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Friendships Beyond Class: Female Desire in *The End of Innocence* and *Sister of My Heart*

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Abstract:

In India, the focus on gender studies had perhaps begun with the emergence of the 'women's question' in the late nineteenth century colonial society, and although Partha Chatterjee claims that the nationalists had successfully resolved the women's question, most feminists would not agree with the idea. If at all, it was probably the beginning of feminism in undivided India, and the issues on gender slowly began to surface, with scholars like Chandra Talpade Mohanty carving out a separate identity for the non-western woman devoid of the all-encompassing and homogenous discourse of Western feminism. The individual and diverse experiences of South Asian women were recorded in the literature written by women in India and in Pakistan, and although the two nations have gone their separate ways after the Partition, socially and economically, the cultural roots of these two countries are undoubtedly intertwined through a shared language, class system, and most importantly, their attitude towards women. In my paper, I would examine how the women of these two countries experience and handle patriarchy, and whether they are able to put up a successful resistance against it. In order to do so, I will critically analyse two novels— *Sister of My Heart* by the Indian English writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni; and *The End of Innocence* by the Pakistani English writer Moni Mohsin. In both these novels, female friendship and solidarity play a crucial role against the violent and destructive patriarchal forces, and they also probe into the issues of class as a marker of identity in a deeply capitalistic world order. Although South Asian feminism has successfully distinguished itself from Western feminism, the ideas of female solidarity, lesbian experience and lesbian continuum, as expounded by Adrienne Rich, remain relatively unexplored in this field. Through these novels, I will examine the theme of desire, not necessarily sexual, but as a subversive act against the 'compulsory heterosexuality' in the respective worlds of the women.

Keywords:

gender, female friendships, queer theory, feminism, desire, heteronormativity, South Asia.

The primary agenda of South Asian feminist scholarship, since its very emergence, has been to carve a niche for itself first to dispel the charges of being a West-derived discourse, much like Partha Chatterjee labels nationalism to be, and second, to establish its difference from Western hegemonic discourse which mostly tends to homogenize the Third World Woman under a single, monolithic category. The 'burden of authenticity', as Ania Loomba calls it, weighed down on Indian feminism for a long time, until works like Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha's *Women's Writings in India* offered evidence that feminist tracts existed in India even before colonial rule.¹ Moreover, feminist activism in India, during and after colonial rule was distinct in each region, separately addressing the immediate and specific needs of each geographical area. Post-independence, one of the major issues which brought these regional women's

organisations together was the response to the Shiv Sena's attack on Deepa Mehta's 1998 film *Fire*, a path breaking film in its depiction of women's sexuality and lesbianism. C. Shah remarks that "[t]he women's movements were the first to articulate concern over the control over sexuality and the societal constructions of gender and are hence the closest link and support for the nascent 'queer' movements in the country."² Although homosexuality has been condemned as a corrupting influence of the West, and as profane products of globalization, funded by transnational organisations, it has been well-established that same-sex love and relations are in no way borrowed concepts but are integral to the literary and cultural tradition of South Asia. In their seminal anthology *Same-Sex Love in India*, Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai show the different traditions of homosexuality which pervaded religions and cultures in the ancient, medieval and modern periods pre-dating colonisation, in Hinduism as well as in Islam.

The link between queer activism and feminism in the West has been believed by many to be tenuous, as "[t]he politics of queer are said to centre on local activities of performative transgression, within which cultural realms tend to dominate, while for feminists the point of political engagement continues to aim for resonance with global struggle and the intent to participate in the state, political and economic arenas."³ However, it can be argued that in India, owing to the haunting presence of article 377—which, ironically was introduced by the British in 1861, and hence is actually, a Western import—queer activism has always already been located within the socio-political domain. Although queer theory, with its complete subversion of sex/gender roles problematized much of feminist ideology, yet, it also empowered women because it foregrounded the knowledge of a woman's desire and body, issues which were and still are considered taboos in most parts of the nation. The term desire has come to signify much more than sexual activity, and has come to play a crucial role in contemporary feminist theory. This has been, undoubtedly the invaluable contribution of queer theory to feminism, because after all, both these social movements are aimed at resisting patriarchy and all its means of oppression. Desire for a person of the same sex need not lead to, or culminate in, the act of sex, because it is, as Madhavi Menon points out in her fascinating study on the history of desire in India, "desire can attach to fantasy, object, story, person, institution, idea, or all of the above...Desire is not (only) love, and neither is it (only) sex."⁴

