this chapter, because the main focus of this section is home, I have only chosen to analyse three narratives from the Sukthankar "Home" section in detail. The first is Firoza's memoir "Memory Feed", the second Amita's piece of autobiographical fiction, "Foreplay", and the third Supriya's working-class oral narrative "Tired of the Broom".

Firoza's "Memory Feed"

The first narrative chosen from this "Home" section is Firoza's *"*Memory Feed", which operates as what I term a memoir fragment. The account is a fragment because it is a very short glimpse into Firoza's memories. The memoir relies heavily on the use of flashbacks to bridge the gap between the past and the present. According to James Phelan, analepsis "depends on the principle that in order to understand the present one needs to understand the (relevant) past" (2016: 240-241). "Memory Feed" is written in two text styles and recounts

Firoza's relationship with her female lover. The memoir fragment is addressed to her unnamed lover who is referred to as "you" (74). In a reversal of convention, the regular text style is indicative of the past while the text in italics indicates present moments. The lengthiest part of the narrative is the analepsis which is most central to the narrative's development, indicating the intense weightage given to the past in this narrative. The past is hence essential for Firoza's understanding of the present.

"Memory Feed" begins with the first flashback which recalls the dining room of Firoza's childhood home. The passage involves the girl sitting with her books across from her grandmother at the dining table. The grandmother is interrogating young Firoza about rejecting the advances of a young man named Rustom. At this moment in time, Firoza is young and in love with another woman. While her grandmother questions her, Firoza thinks of her daily lunchtime discussions in college with her female lover. She also wonders how she should confess her feelings to her love interest (74). Firoza recollects being taken aback by her grandmother asking, "What got into your head?" with regards to her "giving up" on a suitable candidate like Rustom. When her grandmother abruptly interrupts her romantic thoughts, Firoza wonders, "Can it be that she suspects something between you and me?" (74). The dining room combined with the interrogative presence of her grandmother are oppressive domestic symbols of "compulsory heterosexuality" (Rich, 1980: 631). Compulsory heterosexuality, as conceptualised by Adrienne Rich, refers to an inherent bias "through which lesbian experience is perceived on a scale ranging from deviant to abhorrent, or simply rendered invisible" (1980: 632). Firoza's grandmother puts her queer desire under erasure by presumptuously attempting to match her up with a man. She also perceives Firoza's rejection of the man as a deviant action where the older woman wonders what has got into Firoza's "head". Her grandmother even scolds Firoza by asking her to "Be serious, think for a minute" (74), viewing her rejection as a thoughtless mistake. Her interruptions momentarily erase

Firoza's queer fantasy. Firoza's grandmother attempts to home in her granddaughter's queer desire, channelling her feelings into discourses of heterosexuality. Firoza feels that that her "kindly grandmother" was "being pushy" (74). Throughout this analeptic narration the grandmother's insistence on heterosexuality stands in stark contrast to Firoza's mental meanderings into her queer desire.

The space of the dining room makes the past more visceral by adding a component of smell. Firoza recalls her grandmother sitting at the dining table making her own tooth powder by mixing salt, peppermint, and clove oil (74). The comforting domestic ambience of this memory is shattered as it turns into a stark reminder of the suppression of Firoza's queer desire by her relative. I argue that is a significant sensory memory for Firoza which is formative to her queer desires. This is because of the detail provided in the text. Firoza still recalls all the ingredients of her grandmother's tooth powder after a long time has passed. This is perhaps due to the power of smell. Classen et. al write "Smell is powerful. Odours affect us on a physical, psychological, and social level. For the most part, however, we breathe in the aromas which surround us without being consciously aware of their importance to us" (1994: 1). Smells also have the "capacity to bond together various disparate elements with ease" (Chambers, 2019: 73). It seems that in this case the smells of the toothpowder have subconsciously affected Firoza on a deeper level by figuring centrally in a core memory related to her queer desire. It is interesting to note that this analepsis is narrated at the beginning of "Memory Feed", setting the tone for the upcoming suppression of Firoza's queer desire.

This first and second analepses are interrupted by the italic font of present events where a baby is smiling in her sleep. Firoza states that she is attached to the child as if it were her own (74). At this stage, we are only told that currently Firoza holds maternal feelings towards a child. Apart from providing us with context, the analepsis also builds up suspense

for the reader (Phelan, 2016: 244). The reader is encouraged to speculate about Firoza's relationship with this unknown child. As the story moves forward, the analeptic narrative regularly breaks chronology and dives back into the past to "recount prior events" (Phelan, 2016: 242) reiterating to us the significant impact the past has on Firoza's present state.

The next moment of analepsis is an intense recollection of queer intimacies[21] between Firoza and her lover. Here the term intimacies refer to communication "with the sparest of signs and gestures" (Berlant, 1998: 281) which relies "heavily on the shifting registers of unspoken ambivalence" (Berlant, 1998: 285-286). For Lauren Berlant, intimacy at its root is a form of attachment. In my analysis, intimacy is the performed aspect of queer desire. The conventional, publicly accepted notions of intimacy always rely on a certain form of "expression" where intimacies based on "appetites" and unconventional desires are discredited or neglected (1998: 285). Firoza's flashbacks give us images of unconventional queer intimacy within the space of the home. She recounts a blissful memory of sleeping next to her lover on a cane mat on the floor of her aunt's living room, as well as spending all her time studying and eating lunch with her lover. Firoza also recalls the ecstasy of "bodies touching" and lying side by side (75). These intimacies between the young Firoza and her lover are not based on any overt expressions of love and commitment but still convey a sense of attachment and intensity. Firoza also unwittingly evokes Berlant's conception of unconventional intimacies based on "appetites" (1998: 285) when she states that she could feel an "intensity" and a hunger while lying next to her lover (75). Despite this intimacy, the threat of the homophobic heterosexual family always looms. The women become intimate in Firoza's aunt's living room while Firoza's family "never gives a second thought" to their

[21] See my introduction with regards to the different between queer deires and intimacies applying to this entire project based on Berlant's works (2012, 1998). In my thesis I will examine both expressions of queer desire and intimacy. In simpler terms we can view intimacy as an extension of desire or 'desire in action'. For example, in this chapter section I am looking at desire and intimacy models within my definition of home. In Firoza's "Memory Feed", the first flashback is an example of queer desire within the home whereas her later flashbacks of being around her lover and sleeping next to her lover on the cane mat are examples of queer intimacy.

relationship only because they were presumed to be "studying" (75). This implies that their relationship exists domestically only because these women can conceal their attachment as a conventionally acceptable form of female intimacy. The concealment of queer desire is of course indicative of its oppression, yet its disguise on the part of the women is a paradoxical way of avoiding punishment by reorienting themselves as sisters studying together within a home. This alludes to the reorientative potential of queer intimacies. The core of the Ahmedian concept of reorientation is to make an inhabitable hostile space for queer bodies liveable by finding new ways to re-identify with such spaces (Ahmed, 2008: 9). That is what these women achieve in this instance. They turn the secrecy of the relationship into an opportunity of intimacy.

After the second analepsis, the memoir fragment is again interrupted by present events when the baby smiles in her sleep. Firoza states that the baby "*has your dimples, the shape of your lips*". Firoza states that she is the "*aunty, masi*" of this baby named Shireen (75; emphasis in original). For little Shireen, Firoza is her *masi* (a Hindi term for the mother's sister). This reveals the reality that Firoza and her lover haven't been able to conventionalise their intimacy into normative forms of domesticity such as in the form of a reproductive marriage or partnership. Instead, they are publicly considered as having a sisterly relationship, a chaste fate that the women seemed to have accepted. As discussed above, while this may not be ideal for Firoza, it is the only way in which she can reorient her queer desires with her partner's domestic life.

Firoza's next and third analepsis gives us an insight into her fantasy of an ideal domestic life. She and her lover travel the whole of south India discovering cities together. Firoza tells her lover that if they ever have a baby together, she would be the one to stay at home and take care of it as she was always "one for a domestic life" (76). In an interview, Berlant states that within the life-writing genre the notion of a good life is the "most

destructive conventionalized form of normativity" because when these life norms are treated as laws they threaten "people's capacity to invent ways to attach to the world" (2011a: 182). With this term 'the good life' Berlant alludes to the modern fantasy of a high-quality existence that is rooted in ideas of heteronormative forms of domestication, capitalism and urbanity which are based on "enduring reciprocity in couples, families, political systems, institutions, markets, and at work" (2011b: 2). Berlant shows us how the promise of a good life is interlinked with a reciprocal approval of several systems which include the home and the family and the couple themselves. A lack of reciprocity at one level can severely impede this promise of a good life.

During Firoza's flashback we are told how her ideal domestic fantasy is shattered when her lover tells her that she wants to marry a man and have a child (75). This conveys to us that even between the two women there is a lack of reciprocity regarding their lesbian status as a couple. It is a bombshell for Firoza to realise that her lover's life script and ideas of domesticity are rooted in conventional heterosexual marriage. She describes being "devastated" and "in denial" to a point where she still believes that her lover will ultimately "seek shelter" in her arms (75). The use of the word "shelter" is interesting as it alludes to Firoza's longing desire to build a mutually protective life with her lover. Despite her lover's rejection, Firoza still seeks the comfort of a sanctuary with her. It is important to note that the lover's rejection is not just the rejection of queer desire but the rejection of the non-reproductive aspect of queer relationships. For the lover, a home without a child is not a home at all and the lover can only envision the possibility of having a child with a member of the opposite sex.

To examine Firoza's feelings further, it is essential to look into the present state of intimacy between her and her married lover. Firoza is still taking care of her lover's baby. She addresses her lover in the narrative, stating:

> *Ironically, we are back to the intimacy we had once shared for fourteen years. While you sit on the bed and pump your milk into plastic bottles, I lie beside you and we chortle over family anecdotes...Often we spend all day taking turns with her, feeding, cleaning and calming her. Should I dare to unravel the complex layers of such ease, now that you are straight and I am still a lesbian?* (1999: 74-75; emphasis in original)

After years of denial, Firoza is able to articulate the irony of babysitting her married lover's child. The imagery of the women sharing a bed while one pumps breast milk into a plastic bottle, laughing at family stories, makes for an ideal picture of lesbian domestic intimacy and parenting. The imagery is ironic yet comforting because it depicts a marriage not in name but at least in practice. Firoza feels hopeful around her lover again but is unsure what this intimacy will lead to in the future. The intimacy between the two women is always there whether or not they remain as a couple. It exists both in the past and in the present. In a similar manner, the depiction of time in the narrative is also not chronological. The use of analepsis makes time appear like a "palimpsest: the present does not simply succeed the past but rather overlays it" (Phelan, 2016: 250). The complex layering of time and intimacy creates a present that is a "mediated affect" which is "sensed and under constant revision" (Berlant, 2011: 4) The present for Firoza is a disorientating turmoil that she cannot resolve. She articulates the ease with which intimacy is achieved but cannot find ways to "unravel" or grapple with the emotional turmoil it causes. For the first time in her narrative, Firoza self-identifies as a lesbian and laments that her lover has moved on to being "straight" while she

herself is “still a lesbian”. This turmoil is caused by a combined intersection and impact of layered time, hidden intimacies and the suppression of queer identities and desires.

Firoza’s denial and longing to achieve a conventional expression of intimacy with her partner makes her ignore the changing contours of her lover’s desires (77). Berlant believes that queer and feminist life writing in the contemporary era can “multiply” the ways in which life can be lived (2011a: 281). Firoza does find an alternative way of intimately coexisting with her lover in the narrative. There is a plurality in her manner of attachments with her lover. From studying together as ‘sisters’ in their childhood, to becoming lovers, to now coparenting baby Shireen, the two women find ways to remain intimate with one another. The narrative ends on a final analepsis which begins with the entry of Paul (her lover’s husband) into the house. Firoza states, “When Paul comes home at night, I know I must leave right away” (77). Even though Paul is nothing but cordial to Firoza, she feels threatened by his presence. The invocation of Paul in Firoza’s narrative, makes sense if we understand his presence as a mandatory separation and interruption of Firoza’s queer desire similar to her grandmother’s scolding in the dining room during the first analepsis.

When Paul enters the home, Firoza’s “charmed world is disrupted”. She writes that she is still “clinging to the hope of a family – you, me and the baby”. This is “a fugitive fantasy” which is destroyed wordlessly by the entry of her lover’s husband into the house (77). Here the term “fugitive fantasy” could mean both a fantasy that is hidden as well as a dream that is fleeting or temporary. Firoza’s desire for her lover is “cruelly optimistic”, in that the desire is obstructive to Firoza’s growth and flourishment (Berlant, 2011b: 1). All of Firoza’s memories of intimacy turn into memories of disruption and despair when Paul enters those memories. Berlant states that when one gets too attached to the “fantasy of the ‘good life’” it can lead to a “double loss” where one risks losing not only that particular form of attachment but also the fantasy of attachment itself (2011a: 182). According to this idea of

double loss, Firoza risks losing not only her intimacy with her lover but also and in general her desire for a family of her own.

Berlant asserts that because of the "overwhelming double logic" of this double loss, "people often stay tethered to bad lives" (2011a: 182). This is true in Firoza's case as she admits to "clinging" to the hope that her lover will one day start a family with her (77). Firoza's intense attachment to baby Shireen is an irresistible tether to her "fugitive" fantasies. All the analepsis keep getting interrupted by Shireen's shrill cries or her sleeping smiles. Firoza writes that she feels she "*must hold and comfort her. This child is my memory feed*" (77; emphasis in original). Firoza feels inexorably drawn to the child. The use of the term "*memory feed*" is an intriguing choice both as a title and as a reference to baby Shireen. There are several meanings behind the term *feed.* Due to her striking resemblance to her mother, Shireen serves as a continual trigger for Firoza's memories with her lover. Baby Shireen *feeds* (provides an appetite for) Firoza's memories of intimacy while simultaneously functioning as a live *feed* for Firoza's lesbian memories due to her resemblance to Firoza's lover. Firoza sees her lover in baby Shireen constantly: "*The baby has your dimples, the shape of your lips*" (75; emphasis in original). In return, Firoza too *feeds*, nourishes, and takes care of Shireen, as she and her lover have a responsibility to give milk to the baby. In this way, Firoza further tethers herself to her "fugitive" fantasy of unattainable lesbian domesticity.

While Berlant's work is helpful in understanding the tethered nature of Firoza's lesbian domestic intimacy, it makes for pessimistic theorisation of Firoza's desires. Understood through the lens of Berlant, Firoza's tethered intimacy could lead to a possible "double loss". This is where Ahmed's framework of queer phenomenology is useful. For Ahmed all sexual orientations are a matter of residence, dependent on those with whom we inhabit spaces (2008: 1). Here the word orientation (different from the term sexual

orientation) refers to a dynamic process through which one finds ways to feel at home and discover one's own path. Hence, the process of a person being orientated involves finding out "what home means, or how we occupy space at home" (2008: 9). The phenomenology of being queer at home is important as it makes us realise that home is not just external to the body spatially but is also something that "feels like second skin" that "unfolds on the folds of the body" (Ahmed, 2013: 89). This conception of home implies that the home is a constantly evolving embodied experience that affects the feelings and mental state of an individual.

As discussed in the introduction to this chapter, queer womxn already occupy society's threshold/liminal/marginal positions based on the power structures within the Indian home. Firoza's first analepsis is about her being groomed into "compulsory heterosexuality" (Rich, 1980) by her grandmother in the family dining room. She then grows up to reorient her lesbian orientation with her lover under the guise of studying (75). So far Firoza's lesbianism is orientated (or homed into) discourses of suppression. Then Firoza's intimate partnership with her lover gets shattered due her lover's heterosexual marriage to Paul and the birth of Shireen. Ahmed states that often, familial homes and the world in general are especially organised around heterosexual couples and filled with "traces of heterosexual intimacy" so much that a lesbian body feels "out of place" (2008: 19).

Disorientation is a "bodily feeling of losing one's place, and an effect of the loss of a place: it can be a violent feeling, and a feeling that is affected by violence" (Ahmed, 2008: 160). Firoza feels 'out of place' within the dynamic of her lover and Paul. In "Memory Feed", Firoza depicts her intimate fantasies as being "fugitive" (74). She feels devastation and denial when her lover leaves their intimate partnership. When Paul arrives at home, Firoza knows that she has to leave as she cannot occupy space within that house anymore (75-76). This out of placeness is also a lesbian body's inability to inhabit a space or find a

home for herself. This failure to "extend" and occupy space is an inevitable consequence for a queer body. Ahmed articulates this failure through the process of disorientation.

There are constant iterations of Firoza feeling like an outsider either hidden, silent or forced to leave. The narrative abruptly ends on Firoza's disorientation once Paul comes home (76). Yet it should not escape our notice that Ahmed's disorientation is unlike Berlant's idea of "double loss" (2011: 182). For Ahmed, disorientation itself is not a total failure but the first sign of better things to come in the form of the process of reorientation (homing out). The process of reorientation involves being disorientated first and then includes the other processes of the remaking of world and home (2008: 19). Even though we don't see any traces of non-disorientated overt reorientation in Firoza's narrative we cannot fully discount its presence in the narrative. There are covert instances of reorientation that exist simultaneously with Firoza's disorientation. The first is the disguise of the two women as sisters and the second are the brief but intense moments that the two women spend in the love and care of the baby. This caregiver work serves as surrogate practice for lesbian intimacy.

There is another way of understanding Firoza's turmoil as a productive present affect. For Berlant the present can be understood as an impasse, a "stretch of time in which one moves around with a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic, such that the activity of living demands both a wandering absorptive awareness and a hypervigilance that collects material that might help to clarify things" (2011b: 4). Put simply, unlike the general meaning of impasse, Berlant's definition of an impasse involves a sense of a chaotic present where one is not stagnant or stationary but affectively active in order to make sense of things. Firoza's narrative ends on an impasse where through her autobiographical analeptic narrative she attempts to make sense of her queer relationship. By choosing to attach herself to baby Shireen who serves as a "*memory feed*" (77), Firoza attaches herself to a palimpsestic continuum of the past, present and queer desire.

Amita's "Foreplay"

The second narrative from Sukthankar's "Home" section which I analyse gives us a glimpse of the process of reorientation in the form of a reidentification and reconstruction of the home with especially notable use of erotic lesbian imagery. The piece is entitled "Foreplay" and is written by a woman named Amita. In her introduction, Sukthankar recounts meeting a self-identified lesbian couple called Amita and Naseem in a Mumbai coffee shop in relation to the advertisement she had placed in a gay magazine to find writers for her anthology. Sukthankar claims that listening to their story changed her own perspective and made her realise that she didn't need to choose exile or stay abroad to live as a lesbian (xxiii). For Sukthankar, the idea of a lesbian couple living together and making a home for themselves in one of India's biggest cities was an alternative reality and seemed alien at that time. As such, in Sukthankar's introduction, Amita and Naseem are valorised as living the modern Indian lesbian 'good life'. Here a 'good life' is based on the ideas of upward social mobility, urbanisation, and a domestication of intimacies (Berlant and Prosser, 2011: 182). Despite their idealised description in the introduction, Amita's narrative reveals the tension between lesbian intimacy and conventional notions of home and domesticity.

The first sign of this tension is the choice of narrator of "Foreplay". As she is writing for the anthology, Amita inhabits the position of a third-person narrator who narrates the story of two protagonists named Asmita and Naseem. While there is no definitive way of knowing whether this is Amita's own life story, we can safely assume that it is, since Naseem, the name of her lover, is the same in Amita's written account. Amita, the lesbian writer, only changes her own name by one letter to Asmita, that of the protagonist. This refusal to self-identify and use the first-person pronoun helps to create a certain distance from the content, allowing it to be more explicit, sexual, and less inhibited in expression. Amita is

not looking to be identified as a protagonist of her story. Sukthankar in her introduction lauds Amita and Naseem as "courageous" for meeting her in the cafe after reading only three lines about her in an advertisement. She thanks them for making "themselves vulnerable" to the possibility that Sukthankar might have been a predatory journalist[22] looking for an expose, or even a bigot or a homophobe (xxiii). Several other women contributors were also hesitant to reveal the real names behind their lesbian stories as they felt that "Indian society" was "not ready" for them. For Sukthankar, the idea of pseudonyms provides a kind of "ironic freedom" under which women can freely explore and express their hidden selves (xxvi). Even though Amita never admits to co-opting this idea of "ironic freedom", she does write a narrative with erotic undertones about a protagonist with a name very similar to her own.

"Foreplay" centres on Asmita and Naseem's attempt to spend an intimate weekend with each other despite their burgeoning home responsibilities. Both women live in urban flats in an unspecified metropolitan Indian city. Asmita is a working single mother who lives with her two teenage daughters and is frequently visited by her lover Naseem who works long hours and is responsible for the care of her ageing mother (140). The women independently manage their separate households but live together, supposedly as flatmates while working full-time and taking care of children and family members. They do this work without any contribution from or mention in the narrative of their male relatives, ex-husbands, or family members. Asmita writes, "Intimacy, romance, lovemaking was becoming more and more difficult in the small flat" (140). The flat is small not just in terms of its size but also because of the continual presence of Asmita's two daughters. The women feel "inhibited" while being intimate due to the daughters sleeping only a few feet away from their bedroom door. There is deeply embedded fear of being discovered. This constricting

[22] The threat of journalist doing a lesbian expose in 1999 is a very real one since the controversy surrounding Deepa Mehta's *Fire* which came out the previous the year. See Dave (2011) for more details about the constant media slandering of lesbian sexualities by right-wing Hindu organisations (652-653).

sense of smallness and inhibition is omnipresent even when women leave their house. On a vacation, at a resort in Gorai Island, the women get “nervous” after they hear voices outside their room door. This spoils their afternoon of lovemaking (141). This fear of being discovered and outed during their intimate moments is so severe that it is not just limited spatially to their home but is an ever-present affective state of mind.

The only time the women enjoy their intimacy is when their house is completely empty. Asmita writes longingly about waiting for the “small apartment” to be theirs to relax in, so that they can snuggle, kiss and bathe together. She refers to it as the “privilege” of being able to make love in the living room and of being able to “take their time and choose their place”. This highlights the relief the women feel when no heterosexual family members occupy any space of their house. A sense of safety relates not only to the physical structure of the house or the privacy of a locked room but also to the kind of individuals occupying the house. In this case, the women only feel safe when no one is around. According to Asmita, this alone time is almost worth the constant “bitter awareness of the illicitness of their connection” (140). This demonstrates how difficult it is to take complete ownership of your own home and space without the fear of being ostracised. Asmita feels threatened not only by her household family members but also by certain household objects. For instance, Asmita is threatened by the heterosexuality of “The Bed” (an uppercase reference to the conjugal bed she shares with her lover Naseem) (141). The use of the title case typography is symbolic as The Bed is a continual source of trauma.