Same-sex love between women has not yet received ample attention by South Asian writers in English, but in the last few decades, women writers have focused on the importance of friendships and bonding between women, and their role in resisting and subverting different means of social oppression. In this context, I would like to do a comparative study of two novels which deal with relationships between women not related to each other by blood: *Sister of My Heart* (1999) by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and *The End of Innocence* (2006) by Moni Mohsin. In my paper, I will examine how the relationships forged between the women characters of the novel negotiate with the patriarchal forces of oppression, and whether they attempt to subvert these forces or yield to them at the end. In my study, I will try to show how, despite apparent differences in terms of religion, geographical space and socio-cultural environment, there exist deep underlying similarities between the two cultures portrayed in the novels, more so because of a shared history of colonialism. Before partition, the Hindu as well as the Muslim middle-class man felt the need to bring about reforms to improve the state of women in their society. However, the nature of education among Muslim women was as tokenistic and instrumental as it was among Hindu women, and needless to say, was confined among a few elite and liberal-minded families. Ayesha Jalal writes in her "Even the most enlightened of families conceded that education for women was

a worthwhile pursuit only if it enhanced their roles within the natal and the marital family.”⁵ Women of both nations thus experienced what Simone de Beauvoir would call ‘negative emancipation’, and their struggle against patriarchy was conveniently co-opted by the state machinery after independence of both the nations. Some might argue that Indian feminists have ideologically come out of the hegemonic religious revivalist discourse in that they universally reject and resist the oppressive codes of conduct laid by Hindu religious scriptures such as the *Manusamhita*; but the recent resuscitation of the Hindu right and its construction of the idea of the nation cannot be ignored. A large number of Muslim women however still cite the scriptures to derive legitimacy for their cause, and refuse to separate the religious from the political. In what ways, do women writers negotiate with these forces in their novels? I will address this question in the following paragraphs.

Although the treatment of friendship between women in the two novels is completely different, there is no doubt, however, that friendship and love between women are the major themes of the two novels. As Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai write in the Preface to *Same-Sex Love in India*, “Love need not take an explicitly sexual form, but it is nearly always expressed in language of poetic excess and metaphoric power.”⁶ Love and desire between Sudha and Anjali is much more conspicuous, their intimacy bordering on the erotic. Their love clearly has mythical overtones. The end of the novel shows Anju and Sudha locked in an embrace after their reunion at the airport, with Sudha’s baby Dayita in between them. This scene carries stark resemblance with numerous hymns of the *Rig Veda*, which celebrate the process of creation by two women, “The sisters ten, unwedded and united, together grasp the Babe, the new-born infant.”⁷ The entire novel is suffused with mythical imagery and language, something which binds the two women together. They seek refuge from the harsh reality in stories and legends, and both Book I and Book II are named after the tales they tell each other, ‘The Princess in the Palace of Snakes’ and ‘The Queen of Swords’. Both these stories are narrated by Sudha to Anju, and their names suggest the transformation that not only they undergo, but one that the readers are also meant to participate in. The two stories play an essential role in highlighting the difference between heterosexual love and female bonding. In the first one, the princess is a conventional character, introduced to the outside world by the prince, whereas in the second one, the princess is an active agent, who saves herself and is finally rescued by her sister living across the ocean. The first story is a known fairy tale, handed down to the girls by their Pishi, a social construct where the woman is passive, whereas the second is Sudha’s own creation, one complete with the realization that her true love lay with her sister and not Ashok. Heterosexual love is considered impulsive and all-consuming, whereas love between women is more enabling, subtle, and more powerful. Ashok waits for Sudha, but refuses to accept her daughter as his own, whereas Anju feels betrayed by Sunil when she discovers he is secretly in love with Sudha. It is interesting to note that the two women choose each other, or rather, are drawn towards each other at times of emotional crises: when Sunil fails to help Anju during her depression after her miscarriage, it is Sudha who comes to her aid, not by counselling her or repeating inane words of consolation, but by telling a story which highlights Anju’s importance in Sudha’s life. Anju tells Sunil, “I don’t think you’ve ever loved anyone the way we love each other. Sudha’s like my other half—how could I just sit back and let her mother-in-law and that jellyfish of a husband force her into an abortion she didn’t want?”(273). Sudha too rejects Ashok’s proposal to fulfil her promise to Anju to go and stay with her in America. Sudha and Anju, therefore, choose each other over the men in their lives, and break out of the ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ which acts through “the cluster of forces

within which women have been convinced that marriage and sexual orientation toward men are inevitable, even if unsatisfying or oppressive components of their lives.”⁸