Since Asmita is a single mother of two, The Bed in the past has been a site of heterosexual sex and procreation. Now that her Bed is occupied by a woman, Asmita still feels “shy” about “flaunting” a double bed in the flat that she shares with Naseem (141). For Asmita, the double size of her bed would indicate to the world that this ‘single’ mother of two is sexually active. The term “flaunting” is an interesting choice of word by the narrator as it

indicates that even the bedroom isn't safe from the prying eyes of the heterosexual public. To the world Naseem is just her "flat mate (paying guest as some people insisted)" with whom she cannot possibly share a double bed, especially with her children being around (141). The term "paying guest" indicates that some people around them cannot imagine them even as friends and flatmates who choose to live together and share the rent. Instead, some people insist on believing that Naseem is just a lodger at Asmita's house paying rent to Asmita. Like the flat, their intimate space is also "small" as the women are confined to their bedroom when other family members are around. Asmita internalises this "smallness" by restricting herself further as she buys only a four feet wide conjugal bed for her and Naseem.

The Bed is so small that the women cannot sleep on it without touching. It serves its purpose during lovemaking but when the women fight, Naseem has to take a sleeping bag and sleep in the hall (141). Even this doesn't resolve the women's "problem" – the constant anxiety of being outed. In one instance, while making love on The Bed, the women get frightened when they see their neighbours flash festive lights near their window. Even though the design of the window makes it impossible to look inside clearly, the women become paranoid (141). Judith Butler states that heterosexuality produces a "field of heterosexual objects at the same time as it produces a domain of those whom it would be impossible to love" (1997b: 21). Ahmed's deconstruction of the Butlerian phrase "field of heterosexual objects" implies that heterosexual objects are produced due to the "effect of how objects gather to clear a ground, how objects are arranged to create a background" (2008: 87). This suggests that heterosexuality doesn't simply exist inside an object but depends on how the object has been discursively used or made available as a social inheritance. Thus, The Bed is an example of how a discursively heterosexual object can produce debilitating effects of out-of-placeness and disorientation. Despite having a bedroom to themselves, the women find it hard to occupy and inhabit their home space.

The full extent of Asmita's disorientation becomes clear when we analyse the main point of conflict in the narrative. The couple plan an intimate evening in their empty flat for which Asmita is late due to a forced lunch commitment with her family members. Naseem cannot be invited to this lunch as the couple are closeted. This leads to a fight between the two of them. Asmita describes the lunch as being "excruciatingly slow, awkward and painful". She despises the fact that "her soul-mate" has "no *locus standi* in the family" while everyone else's partners get to sit at the lunch table. Asmita even goes as far as to say that her relationship with Naseem is much more intense and romantic than everyone else's (141). The use of the term "locus standi" is interesting as it means a legal right or capacity to bring to action. This allusion to legality may be a deliberate choice since at the time this narrative was written homosexuality was illegal in India and Asmita and Naseem's struggles technically had no locus standi in the Indian socio-legal context. Asmita feels out of place, invisible and angry at her family lunch table. She comes home sobbing, and collapses on The Bed presuming that Naseem has left the house angrily (142). At this point in the narrative, we understand the full impact of Asmita being homed in and disorientated within her own house. Owning a house and inhabiting it as a lesbian couple become two very separate things when one acknowledges the influence of heterosexual objects, discourses and the politics of household and family.

Yet, at the end "Foreplay" takes an erotic and reorientative turn. Asmita comes out of the living room to find Naseem sprawled naked on the living room mat "fast asleep" with her "small pointed breasts" and "inky black thicket between her legs". A "gush of wetness" trickles down Asmita's thighs as she is overcome by an overwhelming desire for her lover. Instead of waking Naseem up, Asmita quietly goes back to her room claiming that "the foreplay had begun" (142-142). The sight of her naked lover's body sprawled out on the living room floor makes her reclaim her home space, temporarily, forgetting the burdens of

her household and chaste notions of domesticity. Berlant (1998) talks about how non-verbal forms of intimacy can be a source of optimism as they have the potential to provide some relief to the minds and bodies of individuals damaged by hegemonic forms of desire and intimacy. Intimacy at home can be rethought if one critiques the conditions that allow hegemonic notions of home and domesticity to thrive, and if one accepts that non-normative models of intimacy can coexist. The narrative ends by teasing us with this reorientative potential of lesbian intimacies at home.

Supriya's "Tired of the Broom"

The next narrative is also from Sukthankar's "Home" section and has the title "Tired of the Broom". It was orally narrated by Supriya, a domestic help, in Marathi and was then taped and transcribed by U.S.G. There are two key factors that enable an illiterate Supriya to be part of this written anthology. The first is her connection to Sukthankar who, being a member of the English-speaking, Harvard-educated elite inhabits a world very different from Supriya's. In the introduction we are told that Sukthankar knew Supriya from her childhood as a domestic worker, and even at a young age could gauge that Supriya was like her in some ways (1999: xxiv). While none of this is elaborated further in the text and it isn't made clear if Supriya was ever Sukthankar's domestic help, it is important to remember that this is an unequal relationship based on class hierarchy and servitude. Sukthankar would never have known a subject like Supriya on a personal level if it weren't for this master-servant relationship, a common phenomenon in urban middle- and upper-class Indian households. The second key factor is Supriya's lack of hesitation at agreeing to be part of this anthology. When invited to contribute to the work, Supriya states, "If I let this chance go by, how will anyone ever know how I have lived?" (1999: xxiv). This statement reflects a strong desire for ownership over her narrative and helps to explain why it is narrated in the first person. It also conveys her astuteness at having recognized the harsh reality that there aren't many platforms

for a woman like her to tell her story. This narrative in a sense is Supriya's attempt to claim space for herself and her queer desire.

The narrative begins with a violent 'homing in' of young Supriya into conventional and patriarchally oppressive discourses of home and household such as compulsory heterosexuality and forced marriage. Through her narrative, we are told that she is "married off" (121) to an alcoholic man who already has a wife with whom he cannot produce children and hence he has decided to marry a second time. There is no indication in the text that Supriya's husband is a Muslim man given that Lakshmi, his first wife, is named after a Hindu goddess. In all likelihood Supriya's marriage to her husband is an illegal one since the Hindu Marriage Act in India recognises only one legal spouse (The Hindu Marriage Act 1955, n.d.: 4). Supriya's marriage is a reproductive contract based in the husband's pursuit of a male heir. Supriya's family is not wealthy enough to demand a groom of their choice, so Supriya is forced to submit to their decision and ultimately gives birth to two boys. Even though the marriage is illegal it is socially accepted by the parents since the failure here is seen as lying in the body of the first wife, Lakshmi, as she is the one who is unable to give birth to a child.

For the first two months after her marriage Supriya spends time in her husband's village. Their domestic life begins in a very heterosexual and abusive space, with the sexual threat of the drunken alcoholic husband looming over the narrative; he only wants to "make mischief and not leave me in peace even for a minute" (123). "Mak[ing] mischief" is of course a coded reference to sexual intercourse especially when someone wants to euphemistically avoid making references to sex. Equivalent terms in Hindi could include मस्ती करना (*masti karna*, or having fun) or मज़ा करना (*maza karna*; enjoying oneself). However, as I am not a Marathi speaker the original words used by Supriya in her oral narration remain known only to the transcriber U.S.G. (whose identity is never specified further in the text). There is no way of knowing if Supriya's heterosexual encounters with her

husband were consensual. The playful and understated mention of their sexual interaction is nonetheless foreboding.

After two months, Supriya and her husband move to the city for employment. It is here that she starts an affair with Lakshmi, her husband's first wife. Initially Lakshmi taunts Supriya, the younger wife, for being overdressed at home after the wedding. When Supriya begins to cry, Lakshmi taunts her further by stating that crying is the best activity because it doesn't cost any money (122). While this exchange is tense it highlights the working-class struggle of constantly having to worry about the financial aspects of a household. But Lakshmi and Supriya's dynamic shifts very quickly from jealousy to a maternal form of affection. As soon as Supriya bears two children, she and Lakshmi become very close, with Lakshmi taking care of the children from the very first day onwards. Describing her experiences after motherhood, Supriya narrates, "All I had to do was nurse them with my milk. And if Husband[23] was troubling me, she [Lakshmi] would nurse *him* with booze and send him to sleep" (122). Similar to Amita's threatening single "Bed" in the previous narrative, here the "Husband's" looming threat is denoted via capitalisation.

This contrasting image of Lakshmi nursing with milk as well as alcohol creates quite a dichotomy as Lakshmi is maternal not only towards Supriya and the children but also towards the abusive husband. The term "nurse *him*" has the pronoun italicised because it denotes an ironic form of nursing through alcohol which ultimately leads to the husband's fall from his high status within the household. Supriya informs us that her husband's job as a bank's security guard was not worth asking about because he was thrown out at least a "thousand times" for being a drunkard (122). In the meantime, Lakshmi's early relationship

[23] The term Husband is capitalised throughout the narrative. This foregrounds his position as a looming abusive patriarchal figure. Though this typographical choice was made by the translator it is perhaps a nod to orthodox patriarchal communication styles where the elders and the husband are never addressed by their first name as a sign of reverence and respect. See Nishimura et al. (2008: 792) for more details about Indian styles of communication.

with Supriya has maternal elements as Supriya states, “When she sang for the baby, she was also singing to me because she said I was like her daughter” (122). This motherly care affects Supriya so much that tears would come to her eyes, for even her mother hadn’t been this affectionate towards her. Thus, Lakshmi feels protective and attached to Supriya which makes her nurse both Supriya and the husband to avoid any untoward dynamics between the two. The husband is jealous of the bonding between the two women and constantly tries to pit them against one another “by putting ideas in my [Supriya’s] ears[24]” (122). However, he is unsuccessful and the two remain undivided.

Supriya then informs us that her husband “was going to whores”, implying that he began visiting sex workers for his pleasure after his two wives began keeping their distance. Supriya refuses to sleep next to her husband. She conveys her fears to Lakshmi by stating, “I was afraid that if he touched me, I would get diseases” (123). This statement is highly problematic as it reinforces years of casteist Indian stereotypes about sex workers and their bodies being dirty and impure (Cornish, 2006). But it also results in a sexual intimacy between the two women as it is because of this fear that Supriya and Lakshmi begin sleeping next to each other. Every time the husband puts a hand on Supriya’s shoulder to initiate sexual contact Lakshmi shoos him away (123).

“Tired of the Broom” as a narrative is exceptionally different from all the other ones in the “Home” section, precisely due to the radical newness of the vocabulary around queer desire and because of the piece’s original spatial organization. Spatially, Supriya and Lakshmi’s chawl accommodation is low-income housing where the two women do not have their own bedroom and “never do anything until they [the children] are asleep” (123). This,

[24] The term “putting ideas in my ears” seems to be a literal verbatim translation of the Hindi idiom कान भरना (*kaan bharna* or filling the ears) by the translator which in English roughly means to poison someone’s mind against another by talking ill about them behind their back.

along with the looming presence of the alcoholic husband who tries to engage in sexual activity, makes theirs a unique domestic arrangement for queer intimacy.

In terms of the diction of queer desire, since rural Indian women like Supriya do not use conventionally sexualized queer signifiers and nor do they speak the colonial language, how can we map queer desire and emotion in their language? There are several ways of approaching this question. Don Kullick (2008) has criticised language studies on sexual subjects as being too rooted in identity categories. There is a strong assumption that gay and lesbian speech and language is somehow rooted in gay and lesbian identities. There is no theory of sexuality that is used to discuss how desire, fear, repression, and culture operate linguistically. A language act is considered gay or lesbian only if the speaker intends it to be understood as such (2008: 124). Kullick states that while this may be the case sometimes, there is an urgent need to study not only intentional desire but also "forged or concealed" desire and erotic fulfilment, which may be available to us in specific culturally codified ways. This cultural codification is "analysing not only what is said, but also how that saying is in many senses dependent on what remains unsaid, or unsayable" (Kullick, 2008: 124). This idea of the unsayable is specifically applicable to non-Western societies, as discussed in Ephrem and White's study on Ethiopian lesbians where the assumption that if no word for queer exists in a culture it doesn't mean that there is no such practice. Indeed, it could mean that practices aren't named explicitly to avoid discussions about a taboo topic (2011: 64).

It therefore becomes essential to analyse the 'unsayable' and codified queer desire diction within Supriya's narrative. Supriya recounts that she doesn't remember how "this thing" started between her and Lakshmi (123). Here the term "this thing" is an evasively abstract way to refer to the taboo relationship between the two women. In another incident where Supriya is husking some rice grains, Lakshmi comes in laughing and says the following words to her:

> In my next life, I want to come back as the rice grains that you are cleaning. You hold them in your lap, and shake them so gently, up and down, up and down . . . (Sukthankar, 1999: 123).

This description is culturally embedded in the codes of domestic labour as here the up and down movement caused by the husking of the rice grains is used as a metaphor for lesbian sex. This metaphor is rooted in the women's class and social position and needs to be read within that context. The use of the ellipsis at the end indicates that Lakshmi trails off while describing the rhythmic movement of the rice grains, as equated with lesbian sexual activity. The language used to express queer desire is affective. Affect here is a moment of intensity which is abstract because affect cannot be fully realised in language, and because it is always prior to and/or outside of consciousness (Massumi, 2015).

Due to her socio-linguistic position as a non-English speaker, Lakshmi may not consciously realize the full erotic potential of her language, but she nonetheless conveys it in a vivid way. Supriya's lexicon, on the other hand, is rooted more in immediacy and emotion. As discussed earlier on in the analysis, Supriya describes Lakshmi as a maternal figure who nurses her two children and sings to them (122). Supriya uses sentimental and maternal language to refer to her initial attachment with Lakshmi as, apart from non-sexualized models of female companionship such as motherhood and friendship, there are few other models of female relationships available to her within her patriarchal and compulsorily heterosexual environment. Yet there is one instance where Supriya expresses her sexual desire. When her father is outraged at his daughter's subservient status as the second woman in the household he lashes out, "What will Supriya do with the other wife, take her on her head and dance around?". Supriya after being intimate with Lakshmi recounts her father's reaction and

sheepishly answers his rhetorical question by stating, “What did he know about what I could do with her” (121). The humorous and sexual connotations in her imagined reply indicate that she is aware of her queer desire and takes ownership of it. Despite this ownership of her queer desire, the taboo around it is so deeply engrained in Supriya that she states, “I could no longer call myself a woman when this thing started between me and Lakshmi” (123). Supriya cannot reconcile her womanhood with her queer desire. She feels less of a woman after inhabiting her desires. She also fears being discovered by children and the other denizens of her slum. For Supriya, there is still a need to keep up heterosexual appearances for public acceptance. It is evident, then, that Supriya’s narrative is deeply rooted in a language of desire that is specific to her socio-cultural location.

Based on the above analysis, it becomes clear that within Supriya’s narrative the definition of a home is vastly reorientated especially with regards to spatiality and the expression of queer desire within the home. Even with regards to the idea of a household, the abusive situation of the home alters when the husband’s drinking gradually worsens. He loses his capacity to hold down a job and thus his patriarchal control over the household declines. It is then that the women take charge of the household. Lakshmi raises the children while Supriya works outside the home as a domestic servant (122-123). The narrative is also extremely fatalistic when Supriya states, “What God has given us to do in life, we will do” (121). This fatalism is not always positive but often marked with exhaustion at having to raise a family of two children, and to hide a queer relationship while doing vigorous domestic labour both in and outside the house: “Work and get kicks in return, that is a woman’s life” (123). Even the title of the narrative, “Tired of the Broom”, indicates a level of exhaustion with the excruciating burden of working-class servant labour in the home. The apparently heterosexual household, in terms of its divisions of domestic and sexual labour, becomes a queer one. Yet, all this happens inside a one-bedroom slum dwelling without the two women

labelling their desire or cloaking it in conventional notions of privacy. The narrative ends with the women hoping to send their sons to a good school. Supriya's queer desire is an example of how working-class queer Indian women have their own script of desire and create their own ways of inhabiting a household and reorientating the body in a space after facing abusive circumstances. It is perhaps essential to foreground that the narrative contains no overt mentions of any feelings that suggest the Ahmedian concept of queer disorientation either. This is because the working-class body of Supriya is constantly undergoing manual labour and her mind thinking of survival. As such, she does not have the privilege of languishing in her emotions. The working-class body is never at rest and hence is forced to reorientate itself for survival. While there is hope in Supriya's narrative, it is also essential to highlight the importance of the labour that she has to do to sustain herself. This is not to argue that a certain version of disorientation is always mandatory in a queer body but to intimate how queer disorientation might operate less overtly in a working-class body due to the above reasons.

Concluding Remarks

Through the analysis of a diverse set of narratives from Sukthankar's anthology, I have shown how 'home' isn't always just a fixed geographical site or a feeling. It is an ever-changing combination of both, one that keeps evolving as queer bodies and queer desire are constantly disorientated and reorientated within the world. To feel at home, a queer body has to put in labour depending on her social position, to engage in everyday negotiations and "inhabit the intensity of her disorientation" (Ahmed, 2008: 107). The search for the meaning of home continues throughout a lifetime, across time and space and through labour. Home both as a feeling, as a sense of belonging and as a geographical site needs to be found. Through the analysis of three very different narratives from *Facing the Mirror*'s "Home"

section I have shown how that process of finding home varies for women from different positionalities as well as how it is expressed through multiple personal narrative forms such as memories, oral narratives, and autobiographical fiction.

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PART 2: WORLD

Theorization of the World for all my key texts

In my home section, I analysed the descriptions of queer desire between womxn in the texts through the lens of private cultures and discourses of family, domesticity, the household, and the physical home space. In this Part, I explore Indian public cultures under the umbrella term of the world. Desire and sexuality are products of histories and cultures and in a globalising context these cultures criss-cross and intersect (Martin, 2003: 7). In this section I use the term public culture to refer to these intersecting histories and cultures of queer desire in the Indian context as they play out in my texts. Under this idea of public culture, I want to analyse what occurs when queer womxn occupy space within public discourses. Public discourses in the texts exist in the form of discourses of media (such as in print and film), nationality, criminality in the form of anti-sodomy colonial criminality, the Indian caste system, class, police brutality, hegemonic societal norms, and regulations for women. All of these issues have significant impact on the expression of queer desire and form its public culture. Included in this public culture are the violent responses of the state and public institutions of law, healthcare, and education, as well as the reclaiming of public culture and spaces by queer womxn.

In the Indian context, the response of public cultures to the existence of queer womxn has been negative, violent, and exclusionary. In *Gandhi's Tiger and Sita's Smile*, Ruth Vanita, talks in detail about Indian cultural debates around homosexuality as a foreign import and the origin of such debates at the turn of the nineteenth century (2005: 60). Maya Sharma, the author of *Loving Women*, claims that she was driven to write about underprivileged women because her desire was to "dispel the myth that lesbians in India were all urban, Westernised and came from the upper and middle classes" (2006: 42). Sharma here is alluding to these cultural debates that view homosexuality as a Western, urban phenomena.

Right after the release of Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1998), a film that depicts a lesbian relationship between two sisters-in-law, right-wing conservative parties vandalised cinemas where the film was being screened, arguing that lesbianism was against Indian culture. Sharma (2006), directly quotes from a report by a lesbian organisation named CALERI (1999) that challenges these right-wing parties by compiling and then questioning their homophobic viewpoints. One such telling statement is made by the then-Union Minister of India, L. K. Advani,[25] who laments, "'Why are such films made here? They can be made in the US or other Western countries. A theme like lesbianism does not fit in the Indian atmosphere" (Sharma, 2006: 165). The use of the term "Indian atmosphere" is interesting as it reveals the dominant belief that there is something non-Indian and anti-national about lesbianism. It can be inferred that the Indian environment needs to be protected from lesbianism. Despite her critique of such discourse as baseless and "unqualified" (Sharma, 2006: 165), it still results in violence and hinders the emancipation, visibility, and development queer desire between women in the public domain. This idea of an "Indian atmosphere" and its complicated relationship with queer desire forms the theoretical framework for this section.

This vandalism of cinema halls led to lesbian activists from such groups as CALERI protesting in favour of lesbian rights, as they held placards stating "Indian and Lesbian" in order to affirm the coexistence of both identities together for the first time in public culture. This placard became a front-page headline in newspapers (Dave, 2011: 651). For Naisargi N. Dave the film sparked a "public clash of the incommensurable (enabling the question, 'what is now possible?')" (2011: 650). The public culture of protests and its media reporting played

[25] L.K Advani was a cofounder and senior member of the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP). The right-wing conservative force that Modi is the face of in India currently. He also served as the Deputy CM of India from 2002-2004. Advani was also the member of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a paramilitary organization created to preserve the Hindu nation and Hindu cultural ideologies (Advani, 2008). The RSS is currently known for its communal fascist origins and politics under the Modi regime (K. Jha, 2021).

a huge role in making lesbian desire visible for the first time in the modern Indian context. The question of "what is now possible?" further highlights how public culture can be a space of resistance and emancipation for taboo desires and subjects. Ashwini Sukthankar, in her introduction to *Facing the Mirror*, also refers to the "public face" of "lesbian" desire which is based on legal repercussions and confined to a "discourse of catastrophe" (1999: xv). In her introduction Sharma argues that "Indian culture and society" is a site where the female is viewed "for all kinds of action and reaction, but not as a legitimate site for sexual autonomy or personal agency" (2006: 13). Sharma views women's lives and embodied experiences as being subject to patriarchal actions and reactions devoid of any legitimate choices. Within Sharma's construction of this oppressive public culture, "lesbian" women and their desires are further invalidated since they are oppositional to heterosexuality and hence deserving of punishment and persecution (19). Sharma's understanding here is built on the intersection of two public discourses – patriarchy and homosexual criminality. I argue that in all my key texts several intersecting discourses form a public culture which frames queer desire.

Such an othered form of branding of queer desire also had a trickle-down effect into the women's movement in India. Sharma in the introduction to her memoir explores her own experiences within feminist activism from the 1980s to the early 2000s. She alludes to the resistance and hesitation within the women's movement when it came to supporting "lesbian" rights publicly, for that meant going against the majority voice within Indian culture. Feminists from such movements, Sharma informs the reader, go so far as to say to her that any "politicisation should be postponed for a later time, presumably when there is a greater level of societal awareness and acceptance of homosexuality" (2006: 339). This makes Sharma's text even more important. Her work is one of the first full-length published texts that makes visible the existence of underprivileged queer desire between women in India; an

existence that is negated both by the national discourses as well as by the women's movements.

It is this seemingly negative and complicated public face of queer that I want to analyse in this section. This therefore calls for a deeper understanding of queer desire within the multiple intersections of public cultures described in each text. It is important to note that my idea of public culture is also inclusive of (but not limited to) the geographical notion of public spaces. Similar to my understanding of the home space, public spaces too impact the expression of desires and sexualities.[26] My understanding of sexuality and desire is grounded in Sara Ahmed's phenomenological conception of sexual orientation as a matter of residence where we attempt to understand how we might inhabit spaces as well as "who" and "what" we inhabit spaces with" (2008: 1). A phenomenological approach is useful for my thesis as it foregrounds the importance of lived experience and allows me to explore how queer bodies inhabit and occupy space in the world (Ahmed, 2008: 2). Hence, within this realm of public culture, I will also analyse how and with whom does queer desire occupy public spaces.

I collectively refer to this public culture as the world from here onwards. This idea of the world is borrowed from Rabindranath Tagore's serialised Bengali text *Ghare Baire* (1915) which was published as a novel in 1916. It was translated into English by Surendranath Tagore (Tagore's nephew) in 1919 and published as *The Home and The World*.[27] The novel is set in 1905-1908 in Bengal when the province was being partitioned under the British Government, giving rise to "militant nationalism, historicised as *bangahhanga* and the swadeshi movement" (Sengupta et al., 2007: 1). Even though the novel

[26] Research by queer geographers Bell and Valentine (1995) shows how living in the countryside structurally and culturally impacts the lifestyles of gays and lesbians. Browning's (1996) work on gay men explores how geography plays a role in sexuality and sexual roles.

[27] Since I cannot read Bengali in this thesis, I will only refer to Surendranath Tagore's (Tagore's nephew) 1919 English translation of *The Home and The World.*

is about a historic public event in the fight for India's independence, the main protagonist is a woman named Bimala, the dutiful domestic wife confined to the inner quarters of her house and married to an upper-caste landlord named Nikhilesh. The plot of the narrative revolves around Bimala and her desires and struggles between two men: Nikhilesh, the dutiful, gentle husband but staunch critic of the *swadeshi* movement; and Sandip, the fiery and impassioned militant *swadeshi* supporter. Kathleen Koljian refers to Tagore's text as an "allegorical novel" where "Bimala, as the representative of the nation and the nation's women, undergoes a series of transformations" (2003: 119). These transformations involve the enticement of Bimala (as symbolic of the emerging nation-state) out of her purdah and the loving tutelage of her patriarchal husband Nikhilesh (symbolising the home) towards the amorous fiery passions of Sandip (symbolising the world), only to then be disillusioned by the militant extremism of the Sandip and the world and return to her husband and the home.

I adapt Tagore's world framework to incorporate my idea of public culture, as discussed above. Tagore's world is a fictional concept in the novel that is represented symbolically through Sandip and his militant *swadeshi* politics. Yet the world isn't just limited to the outside in terms of just the nation and its politics. For critics like Bandana Purkayastha (2003), the world provides an alternative cultural framework for rethinking the processes that lead to the formation of collective identities, public formation, and the incorporation of groups into societies other than nationalistic and communal frameworks. Tagore was always critical of nationalism and firmly believed that citizenship provided on the basis of nation states was an exclusionary framework as "It made some – whether they are individuals or groups or entire societies – more equal than others. Tagore's critique was based on his experience with the behaviour of contemporary western countries" (Purkayastha, 2003: 50). This idea of nation-state politics being limiting and exclusionary is also held by many contemporary scholars. For instance, Anna Triandafyllidou also talks about "the

double-edged character of national identity, namely its capacity of defining who is a member of the community but also who is a foreigner" (1998: 593). The politics of the nation are often based on the politics of othering. Despite their limitations, nation-state politics are a part of Tagore's conception of the world, albeit through their staunch critique. Sandip in the novel, symbolic of the world, represents militant *swadeshi* nationalist politics (which Tagore rejects through this ultimate repudiation of Sandip once Bimala returns to her husband). Yet Sandip as the world also represents a vast arena of possibilities and challenges that can occur when India's women and minorities (symbolised in the form of Bimala) attempt to participate and interact with the world. Partha Chatterjee critically examines Tagore's work in general and this novel in particular, referring to the fiction as raising the "woman question" where "the struggle to reconstitute the normative figure of the woman as an equal member of the people-nation remains" (2018: 386) is yet to be solved by various cultures. I adapt Chatterjee's "woman question" and view the world as a useful framework that helps in analysing all the challenges that occur while understanding the figure of the queer womxn within Indian public culture in my texts. In that sense, with my theorisation, I hope to raise the womxn question.

According to Purkayastha, Tagore's "home and the world" is a metaphor that is used to "denote three overlapping but distinct levels of society – the domestic sphere vs. the public sphere, the community vs. larger society, and the nation – state vs. the rest of the world" (2003: 50). Here the world is viewed as metaphor that is simultaneously the public sphere, the larger society and global world outside the Indian state. Similar to Purkasyastha, I too view the world as being a metaphor that denotes multiple and simultaneous types of Indian public culture (as defined earlier) that shape the expression of queer desires in my texts. The idea of nation is just one example of a public culture discussed under by definition of the world. Prior to discovering Tagore in depth, I had intended on referring to this Part as

'Nation', but upon writing my analysis I found that framework limiting and lacking originality. The women in all my key texts refer to a struggle to conflate their queer desires with an Indian national origin that criminalises them. But there are also other public cultures simultaneously operating within each text. Sharma's *Loving Women* (2006) deals with caste and class discourses in a rural context, Sukhthankar's *Facing the Mirror* (1999) refers to queer in urban metropolitan public cultures such as big city neighbourhoods and workplaces, while Namjoshi's *Goja* (2000) talks about this desire across three different countries in a diaspora context from an upper-caste privileged perspective. Hence, nation becomes a very limited term for all these various public contexts that I wish to interrogate within my texts.

Based on the above-mentioned statement by Purkayastha, the "home and the world" are "overlapping but distinct" (2003: 50). In other words, this division of the world and the home is to an extent arbitrary as there are certain times in the texts when the home (private culture) do intrude on the world (public culture). In the novel, Bimala is constantly struggling to cope with the ever-changing dynamic of her home and her world. She is conflicted in her love for Nikhilesh the gentle, tame but conservative husband, and desire for Sandip the amorous lover who puts her on a pedestal. For Tagore, the personal *is* political, as he shows allegorically that the idea of women and deification of femininity is exploited for militant political *swadeshi* gains (Purkayastha, 2003: 53). It is not possible to entirely separate queer womxn into neat and mutually exclusive categories of the public and the private or the home and the world. This is tacitly anticipated by Ashwini Sukthankar in the introduction to her anthology *Facing the Mirror*, where she describes the feeling of inhabiting a "lesbian" body as being a kind of "violence from within – a schizoid dismembering, the self, ripped into its public parts and its private parts" (1999: xvi). This ripping of the self into messy, scattered, and fragmented parts challenges the neatly demarcated private/public existence of identities. In the introduction of *Loving Women* we are told that Sharma's own feminist activism is

sparked and, ultimately, her lesbian identity awakened while watching feminist protests and sloganeering on television. She writes, “The boldness of these groups, bringing private issues into the public arena, initially shocked me and ought to have alienated me. Instead, I was drawn to them” (2006: 118-124). This is an interesting quotation, as it demonstrates the emancipatory impact of the world in the form of public protests. It also reveals the shattering of Sharma’s internalised belief that feminist issues (similar to queer desire) are only private battles that do not have a public face.

My adaptation of the public cultures as the world is also based on the foundational understanding that culture and traditions are not “singular, pure and transparently knowable” (Martin, 2003: 7). Hence, the world is always multi-layered and constantly shifting and evolving in a modern postcolonial context where culture is hybrid – made up of the influences of the past as well as the present context (Bhabha, 1994). I will also interrogate the so-called Indianness of this world not in terms of its geographical location but as an understanding of Indianness as writing that is situated in the knowledge of understanding India as country (a political national entity) and its subsequent freedoms, restrictions, and cultural properties (Sukhthankar, 1999: xix).

Tagore’s world is based on a “broader notion of connectedness” (Purkayastha, 2003: 50) that goes beyond the politics of nation and citizenship. Michael Collins states that for Tagore, more than the nation, the society and “unity with fellow men” was of utmost importance as “man had to realise himself in the social world” (2012: 157). It is however worth foregrounding that Collins also believes that this worldview is too idealistic and utopian to implement in the current globalised and capitalised world (2012: 160). While this may be true to an extent policy-wise, ideologically, Tagore was interested in questioning and challenging the “genealogies of ‘Indianness’” (Collins, 2012: 69). This combined with

Chatterjee's analysis of *Ghaire Baire* as raising the "woman question" (2018: 386) makes Tagore's world an apt Indian-origin, proto-feminist metaphor for understanding queer desire between womxn in Indian public culture. The inclusivity of the world also implies that my analysis is not limited to the nation but also critiques its intersection with other oppressive public discourses, for example the media, social culture, economics, caste, and state machinery such as the police force. In my next section, I will analyse the world as it appears in Sharma's *Loving Women*.

Chapter 5: Out of the World: Exclusion and Violation of Queer Underprivileged Womxn in Maya Sharma's *Loving Women*

There is a scene in Neeraj Ghaywan's 2021 short film for Netflix, *Geeli Pucchi* (Wet Kiss), that remains imprinted on my memory. It is a moment of the confession of queer desire between two women: Bharti Mondol (a Dalit factory worker, played by Konkona Sen Sharma) and Priya Sharma (a married Brahmin accounts manager in the same factory, played by Aditi Rao Hydari). The film shows us how Bharti is repeatedly denied the better-paying job of accounts manager despite being well qualified. By contrast, Priya gets the same job almost immediately due to her caste and class privilege, despite having no relevant skills or experience. Nonetheless, over time the two women develop a romantic bond where they tease, kiss hands and cheeks and share food with each other. However, throughout their courtship, Bharti senses Priya's casteist worldview and avoids revealing her actual caste with her until the moment of their admission of love. Prior to the moment when they share their feelings with each other, Priya is comfortably intimate with Bharti, unaware as she is of Bharti's caste position. The women hold hands and sit close to each another. Then Priya confesses to Bharti that she is unable to have sex with her husband as she is in love with the other woman. Emboldened by this declaration of love, Bharti encourages Priya to live her 'truth' and embrace her sexuality, revealing to her that she is in fact a Dalit woman. It is the next frame that is engraved into my consciousness. Priya instantly retreats and withdraws her hands from Bharti's as if burnt by her touch. Pallavi Paul (2021: n.p.) in her review of the film refers to this moment as Priya's "unsaid repulsion" at Bharti's caste origin. The image of the two women's abrupt parting of hands without the utterance of a single word left me with a visceral sensation of pain mixed with discomfort and disgust.

I felt pain because as a hopeful queer viewer I was hungry and eager for a transgressive Dalit working-class lesbian love story in a Hindi film. But my hopes for a conventional 'happy ending' were shattered. The feelings of discomfort and disgust were harder to disentangle since I, as an upper-caste woman, felt disgusted and uncomfortable at Priya's upper-class casteist behaviour. It was all too familiar. I had grown up seeing older generations react in equally visceral ways to lower-caste proximity. My grandmother separated our household help's utensils from our own to avoid any contact. While I abhorred my grandmother's attitude, I still felt immensely complicit. This scene triggered my old feelings of casteist complicity. My mind subconsciously evoked and felt repulsed by the sheer violence of the Indian discourse of untouchability that rejects Dalit bodies as impure, untouchable, dirty and less than human: fit only for menial labour. It also triggered some anxieties in me as an upper-caste middle-class researcher, analysing a book with a working-class focus like Maya Sharma's *Loving Women*, which was about a caste and class context I was unfamiliar with and privileged over.

How would I write reflexively about such womxn without feeling complicit in any caste–class oppression or biases? Sudeep Khanal states that a "researcher cannot disrupt gender and caste discrimination until they understand the self" (2021: 7). Hence, on prodding this anxiety and discomfort further I realised that it was also related to the structure of *Loving Women* itself. It is an ethnographic memoir of semi-structured interviews of "working-class" and "lesbian"[28] womxn written by Maya Sharma. Sharma refers to these women as "working-class" (31), but I prefer to use the term underprivileged instead. The term working-class only indicates a financial disparity between these womxn and the society they inhabit, thus not

[28] The term "lesbian" is in quotes because it is Sharma's understanding and collective labelling of her women participants' sexuality in her text and not mine. See the 1.2 **Terminology** section of Chapter 1 of this thesis for a detailed context on the genre and structure of this text.

factoring in the casteist bias these womxn face. The term underprivileged is more inclusive as it indicates the marginality of the womxn as compared to the rest of the society without pinning it down to only to their class position. Class and caste are both discourses that oppress queer desire in the world of Sharma's text. Interestingly, Sharma's subtitle for her text is *Being Lesbian in Unprivileged India*. Sharma refers to the India mentioned in the text as being unprivileged apart from the "working-class" womxn that she is writing about. Through my analysis of the text, I argue that that the marginality of being underprivileged or unprivileged is located phenomenologically in lived experiences (Ahmed, 2008: 2). This lack of privilege is marked on the bodies of these womxn and is not just rooted in the geo-political idea of India as a nation. Thus, the womxn and their world both are underprivileged. This world consists of the public cultures of caste and class oppression as well as criminalisation of queer desires, police brutality and media sensationalism.

It is important to recognise that caste is not the same as class in the text. Ramkrishna Mukherjee talks about how in currently in India "caste *is* class" (2000: 339) depicts the reality. Mukherjee claims that due to post-independence reforms like the caste reservations under the Mandal commission, several lower-caste communities have risen the ranks in terms of class. Sections of these communities now belong "within the spectrum of the high, middle, and low echelons of the class system in society" (2000: 339), which has sometimes led to tensions and a divide between a caste community into stronger and weaker sections. Despite being affluent as compared to before, casteism against these communities still exists. Research done by Pathania and Tierney shows that presently, even if lower castes have access to higher education and other facilities, most of the world around them views caste as a part of Indian culture and not as a structural shortcoming that needs to be overcome (2018: 10). Thus, caste is very much present *in* all levels of class. This is also evident in the text where all the underprivileged womxn interviewed are working-class. They haven't been

fortunate enough to earn their way up the ranks to be financially stable, but not all the womxn interviewed are lower caste. Caste in the text operates very insidiously. It is either not declared overtly by the lower-caste communities out of fear or becomes evident through the sheer violence the women go through at the hands of the state-machinery. Only one participant, Vimlesh (who is a working-class *brahmin*, the highest ranked caste) talks proudly about his[29] caste identity as a badge of honour. Vimlesh not only takes pride in his Brahminism but also looks down on the lower-caste *harijan* and *chamaar* communities living in his colony. Vimlesh believes that these lower castes are taking away jobs meant for his caste due to their class mobility under the reservation system (964). This is an interesting example as it proves that despite all participants being working-class, caste hierarchies still exist sometimes in the same class. This also proves that while all the participants in the text are underprivileged, they are not underprivileged in the same way. Caste and class are separate but not mutually exclusive parts of this world.

Similar to myself, Sharma is an upper-caste middle-class woman writing about underprivileged womxn. My anxieties, discomfort and ethical responsibilities as a researcher derive from the fact that not only do I have to be continually reflexive about my perspective about such a nuanced world portrayed in the text but also to keenly observe Sharma's gaze in the text. Throughout my analysis this dual presence of the privileged gaze will be discussed. A similar sense of apprehension and discomfort is also felt by Sharma herself while she conducts semi-structured interviews with these womxn. The memoir is tinged with Sharma's awareness of being an outsider in the caste and class context. In her introduction, Sharma writes, "I was disturbed by the evident class difference between myself as the researcher and the subjects I hoped to write about" (48). She also states that "It was not an easy decision to

[29] Even though I am not analysing Vimlesh's story in detail in this chapter, I use the pronouns he/him/his because Vimlesh, despite being born as a AFAB, self-identities as male, according to Sharma (491).

write about a category of women in whose presence my class gave me automatic entitlements" (48-55). Sharma is self-reflexive, aware, and disturbed by the class gap between her and her interviewees. That said Sharma does not mention any caste gap between herself and her participants. I believe this to be an unconscious omission indicating a form of upper-caste denialism and a lack of acknowledgement of caste as a structural, fundamental, and visible problem.

Sharma states that she is nonetheless encouraged to write about these womxn. After years of activism with underprivileged womxn for the Indian feminist and labour movements, Sharma developed "close friendships and strong bonds" (48) with several womxn. For example, Sharma claims that her "partnership" with Shanti,[30] a well-known underprivileged activist, "emboldened" her (55). Sharma also argues in her introduction that Shanti made her "unflinchingly aware of my class privileges, and yet made me see that those very entitlements, including education, enabled me to go about the task of documenting these stories. I was able to travel, take leave from my regular full-time job, use technology, access infrastructure, and make contacts" (55). It is true that Sharma's "automatic entitlements" (48) allow her to do all the things listed here, and that she is thereby enabled to write this text. Yet Shanti is someone who does not have these privileges of literacy, a stable job, infrastructure, and so forth. I submit that Sharma pacifies her own discomfort through Shanti's presence in the text. Shanti's endorsement makes her feel better about the gap between her and her research participants. But since we never hear from Shanti directly in the text, there is no way to state whether this endorsement is what Sharma claims it to be. Even if Shanti does support Sharma in her endeavours, aids her discomfort and gives it her underprivileged approval, this

[30] I talk about the Shanti–Sharma dynamic in much more detail in the **Introduction** of this thesis. Shanti is mentioned here in order to highlight Sharma's discomfort at the caste and class gap between her and her interviewees.

"partnership" will always be unequal as the caste–class disparity remains. Watching *Geeli Pucchi* led me to discover both my own and then Sharma's discomfort at caste–class representations. This discomfort drove the realisation that while I may dream of intersectional and transgressive representations of queer desire, this desire cannot be separated from the impact of the classist and casteist world in which it exists.

The first account analysed from Sharma's text, of Rekha and Dolly, is a prime example of how the media world intersects with the world of criminalised homosexuality.[31] Sharma's accounts of Rekha and Dolly and of Payal and Menaka are two examples of how queer desire in underprivileged contexts is criminalised and pathologized by state-run apparatuses such as newspapers and media. Criminality exists as an undercurrent for many of the women in all my key texts, since the anti-sodomy law was in effect when the three texts were written. However, the direct involvement of the media is seen in two accounts of Rekha and Dolly and Menaka and Payal. The media sensationalism and direct involvement of the police is due to the caste and class position of these women. Priyam Ghosh's research on media coverage on lesbians in the mid-1990s reveals that the phenomenon of "lesbian suicides", where two lesbian lovers take their own lives once separated, became very common in rural and underprivileged parts of the country. This led to a lot of sensational media coverage and police intervention in such neighbourhoods (2022: 105-105). The world for such women then became a complex navigation of police, the media, family members and queer desire. Sharma refers to these two stories as the product of "fact-finding visits to the subjects' homes after the relationship had been exposed in the newspapers and had become a cause for public scandal" (2006: 425). Sharma co-opts this language of criminality (only in these two accounts) by referring to her visits to these women's homes as "fact-finding visits".

[31] See Alok Gupta (2006) for a detailed analysis of the formation and implementation of the colonial anti-sodomy law in India that criminalises un-natural same-sex intercourse.

Not unlike a crime scene investigator, she arrives at a scene of crime to find and piece together information. These accounts are also called "fact-finding missions" because there is a high probability that Sharma wouldn't even have known about the existence of these poor working-class women if it weren't for the perverse media attention given to them. Sharma is also aware of the state-run's media's homophobic reporting[32] during the coverage of the *Fire* film protests in 1998. Sharma, as an activist, was a part of the lesbian groups fighting for visibility around the time of the film's release, and she refers quite extensively in her introduction to the regressive media response (202). She knows that the media reports half-facts and that another version of truth 'truth' from the field needs to be investigated (at least by a queer ally). As such, the term "fact-finding missions" seems appropriate in that context. She also refers to the women as "subjects". This could stem from Sharma's activist desire to cast light on these women's subjectivities within the world. Out of the two accounts mentioning the media, I will only analyse the Dolly and Rekha one in detail. I have also previously analysed the narrative of Dolly and Rekha narrative in detail but with the purview of the theme of the home.

We are told that Sharma became aware of Dolly and Rekha because their relationship made front-page headlines in a Hindi newspaper in 2001. Both women are Hindu, working-class and not from a privileged caste. They also ran away from their homes in the city of Indore and "went to a town in a different state and got married to one another. They then took shelter within a popular religious sect. From here they were forcibly retrieved by the police after their families lodged a Missing Person's Report" (443). The women suffered intense trauma when they were forcibly separated and returned to their families. It took Sharma four

[32] See Naisargi N. Dave's (2011) article on how the "incommensurable" lesbian activists and protests put the Indian media and society into a frenzy, and Shohini Ghosh (2010) for a detailed analysis of the media controversy *Fire* created. The *Fire* protests were the first collective media response to the existence of lesbians in India, so it is essential to refer to them and their influence.

days to find the names and addresses of the women through the help of the reporting journalist. Until that time the women were still in police custody. Sharma even had to go to the police to retrieve the house addresses of the two women. By the time Sharma reached Indore, the women had been released and sent to their homes (799). While we know little of what happened to the women in police custody it could not have been anything but harrowing for these two young working-class women. In this case, we can see the intensity of the homophobia that the women have to deal with in the world around them, simply because they chose to act on their queer desire by deciding to be together.

The intrusion of the home into the world is also seen in this account as their love is viewed as a punishable transgression. First this is the stance of their own families, who decide to go to the police once the women leave home together. Ghosh also talks about how the sensationalistic "lesbian suicide" coverage of lesbians in the 1990s gave rise to another dimension in the good versus bad woman binary discourse as parents tended to see any close female friendship as a threat to heteronormativity (2022: 107). Unsurprisingly, Rekha and Dolly's families seem very threatened by their close bond. Their desire is subsequently sensationalised by the media, and they are then tormented police authorities. By the time Sharma is able to reach these women and attempt to offer any form of support, the women are sealed off in a cocoon of silence and trauma. Police brutality is ominously present in the text but there is a complete absence of any description of what the police actually did with these women while they were in custody. Sharma cannot access this information because the police after inflicting their brutality release the women back to their family. When Sharma is finally able to locate and enter into Rekha's home, Rekha is guarded constantly by the rabid patriarch of her family. This is her uncle, who claims that he was "worried" about Rekha, even as he informs Sharma that "It violates our family honour when women run away" (869). This discourse of women being the vessels of the honour of the entire family alludes to the

practice of honour-based violence where it is the legitimate customary duty of male members of the family to punish women for transgressing sexual boundaries. This practice is based in caste-based notions of endogamy and compulsory heterosexuality (Singhal, 2014). The violence of the world is then followed by the violence of the home, and the vicious cycle continues. Sharma has no privacy or space to ask Rekha directly about the abuse she suffered in custody while in the family's presence. In her introduction, Sharma criticises the media reporting of this case by stating that, "the other half of this story, in which families, communities and the state conspire to silence the sexual lives of lesbian subjects even further, in defence of family/community honour that has been transgressed by the subjects, found no space at all in the paper" (2006: 446). The media world does not acknowledge the violence done by the home. The world and the home become the keepers of each other's homophobic violence, enabling this vicious cycle to continue unabated.

The patriarchal uncle also completely negates Rekha and Dolly's elopement by mockingly joking with Sharma: "These two say that they have got married. Tell me, can such a thing be possible?" (857). This nullification of "lesbianism" in the eyes of the family and the police explains why a Missing Person's Report is filed. Here, it is noteworthy that while the transgression of the women is punished both publicly and privately, the reason behind this transgression, namely queer desire, is denied. Everyone truly believes that Rekha is just a missing wayward young woman and not someone who has willingly decided to be with a woman. Queer desire is a non-existent possibility. The legal state machinery heavily aids this non-existence and invisiblisation of "lesbian" sexualities. The state with its anti-sodomy law and "muddy rhetoric criminalises what is perceived to be male homosexual activity, that is, the act of sodomy and its sexual practitioners who supposedly go 'against the order of nature'. Lesbianism is not specified as a criminal act, but since it is perceived as 'unnatural', it is illegal by analogy" (Sharma, 2006: 295). Thus, even the criminality of queer desire

between womxn is based on unclear indirect parameters, making the law easily mouldable in favour of those in power. For Sharma the state itself is the biggest offender in this regard, as it bases "lesbian lives" on a "fundamental paradox" of "their complete absence as legal subjects. Since they do not exist in the eyes of the law, they do not violate the law. But nor do they have any political or social rights" (289). This is a fundamental worldly problem for queer womxn, for in the absence of clear legal guidelines their status as participating Indian citizens and legal subjects does not exist. They cannot claim any space in the political world. Rekha and Dolly's marriage is invalidated, and a police complaint allows the women to be separated and kept in legal custody. There is no mechanism in the entire nation-state machinery that protects them and prevents such atrocities from happening.