In *The End of Innocence*, the friendship between Rani and Laila does not have any sensual overtones. However, the language used often comes across as the language of desire. It begins with the line “Perched on the edge of a car seat, Rani and Laila hurtled towards a love story.” (3) Laila’s love for Rani is pure, that of a child for an elder girl, and it is less complicated than that between her and her sister Sara. “For Laila, Rani had no equal. Rani alone had the unique ability to make the everyday wondrous and the dull delightful...Rani was clever in ways that Laila envied.”(15) It is also Laila who is the first to become aware of Rani’s blossoming sexuality, when the older girl strikes a ‘provocative’ pose in front of her, copying Heer’s posture from the film *Heer Ranjha* they had seen together. Laila’s desire for Rani can be explained by the different psychoanalytical theories on the childhood of women. Carol Gilligan argues that because the primary care-giver in childhood is invariably a woman (the mother),--given the sexual division of labour—the process by which men and women come to adulthood is different. Boys come into adulthood learning to differentiate themselves from their mother, while girls do so by identifying with the mother. Nancy Chodorow presents a similar argument in her essay *The Reproduction of Mothering* when she says that the primary sense of the self that the girl child develops and carries through her life is one of self-in-relationship. Therefore, Laila’s identification with Rani is probably her desire to attain that psychic wholeness which she initially had with her mother. A younger female’s need to relate to and identify with an older female therefore is, according to these psychoanalysts, an attempt to recreate the mother-daughter bonding. However, these theories present a rather reductive view of female friendship by undervaluing the ‘choice’ that is involved in these relationships, as was evident in the relationship between Sudha and Anju. Laila’s love for Rani might have a psychological basis, but it goes beyond the impulsive need for recreation of a mother’s love. This is especially more prominent because of the socio-economic gap between Laila and Rani. Laila refuses to conform to Sardar Begum’s condescending notions about servants, and treats Rani not only as an equal but as a mentor. Ann Laura Stoler points out that children “learn certain normative conventions and not others and frequently defy the divisions that adults are wont to draw.”⁹Laila’s friendship for Rani is unadulterated by notions of socio-cultural hierarchy, something which is present even in Fareeda, Laila’s mother. Rani is Laila’s partner in crime, her accomplice and although Rani’s playful condescension is evident in the ways she often humors Laila, Laila is her confidante. Laila guards Rani’s secret love affair with a loyalty surprising for an eight year old, and protects her from the society.

Rani too, however, is a victim of the ideological forces of heterosexuality, one of the most prominent of which is the cinema. In the novel, the idealized love story of *Heer Ranjha*, implants fanciful and improbable ideas in her head, and is finally responsible for her so-called dishonour and death. Sardar Begum labels this as ‘dangerous love’, the kind that tears you away from your family that makes you forget your duty...No girl must love like that.” (28) The mythical tale of the star crossed lovers and their tragic love story is meant to be a cautionary tale for Rani and Laila, but instead becomes the portal of Rani’s romantic dreams and desires. It is noteworthy that it is only girls that are not allowed to love anyone of her own choice, and no morals are provided for men. There is a clear distinction between the innocent, genuine and comforting love that Laila offers Rani, and the destructive and all-consuming passion for her lover. Just as Sudha had felt when she had fallen for Ashok, Rani feels the same way for her lover. Sudha tells Anju, “When she looked into his eyes, their dark centre, she saw herself for

the first time, tiny and doubled and beautiful. I think that's why she loved him most. Without him she would never have known who she was." (101), whereas Rani tells Laila: "He makes me feel important and beautiful...I'm not Rani the servant girl. I become someone else...He says I'm a real rani, a princess...with him, I feel like one." (137) Laila is envious of her friend's undivided affections for a man whom she had just met, just as Anju was of Sudha. Both Sudha and Rani, impressionable at that age, are swept by idealistic notions of heterosexual love divorced from reality and end up as sufferers of the social framework which denied women their right to choose. Janice Raymond puts forward a compelling argument, "While I agree that we are living in a heterosexist society, I think the wider problem is that we live in a hetero-relational society where most of women's personal, social, political, professional and economic relations are defined by the ideology that woman is for man. Hetero-relations name more accurately the ways in which Gyn/affection is obscured and eclipsed for all women,"¹⁰ The section where Sister Clementine comes seeking Fareeda's help for Rani in *The End of Innocence* can be cited as an example of hetero-relationality hindering spontaneous solidarity between women. The presence of Babu Jacob, Fareeda and Tariq's employee, and the urgent factory business Fareeda is in the midst of, discourages Sister Clementine from revealing Rani's pregnancy, a move which turns out to be fatal for the girl. Later, Fareeda also chides Bua, Laila's Ayah for concealing Rani's pregnancy, but it is partly she herself who is to blame because of the aura of inaccessibility she has created for herself. In this case, though, class, and all the baggage that comes with it, poses a formidable obstacle in the path of solidarity and understanding between women.