The other arm of the world that further highlights and sensationalises the women's transgression is the media. The newspaper article that spotlights the women's elopement as the front-page story changes the women's first names to protect them and provides no other markers of their identity. Yet, later, we are told that despite this the newspaper asked the reporting journalist to send in pictures of the women for publication. Luckily these weren't published in the paper, as 9/11 happened around the same time and the "lesbian" elopement news story stopped being breaking news (443). But another newspaper did pick up the story and published their pictures alongside an article. While these newspaper articles are not analysed by Sharma in detail in her text, she comments that the politics of these newspapers is not in favour of the women. There is also no follow-up by either of the media reporters on the current situation of the two women. All the "fact-finding" and offers of help are left to activists like Sharma and her support system of working-class aides. Clearly in this case they do not care about maintaining the anonymity of two young working-class women and nor do they view their elopement as legitimate.

Sharma's attempts at resistance lie in her "fact-finding" visits where she deceives her way into Rekha's house accompanied by the reporting journalist who first wrote about Rekha and Dolly. She lies about being from a fictitious "Mahila Sudharak Samiti" (Women's Improvement Committee) implying that she is here to counsel and "admonish" Rekha for her transgressions (823). This co-opting of the persona of a 'crime' scene investigator and 'improvement' officer discourse is essential for Sharma to gather any information even if she must morally compromise herself. Even then she is heavily scrutinised and gets barely an hour with Rekha while being constantly surrounded by family members and the overbearing uncle. Even while entering Rekha's underprivileged neighbourhood, Sharma records feeling a "collective gaze" of the community upon her "middle-class appearance" which "added to the suspicion that quietly smouldered there after the scandal of the two women running away from their neighbourhood" (811). This indicates that while the police and journalists might have left Rekha's neighbourhood, the community policing continues. Sharma also admits that she overestimated her access to Rekha for she believed naively that Rekha would talk to her openly. But Sharma soon realises that "having had their privacy and autonomy violated and censored by kin, by the media, the police and other authorities, they were forced back into the realm of silence, which became their mode of resistance, means of protection, dignity, even sanity" (869). It now behoves us to better understand and contextualise this silence.

Silence is the dominant form of communication that Sharma has with both Rekha and Dolly. She looks for traces of resistance in silences, body languages and non-verbal cues. Sharma refers to a "certain defiance" emanating from Rekha's body as she stood in the middle of the room, surrounded by her oppressive family, her "circle of keepers", while casually flicking and drying her hair with the towel (857). Rekha and Sharma's only conversation is monitored by the family and hinges on a discussion of Rekha's tailoring

skills. Sharma is curious to know what Rekha can do to sustain herself if she is to fight her family's insistence on heterosexual marriage. Rekha speaks proudly of her stitching skills and even brings a *salwar kameez*[33] she stitched herself to show Sharma while they converse (880). Feminist work posits stitching, sewing and embroidery as forms of feminine expression that are equally valuable as writing and speech-making (Houston and Kramarae, 1991: 395). These non-verbal non-written and silent forms of expression offer a means of coping and healing, especially for underprivileged women who often do not have access to literacy and education. In this case, sewing can even become a form of independent livelihood and a way out for Rekha.

Dolly's presence in this narrative is felt through her absence. Rekha's uncle angrily informs Sharma that Dolly has filed a counter-police complaint against Rekha's family for not allowing Rekha to meet her. The police now begin "pestering" Rekha's family, which means agitating the uncle and his notions about family reputation and honour (885). Dolly now uses the same state machinery of the police which had been used to target her to fight back. For Louis Althusser the police force forms a part of the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) along with the government and the legal systems. The job of the RSAs is to maintain and reproduce the hegemonic power of the state through forms of violence, both physical and non-physical (for example administrative violence) (1970: 14). As the legal discourse lacks any clear rhetoric around queer between women, the police do not have any clear guidelines on how to act. Instead, they respond on a complaint-by-complaint basis. Dolly takes advantage of this legal and policing blind spot to file a complaint against Rekha's homophobic family. This redirection of the police RSA violence is her attempt from her

[33] A traditional dress worn by women in South Asia. The *salwar* forms the pleated trouser whereas the *kameez* forms the long shirt.

underprivileged background to show resistance and try to “seize state power” (Althusser, 1970: 13) to gain some control in a heteronormative capitalist world.

Sharma tries to enter Dolly’s house, but she is sarcastically shooed away by an unidentified woman who retorts, “"Why? It is all over the newspapers, can’t you get your information from there? Besides, she is not home!” (902). The comment is contemptuous because it posits Sharma again as an unwelcome curious outsider who is only here to further perpetuate the media scandal that Dolly and Rekha’s story became due to the shoddy newspaper coverage. Everyone around Dolly is now extremely suspicious of outsiders and Sharma’s ruse of belonging to a Women’s Improvement Committee does not work either. The unidentified woman further lambasts Sharma with the following words: “We don’t want any of your kind here. Go away!” (906). This shows how small working-class communities do not even trust local women’s groups in serious matters involving family and state machinery. Dolly does not come out and meet Sharma. This refusal to meet as well as Dolly’s counter-police complaint against Rekha’s family is read by Sharma as a form of resistance from Dolly. Sharma claims that a part of her was “deeply moved by her refusal to see me. As long as anger beats with our hearts, there is hope” (917). Rekha’s silence and Dolly’s absence and anger are Sharma’s interpretations of a mode of resistance that may not always be overt or completely averse to taking the help of nation-state machinery such as the police. It is important to remember that there is no sure way of knowing whether Rekha’s silence and Dolly’s anger actually exist and intend to mean what Sharma observes them to mean since we never get any access to the women directly. A postscript right after the narrative informs us that eventually the police drop all complaints against the women and order the families to allow them to meet each other (923). Yet this in no way is an indication of whether the women found a sense of a place in the world. It only means that the world decided not to criminally prosecute them for their desires.

The next account analysed from the Sharma text is the story of Shiela – a violent and graphic story of a queer womxn with a gender-questioning identity. Shiela was born in a woman's body but sartorially dresses in a masculine fashion. There is evidence in *Loving Women* that indicates that Shiela is questioning their gender. In a direct conversation with Sharma, Shiela reveals that they used to write love letters to Lali (one of their lovers) under the false male pseudonym of Ravi (1987). This indicates that they were exploring a masculine identity even if it was hypothetical. But Shiela never explicitly comes out as a womxn person in the text. This is mostly because Shiela is a non-English speaking working-class subject and Western English gender terminology isn't available to them. Even though Sharma[34] keeps using she/her pronoun for them, I still believe that the "they/them" pronoun is the most appropriate choice for me to use for Shiela as it 'lets the subaltern subject speak' in the Spivakian sense without neatly covering the gaps and silences of Shiela's developing gender expression. Hence, presenting and respecting the gaps and silences in my texts as they are, is part of my endeavour and hence the "they/them" fits suitably. This pronoun also doesn't position Shiela's lack of access to colonial language in a negative light by positing Western English terminology as the only path to valid queer existence.

I argue that this layer of masculine appearance adds another layer of violence, criminality and social ostracization to Shiela's world. In fact, Sharma first hears about Shiela

[34] Sharma being an elder activist may not be aware of the use of gender-neutral pronouns. *Loving Women* came out in 2006, a time when cis same-sex desire had just been discussed in the Indian public context after the release of *Fire.* There was no discussion or debate about non-cis/trans queer desire or pronouns at that point in the Indian context.

All this changed post 2009, when the Supreme Court of India overturned the anti-sodomy law that criminalised homosexuality for the first time. R. Raja Rao states that this moment in the legal system combined with the recognition of transgender as a third gender in 2014 led to a lot of gay and trans people feeling emboldened enough to occupy public space. This also presumably led to the release of several films and documentaries discussing non-cis queer desire (2017: 133-136).

It is only after 2014 that awareness of gender-neutral pronouns began to enter mainstream public discourse. Interestingly, Sharma has just published another text titled, *Footprints of a Queer History: Life Stories from Gujarat* (2022) This is a collection of stories of mostly trans men from the state of Gujarat. Here Sharma acknowledges the usefulness of the "they/them" pronoun as it accommodates the maximum amount of gender fluidity. She even admits to "not knowing any better" (2022: 7) until now with regards to her knowledge of pronouns. It is refreshing to see Sharma, as an older academic, keeping up to date with today's queer politics.

through a construction worker named Babulal who describes Shiela as an aggressive, non-rent paying illegal tenant (1878). Due to her activist work with the feminist labour movement, Sharma organises several meetings in working-class neighbourhoods where community members come to solve their grievances after finishing their daily chores (1868). The idea behind these meetings is to offer community support, building contacts and a rapport with the working-class people. It is in one such meeting that Babulal complains about Shiela and describes them as an orphaned vagabond. He states that Sheila refused to pay up, move out and even brought thugs to the house to intimidate Babulal and his wife (1878). This claim of Shiela bringing thugs to the house to threaten Babulal further hardens their criminal status by positing to the reader that Shiela also keeps company of bad men and goons. Sharma's interest in Shiela is piqued, she tells us, when Babulal grimaced over the fact that Shiela has also "struck a friendship" (1878) with his daughter Lali and now "Lali wants to be with Shiela all the time. They were inseparable, eating, sleeping, walking around together. She seems to have discarded us, her own family, like an old piece of furniture" (1884). Sharma writes that she realised this wasn't a tenant–landlord conflict but a family being threatened by the growing intimacy and queer desire between two consenting queer people. To us as readers, Shiela is already being subject to a witch hunt by the family while Lali is sent to stay away from home with her relatives as a form of punishment (1890). Following Lali's punishment, Babulal wanted to punish Shiela for their alleged crime and hence he kept insisting that Sharma "accompany him to the village Shiela claimed she was from, to 'collect evidence' that would support his case" (1895). The term "collect evidence" further perpetuates Babulal's desire to pin Shiela down as a criminal individual. Sharma agreed to travel to Shiela's village as by now she wanted to further investigate all claims.

We are informed that Shiela's village lay two hours away from the capital city of Delhi in an underdeveloped and neglected area in the neighbouring state of Haryana. The

state of Haryana is currently also infamous for its skewed sex ratio, casteist governance by *khap panchayat*s[35] and bride trafficking (Thapar-Björkert and Ranwa, 2021: 119). Needless to say, Haryana, in terms of societal codes and norms for women as well as for gender-questioning individuals,[36] is deeply rooted in misogyny, casteism and patriarchy. Initially, Sharma is surprised to find out that Shiela is well liked and respected by the village residents even though they don't conform to the traditional social appearance of a woman. Several villagers give multiple descriptions of Shiela as "not a bad woman" (1902). But all this changes when Shiela develops a close friendship with an unnamed Muslim woman. This friendship is fairly public, and the unnamed Muslim woman's family vehemently oppose this closeness. The same villagers, upon discovering this close friendship, suddenly turn on Shiela and accuse them of "selling women" (1902). This notion of "selling women" amounts to the villagers accusing Shiela of being a pimp and luring innocent women into their trap. I argue that this is also because of Shiela's masculine appearance. The villagers find it easier to demonise Shiela and her masculine appearance than accept the fact that the unnamed Muslim woman consensually befriended them. Shiela is thrown out of the village but returns quietly and elopes with the unnamed Muslim woman. The two partners are later identified and captured from a neighbouring village. What happens to Shiela next is a type of mob lynching. Sharma writes:

> Shiela was locked up for two days, beaten and stripped to verify that she was indeed a woman. Before being released, her face was blackened and she was paraded around

[35] *Khap panchayats* are rural male-dominated governing bodies made of village council elders, similar to a regular Indian village *panchayat*. The main difference between a *khap* and regular *panchayat* is that a kh*ap panchayat* even though, it is meant to be a multi-caste comprising body, it usually ends up being dominated by one economically powerful caste section for example the *Jats* in the areas of Haryana, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh (Thapar-Björkert and Ranwa, 2021: 125). This increases the possibility of them being a lot more casteist, homophonic and misogynistic.

[36] Please note that I use the term gender-questioning individuals because not only is it trans inclusive but it is also inclusive to individuals like Shiela who are born in feminine bodies but do not express any explicit identification with any trans identity in their personal narrative.

> the village with a garland of shoes around her neck. A man who took part in this proudly declared, "We did not report the incident to the police because our daughter would also have been dragged into the mess. Besides, the whole affair of two women developing such relations would have brought shame upon our village. We settled things amongst ourselves." (Sharma, 2006: 1908)

I argue that Shiela's masculine presentation plays a huge role in the brutality of this violence especially during the part where they are stripped to indeed verify if they are a woman. I also quote this traumatic description to emphasise the extent of forms of violence (where a body is stripped naked, paraded in the community with a blackened face and shoes as public spectacle to be made an example of) performed on lower-caste individuals particularly in the Indian context. While Shiela's caste is not explicitly mentioned in the text and neither is their religion, we can safely presume that Shiela does not belong to an upper caste. Bina B. Hanchinamani's work chronicles in detail how Dalits and tribals are subjected to this exact form of punishment if they flout any upper-caste norms set by their community (2001: 15). Similarly, Anil Kumar Biswas explains how this form of punishment along with burning practices are used during the witch hunting of women in rural tribal Indian communities (2018: 131).

What happened to Shiela is an example of this delusional and violent form of 'community justice' where privileged and powerful members of a community take matters into their own hands by deciding that someone has brought 'shame' on them, and thus resort to 'settling things' amongst themselves. As discussed previously, this idea of honour and shame is always linked to caste endogamy, women, gender-questioning individuals and their sexual agency (Singhal, 2014). As I also argued above, Shiela's masculine appearance does add to the amount of violence to which they are subjected. The 'verification' or rather

violation of Shiela to confirm whether they are a 'woman' is a form of transphobic and homophonic community violence. It is also significant that it is only Shiela, the masculine-presenting individual, who is subjected to such a grotesque public punishment while the unnamed Muslim woman partner remains unmentioned in the villagers' accounts to Sharma. The status given to the Muslim woman is that of "our daughter" or "*hamari beti*" (1908), whereas the masculine-presenting Shiela is villainised, brutalised and excluded from any form of community membership. In the quotation cited above Sharma is informed that the police weren't involved in this incident to protect the reputation of "our daughter" (1908). Sharma writes that the village men flaunted this "heroic deed" of violating Shiela so publicly that their crime could not have been executed without the "connivance of the police" (1914). I agree with Sharma here as *khap panchayats* and their vigilante form of 'communal justice' are an extension of Althusserian RSAs. This is because, similar to the police and governments, the *panchayat*'s ultimate aim is to reproduce and sustain hegemonic modes of power through violence. The police and the *khaps* work together in tandem to reproduce state power (Althusser, 1970: 16).

Sharma also makes an important point about this violent incident with Shiela. She states: "The episode was sobering for us [Sharma and her team of underprivileged aides] in another respect as well, in reminding us that we too, as representatives of women's rights, intervened in social and family conflicts and settled them according to our own reckonings and sense of justice" (1914). This is a self-reflexive comment regarding Sharma's own involvement in the process of providing support and justice to minority communities. She is not justifying the violent means of governance adopted by the *khap panchayats*. But just like the *panchayats* Sharma is attempting to provide a vigilante, external and unstructured form of justice for victimised underprivileged queer women. Sharma and her aides operate like their own version of a *panchayat* solving rural cases door to door by attempting to provide their

version of social justice in each matter. Either way both the *khaps* and Sharma can only intervene to this extent because there is a lack of state machinery protecting these underprivileged women. This proves a larger point about how justice and legality operate in the world as discourse. In the absence of a clear legal framework applied to minority communities such as queer identities vigilantism can functions a double-edged sword of support and brutalisation.

So far in my discussion, we have seen that Shiela is villainised and brutalised by the world. The final layer of the world's brutality comes from Shiela's lover Lali who accuses Shiela of being a womaniser who used Lali for her emotions and body, while being in a relationship with two other neighbourhood women at the same time (1926). Sharma writes that her task now as an objective researcher is to verify all these worldly claims made about Shiela. She travels back to Delhi and is finally able to locate Shiela in a nameless, illegal, and "unsanctioned" (1948) slum colony of Delhi, filled with "fugitives who had broken the rules and wanted to cut loose from given identities" (1954). It is here in a locality of people shunned and misunderstood by the world that Sharma finally finds Shiela sitting at a *paanwala* (betel nut) shop. Sharma describes them at first sight as follows:

> As the shop came into sight Babulal stopped us and pointed to a young person dressed in a white shirt and green pants. Her hair was very short. "There she is." She sat between two policemen in khaki uniforms, her legs slightly apart. She seemed perfectly at ease in the public world of men, one with them, drinking tea. From her posture it was impossible to tell that she was a woman. (2006: 1965)

This mention of Shiela sitting "between two policemen" very comfortably is jarring for the reader given the alleged public brutalisation that Shiela had to go through in their village at the hands of RSAs like the *khap panchayats* that often work indirectly with the approval of

the police. Shiela seems surprisingly comfortable amongst authority figures in a public market, at least according to Sharma. Sharma earlier states that she found Shiela in an unnamed locality of misfits and outsiders where "the locality took them all in without discrimination and sheltered them all equally, for a price much lower than the price extorted by the current they were swimming against" (1954). While this may make it seem as though Shiela now lives in an egalitarian ecosystem where the boundaries between the oppressor and oppressed are slightly blurred, I argue, in agreement with Sharma's later field notes, that Shiela still exists very much in a cis man's world where befriending your oppressors is the greatest survival mechanism (1981). This also explains why Shiela keeps company with several goons and thugs. Sharma also states that this locality and its people comprise an environment where Shiela did not give their "struggles or her choices any validity. As long as we stayed in that spot with her, our manner would have to match the setting" (1981). This is an important quote to analyse because it conveys Sharma's view of Shiela's world. For Sharma this locality, which is a part of Shiela's world, is filled with shady characters who do not create a safe space for Shiela and their queer desires. Sharma implies that she cannot have an honest conversation with Shiela in such a setting unless she adopts a threatening manner matching this environment.

While it may seem like Sharma is judging this unnamed locality from a moralistic and classist perspective, her judgement also comes from experiences of fear and rejection because in places like these it is not the police or the *paanwala* who are the outsiders but Sharma herself. Sharma as an upper-caste woman and activist is entering this space to talk about queer desire. She is looked at suspiciously by the *paanwala* who recognises her and her aides as activists and enquires, "'What is it that brings you here now? Last time you had rescued our locality boys from the police, this time what is the problem?' (1965). The *paanwala*'s exasperated comment is revealing of how underprivileged communities are rightly suspicious

of upper-caste activists in their neighbourhoods. Clearly this is not the first time the *paanwala* has witnessed 'help' being offered by outsiders like Sharma, which is why he recognises her and her aides.

The task of talking to Shiela about their desires seem almost impossible in such a public space, which is why Sharma resorts to, what I term as her. 'tactics'. These tactics are Sharma's way of not just extracting relevant information out of her subjects but also a self-check and navigation of her own uncomfortable upper-caste and -class position in each instance. She states that her research terrain was "simultaneously exhilarating and punishing, prov[ing] to be a great leveller. I had to begin from the very basics in each case, had to constantly redefine my approach to my subjects and to their contexts, because the material I was seeking often evaded me" (60). In this context Sharma has to navigate her own upper-caste and -class positionality, the world in the form of the presence of the police, local community members and a queer subject with an alleged history of public punishment and brutalisation.

Sharma uses the collective term "we" in this instance, implying that she wasn't alone in this locality but was with her aides. One of Sharma's aides began talking to the police as a ruse while another aide took Shiela aside and directly confronted them with Babulal's accusations of illegal tenancy. Shiela denied all the allegations. The approach taken to communicate with Shiela is attack and "intimidation" since "open communication" about a love affair between Shiela and Babulal's daughter Lali would not be possible in such a public market. Yet, the intimidation doesn't work, and Sharma is forced to whisk Shiela away from the police and ask them directly about their sexual relationship with Lali (1981). It is only at this point that Shiela's defensive exterior softens and their hostility turns into ease when they realise that Sharma is aware of and supports queer desire. Sharma writes: "We had touched a

raw nerve. ‘Come,’ she said in a voice heavy with unshed tears, ‘let’s go to my house, I will tell you everything.’ As we moved off we heard one of the men exclaiming, Strange, how can two women do it?'" (1987). This is a telling moment as it shows us that it is not possible to have a private conversation in a public place. It also shows us that there is no place for queer desire between two queer people without a cis man commenting on the validity of that sexual relationship. The world and public culture still remain a cis man’s world.

Shiela inviting Sharma to their home in the quotation cited above is another example of the home overlapping with the world, suggesting that in some contexts conversations about queer desire can only happen within the privacy of the home. Thereafter, Sharma gradually learns about Shiela’s affairs not only with Lali but also several other women, the latest incident being her infatuation with a widowed woman named Manju. Shiela denies all the criminal charges made against them by Babulal. Yet Sharma and her aides hesitate to trust Shiela and describe them as being somewhat of a charmer in life where “promiscuity and its related exploitative modes seemed to be a way of life with her” (2005). They judge them morally (if not criminally) for being promiscuous.[37]

When Sharma and her aides finally build a rapport over time with Shiela, they begin visiting their home frequently. During one such visit they find a long elbow wound running down their arm. Sharma promptly wonders if this scar is a remnant of Shiela’s brutal public violation by the villagers and so directly asks Shiela if they had ever been beaten. Shiela immediately responds with a “vehemence that took us all by surprise. ‘If you are asking me this because of my arm, I can tell you it was not because I was beaten up. No one would dare

[37] I am deliberately choosing not to go into the details of Shiela’s romantic liaisons with other women because they only occur in the private domain of the home.

to beat me'" (2052). Shiela is astute enough to know that people notice their bodily scars. They choose not to break their silence and discuss the incident with Sharma.

Sharma realises soon that no matter how much rapport she attempts to build with Shiela they would "never acknowledge the incident of being locked up in the village, or anything that was even remotely connected with it. And we had nothing to verify the story. It would be her word against the villagers" (2052). There is no concrete way of proving if this injury is a result of village violence as Shiela attributes it to a *rickshaw* fall, but based on the vile gloating of the village men I presume that it is. This lack of acknowledgement is presented to us without commentary in the text because Sharma does not view this as a failure in any sense. Sharma in her introduction writes: "We have to acknowledge the silence between the urban and rural contexts, between activists with class privilege and those from the working class, between our own varying levels of Westernisation and use of English, and the grassroots reality we were trying to understand in its own languages" (580).

As I have discussed, this denial and silence is an example of caste and class gaps between Sharma and her participants. Even though both Sharma and Shiela are queer individuals, the nature of Shiela's public brutalisation, as previously discussed, is shaped in their caste-, class- and gender-questioning positionality. Sharma as an upper-caste class woman would never be subjected to this kind of violence in the public domain. Silence sometimes is the only communication that can occur if the gap between two parties is very large. The aim of my analysis is to present the gaps, rejections, and silences of the participants without attempting to smooth them over with discourse. Sharma writes that,

> sometimes apparent lies are in fact the existential truth. And no matter how frustrated we sometimes became when the doors were shut in our faces, no matter how agitated we felt at the open denial, we committed ourselves to recording whatever was

> possible to record the denials, the affirmations and the circumstances and contexts in which they were rooted, for it was the only way to give an authentic picture of the ground realities, of things as they actually are (Sharma, 2006:101).

Shiela chooses denial to be the best mechanism in this instance, proving that not all silences need to be broken; rather some just need to be presented as critique of structural gaps and failures of the world.

Sharma is however able to discuss one aspect of the world with Shiela and that is activism and protest culture. Shiela doesn't mention the term lesbian but informs Sharma that they have seen the film *Fire* and are aware of the media reports of the film being banned. Shiela also mentions that they had no idea about the pro-*Fire* protests by lesbian NGOs like CALERI. They urge Sharma to distribute more awareness pamphlets, especially in slums so that people like them can find more support (2103). Shiela is aware, then, of some public moments in the history of Indian lesbian desire. Their wish for more pamphlets also reveals their desire to be a part of a wider support system for individuals like them. Despite the graphic violence, Shiela's narrative ends on a humorous and cheeky note. They were living in with their lover Manju during Sharma's last visit to their house. In the end Shiela "half-jokingly" requests that Sharma host regular meetings with queer womxn twice a month where "We can all meet and talk about such things. You know what I mean. We can drop in . . .' and then with a twinkle in her eye, 'but make sure there is a bed there . . . !'" (2119). Shiela cheekily displays their Casanova, flirtatious nature even while attempting to get involved in activism. Sharma views Shiela as a self-made, independent individual who left home at an early age and traversed a "path that cuts through sex, gender, caste, class, and religion, challenging the received notions of womanhood. Though uprooted several times, she fights back to grow again in places with little water and harsh sun and cold" (2034). This is a very

apt description of Shiela as someone who has survived and thrived in spite of the world's best attempts at degrading their humanity.

Concluding Remarks and reimagination of queer desire in *Loving Women*

I began writing this chapter triggered by a casteist complicity stirred up by a movie scene. My aim was to understand and analyse the impact of public discourses and culture or the world on underprivileged queer desire in *Loving Women*. My analysis suggests that this world in the text, does not accommodate queer desire. In fact, it attempts to control, violate, and subjugate it to criminal, heterosexual patriarchal discourse in the public domain. This makes a positive expression of queer desire between womxn in the underprivileged world very difficult. In the introduction to her text, based on her experience with the Indian feminist movement, Sharma states that because public discourse about "lesbianism" does not exist, the women's movement is hesitant to include "lesbian" issues in their form of activism. The support that they do offer is at a specific case-by-case basis and private level (25). As a result of this lack of public support from the feminist movement, individuals like Shiela aren't aware of the pamphlets distributed by lesbian NGOs during the release of *Fire.* Sharma's text is vitally important because it succeeds as a successful first attempt at addressing the "larger umbrella of cultural silence around issues of alternative sexuality" (31) in the world, especially in the hopes of an "emergence of a collective voice and at least fragments of visibility" (37) for underprivileged queer womxn. Sharma also collected and wrote the life stories to break this vicious cycle of womxn coming forward to tell their stories but then themselves refusing to put them in print due to a lack of support from the world.

My analysis also demonstrates that underprivileged worlds are not only about caste but about an interaction of caste with class, gender, police, and the media. Caste however becomes the underlying factor that decides the brutality of the violence as in the case of Shiela. Satish Deshpande talks about the "central predicament of caste today – its hyper visibility for the so-called lower castes and its invisibility for the so-called upper caste" (2013: 32). This is especially true in the text as Rekha's, Dolly's and Shiela's bodies are violently marked by their caste identity whether that is in terms of their nameless illegal localities and transient homes, the sensationalisation of their lives in the media, police brutality or the form of vigilante *khap panchayat* justice to which they are always in danger of being subjected. The social exclusion faced by Sharma (in the form of suspicious glances and research challenges) is nothing compared to the on-the-ground realities of caste-marked bodies. In fact, Shiela's elbow is literally marked with an injury (2052) as a painful physical reminder of casteist *khap panchayat*'s brutalisation. Sharma, on the other hand, has her working-class aides like Shanti who protect her and enable her research. The analysis of the two life narratives also shows how Sharma is easily able to communicate with the police force both inside and outside the police station. This is something an underprivileged individual would never dare to do due to fear of the establishment and the sheer violence of Althusserian RSAs especially for criminalised minority communities. That impending threat of state violence always hangs eerily in the air for working-class queer bodies, impacting how they occupy public spaces in the world.

Deshpande refers to this privilege of Sharma's as the "invisible castelessness" of upper-caste bodies that severely needs to be examined in the public cultures (2013: 32). Deshpande wishes for a world where the invisible access of upper-caste communities to marginalised worlds is further examined by turning the gaze inwards. The main advantage as well as a serious limitation of Sharma's text is that it does exactly this. Sharma inserts her

own story into the text as an ethnographer in an effort to be transparent. She also attempts to be self-reflexive in her narrative. Sharma succeeds in doing so for the majority of the time and especially when it comes to respecting the silences, gaps, and wordless boundaries of the working-class context. Her lack of awareness about gender-neutral pronouns can certainly be overlooked due to the time at which *Loving Women* was first published. Sharma has also made critically reflected on pronoun usage in her second book, a collection of trans men's personal narratives, entitled *Footprints of a Queer History* (2022).

I have dedicated most of the analysis of the text in this chapter in showing that the world in this text is hostile, exclusive of and violent towards queer desire for working-class womxn. Yet, I want to end this chapter on a hopeful note by describing two brief instances from two other personal narratives in the text that do reveal to us that there are some brief moments when queer womxn can safely occupy a public space while simultaneously expressing their desires without censorship. The first is example is from the love story of Razia and Sabo, two working-class Muslim women from a small village in Uttar Pradesh. The two women grow up together as neighbours and eventually Sharma meets Razia through her activism as a community leader.

When Razia and Sharma build a rapport, Sharma travels with Razia to her village to meet Sabo. Razia confesses her love and sexual desires for Sabo in a public place. She says to Sharma, "We'll go to the *talaab* later, sit by the water and talk without fear of being overheard. No one will disturb us there" (2329). *Talaab* is the village community pond located in a secluded spot away from the prying eyes and ears of the public. It is here that Razia feels safe enough to confess her queer desire. Sharma is aghast at the vastness, wilderness, and depth of a deceptively small *taalab* but Razia puts Sharma's fears of drowning to rest by stating, "there is such a network of water hyacinth that no one can drown,

but one might suffocate" (2335). Despite a threat of suffocation Razia feels safer near the *taalab* than in her own home when it comes to the expression of her desire. She even tells Sharma about making love to Sabo in the agricultural fields where their bodies touched while lying side by side (2346). This is the first time a description of sexual activity between two women has been made in public space, hence proving that it is the presence of people and the oppression of man-made public institutions that are the source of violence for these women.

Public spaces, if imagined in the context of nature, are actually a space of healing, desire, and safety in this piece of writing. This calls for an emancipatory reimagining of the concept of public cultures, the world, and the public space in the Indian working-class context. Sharma too makes an observation similar to this in her introduction when she states, "our efforts to access the subjects' thoughts and feelings often materialised in exterior setting public spaces such as railway stations, terraces, ponds, parks, roads" (513). Interestingly when Sharma imagines safe public spaces, she includes not just nature (meaning no people) but also crowds in railway stations and roads (suggesting too many people) as safe public spaces for the expression of queer desires. This point also serves as a useful addition to the idea of the reimagination of the idea of the world or public cultures.

Another example of nature as a safe place for desire can be found in the story of Vimlesh, as mentioned in the beginning as a casteist brahmin AFAB who in the text self-identities as a male. Sharma and her aides eat a meal at Vimlesh's house and become friends with him. But Sharma and her team soon realise that it is impossible to have a moment alone with Vimlesh in his house since his family is always around. This time it is Sharma's aide and friend who asks Vimlesh to show them the pond near their house which he had mentioned earlier. Vimlesh readily agrees and takes Sharma's team to the pond and mango orchid near their house. This orchid also contains a religious shrine. It is in the "dense shade

and deep silence" (1164) of this environment that Vimlesh is able to confess his love for a woman named Munaka. It is essential to foreground that Vimlesh's access to this beautiful natural world is due to his caste privilege. Vimlesh's father is a Brahmin *pandit. Pandit* literally translates to a Hindu priest in Hindi, indicating that it is a Brahmin caste surname since Brahmins are occupationally supposed to be theologians. Brahmins are considered the most superior caste in the Hindu caste hierarchy. Usually in a village or small-town locality, upper-caste houses are easily identifiable since they are often in the centre of town or close to important landmarks such as clinics or places of worship such as temples. Lower-caste housing is usually at the periphery of the locality due to the 'impure' status of its inhabitants while "ritually pure" (Sinha, 1990: 15) upper-caste houses are located at the centre of the village (see Sinha, 1990 for a detailed analysis of village layouts). This explains why Vimlesh's house is so near to the pond, orchid and the religious shrine. It also drives home another powerful point: that even in the natural world where there is an alleged absence of people, violent public discourse of caste still exists as an influence on the landscape and village design. The markers of caste are so insidious and omnipresent that they geographically alter the nature of the world. Even our reimagining of the world for underprivileged queer bodies needs to factor in the implications of caste.

I would like to end by stating that it has been more than 15 years since *Loving Women* was first published, and to date not a single life writing narrative written solely by a queer working-class womxn has been published in the Indian context. We only hear underprivileged queer life stories through Sharma who published her second collection of trans men's life stories in 2022. We need to examine the reasons why this is case. What are the complex challenges in the contemporary Indian world that prevent a working-class queer womxn from telling her story? It would be interesting to do a comparative study on the two Sharma texts to better understand if any world improvements have occurred in the lived

experiences of underprivileged queer individuals. But all this lies beyond the scope of the present chapter and the broader project to which it belongs.

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Chapter 6: Refracted Reflections: Mapping Queer Desire Within Contested World Negotiations in Sukthankar's *Facing the Mirror*

> 'We will not be shamed into pretending we do not exist' – Ashwini Sukthankar, *Facing the Mirror* (1999: iii)

As discussed in my introduction to the world section, the idea of the world is borrowed from Tagore's *The Home and the World* (1916). In the novel, the world is represented as an allegorical politically contested space through the character of an extremist *swadeshi*, Sandip. Bimala, who is the allegorical representation of Indian womanhood, and the nation is conflicted about choosing between the home (her husband Nikhilesh) and the world (her infatuation with Sandip) (Kolijan, 2003). Scholars like Partha Chatterjee have used Tagore's home versus world classification to raise the unresolved "woman question" in order to understand the challenges that arise when notions of emerging Indian womanhood are accommodated within the politics of the modern nation state (2018: 386). I adapt Tagore's idea of the world to understand how queer subjects navigate public cultures and spaces as well as how these public cultures accommodate or react to them.

Similar to Tagore's novel, the queer navigation of the home versus the world and the public versus the private is a contested, mediated, and conflicting process. This is because the world is predominantly a heteronormative place. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner state that "[h]eteronormativity is more than ideology, or prejudice, or phobia against gays and lesbians; it is produced in almost every aspect of the forms and arrangements of social life: nationality, the state, and the law; commerce; medicine; and education; as well as in the conventions and affects of narrativity, romance, and other protected spaces of culture" (1998:

554-55). For Berlant and Warner, heteronormativity seeps into every aspect of the world. It is this insidious mundane nature of the heteronormative world that is difficult to read, theorize, and challenge. For Sukthankar, this constant tussle leads to a "schizoid dismembering" of the self whereby the self is ripped into its public and private components (xvi). The violence of the navigation of the heteronormative is also inflicted on the form of "writing" in this text. In her introduction, Sukthankar recalls approaching an unnamed contributor who refused to write as a "lesbian" as she had "forgotten how", and hence hadn't written a word in over 30 years (xiii). After hours of prodding and coaxing by Sukthankar, the unnamed woman assumed the penname Barley and produced a first-person narrative about queer love, entitled, "Always in Due Course". Even though her account used the first-person pronoun to narrate experiences of falling in love during her college years, Barley decided to call her account "fiction", deeming this the most "appropriate" thing to do (xiii). Despite the narrative having autobiographical elements such as the use of the first-person pronoun, Barley does not claim it as her story. She cannot claim her "lesbianism" within autobiographical writing because of the suppression of queer desire, and hence the work feels fictive to her. This isn't to take away from the overall belief underlying this thesis that all autobiographical writing is inherently fictive in the sense that the 'I' is created discursively during the process of auto-writing. This performed and mediative aspect of autobiography negates any notion of a unified, pre-defined and singular sense of self (Smith, 1995). Yet here the term "fiction" used by Barley isn't a nod to this conception of autobiography theory but a reference to the fragmented and dismembered existence of the suppressed "lesbian" self which makes queer desire feel alien, foreign, and fictive.

For Sukthankar, the world plays a huge role in conferring a fictional and mythical status to "lesbian" existence. My conception of the world in this section isn't geographically limited to India but there is an 'Indianness' that informs my analysis. Prasenjit Das, while

analysing Indian English writing, defines, 'Indianness' as a "construct of literary devices and practices that intends to critique and most importantly, represent Indian realities or realities accessed by the Indians. This realization necessitates a reflection not only on the socio-political and cultural stances of the author/narrator, but also on the relevance of certain narrative traditions, styles, and modes of presentations" (2011: 2). For Das, 'Indianness' is a unique and self-reflexive manner of literary analysis steeped in a unique but complex Indian perspective, given the diverse national culture of India. Similar to Das's conception, Sukthankar describes 'Indianness' as writing that is produced with a knowledge of India that can relate to "its particular freedoms and restrictions and properties from that perspective" (xix). In other words, 'Indianness' is not a geographic but cultural and literary process. It is evident not just in terms of Indian writing but also rooted in the societal norms, public discourses and culturally codified ways that influence the way in which one occupies space within a society. Queer desire in the world is also constructed and influenced by a certain 'Indianness'.

Whether it is in terms of the archaic anti-sodomy law, Section 377, that neither condemns nor accepts female homosexuality, or the homosocial public culture that enables all women's gatherings while denying any sexual possibilities within the same sex, both contribute to this "lesbian myth" (xiii-xv). Here by the reference to "lesbian myth" Sukthankar is alluding to the dubious and unconfirmed status of "lesbian" sex and its legality under the Indian legal system (Gupta, 2006) as well as to the general level of ignorance and denial in the society regarding the existence of Indian "lesbians" (xiii). Sukthankar believes that the law and media are two major oppressive public cultures that perpetuate this suppressed and mythical status of the "lesbian". She states that "suicides and elopements" are

the media's favourite themes[38] of "lesbian" representation (xxxi). While examining homophobic media culture and its headlines, Sukthankar laments, "we looked at ourselves and saw indistinct shapes distorted beyond recognition" (xxii). Here the "we" is Sukthankar writing on behalf of collective, fragmented, and suppressed "lesbian" voice. The world in the form of media and legal discourses is viewed as guilty of producing only a "discourse of catastrophe" about "lesbian" existence (xv). This discourse, according to Sukthankar, either fetishizes "lesbian" women as a debauched colonial legacy or negates their sexuality as an unhappy choice made due to the sexual suppression in Indian society (xxii).

Charles Taylor refers to the politics of *mis*recognition, where an "identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the *mis*recognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves" (1992: 25; emphasis in original). The world plays an active role in misrecognising and distorting the "lesbian" identity in the text. That distortion is visible not just in Sukthankar's editorial conception of a schizoid dismembered "lesbian" self (xvi) but also in the narratives that underline the impact of the world in this chapter. As discussed above, through the example of Barley, even the forms of writing used are distorted and disruptive. Barley "forgets" how to write as a "lesbian" and ultimately calls her first-person account a fiction, choosing not to self-identify with a "lesbian" authorship.

Here it is important to note that the use of fiction in the anthology is not only a response to "lesbian" misrecognition and distortion but also a means of making the unsayable

[38] Sukthankar's claims are reiterated by my unpublished MA thesis, "Reading Between the Lines", which analysed lesbian newspaper report archives from 2008-2013, from two major English daily national newspapers. My research concluded that at least from the 1990s onwards till prior to the advent of social media, print media in India, still primarily focused on a sensationalistic representation of lesbian suicides and elopements (Theraja, 2018). See Dasgupta's (2017) detailed analysis of the emergence of digital cultures and queer identities. Interested readers may also refer to a similar conclusion in Ghosh's (2022) analysis of lesbian suicides in Indian print media and cinema.

sayable. An autobiographical confessional mode of writing isn't the only way to make oneself visible in writing. Gabeda Baderoon, through her analysis of Muslim lesbian autobiographies in South Africa, refers to the need to quench the desire for an always transparent "unmediated autobiographical voice" and instead understand and appreciate the element of "craftedness" which can carry ambiguous implications (2015: 906). This idea of "craftedness" is borrowed from Patricia McFadden's notion of "crafting" (2010). McFadden defines crafting as "the ability to […] imagine and create something that is new; something that comes out of our collective desires to live lives of dignity and self-worth" (2010: 3). Hence, a lot of contributors also choose to craft and create through the use of autobiographical fiction which does not always represent a lack or an absence. Qamar Roshanabadi, a contributor in the anthology who primarily writes fiction, tells Sukthankar that writing fiction comes naturally to queer people since they are "habituated" to view the world as a "pageant or sport with strange rules", as something strange that they cannot participate in (xxiv). For Roshanabadi, the exclusive heteronormativity of the world puts queer identities at the margins. Fiction thus comes easily to queer people because creating worlds while already feeling a sense of removal or distance from the world can be an empowering process where the power to mould the world lies in the hands of the author (xiv). This view of fiction is similar to McFadden's idea of "crafting" that highlights a strong desire to create in order to feel empowered and to assert an agency in the world.

A distance from the world has led to the anthology's writing being genre-fluid. Yet, *Facing the Mirror*'s marginal world existence also left out a lot of womxn, meaning that their stories remained unwritten. Sukthankar refers to several other unnamed contributors in her introduction who could not write at all for the anthology as reflecting on their queer desire was beyond their "realm of consideration". They were so used to side-stepping their sexuality while describing themselves to others that they could no longer conceive of it themselves

anymore (xxv). Here the presence of the world through a culture of othering also silences the same queer self. There were also several womxn who did not want to write under a pseudonym since they felt that would defeat the purpose of making their writing public. Meanwhile, others simply refused to contribute as they felt they world wasn't ready for this anthology (xxvi). As such, who gets to write and how one writes is also influenced by the politics of the world.

The anthology was given the title *Facing the Mirror*, because Sukthankar believed that only destructive reflections of "lesbian" lives existed in the world and that these were utterly dependent on the "mediations of those who offered to speak for us and interpret us" (xxiii). Getting "lesbian" women to write for the anthology is Sukthankar's way of making the women 'face the mirror' to self-reflect and create empowering reflections for themselves to counter the destructive narratives of the world. Sukthankar dedicates the anthology for the "sake of all the lesbians" who "flinched as they read the pathologies of guilt and shame, death and rupture and doubted their own chances of survival" (xxiv). The "lesbian" anthology, being the first of its kind in India, is also meant to convey a standpoint of 'Indianness' as well as "strategies for existing" within this cultural context during the "practice of daily lives" (xxiv). The anthology isn't about being a resident of India as much as it is about navigating 'Indianness' through various contexts. Several contributors of the anthology are part of the Indian diaspora, including Sukthankar herself who lived in America at this time.

Sukthankar divides her text into six sections. One of them is titled "Worlds". which aims at bringing together the "wider backgrounds of lesbian existence" where womxn writers reflect on the "anxieties of performance" such as the "parts they play at work" (xxxiii). This reference to a "wider background" alludes to the various public contexts the womxn belong to, contexts which include their workplaces and social spaces. The term "anxieties of performance" refers to the performed aspect of their queer desire since this isn't widely

accepted by the world around them. For queer desire, existing in a world that is hostile towards its existence involves this repeated naturalisation and stylization of the desiring body to make existence bearable, especially in a public setting. Acts such as masking queer desire and performing heterosexuality in response to the hostile world. I will engage more critically with this idea of the public performance of queer desire once I begin analyzing the narratives in the text.

I will evaluate three accounts from the "Worlds" section in detail: Gauri's 'The Bi-Line', Preeti's 'The Score' and Rashmi's 'Some Funny Business'. All three accounts are first-person narratives about women navigating their queer desires within an urban office space. The concept of the world isn't just limited to the workplace in this section but also includes the conflicts arising from various intersecting national contexts. For example, Zebunissa Makhfi's poem "Cherokee Driver" talks about queer desire as a Native American (Indian) with an Indian lover (Makhfi mocks the ironic use of the term 'Indian' for both identities in the introduction (xxiii)), and Pia's "Fateful Encounter" describes her first same-gender sexual encounter in Kenya. In fact, the "Worlds" section contains Sukthankar's own contribution titled, "Break up of a 'Boston Marriage'", which chronicles the end of her relationship with her Chinese girlfriend in Boston. Sukthankar's account is primarily about the incompatibility of two lesbian lovers when one of the reasons of conflict is the cultural differences between the two women. Sukthankar conveys her irritation with her girlfriend's sweeping statements such as "we are both Asians" (in this case Sukthankar is South Asian whereas her girlfriend is East Asian) and notions about "starving Indians". She also has to confront her own prejudices against "Orientals eating their pet dogs" (188). The world in this narrative exists in the form of racist cultural stereotypes that one might possess about the other. Yet, I choose only to analyze the first three narratives from the "Worlds" section in detail since they have the most to say about public cultures in the form of urban workspaces.

Sukthankar's anthology contains contributions only from upper- and middle-class women,[39] so an analysis of queer desire and urban culture will be very productive for this text. Permilla D'Cruz et al (2021) have recently observed that the related concepts of workplace bullying, sexual identity and dignity are under-researched in the Indian context. There is a greater need to understand experiences of educated urban queer people at work. All three privileged women in the anthology chose to write about their queer desire and their careers with reference to some degree of workplace bullying, making the three narratives similar in this aspect despite their other differences.

A major limitation of the anthology is the complete absence of the rural and working-class "lesbian" world in the text, a limitation that is acknowledged by Sukthankar herself (xxvii). This is a world which Sukthankar, as an upper middle-class diasporic academic is far removed from. Interestingly, Sukthankar contacts rural lesbian activist Maya Sharma for the purpose of including more rural perspectives in the anthology. Sharma encourages Sukthankar to enter the field and do activist work (xxvii). Yet, Sukthankar acknowledges in the introduction that this work is "far beyond the scope of this text" and this absence "renders this whole collection incomplete" (xxvii). Sukthankar also makes a nod to the rural activist efforts of Sharma herself, whose book *Loving Women* is of course one of my other key texts in this thesis.