The most monumental hurdle in the path of 'gyn/affection' is of course the institution of marriage. Sardar Begum tells Laila that a woman's foremost priority after marriage is her husband and his family, friends "are soon forgotten" after marriage. Marriage, the culmination of hetero-relationality, is considered to be the be-all and end-all of a woman's life, her life being neatly categorized into the premarital state of relative freedom but innocent chastity, and the postmarital state of subservient sexuality. Indian feminists have noted that the honour of the family is located in the conduct of women; Vrinda Nabar argues, "*Izzat* seems to be a female-linked commodity. Its preservation is incumbent upon women's behaviour alone."¹¹ To protect Anju's marriage, Sudha calls off her plan to elope with Ashok because Anju's father-in-law says: "Better a penniless, ugly girl, I said to my wife, than one whose family is stained with immorality." (139) When Rani becomes pregnant before marriage, Kaneez, her grandmother, laments, "The only thing I had left was my dignity. And the hope that it would be different for you. But today you have robbed me of both. I have nothing left." (233) According to Shariah or Islamic law, premarital sex is a punishable offence "*The fornicatress and the fornicator, flog each of them with a hundred stripes.*"¹² However, in reality it is only Rani who suffers from retribution at the hands of Mashooq, her stepfather, who kills her because she carries a bastard child. It is also ruled that women who have illicit sex will not be allowed abortion because that would mean covering up the immoral act. Moreover, the foetus in case of illicit sex has no guardian, as it is the product of wanton sexuality. The laws clearly aim at controlling a woman's body and her sexuality, justifying Mashooq's murder of Rani because he thinks that by killing Rani and destroying her bastard child, he has cleansed and purged the earth of the products of dishonour.

Not only is a woman's body and sexuality controlled and restricted, the fate of the products of that sexuality, i.e. babies, are also determined by patriarchal ideology. In *Sister of My Heart*, when it is known that Sudha is carrying a girl child, her mother-in-

law commands her to undergo an abortion, and in *The End of Innocence*, Mashooq takes the responsibility of killing Rani and her unborn child born out of wedlock. Mohsin's characterisation of Mashooq is interesting: he is a man who had to bear the burden of being a bastard his entire life, and felt that there was no greater sin than begetting a bastard, "I have liberated them both. I removed the dishonour from Rani. As for the baby, I rescued it from living hell. It was all planned up above. Allah wanted me to redeem myself." (325) In Divakaruni's novel, Sudha's father is also a bastard, who tricks Anju's father in believing that he is his cousin. Both men in both novels are driven by the desire to avenge themselves against the forces which deprived them of a proper identity and a life of dignity, thus upholding how men too inevitably become victims of patriarchy. Motherhood therefore stops being a socially desirable concept and exposes the dangers of unregulated sexuality and unwanted desire of a woman. It is also significant that a woman, in many Indian families is valued only if she gives birth to a son; her power derives from her ability to perpetuate the patriarchal tradition of patrilineality. Rich argues in her work *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, "Patriarchy is the power of the fathers: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men - by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law, and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labor, determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male."¹³

If *Sister of My Heart* upholds the depth and durability of female friendships, *The End of Innocence* underscores how the barriers which women face in a hetero-relational society often end up causing severe damage to people and relationships. Both novels espouse the need for greater understanding and compassion between women in an increasingly hostile heterosexual and patriarchal world. Albeit it is not possible for all women to identify with each other, or to consider each other as a friend, but what is necessary is solidarity across all socio-cultural, religious and economic barriers, that which makes this friendship a political act, against all the heterosexual and patriarchal forces which continue to operate in many ways in contemporary society.

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BIO-NOTE

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