The *Facing the Mirror* anthology is over 400 pages long, so analyzing each reference to the world, as defined earlier, lies beyond the purview of a single chapter. With that said, I will explore two narratives from outside of the "Worlds" section for their treatment of "lesbian" desire as a public political category. These are Stree Sangam's "Dyking Around" and Naseem's "Reflections of an Indian Lesbian" from the section titled "Connections". Both

[39] The only exception to this is Supriya's 'Tired of the Broom' narrative. This is an oral narrative contributed by a working-class domestic servant whom Sukthankar knew since her younger days.

narratives are about a desire for a lesbian community in the world. All five narratives chosen in this chapter are set in urban landscapes such as workplaces and the challenges of living in a big city because that is the setting for the dominant social-economic group of the anthology's contributors. Furthermore, there is a great need to critically examine the impact of urban public culture on queer womxn's lives in the Indian context. Niharika Banerjea, in her urban queer ethnography, states that in India, "identity-based activism around LGBT issues, in particular HIV/AIDS emerged within the context of economic liberalization in the early 1990s" (2015: 1069). Yet despite this, Indian urban spaces were not subject to phenomena like gay ghettos, gay tourism and commodification of space but instead were always "in making" in their own unique way (Banerjea, 2015: 1058). The rise of this emerging urban queer community is not well documented especially in terms of queer womxn (Bacchetta, 2003: 957). As such, there is a pressing need to analyse their experiences. Sukthankar's (1999) text was published during this nascent state of urban queer Indian activism and to date it is the only text that singularly focuses on such a diverse range of "writing" exclusively by modern Indian queer women.[40]

A World with 'Worlds': Narratives from Sukthankar's "Worlds" section

Gauri's account is a short narrative of her life as a self-identified bisexual copywriter. It is given the cheeky title 'The Bi-line', a playful pun on both her bisexuality and copywriting bylines. Gauri states that she is closeted at work. Despite that, she is shocked that her colleagues do not notice the "love-bites" around her neck and connect them to her girlfriend since her girlfriend is the only person, she repeatedly mentions during office conversations about weekend plans (153). Gauri speculates that perhaps her colleagues

[40] Minal Hajratwala's *Out! Stories from the New Queer India* (2012) is the latest anthology of modern queer Indian stories but it isn't exclusively by women and includes the wider spectrum of LGBTQIA+ identities as well.

already know and have decided to silently accept her. Yet, a part of her is amazed at "how it's accepted. Nobody behaves strangely, nobody shuns me, it's taken as just another way of life, but a thing of curiosity" (153). These lines convey that Gauri is aware of her desires being an aberration within the heterosexual environment around her. There is both a sense of fear and amazement at being "tolerated" and not being shunned by the general public.

Gauri anticipates a discovery and rejection of her queer desire. Even though her office colleagues are not overtly bullying her, Gauri internalizes her difference and becomes conscious about being perceived as a bisexual in the eyes of the world. There is no evidence (either direct or anecdotal) in the account which confirms that Gauri's colleagues are "dying" to ask about her and her girlfriend, even though she claims they "must be" (153). All Gauri tells us is that they seemed restrained only because she hadn't said anything concrete (153). Whether her colleagues are genuinely curious or not, Gauri constantly feels a 'public gaze' of enquiry and curiosity regarding her relationship status, yet she remains closeted. Gauri's ambiguous sexuality status comforts her and the idea of coming out to her parents terrifies her. She states that she enjoys not confirming her colleagues alleged "doubt" about her relationship since that gives her a sense of control (153). She also describes the idea of coming out to her parents as similar to "climbing Mount Everest" where she is "out of breath just thinking about it" (153). Gauri relishes being ambiguous in front of her colleagues while simultaneously being afraid of coming out. There is a certain sense of agency provided by ambiguity.

It is important to deconstruct the idea of performative agency. Butler's concept of performativity is helpful for understanding the discursive constitution of queer desire, yet it is also a limited framework when it comes to theorizing modes of resistance within queer desire and its public expressions. For Butler, a subversion within performativity always occurs from "within the terms of the law, through the possibilities that merge when the law turns against

itself and spawns unexpected permutations itself" (1990: 114). In Butler's view any possibility of agency and resistance is located within discursive performativity. Opponents of Butler such as Fiona Webster have criticized them for not clearly defining subject agency especially in terms of its difference from the subject performativity of doing and undoing (2002: 5). Wenjuan Xie talks about the need for 'queering' this idea of performativity. She states that Butler has a very "binary frame of conception: dominant and nondominant, consolidation and resistance, doing and undoing" (2014: 37), all of which does not make room for ambivalence. Other the hand, Saba Mahmood's work on feminist agency in Islamic culture advances the claim that "norms are performed, inhabited, and experienced in a variety of ways" and "agency can be conceived not merely in terms of resistance" (2005: 22). Gauri's account is an example of how norms and restrictions can be inhabited ambiguously in public cultures and that there are other ways of existing apart from either conforming or resisting. By choosing to not come out and instead to remain ambiguous, Gauri is not necessarily the totally oppressed victim without any agency.

Yet, Gauri isn't entirely comfortable with her ambivalence. There is an internalised pressure to come out and 'be' bisexual publicly. By 'being' bisexual, I refer to an internalised pressure that Gauri puts on herself to 'come out'. The whole discourse of 'coming out' is primarily a white, Western, middle-class experience that has been co-opted as being a path to a universal queer experience while all non-white queer experiences get sidelined are not considered queer enough (Chavez, 2013, Villicana et all, 2016, El-Tayeb, 2012). Gauri chastises herself for finding comfort and empowerment in her ambivalence. She writes, "I guess I live in an unreal world" (153). Her ambiguity makes her feel as if she is being unrealistic about living in the world. Yet, the more queer people she meets in the world of advertisement, the more they reinforce her belief about remaining closeted by telling her that she is doing "the right thing" (153). This pressure to do the "right thing" causes conflict in

Gauri and she finds it hard to simply exist as her queer self in the world. She even feels the need to justify her position by stating that she is trying her best to make a difference in her office by making sure that no sexist or patriarchal bylines and product campaigns are produced under her team (153-54). Gauri's ambivalence results from her having been trapped in a discourse that views queer existence as being valued only in terms of its fulfillment of standards set by Western queer discourses such as a public 'coming out' process or community activism. Gauri struggles with a fundamental queer question: Am I queer enough? Gauri's ambivalent silence is a challenge to the discourse which states that in order to gain power one "must activate voice in order to resist and transform the conditions of their oppression" (Carrillo Rowe & Malhotra, 2013: 1). This discourse must change in order to recognise and make space for contested and ambiguous silences. Gauri ends her account by stating, "I do my bit, but I wasn't born to change the world" (154). The need to justify her 'bit' in the world is the root of Gauri's struggle. Yet, it is crucial to recognise her ambivalence as a valid form of existence and agency. Sometimes the road to becoming who you are in the world is paved with the conundrum of 'to be or not to be'.

Preeti's "The Score" is an oral narrative, narrated to an unnamed narrator called A.S. We have no information in the text regarding the language in which Preeti narrated her story nor do we have any information regarding whether she knew English or not, even though she does make a reference to the American English language film *Ten* starring Bo Derek (165). All we know with certainty is that she chose not to write her story in her own words for the anthology. As discussed before, womxn contributors not being able to write despite being literate happened due to various reasons. As Sukthankar states in her introduction, several women chose oral narratives because they spent so many years using language as a "shield of prevarication" that writing to "reveal and express" had become impossible (xxi). Here the dismembered "lesbian" self struggles to map out its own desires within language.

Prevarication operates more ambiguously than silence as it involves masking and evasiveness of meaning. Even though Sukthankar does not specify the names of the contributors who felt this way, we are told that Preeti has worked for multiple advertisement agencies (164-63). Advertising by design uses manipulative language as the predominant tool to sell a campaign. When Sukthankar first approached another copywriter Gauri, the latter was at a loss for words when asked to contribute to the anthology in any manner. This was despite her using three different languages to sell vegetable oil at her workplace. “I can’t do that. You’ll have to give me a brief”, she jokingly told Sukthankar (xxv). Even though the exact nature of Preeti’s job role isn’t specified, she does belong to the same field of advertising as Gauri’s and works in an urban corporate office environment in the metropolitan city of Mumbai, surrounded by similar work cultures.

Preeti writes about how men at work treat her differently because she did not “play the game of the sexes” (164). She narrates that men do not know “what to do with her” simply because she interacted with them as fellow human beings and not as potential romantic or sexual interests (164). This led to toxic male locker room banter where men from the office rated women at work and referred to Preeti as being “desexed”. The men came up with a “general consensus” that since they couldn’t imagine Preeti in bed, she must be “frigid” (165). “Frigid” is a cliched term and a stereotype associated with lesbians and any woman who does not respond favorably to cis male attention (Biswas, 2021). Interestingly it is a gay male colleague who informed Preeti about these toxic “male club” conversations, implying that gay men at the office still had their cis male privilege intact as they are clearly able to take part in or at least witness such conversations. Unlike the straight men, the women at Preeti’s office soon began to catch onto the fact that she was gay, either based on something she had said or done. Preeti is unsure how the women came to know but she chooses not to deny her lesbianism when word gets around. She calls herself “too idealistic”

for trusting urban, educated, city-dwelling people to be open-minded and tolerant (165). Hereafter, despite the gay male colleague being accepted by the office, the backlash Preeti faces is terrible. She recalls people "reacting" to the most "innocent physical gesture" from her (165-66). Male colleagues either cringe or recoil from her hugs as though she has "tentacles" (166). This violently homophobic response treats the lesbian body as a foreign, alien-like repugnant monstrosity that needs to be banished. Western cultural representations and the medicalisation of homosexuality often portray queer desires as a monstrous condition that claims its victims either in the form of the individual (who becomes a threat to their own self) or the society (when a homosexual individual becomes a threat to gender, society and notions of family) (Benshoff, 2021: 116). Yet, patriarchy ensures that Preeti is doubly vilified as a lesbian and as a woman. Preeti observes that while her gay colleague was subjected to "ribbing and teasing" at the end of the day, he was "part of the male pack and men will rally around them" (166). The women at the office however offered no such support. They instead began taking advantage of Preeti's unpopularity with men by not giving her due credit for her work and weaponising her lesbianism. Preeti reports that a female colleague had reported Preeti to her male boss, stating Preeti was complaining about the colleague's work ethic only because she had rejected her lesbian advances (167). Preeti ultimately had to leave this organisation and join another one but the news of her being a lesbian had spread in the advertising industry. At her new workplace, Preeti has to face a male colleague who simply refuses to believe that she is a lesbian since she isn't "butch", is a "man's woman" (169) and cannot be a lesbian as she is "natural" and "free with him (170). Preeti alludes to this "wretched" stereotype that not only reeks of femme erasure (Blair and Hoskin, 2015) but presumes that lesbians are inherently 'man-hating' or uncomfortable around men (170).

It isn't just Preeti's appearance or gestures that are viewed homophobically, it is also the quality of her work and her position. She recalls an instance where she had designed a

lingerie campaign which was meant to be sensual. Yet her colleagues passed "snide" and "smutty" comments and accused her of always being obsessed with women's bodies (170). At another organisation, we learn, a young intern attempted to "rattle" her by showing her pictures of naked models after having discovered Preeti's sexuality (170). All these instances portray lesbianism as a perverted aberration. Both men and women project their homophobia onto Preeti who views both men and women as equally homophobic in society. She concludes, "Women operating in a man's world play by the same rules as men do. Unless the woman you're dealing with is evolved, you're facing exactly the same kind of shit that you would with a man" (167).

Internalised patriarchy and homophobia go hand in hand in the light of Preeti's experiences. Interestingly, Preeti's experience shows that homophobia, urban living, and education are not always directly correlated. The more educated and urbane an environment is does not necessarily imply the more tolerant it is of homosexuality. Preeti is accepted at work only when she moves to a smaller organisation that comprised of middle-class immigrants from smaller Indian states such as Haryana and Madhya Pradesh. According to Preeti, these people lacked "the veneer of sophistication of Bombay's modern society" but were far more accepting of her being gay. No one misinterpreted her hugs or physical gestures, and nor did they impose any labels on her sexual identity despite being aware of it (167). Preeti laments that "importing" Western concepts of "lesbian, gay, sex, sexuality" has been detrimental to women's relationships (168). For Preeti, importing Western sexual terminology and ontology has resulted in the death of Indian homosocial relationships especially in non-metropolitan cities. She goes on further to add that it is saddening to see how urban society has lost its "simplicity" (167). Here the term simplicity isn't meant to indicate a lack of intellect or a sense of ignorance but instead a sense of tolerance and intimate ease that does not rely on Western metropolitan models of labels and intimacies. It is

a coded reference to the homosocial acceptance still found in rural India. Kanchana Natarajan (2000) discusses female homosociality in southern rural India due to gender-segregated large joint family systems. This allows intense bonds to develop between women. Rural areas often have less judgement and more acceptance towards homosocial intimacies especially in the form of physical affection such as handholding and hugging. There is a need to separate queer desire from its hegemonic Western "urbanormative" and meteronormative" (Halberstam, 2005) conceptions since the alternate possibilities often serve more inclusive places of tolerance and acceptance. Even though Halberstam is referring to the urban culture in the United States, their conception can be applied to the Indian context to displace the hegemonic notion that Indian urban queer spaces are always open-minded and progressive just because they consist of educated individuals or are sites of the emergence of much queer Indian activism (Bacchetta, 2003).

Preeti ends her narrative by stating that "Being gay is one of the biggest possible handicaps at work" (170). Not remaining guarded about her sexuality has made her paranoid. The homophobia permeated and travelled with her to all her urban workplaces. According to Preeti, urban society is affected with a Western homophobic bias, which she is now so used to facing that she can gauge exactly when someone has found out about her sexuality. Her last line ends on a pessimistic but harsh reality that a woman is "out" as soon as she refuses to play the heterosexual "game of men and women" (171) and rejects the rules of the accepted world around her. Preeti's modern capitalist world is a long way from accommodating queer desires.

Rashmi's 'Some Funny Business' is the last narrative I will analyse from the "Worlds" section. I analyse it primarily because I view it as a humorous and empowering take on the theme of homophobic and toxic modern workspace culture. Rashmi informs us vaguely that she works in "business or finance" where she is "hush-hush" about being

perceived as nothing but a heterosexual woman (172). She is okay with this because all her colleagues are "single young men in suits" who would make her life a living hell if they suspected otherwise (172). The only way Rashmi has managed to work and cope in such a masculine, testosterone-driven environment is to play along with their toxic workplace 'banter'. She writes that when men flirt with her or ask her out for a date, she either makes inappropriate comments about their "cock size" or passes sarcastic comments such as, "Sure, when you can get it up!" (172). For Rashmi, this is the definition of 'giving it back' within the realms of heterosexuality. Such remarks put "The End" (172) to the conversation in a safe manner, leaving Rashmi's perceived heterosexuality and real lesbianism hidden, intact and out of the question.

Rashmi claims that in a business like hers one cannot imagine going to a boss every time a man makes a sexual comment. Because there are few women around, "you constantly have to prove your balls are the biggest ones around" (172). Here Rashmi uses the same hypermasculine crude lingo to convey the extent of toxic masculinity and competitiveness at her workplace. Rashmi works at an executive level at her office, implying that she is one of the very few women in such a high-paying position. But despite her financial privilege she is subjected to sexism at work by men who seem to feel threatened by her. Even the physical space that she works in is indicative of a gendered hierarchy. There is no other female colleague in her entire executive office. Hence, the ladies' bathroom becomes a sacred space that is entirely for her use. It gradually becomes the only place where she can get away from the lewd and crude gaze of the misogynist men at work.

Rashmi spends a large amount of time in this bathroom alone and looks in the mirror to keep in touch with her "real" self (172). It is interesting that the mirror motif comes up in this narrative as well. As discussed previously, Sukthankar titled the anthology *Facing the Mirror,* so that the women could write and reflect on an authentic "lesbian" version of

themselves (xxiv). Similarly, Rashmi uses her reflection in the bathroom mirror to ground herself. She humorously refers to herself as Superman outside the bathroom and at work but Clark Kent, the "mild lover of women", inside the bathroom. She also states that the first thing she usually does when she enters the bathroom is to wash all the 'buddy' jokes and sexist lingo out of her mouth with Listerine (172). While Rashmi's humorous takes are refreshing, they also serve as an example of Xie's (2014) notion of a queered Butlerian performativity. Here Rashmi is neither conforming to nor overtly resisting hegemonic public and social norms but instead chooses to navigate them in her own way while ensuring her survival. This is an instance of her exerting her agency in the world.

The narrative ends on an erotic reclamation of Rashmi's lesbian identity at work. Having discovered Rashmi's struggles at work, her girlfriend gifts her a pair of panties with an 'L' painted on them to remind Rashmi that she is not in fact "one of the boys" (173). Rashmi recalls the "lesbian panties" "staring" at her every time she pulled up her skirt in the work bathrooms to pee. The panties make Rashmi nervous. They are personified by Rashmi because the panties subvert and reverse the hyper-masculine gaze that Rashmi is subjected to by now "staring" back while asserting their lesbianism. She claims that she can almost hear the men discovering them and mockingly commenting, "Hey guys, she is not a ball-busting aggressive bitch! She's a soft little lesbian" (173). Despite these anxieties of being discovered, the gesture of the "lesbian panties" is a covert yet erotically empowering example of some relief and erotic assertion in a patriarchal world.

So far, I have I analysed the ways in which three women navigate the workplace in a world riddled with homophobia. Their experiences challenge the inherently biased notion that the modern, educated urban world is always accepting of queer desires and that queerness is always empowering if observed within a cosmopolitan context. In the next section, I will analyse two narratives from outside the "Worlds" section.

Connected Worlds: Analysis of narratives from outside the "Worlds" section

Other sections of Sukthankar's text (beyond the "Worlds" section) also give a significant insight into the idea of the world as I am understanding it in this chapter. The section titled "Connections" is primarily about the friendships, networks, and bonds that "lesbians" form with other groups, other queer subjects and amongst themselves, which go beyond romantic attachment (xxxvi). These connections can be inter-religious, across class and caste, with other LGBTQ+ identities or with the larger feminist movement (xxxvi-xxxvii). Sukthankar claims that the "society" might frown upon these bonds and connections and find them "disturbing" (xxxvi). Here "society" is a reference to the hegemonic heterosexual cultural world that perceives alliances between various repressed minorities as a threat.

"Dyking Around" is by Stree Sangam. The narrative is unique in that it is a report of the first nationwide lesbian and bisexual women's retreat in India that was held in 1995 (xxxviii). The retreat was organised by Stree Sangam, a lesbian women's group based in Mumbai. Hence, the report is authored by a "we" and not an "I". It is written collectively by the thirty women who attended this weekend picnic. We are given no further details about how the women compiled this narrative. The aim of the picnic was to "create for ourselves spaces where we can be all of who we are" (295). Beyond making connections with other "lesbians", an aim behind the retreat was to reclaim queer space in a world that is heteronormatively occupied. Sara Ahmed (2008) writes in detail of how physical spaces are sexualised and connected to sexual orientations. The queer body is bound to feel "out of place" when it attempts to extend itself into a world that is designed only to favour heterosexuals. Use of the phrase "all of who we are" is an interesting choice because it conveys that even though these women were in a public place for a picnic, they felt that they

could still unmask and bring out “all” aspects of their queer selves since they were in the presence of like-minded queer women. Since this was a first of its kind of gathering of queer women in India, the retreat holds a unique place as a moment of public culture. Thirty women, mostly from big cities like Mumbai and Delhi, met at a public beach in Mumbai. Some were as young as twenty (295-96). The location of a public beach in Mumbai is an ironic choice since public beaches in Mumbai are imprinted in the urban Indian memory as meeting points for heterosexual lovers both culturally and cinematically (Bohidar, 2021). The beach is also a liminal landscape located neither in an urban or rural space but in its own “third space” (Bhabha, 1990) with a potential for re-identification and re-configuration. Hence the women can be seen to be re-writing erotic scripts by meeting at a public place culturally revered as a heterosexual lovers’ meeting point.

The narrative divides the women into two groups: the Delhi group and the Mumbai group. For the purposes of a productive retreat, the Delhi group brought films while the Mumbai group brought its library and documents (296). This pooling of resources was just the beginning of a weekend-long interaction which included introductions, icebreakers, workshop ideas, ‘coming out’ stories, discussions around AIDS and androgyny, among many other topics (296-97). The report unfortunately does not go into further detail regarding the nature of these discussions, but it claims that the women felt a certain “joy” while loving and being loved by other women (297). Some women, we learn, also found the time to establish a romantic connection with one another. Yet, all wasn’t entirely positive – there is mention of some “differences” cropping up during discussions, but the nature of these differences isn’t elaborated in the report (297). The retreat ends with a sense of excitement for the future and elaborate plans to organise another such event in Delhi. The report suggests that the main takeaway, felt by the women as a collective, was that their time together had been “brief” and that not all differences had been openly communicated. This meant that there was a greater

need to improve communication skills for the future (297). The retreat and its report are by no means perfect. More context and a great deal more information needs to be provided to analyse it further. Since the attendees were privileged city women from Mumbai and Delhi, more needs to be done to make such retreats properly inclusive. Yet, as a first attempt in reclaiming public places as a "lesbian" collective, it is a step in the right direction.

The last narrative analysed from this section is "Reflections of an Indian Lesbian" by Naseem, previously discussed in my analysis of Amita's account, "Foreplay" in my Home chapter on this text. Naseem and Amita are long-term lesbian partners living in Mumbai. Sukthankar describes their lesbian relationship as being aspirational since they are living proof that lesbians can live together in India and that exile from the country is not the only option for survival (xxiii). Naseem and Amita are public role models within their local "lesbian" community. Their exemplar is also something to which Naseem aspires. Her other account analysed in this section, "Reflections of an Indian Lesbian", was first presented as a speech at the Asian Lesbian Network Conference in Bangkok in 1991. Naseem is used to discussing her lesbianism in front an audience, we learn. Conferences like these are an activist effort in building alliances. Activist Maya Sharma also recalls several such global Asian conferences in the introduction to *Loving Women* (2006: 3014). Such conferences were often the first places where women openly spoke about their lesbianism in the public. For Naseem, lesbianism was not just a "sexual preference" but a "form of resistance to patriarchy and male oppression" (332). Naseem conceives her lesbianism personally as well as politically, and actively engages in community-building efforts. Her eight-year-old relationship with Amita nurtures her "through the struggle with the outside world" (334). The women see their relationship as an alternative to the conventional family. For instance, Naseem refers to them as a "domestic unit" and expresses her desire to build a household for herself and Amita (334). We see glimpses of personal struggle in Amita's "Foreplay" in the

Home section, which highlights the challenge of balancing a lesbian relationship while being closeted around other family members. Yet, existing as an empowered lesbian couple in a vacuum is not sustainable for the women. Naseem writes about the need to break the "sustained isolation of living as the only 'declared' lesbian couple' in Mumbai" (332). The term "declared" is a reference to their public status as a lesbian couple. Naseem also talks about the need to create a community of women who validate each other's existence (334). Here we can see Naseem's longing desire for an empowering connection with the "outside world" in the form of a community of like-minded "lesbians" (334). Yet, this "outside world" is a place of struggle that excludes and invalidates queer desire.

In this account, Naseem also reflects upon her observations about the world through her activist and community-building work. She states that the world accepts queer interactions amongst men and women only if "nonconformist sexual choices" are hidden and remain unverbalised (332). The world here is described as debasing homosexuality and accepting homosociality only if it does not pose a threat to heterosexuality. For Naseem, a woman's "sexual choice" is a world or public question since it is tied to a woman's position in other public institutions such as her education, socioeconomic status and caste or class privilege (332). Sexuality is not simply a private choice. According to Naseem, heterosexual marriage is still the most powerful social and cultural contract that needs to be maintained. She cites the example of various women who are alright with "indulging" in "lesbianism" if it doesn't threaten their marriage (333). The fear of a backlash from the world keeps these women tied to unhappy marriages. This further reiterates Naseem's desire for a public community support group for women like her. She states that "lesbians" who are public need a social space in the world that validates their personal choices which are so central to their existence (332). Queer desire is contested both publicly and privately. These lines point to a connection between the home and the world, the public versus the private. Both are separate

yet they do not operate in a vacuum and at some levels they intersect. Queer desire is excluded and contested both at home and in the world.

Naseem's and Stree Sangam's accounts are narratives initially written as public documents which are then repurposed to be published in Sukthankar's anthology. Manjima Bhattarcharya talks in detail about the role that feminist conference spaces play both in the personal journeys of activists as well in bringing out the "sticky" and problematic issues of feminist collectives (2021: 623). Here "sticky" is a reference to the sometimes uncomfortable and necessary findings from a conference. We see glimpses of this both in Naseem's and Stree Sangam's accounts. For Naseem the conferences helped her as an activist in framing her "lesbianism" politically while for Stree Sangam, the conferences brought out their nascent challenges as a collective. Both accounts talk about the importance of building forms of support and a network in the world for queer womxn. They also highlight the potential the otherwise hostile world can have if queer womxn reinhabit, repurpose, reclaim, and challenge the heterosexual world order.

Concluding Remarks

My analysis of the world in *Facing the Mirror* has shown how the world discussed in the text is a heteronormative, hostile, conflicting, and mediated space for queer womxn. The world is predominantly an urban modern landscape permeated by a sense of 'Indianness'. Public discourses in the form of media, law and societal norms govern the manner in which the womxn choose to write for the anthology. Some do not write at all. The anthology is a simultaneous documentation of empowerment, visibility, and grieving. All the narratives analysed with regard to the world are filled with a "wrenching sense of recontextualisation, as its gay and lesbian subjects, begin to piece together how it is that social and economic discourses, institutions and practices that don't feel especially sexual or familial collaborate

to produce as a social norm an ideal that is an extremely narrow context for living" (Berlant and Warner, 1998: 556). This intense mediation is a byproduct of the dominant world order. The recontextualisation to live alternatively can take various forms. My analysis has respected these reconfigurations as they appear, as well as positing that not all agency lies in either conforming to or resisting a norm. There is a need to better understand ambiguous and covert forms of living in the world and challenging heteronormativity. The community-building narratives analysed from the text are based on the belief that for the queer world to make progress, there is a need to offer "affective, erotic, and personal living that are public in the sense of being accessible, available to memory, and sustained through collective activity" (Berland and Warner, 1998: 562). Queer womxn connect and empower themselves through collective public activity such as conferences, meetings, and retreats. While the utopian 'normal life' model is aspirational and its burden very heavy to carry, it is necessary to recognise that it is a very small representation of a multitude of possibilities in the queer world.

Chapter 7: Words, Worlds and Changing Landscapes:

Transgressive Desire and Worldmaking in Suniti Namjoshi's *Goja*

Suniti Namjoshi's *Goja* (2000) is a complex, layered and intricately webbed piece of autobiographical writing that dabbles heavily with fictive and mythical elements. Robert McGill (2013), while analysing autobiographical fiction, perceives a difference between the terms fictive and fictional. Technically all autobiography is fictional since it is subjective and reflects the author's life and viewpoint (McGill: 2013: 6). Yet *Goja* contains fictive elements which are imagined and constructed and non-referential to the author's life. Namjoshi is aware of the subjectivity of her autobiographical experience and hence she refers to it as being "fictional". However, she also uses the term "mythical" for the text to convey that it is only by "making patterns" that she can make sense of her life experiences (ix). The fictive elements of the text predominantly comprise the extensive use of Greek and Christian myths in the text. Myths are a departure from the real world. Myths have their own internal worlds and contexts which do not ascribe to the rules of the realistic world. Yvonne M. Klein talks about how lesbian writers often invoke a "mythic community" to move past grief and affirm the lesbian self when the wider social, political world systems fail to do so (1990: 337). This making of patterns using the world of myths in *Goja* is Namjoshi's attempt at making sense of her own trauma, the death of her loved ones, her sexual abuse as a child, and her lesbianism.

Namjoshi uses the myths as she pleases, sometimes twisting and changing them, making them self-referential by interspersing them with autobiographical accounts, and at other times keeping them fictive. In this sense the text is truly transgressive as it constantly keeps pushing the boundaries between the autobiographical and fictive elements of the text, constantly pushing the boundaries of a conventional autobiography (Gudmundsdóttir, 2016:

8). Yet, as an Indian woman, Namjoshi's access to and use of Western myths is a marker of her privileged education and command over language. As a privileged upper-caste woman belonging to a family of officers that worked for the British Empire in India, Namjoshi is self-aware not only of her privilege but also the "history of the English language" (ix). It is inevitable that her writing is marked by her wealth and Christian boarding school education (ix). I argue in this chapter that mythmaking and fiction serve as a method of coping. Words soothe, embalm, and inflame Namjoshi's traumatic recollections. Worldmaking is related to word-making in the text. By the term worldmaking I refer to the affective process rooted in the question, "How do I feel?", where one's understanding of the world is built in intimate and local ways, where the world is seen as a place that creates "sites of positive (joy) and negative affects (violence and terror)" (Cvetkovich, 2022: 76). Pheng Cheah (2008) also refers to the world not as a spatial–geographical site but as a constantly contested and dynamic process of making and remaking the ideas of belonging. For Cheah in such a notion of the world, world literature can be seen as an agent of this constant process of making and re-making. World-making through world literature is the realisation "that we can belong in many ways, and that quivering beneath the surface of the existing world are other worlds too" (Cheah, 2008: 38). Both Cvetkovich and Cheah view the world as an affective and constantly contested space that one can discover and belong to in multiple ways especially through world literature. The aim of this chapter is to analyse the affective effects of an always contested world through the use of mythical world literature. Narratives and storytelling aid this process, hence the importance of linking worldmaking to word-making.

Namjoshi as a literary scholar, writer and poet uses her skills in the English language to weave together her experiences and feelings of being in the world. In an imagined address to her dead grandmother Goldie, Namjoshi states, "I don't want to tell you all about the West. I just want to tell you what it was like for me" (103). The affective worldmaking in the text

makes space for Namjoshi's feelings. The text highlights how Namjoshi feels under the influence of public cultures around her. In *Goja*, it is important to focus on the language used to refer to the world, since understanding Namjoshi's language patterns and mythical word play is essential to unravelling the intricate layers of meaning within the text.

As discussed earlier, the world here is an adaption of Rabindranath Tagore's world conception in his novel *The Home and The World* (1919). Tagore critics see his world as an allegorical reference (through the character of Sandip) to nationalist *swadeshi* politics in post-independence India (Kolijan, 2003). Similarly, my conception of the world is a combined reference to the public cultures that exist in my key texts and how queer womxn navigate them in their lived experiences. These public cultures include nationality, citizenship, community, migration, societal norms and regulations, public spaces, state machinery such as the police and media as well as nature in the texts. Each public culture or world has its own set of rules, which are often hostile to Namjoshi's experiences. She in turn creates her own mythical world with her own rules to counteract and challenge her exclusion from the world. Though a wide term, the world is also the most inclusive one since it is not restricted by national, geographic, or political boundaries. Namjoshi as a diasporic, lesbian Indian woman of colour repeatedly navigates several world boundaries and public cultures (sometimes simultaneously), making this idea of the world extremely relevant for her text. In this chapter, I will focus on how Namjoshi understands, copes with and is affected by the world around her, all the while finding deep solace throughout her life in the natural world and its various landscapes.

The world in *Goja* is multi-layered and complex. These layers are references to public cultures and the world but do not appear chronologically in the text. Since the narrative is non-linear, several layers are visible simultaneously. Due to the autobiographical and fictive nature of the text, Namjoshi the narrator is not the same as Namjoshi the author. Hence, when

I use the term Namjoshi or discuss her politics in this chapter I am referring only to Namjoshi as the narrator of *Goja*.

The first idea of the world in the text is the child narrator's relationship with her domestic help Goja and how that is used to navigate adult Namjoshi's class consciousness. Notions about class go through shifts and contestations in the text. The earliest mention of the world, in terms of class, in the text comes from Goja's perspective. Namjoshi was raised by Goja and develops a strong attachment towards her. Goja had been taken in by Namjoshi's grandfather when she was just a child. Ever since then her entire life's labour has been devoted to Namjoshi's family. Namjoshi's 'love' for Goja makes her deconstruct the privileged world that she is born into. I am chary about the term 'love' because for Namjoshi the relationship was a matter of the heart, but for Goja it was an act of service bound by an exploitative employment contract. Namjoshi often wonders whether Goja "loved" her as a child only because the girl was a familiar part of her working environment (9). Goja becomes the mouthpiece of class deconstruction in the text. Namjoshi writes that Goja's adoption into her family as a child servant was perhaps viewed as a "fortunate" (4) thing by everyone since it gave Goja a chance to make a "place in the world" (5) for herself.

In child Namjoshi's view, the world is a place where the poor are placed at the bottom of the hierarchy to serve as a function for the rich. Namjoshi states in her preface that the two most important people in her life were Goja and her grandmother, Goldie, "but the difference in their condition was so vast that it was troubling" (x). Goldie was treated like a queen while Goja's servant life went by inconspicuously, silently and remained "unrecorded" (7). Namjoshi's "love" for Goja becomes a "problem" (5). It is a problem because it is a transgressive love that transcends socially acceptable borders. Employers cannot declare "love" for their servants. Namjoshi's "love" for Goja is subversive but she cannot make sense of how the world treats people differently based on their financial and social position.

This transgressive emotion of 'love' also does not absolve Namjoshi of her own complicity in the exploitation of Goja and other servants. In the majority of her "autobiographical myth", Namjoshi attempts to deconstruct the power systems of the world around her. Her affection for Goja serves as a foundation for this enquiry and her name is used as the title of the text. Instead of naming the book after her grandmother, Namjoshi names it after Goja, as if making an effort to record Goja's unrecorded life. I argue that text is also an admission of Namjoshi's guilt in the exploitation of Goja. Through her autobiographical recollections Namjoshi paints a picture of Goja but also highlights and questions the class and caste inequalities that she witnesses throughout her life. Myths enter the text whenever Namjoshi refers to her wealthy family. In my Home chapter on this text, I discussed in detail how Namjoshi uses satirical royal titles and Biblical myths to refer to her wealthy family. In contrast, for Goja, Namjoshi simply does not know enough about the older woman's life. It is cloaked in silence and invisibility since servant lives are never meant to be recorded. Not one photograph exists of Goja (7). A template of how unfairly the world treats people like Goja has been made visible in Namjoshi's household itself. For example, Namjoshi recalls an instance where her grandfather asked her to respectfully address her grandmother in the plural[41] whereas Goja was given no such reverence or plural mode of address (5). For Namjoshi her "whole world" as a child was the two women who gave her love – her grandmother, Goldie, and Goja – and now "that world is gone" (5). This is because both women had long since died by the time the text was written, leaving behind a lot that remained unsaid between the three women. Namjoshi fictionalises and mythologises her lost world in the text.

[41] In the Hindi language plural pronouns such as *aap, hum, ve tum* are used for the elderly as a sign of reverence and respect.

Since Namjoshi can no longer know Goja, she fictionalises fragments of Goja's existence. She begins the text by giving us details of Goja's birthplace and birth year (5) "born in say 1900 and in a small village on the Deccan plateau" (3). Namjoshi also writes, "I'll endow Goja with a kindly mother, poor like her" (3). The use of words such as "say" and "I'll endow" convey that Namjoshi takes creative liberties with Goja's unrecorded life to fill in the gaps of her world in the (auto)biographical account. The crux of her relationship with Goja in the text is built around the lines: "What might she have said? I could ask her. Would she say it? Could I invent it?" (20). For Namjoshi, what cannot be said either due to death or social boundaries imposed by the world will be invented via language. This serves as another example where word-making is tied to the process of worldmaking.

Namjoshi is conscious of this aspect of her writing since she calls this text "fictional" and "mythical" in the preface (ix). As indicated earlier, whenever there is a gap, trauma, or conflict in Namjoshi's world, she uses metaphors from the natural world in order to seek meaning and comfort. She compares Goja to a *babul* (Indian Gum Arabic) tree that can "just grow anywhere. They must be tough" (3). Namjoshi chooses a tree that can survive in harsh Indian landscapes without much care or nourishment to sketch an impoverished upbringing like Goja's. She asks the rhetorical question: "Is it fair to compare suffering Goja? What were your griefs? Un-annotated?" (17). Namjoshi tries to make sense of her whole world by talking of the suffering of the three women – her own, Goldie's and Goja's. She even dedicates the later part of her text to fictional conversations with the dead women. I choose to focus solely on Goja in this chapter as this servant symbolically represents oppressive class systems in the world, whereas Goldie represents the home and the family, as is discussed in detail in the Home chapter of this thesis.

Yet, the most uncomfortable statement is a comparison of Namjoshi's and Goja's suffering. Critics have accused Namjoshi of creating an idealistic worldview and an

unrealistic sense of community. Namjoshi wishfully tries to resolve all differences by stating, "Goja! Goldie! […] Whether we laugh or cry, we are three old women […] it's not each other we should be questioning" (116). Divya Mehta writes that Namjoshi creates a "utopian continuum" between Goja and her upper-class employers and "scripts an autobiographical self" that is "consciously and defiantly *cutting across* class lines in favour of an imagined *community* of affective solidarity in the face of a common victimisation by a severely patriarchal and class-stratified society" (2019: 585; emphasis in original). Namjoshi's affective desire for a community of women she loves sometimes serves to gloss over the uncomfortable class gaps between these women. Namjoshi's notion that death "deconstructs all" (18) acknowledges that world boundaries and class–caste gaps are so hardened that some conversations can only happen after death (19). Yet, even in death, it would be a disservice to equate Namjoshi and Goldie's suffering to the hardships endured by Goja within the same continuum. No amount of word- or worldmaking can fill in a gap that wide. Despite her desire for a shared continuum of suffering Namjoshi's text does admit that to ask Goja for forgiveness (even in death within an imagined conversation) is a "travesty. It doesn't make sense" (144). Therefore, the last words that Namjoshi positions Goja as saying are, "I cannot, and may not, say all is forgotten and forgiven. I will not collude" (152). Ultimately, Namjoshi honours Goja by not entirely bridging the uncomfortable gap and exploitation complicit in their relationship. This is an uncomfortable worldly truth that Namjoshi will have to live with.

The second idea about the world in the text is Namjoshi's navigation of another kind of transgressive desire: her lesbianism. Namjoshi admits that she is able to love only because of the love that she had received from Goldie and Goja (53). Namjoshi refers to discovering her lesbianism in school as discovering a "sketchy paradise" (51). Chapter 6, entitled, "PARADISE: ITS LOCATION" is Namjoshi's endeavour to find a place for her lesbianism

within a world that forbids it. This paradise is beyond a safe geographical location. Instead, it is a mythical metaphor for an acceptance, as well as tolerance in terms of social location and a person's status in the world. For Namjoshi only very young schoolgirls in love with each can inhabit a blissful paradise since they have "faith" that hasn't yet been "battered" out of them (54). Here paradise is a hopeful and optimistic state of mind not tainted by the cruel homophobia of the world.

Similar to the Biblical paradise which is within the geographical garden but is also a state of an innocent mind lacking corrupt knowledge, the paradise in this chapter is Namjoshi's childhood garden and her young state of mind, representative of a temporarily safe non-homophobic haven for lesbian desire. Recalling her life as a teenage lesbian in the 1970s Namjoshi recalls telling her friends that, "To be a lesbian in India in those days" was "so terrible" that it was like "putting one's head on the block. One risked so much for love that love had to mean everything" (55). Persecution from the world cloaks her lesbian desire in fear, punishment, and a danger of being discovered. Similar to Adam and Eve being thrown out of the Biblical paradise for a committing a sin and disobeying the rules, Namjoshi also fears being thrown out of her paradise for tasting the forbidden fruit of lesbian desire. But Namjoshi twists the Biblical myth by claiming that Adam and Eve weren't real romantics since they were innocent and ignorant prior to the Fall and had no knowledge that their activities were amorous. In that regard, it is only adolescent lesbians who are true romantics since they are aware of the forbidden nature of their desires while simultaneously expressing them (55). For a brief period in her life as a teenage lesbian in love, Namjoshi was a true romantic inhabiting a blissful mental state of paradise. She and her lover found comfort in literature since they both were literary (56). Words and literature in *Goja* also serve as a mental paradise for Namjoshi: a place of comfort, acceptance, and navigation of trauma. The lovers found a mental literary paradise in literature and a physical one in the natural

surroundings of a garden. Namjoshi does not give us any physical descriptions of this garden but elaborates affectively on how she feels within it, unconsciously circling back Cvetkovich's (2021) idea of affective world-making. Namjoshi describes this mental paradise as a "state of mind" where "everything blazed, everything roared, everything was worthwhile" (56). This is a reference to utopian idealism that is nurtured only at a young and hopeful age. The natural world appears as a place of solace as the lovers found time to be together only in the gardens while holding hands (56).

Yet, this paradise space (both mental and physical) is short-lived as one day a servant catches the two lovers kissing and reports them. What follows is punishment and separation (56). This is a crucial moment in the text as Namjoshi is displaced both from her mental and physical locations of paradise. Namjoshi writes that the very existence of society threatens lesbian lovers and being expelled from paradise is not the end of life but the end of everything good (57). Her attempts to find love and social acceptance within the world are constantly thwarted and punished by the homophobic public cultures of the world. Lesbian desire, then, is difficult to mythologise as a paradise since the reality of it is far more painful. Namjoshi refers to this moment as the "end of paradise", indicating continual feelings of suffering, grief and pain which mark her awareness of the marginality of her lesbian identity in the world.

The lovers suffer for a year but attempt to regain their paradise by planning to study and escape abroad. Indeed, Namjoshi begins preparing for her Indian Administrative Service exams. The lovers plan on becoming independent and living "happily together like any ordinary couple" (58). At this point in the narrative, Namjoshi is still deeply invested in what Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner would refer to as "heteronormative notions of intimacy" that are rooted in a conventionally sentimental happy ending as the marker of success for a romance (1998: 562). Yet Namjoshi's happy ending is blown out of its existence as another

metaphorical “snake” strikes in Namjoshi’s paradise. She gains the knowledge that her lover has had an affair with an older, foreign man (57). She turns to the natural world for comfort and “bleeds” into the landscape around her, hoping it will absorb her grief (57). She recalls staring at the trees and the grass to process her difficult emotions (56). Nature soothes but Namjoshi also refers to the persistent existence of a “dark place” that “even the landscape could not occupy” (57).

Yet Namjoshi continues to seek her altered version of paradise. She describes paradise not as being a different place but a “different landscape. It was earth that fell, and did not fall” (57). My understanding of this is that Namjoshi views her version of heaven as existing within the very world and public cultures that excluded her. Paradise here isn’t an unattainable mythical location but a difficult and painful path to finding and fighting for your place within the world. A large part of Namjoshi’s life is spent in finding this paradise and sense of belonging in the world. Despite her lover’s betrayal, Namjoshi passes her exams and becomes an Indian civil servant occupying the rank of a government official. In this, she is much like her family members who had worked for the British Empire as government officials and held official state titles. Yet, this job further exacerbates Namjoshi’s disillusionment with the world of privilege around her. Through Goja’s description in the text, Namjoshi interrogates the wide social gap between the two women she loves the most, as well as the hierarchical servant culture within the house. But it is her job experience out there in the world beyond the home that exposes her to the Indian population and the large class gap between the rich and the poor. On the one hand her family is struggling to cope with their declining feudal status and diminishing royal titles whereas on the other hand the common man is struggling to make ends meet in a largely capitalist independent India (63). Namjoshi admits that she felt “ashamed” because she enjoys her status as a high-ranking officer, including the curtseys and “people rising when I entered an office, the police

springing to attention and presenting arms when I visited a subdivision" (65). Unlike her sexual identity, in India Namjoshi's professional status is not marginalised but stands in sharp contrast, reeking of power and privilege. Yet the glory of her power also sickens her because of the obsequious "gratitude" of the poor who are just "grateful that although I had the power, I did not harm or hinder" (65). Namjoshi deconstructs the relative power that she enjoys within the world and tries to analyse it realistically. She concludes that she is able to be a non-corrupt and honest officer because no one dare cross her family's powerful lineage (66). This failure to do evil was hardly to do good, according to Namjoshi (66). Hence, growing bored with her job she finally decides to quit the Administrative Service.

Her disillusionment with her work and power status, combined with her strained relationship with her family (as discussed in the Home chapter on this text) and the punishment of her lesbianism in the garden serve as reason enough for Namjoshi to decide to migrate to Canada. After finding no place for herself in the hostile world around her she decides to move out of her current world geographically as well as culturally to pursue a sense of belonging. To make hostile spaces habitable, queer bodies need to constantly "move away" and "arrive", according to Sara Ahmed. Migration can be a part of this process (Ahmed, 2008: 9). Migration here shouldn't be seen as a one-way movement towards absolute freedom and a resolution of all worldly conflict but a constant re-evaluation of the feelings of belonging. Namjoshi writes that at the point of migration she also had a new lesbian partner, whom she names Sahali in the text, who had already migrated to Canada. Hence, it seemed logical that Namjoshi would follow since it became clear to her that "in India it would not be possible for two women, who loved one another, to live honourably together" (66). This is a telling sentiment as it conveys the feelings of exclusion and displacement that Namjoshi feels in her own homeland. This, combined with her conflicted

relationship to the large caste and class divide within India, especially with regards to her own privilege, further fragments Namjoshi's sense of belonging in India.

Another important reason for migrating from India to Canada is Namjoshi's realisation that she has been "colonised" by the English language (66). Namjoshi's upbringing and American Mission boarding school education colonise her mind. Her mother directs Namjoshi to learn English with an English accent. She orders Namjoshi to learn "whatever they have to teach you, but never become one of them. That is not permissible" (41). Namjoshi is forced to stay in the school and is bullied by her classmates for being different. She feels lonely for most of her time there while being pressured to be heterosexual, Christian, and American (42). Namjoshi's mother views Western knowledge and the English language (with an English accent) as markers of social superiority and refinement, yet Namjoshi is directed to not assimilate and retain her Indianness. This proves to be a near impossibility as Namjoshi struggles to learn without becoming anglicised. This colonial contradiction results in Namjoshi describing her "mind as a hodgepodge of Greek myths, Hindu experience and Christian words" (58). Throughout the text Namjoshi seeks to make sense of the complex influence that her varied identities have on her experiences. There is a constant drive in her writing to seek the meaning behind the words to secure a sense of belonging in the world. She migrates to Canada to pursue a doctorate in English Literature to see "the reality" behind the English language. Namjoshi believes that if she worked hard enough, she would become a great writer and by seeing the reality behind the words she will use them better (66). This yet again points to a strong link between Namjoshi's processes of word- and worldmaking. She hopes to find her place in the world by enhancing her command over words and language.

The third idea of the world in the text is Namjoshi's experience in the West. Ann Marie Fortier (2003) discusses the perils of viewing migration as a seamless sense of

belonging with no hurdles. It is important to remember that queer migration for colonised bodies isn't a route to an uncomplicated feeling of belonging. Namjoshi's Indian identity brands her as she is labelled as foreign and exotic in the West and subjected to several racist microaggressions during her initial years in Canada and then the United States of America. Namjoshi describes this experience of microaggressions as being like that of "Alice in Wonderland. Strange and aggressive creatures kept insisting that they were right; and any experience I had, which might have helped, somehow never applied properly" (73). The Alice in Wonderland simile aptly conveys the absurdity of Namjoshi's initial experiences. The use of the term experience is interesting as even abroad, in the land of the English language, Namjoshi finds it difficult to situate her experiences. She feels a sense of exclusion in the West as well, albeit that that exclusion is different from her exclusion within India. Everything is questioned, from Namjoshi's Indian attire to whether India had lions and toilets (71-73). Answering these racist questions earnestly does not make a difference as the answers are already pre-determined and no one bothers to listen. These are not harmless enquiries but racist stereotypes. Yet Namjoshi perseveres, hoping that this exclusion will be worth it if she can achieve her happy ever after with her lesbian partner Sahali. Such an outcome is something which would be an impossibility in India. Yet, this dream is shattered yet again by her lover's betrayal. This woman one day confides in Namjoshi that she is not really a lesbian and that by "having 'made her' participate in the relationship I had mutilated her" (77). Sahali's grotesque accusation reeks of internalised homophobia where Namjoshi is set up as a predatory lesbian that preys on and mutilates innocent heterosexual victims. This experience shatters Namjoshi as she is yet again robbed of her happy ending and finds herself alone in a foreign world with no support systems. Namjoshi writes about feeling "stripped", laid bare, and believing that she has "no past, no history and no human framework supporting me" (78). Due to the constant oppression of her lesbianism combined with her experiences with racism,

Namjoshi feels the disorientating effects of being marginalised thrice – as a lesbian, as a woman, and as a person of colour. This of sense of uprootlessness and 'out of placeness' is best described by Sandhya, a contributor in Sukthankar's anthology as attempting to "inhabiting a room which doesn't exist" (xvii). This reference to Virginia Woolf alludes to the challenges of occupying space when all notions of Indianness have constantly attempted to erase, invalidate, and criminalise queer desire. As previously discussed, Indianness here is a reference to literary strategies and cultural process that are informed by Indian socio-economic and political realities (Das, 2011). A continuous marginalisation of queer desire from the remit and scope of Indianness leads to severe feelings of (un)belonging in lesbian women like Namjoshi.

This heartbreak is a key moment in the text because it further cements the connection between Namjoshi's words and her affinity towards natural landscapes as forms of affective world-making within the text. She also learns to live without latching onto heteronormative happy endings in love. Namjoshi's relationship with the English language and natural landscapes changes dramatically when she migrates out of India. Namjoshi had presumed that she knew the language of the West but soon realises that she didn't: "I understood the words, but not the context. I understood the words, but I understood them differently" (80). This alludes to the lived experience of speaking a language in a foreign landscape which is something Namjoshi has to accumulate gradually. She also learns that certain words changed meaning as she travelled across worlds. For example, "Lift" in India meant "Elevator" in Canada and America, whereas "Indian" was a reference to the native indigenous population and not to the inhabitants of Namjoshi's home country (80). It does not matter that people in the West fail to understand the words Namjoshi used, but what is irksome is that they "did not choose to know" (80). Namjoshi believes that in the West people are wilfully ignorant of all forms of knowledge which are non-Western or foreign. Namjoshi gradually begins to

process the politics and unequal power dynamics between the West and the East. I argue that because of the existence of the initial discourses on the Third World as a place where things are lacking (either in terms of hegemonic development, economic or societal standards) instead of what they were (Tomlinson, 2003: 7), there is a notion that such cultures are not worth knowing or understanding. The West does not know about non-Western cultures because it doesn't deem it worthy enough for investigation. This worldly crisis makes Namjoshi question her place in the world as she feels distanced from herself (80). The linguistic and cultural dissonance also affected Namjoshi's relationship to the natural landscape around her.

After separating from her lover, she rents a flat on the first floor and spends a lot of time looking at the native trees such as maple and beech. But the "*difficulty was that they were the wrong shape*" (emphasis in original; 81). Namjoshi dreams of the Indian *neem* tree's leaves and their shapes (81), her soothing landscape visions still rooted geographically in India. She is disoriented to wake up in Canada to see trees she cannot recognise and leaves whose shapes are "*wrong*" because they do not align with her visions. Namjoshi also describes this experience of dissonance with the words, landscapes, and the reality around her as similar to being in an "enchanted forest. I like it here. Dragons, demons, dazzlers – whatever the forest had to offer was fine" (80). Namjoshi writes about this struggle abroad using a fairy tale simile of an adventurous and magical forest to soften the intensity of her alienation. Yet, it is important to remember that this dissonance isn't just an adventure and discovery; it is also proves to be a disconcerting process for the self. Namjoshi refers to a "split between sleeping and walking, night and day, literature and life, India and Canada, between things and their name, words and their meaning, auditory as well as visual" (84). These lines suggest that her dissonance is an affective and overwhelming process that has to be resolved for her to settle into the world. This process of settling isn't a linear or complete

one either. Namjoshi requires a good deal of time to practise her language and craft as a writer, understanding her landscape and navigating the racism and ignorance around her (82).

Gradually, Namjoshi adjusts and eases herself into this new world by mediating her relationship with the "enchanted" language and the natural world. She claims that it "worried" and "delighted" her at the same time how "language cloaked, altered and even fashioned reality, how there were multiple realities, and how it was possible to juxtapose these so that they resonated and shimmered and multiplied meaning" (79). Deconstructing her experiences allows Namjoshi to imagine a hybrid existence in the world. According to Homi Bhabha, postcolonial subjects define themselves in hybrid third spaces; the subject–object relationship isn't rigid but ambivalent (due to the interaction with the other) and always "bears the traces of the feelings and practices that inform it" (1990: 211). In simpler terms, Namjoshi while being hybrid does not create separate third identities for herself but discovers new modes of reidentification in the Western world.

In the postcolonial queer context, this seamless reconfiguration of the Western world is a modern dream. Yet, the affective process of achieving this balance between your multiple identities in the world is a challenging, on-going, nonlinear process. Shalmalee Palekar (1996) further deconstructs the notion of Bhabhaian hybridity by stating that hybridity is never a given; instead, one must arrive at it. Namjoshi's writing becomes hybrid "through a foregrounding of split subjectivities and selves" where she is able to "theorise/make visible/legitimise a particular sort of hybrid self, through subversions of institutionalised and systemic erasures" and by redefining notions of community and finding ways of belonging are indeed different from "fitting in", or "assimilating" (Palekar, 1996: 108). Harveen S. Maan (1997) argues in detail that Namjoshi's writing occupies the liminal Bhabhaian third space, which is inherently anti-binarist. This new third space always bears the traces of its previous history but in a reinvigorating manner (Bhabha, 1994). Writing *Goja* is a part of this

larger process for Namjoshi. She states that her account is “Janus-faced. I want to bridge my two worlds so that at least there might be reconciliation, and if not reconciliation, then at least a degree of straightforwardness” (85). Namjoshi alters the meaning of the term Janus (meaning two-faced) to imply that she is ‘two-worlded’. The reference to Janus highlights the stark difference between the two material world realities of East versus West in Namjoshi’s life where she does not know whether a conventional reconciliation is even a possibility.

Namjoshi’s expression of her lesbianism after she migrates forms the fourth conception of the world in the text. She writes, “Words have to give desire shape” so that desire itself becomes desirable and does not remain a “lump” (95). By giving her desires a worded shape, Namjoshi contextualises her desire with regards to the object of her desire to become successful while wooing and courting (95). After migration to America following her heartbreak, Namjoshi takes as an object of desire a white married woman with whom she falls in love. A change of worlds and landscapes affects the expression of desire. If the first world is described as an “enchanted forest” it is no surprise that Namjoshi uses the metaphor of a “wood nymph” and “enchantress” to refer to her older, white female lover (94). Namjoshi names her Paramour and calls her the “owner of the forest” (94). Paramour is an apt name for a divorced mother of two with whom Namjoshi is besotted (102). Namjoshi’s overwhelming desire seeps into her landscape memories as well. She recalls a row of “peonies” leading up to Paramour’s door and the overwhelming “murmur” she would feel in her chest as she entered, breathless with anticipation at the thought of being in her mistress’s arms (102). Paramour is called the “owner of the forest” because of her Caucasian roots, whereas Namjoshi is in a landscape that she is fighting to survive in. The two lovers inhabit the same forest but are a part of two different ecosystems. Their relationship ultimately ends as Namjoshi describes, “We made love and then we didn’t” (96). In this case desire cloaked and fashioned in grand words still fizzles out as world realities overtake passion. Namjoshi

conveys to us that Paramour wanted her to be a part of her daily life and that of her kids and for Namjoshi it is not the right scenario as the women continually fought (102). The ecstasy of their desires felt real to Namjoshi, but their love did not (106). Namjoshi also accuses Paramour of cruelty and rejection. Paramour sporadically retreats into heterosexuality with a white man throughout their courtship while Namjoshi as a foreign lesbian woman feels continually rejected and threefold made alien (97). The ecstasy of her desires allows Namjoshi to stay in this cruel relationship for a few years. Paramour also fails to understand the struggle of Namjoshi's hybrid realities. Instead, she views them as a plethora of wilful choices. Paramour views Namjoshi's Janus-faced two-worldedness between the East and West not as a postcolonial tussle to belong but a luxury of wilful choices (98). Thus, having suffered in almost every aspect of her life after having migrated, Namjoshi now has a vast landscape of grief to make sense of.

This takes me to the fifth conception of world in the text, the elements of grieving and mourning in the writing and how these relate to the process of affective worldmaking in the text. Namjoshi fictionalises and converses with Goja's and Goldie's personas not only because she has unresolved issues and incomplete conversations with them but also because they serve as symbols of her Indian homeland in the text. Within the text, Namjoshi refers to them as her "captives" who serve as audience to all of Namjoshi's confessions (103). For Namjoshi, not having an audience to language is to "be a nobody" (114). Goja and Goldie represent not only the family but also the India that Namjoshi has left behind. But that is only physically. In one instance, Goldie's post-death imagined persona chides Namjoshi about being open about her lesbianism. Goldie says, "*In India these things cause a scandal. A little discretion would have made a world of a difference*" (81; emphasis in original). These fictive taunts, though Namjoshi's own creation as a part of her fictive autobiographic persona, are a reminder of how Namjoshi associates India with a culture of silence, repression, and taboo

around sexuality where (as Goldie's fictive persona reminds her), "Here people do not do whatever they wish […] especially not women" (126). In the Home chapter, I analysed in detail how the experience of child sexual abuse at the hands of her family as well as the punishment she received because of her queer desire led to Namjoshi repressing her sexuality and refusing to come out to her family members. This culture of silence in the home is part of a larger culture of silence in the Indian context around topics related to sexuality. In her text, Namjoshi seeks to end her suffering and break the silence on both levels – in the home and in the world.

It is important that Namjoshi experiences exclusion not only in India but also the West which comes with its own brands of racism and homophobia (77). Namjoshi is aware of the universal reality that as a lesbian woman she will always be marginalised in any society that she is a part of (110). Queer belonging is always an embodied and mediated process (Ahmed, 2008). But it is in the Western world that Namjoshi fully realises that her hybridity could be understood (78). Being able to explore her lesbianism without the fear of persecution and social ostracisation and criminality is one such reality that Namjoshi is able to explore in the West. Even if that leads to failed relationships and more grief, Namjoshi accumulates and deals with the grief because the West allows her the space for compassion, feeling and emotions. Namjoshi alludes to a Western affective social culture, where taking time out to heal and offering comfort are socially encouraged, where shouting "I hurt" is more acceptable that saying "I hate" (105). None of these world truths about the West are universal but they reflect how Namjoshi understands and heals herself in the West. On the one hand, Namjoshi finds Western social culture more accepting of grief and failure but on the other hand she finds it very hard to forgive Western colonial ignorance and lack of curiosity towards the East (82). The idea of belonging isn't meant to be a simple binary

between the East and the West in *Goja* as Namjoshi wants to deconstruct and analyse all her worlds to lay bare her grief and resolve her emotions.

Conclusions and Resolutions

By the end of the text, Namjoshi has lowered her expectations (138) with regard to achieving a sense of belongingness. The landscape that she finally chooses to live in at the end of the text is England, where she moves to be with her Australian partner, Gill, and her child. Not much is described about either their relationship or about England in the text. Yet, Namjoshi accepts this new landscape with all its good and bad aspects and its many contradictions. She has learnt the art of balancing a scale without tipping it to one side too much. She describes England as "neither nice, nor nasty" but far more aware of India than North America is due to England's colonial history (124). She describes her relationship with Gill in a similarly neutral manner, saying that "we try hard to be good to each other" but we "have our failings" (125). There is a lack of idealism, of happy endings and utopia by the end of the text. Namjoshi simply wishes for all her demons to peacefully coexist, including her internal tussles with Goja and Goldie, whom she still internally carries with herself. She brings them to the mouth of the River Axe in southwest England, very close to where she lives in the English countryside (138). Rivers serve as the final landscape in the text. Namjoshi seeks comfort yet again in the natural landscape and is drawn to the river "in order to find out how this rowing away backwards might be done" (153). This reference to rowing backwards is what Namjoshi does in *Goja* when resurrecting her past to make sense of her life experiences. The desire to absorb "the pastness of the past" (29) is seen as a pathway to an emotional resolution. Natural landscapes serve a major role in conveying to us how Namjoshi feels while affectively worldmaking (Cvetkovich, 2022). Rivers by design are a perfect metaphor for such a narrative since they meander, find their own course, and go backwards and

forwards based on their currents, but always keep flowing. In a similar manner, Namjoshi meanders through her myths, words, and landscapes to seek meaning and make sense of her traumas and desires while continuously persevering. The last chapter ends in a detailed descriptions of all the riverbanks Namjoshi remembers sitting next to, from the sacred Hindu Yamuna River to the great Mississippi. All have brought Namjoshi to her current destination in England near the mouth of the River Axe. Namjoshi admits to "rambling a little" at this point but leaves the reader, "only for the time being" (157), promising to be back soon, as if conveying to us that definite conclusions are not always necessary or possible.

Goja is about finding a place in the world only to realise that that place could be a transient, ever-evolving, and ever-changing location with multiple hybrid realities. It is not about belonging but about meandering like a river to make sense of your course. Namjoshi belongs both to the East and to the West; both accept and reject her at various levels (67). Belonging can be experienced in bouts as a transient and mediated feeling that changes with time. Sometimes language and its power can mediate a dialogue between various worlds. Namjoshi firmly believes that "*Where one is* is a word. *Who one is is* a word – Indian, lesbian, poet, Hindu […] And much of one's life is" about exploring which words fit and in which forest of words one might "live and breathe" (emphasis in original; 83). *Goja*, as an autobiographical fictional text, shows us how words have the power to build and re-build worlds.

CONCLUSION

Anjali Arondekar in her recent work challenges the "epistemological preoccupation with loss as the structuring mode of narration for histories of sexuality" (2023: 2). For Arondekar fixing sexuality within such "vernaculars of loss (while being politically exigent) is to refuse alternative historiographical models, to bypass imaginative histories of sexuality, full of intrepid archives and acts of invention" (2023: 2). Through her analysis of the *Gomantak Maratha Samaj*- a caste oppressed *devadasi* collective in South Asia- Arondekar posits the framework of "abundance" where one must not "invest in and stabilise a new knowledge economy of plenitude" but to make space for the "messy misalignments" that the concept of abundance "lugs along" (2023: 3). Here abundance is a theoretical lens that views sexuality histories as messy, open-ended, productive contestations that defy easy categorization and clarity. This idea of abundance is also built on the histories of subordinated collectives that challenge their devaluation through this abundance (2023: 3). My conception of a kaleidoscopic (re)belonging is similar to Arondekar's politics of abundance. Through a kaleidoscopic understanding of (re)belonging in personal narratives by queer Indian womxn, I have argued that the affective connections these womxn make with themselves, their communities, their gender and sexuality are messy, nonlinear and refute easy categorization. Queer desires and intimacies come in myriad forms and colours and can be expressed in multiple unconventional ways.

Whether it is Supriya and Lakshmi's erotic exchange over husking grains of rice while embedded in the laborious drudgery of their working-class life (Sukthankar, 1999:123), or Firoza's intimate feeding and rearing of her heterosexual and married lover's child, Baby Shireen (Sukthankar, 1999: 74), or Guddi and Aasu's secret silent exchanges on neighbouring terraces (Sharma, 2006: 678-679) and Sabo and Razia's intimate love-making near the village pond (Sharma, 2006: 2344) - both examples of 'clandestine spaces'/Bhabha-ian third spaces/

stolen queer moments in otherwise hostile heteronormative spaces or Namjoshi's mythical construction of her divorced Caucasian lover as Paramour (2000: 102); all are examples of how queer desires and intimacies can co-exist in complex and multiple ways alongside their oppression, silences and often within cis-heteronormative institutions like heterosexual marriage. The autobiographical practice and the framework of the personal narratives function as an apt playing field that allows these womxn to express their desire and tell their stories outside of the generic limits imposed by conventional autobiographies. Akhil Katyal concurs and states that the personal narrative is "inextricably tied to the self" and presents to us the unpredictable and unevenness of the self, the making and unmaking of identities while constantly highlighting the "doubleness of sexuality" and "its constant friction between its conceptualisations and its experiences" (2016: 223). These personal narratives accommodate the variety and "abundance" (Arondekar, 2023) of the womxn and their desire while being conscious of the limitless potential of desire. For Katyal personal narratives intricately convey the "doubleness" of sexuality since they highlight the processes "whereby these subject positions evolve and are constructed, how they are adapted and given up, how they constantly change, how they are marked by both the intensity and banality of sexuality" (2016: 170-171). All narratives are marked by a certain fluid movement in text- not just in terms of a queer phenomenological Ahmedian disorientation and reorientation but also in terms of a rejection of a binarism that comes with identarian labels of sexuality and desire. Queer desire and its self-expressions cannot be contained with fixed categories or templates. The 'I' in these narratives is truly queer and autobiographically performative as it constantly reconstructs itself and through its disruptive movements, makes space for resistance and subversion. The 'I' in my thesis can be fictional, mythical or orally narrated instead. The category of 'life' and its narrations are "irreducible to the immediate political agendas" (Katyal, 2016: 66) and hence require an autobiographical practice that constantly evolves

with its politics. Both Sukthankar and Sharma, editors of the key texts in my thesis, mobilise and politicise the identarian category of the ‘ lesbian’ to both counterbalance and question its limitations (Katyal, 2016: 65). My introductory claim regarding the transient nature of language and terminology is in alignment with this argument. The womxn contributors in my narratives use a range of desire terminology- Supriya abstractedly refers to her affair with Lakshmi as “this thing” (Sukthankar, 1999: 123), Namjoshi calls herself a lesbian in the text but cheekily refers to her first closeted girlfriend as “Sahali” (A Hindi term for a platonic female friend) (2000: 73). The womxn do not feel the need to label or categorize their desire to proclaim its validity. A movement can also be seen in the structure of my thesis. The Home and the World sections permeate each other but their traumas and reorientations need to be studied separately since their discourses contain a multitude of complexities within them. Rekha and Dolly’s account by Sharma (2006) is a good example of how police brutality towards the lower caste queer couples in the world works in tandem with the stifling patriarchal control exercised by Rekha’s uncle at home. Namjoshi’s *Goja* (2000) is an example of how abuse and neglect at home led to a search and discovery of multiple worlds and landscapes- positing belonging itself to be an ever transient state. Hence, the public vs. private, the home and the world cannot be neatly separated.

Expressions of queer desire are theorised as larger political projects of community belonging where these womxn constantly seek a sense of belonging in the texts. Their efforts at belonging are termed as a (re)belonging because they are affectively rooted in a ‘failure’ to belong in the conventional sense. To (re)belong one must grapple with and make sense of their un-belonging first. All queer womxn contributors in my thesis grapple with their longings and un-belongings depending on the varying degrees of their caste class privileges. (Re)-belonging is an affective process that requires varying degrees of self-awareness, self-reflection and the time and space to process emotions. The fatalistic (re)belonging of a

domestic servant like Supriya in Sukthankar's *Tired of the Broom* reads very differently than Suniti Namjoshi's carefully crafted literary pastiche of (re)belongings in *Goja.* All (re)belongings are not the same yet all (re)belongings are valid. (Re)belonging is conveyed through both silences and language. Whether it is Rekha and Dolly's defiant silences towards Sharma or Manjula and Meeta's "cow-dung" like protective layer of silence about the nature of their relationship; one must sometimes look beyond the interpellations of language to understand queer resistance. A successful acknowledgement of queer resistance in these texts is hinged on training oneself to 'look beyond' the obvious oppression and exclusion of queer desires. My theorisation of personal narratives as a queer autobiographical practice and kaleidoscopic (re)belongings is a contribution to this politics of hope, abundance and looking beyond. The nature of this (re)belonging is kaleidoscopic because it is made up of several complex, often contradictory fragments of polyphonic autobiographical forms and practices, multiple vocabularies of desires and intimacies and resistances rooted in an "Indianness" (Das, 2011: 2) which is intersected by the class, gender and caste positionality of the womxn contributor. In order to understand the "abundance" (Arondekar, 2023) of these fragments one must zoom out and then look towards the dynamic kaleidoscopic lights and colours of the multiple facets of queer desire.

In the future, I hope to apply this idea of (re)belonging to personal narratives in the Indian digital humanities space such as on websites and blogs like *Agents of Ishq, Gaysifamily* and *POV Mumbai* and to recently released personal narratives such as Maya Sharma's second ethnographic memoir on Indian trans men titled *Footprints of a Queer History: Life Stories from Gujarat* (2022), K Vaishali's memoir on lesbian disability named *Homeless: Growing up Lesbian and Dyslexic in India* (2023), GC Sapna's memoir about being a lesbian woman from the lesser represented and ethnically conflicted Manipur in the North-Eastern part of India titled *A Memoir on What It's like to Come Out as Queer in my*

Mid-30s (2023) and Shilpa Phadke and Nithila Kanagasabai's anthology which redefines (re)belonging during the COVID 19 pandemic to include friendship between queer womxn titled *Yaari: An Anthology on Friendship by Women and Queer Folx* (2023). The intersections of disability, kink, ethnic conflict, friendship and gender found in the digital space and in these narratives will further add many more colours to my kaleidoscope of queer (re)belongings between Indian womxn.

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