NEOLIBERALISM AND SAME-SEX DESIRE IN THE FICTION AND PUBLIC CULTURES OF INDIA AFTER 1991

A dissertation submitted to Kent State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by

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August, 2013
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am deeply grateful to my dissertation director, Dr. Kevin Floyd. His patience and astonishing generosity with his time, as well as his meticulous guidance at every stage of the writing process were crucial to the completion of this project. Any faults that survive are my own. I would also like to thank the members of my dissertation committee: Dr. Babacar M’Baye, Dr. Tammy Clewell, and Dr. Brian Baer for providing extremely thoughtful feedback. Thanks to Dr. Raymond Craig for agreeing to moderate the defense meeting at an impossibly short notice. For their support during my course work and candidacy examinations, I thank Dr. Mark Bracher and Dr. Willie Harrell respectively. Thanks to Dr. Masood A. Raja for enhancing my understanding of several key concepts in postcolonial theory. I thank the wonderful staff members at the English department who helped me in countless ways during my time here, especially Dawn Lashua and Jenny Dixon. Thanks to Uma Krishnan and Dr. Baer for giving me the opportunity to teach at the Foreign Language Academy. I thank all my friends and colleagues of the Graduate Student Orientation team, especially Molly Taggart and Kate McAnulty.

The friends I made at Kent, my chosen family, have always sustained me with their numerous acts of kindness and gestures of support. For this and more,
I am thankful to Ajisa, Sigrid, Leonardo, Loubna, Libo, Adriana, Chris, Sarah, Rajlakshmi, Jen, Sameer, and Colleen. Thanks to Swaralipi and Sayantani, for their interest in my research and for those many, many hours of academic discussions. I thank my dear friends who were always there for me even while being miles apart: Maharghya, Urna, Shreya, Gargi, Devaleena, Deblina, and Sophie.

I have always been extremely fortunate in having the guidance of excellent teachers and educators. I become aware of how much they have contributed in shaping my worldview with each passing day. I thank my professors at Scottish Church College and at the University of Calcutta, especially Shanta Pal, Dr. Krishna Sen, and Dr. Jharna Sanyal. The skills and the insights I gained during my brief but memorable time at the School of Cultural Texts and Records, Jadavpur University have helped me time and again, and I thank Dr. Anuradha Chanda for giving me the opportunity to work with her.

Finally, it would have been impossible to finish this dissertation without the continuous support and encouragement I received from my family: my parents, Swarup Kumar Ray and Asima Ray; my brother, Swayamjit Ray; my grandparents, Bijoy Gopal Gupta and Durga Gupta; and many others, especially my dear aunt, Pratima Gupta. And thanks to Piyali Gupta, for being my eternal safe space.
INTRODUCTION

“The Orient becomes a living tableau of queerness.”—Edward Said, *Orientalism*

**Neoliberalism and the Living Tableau of Queerness**

Edward Said wrote this sentence in *Orientalism* to explain how the Orient is frequently imagined by Western writers as “a reservoir of infinite peculiarity” while the European is “a watcher, never involved, always detached…” (103). The detached Western gaze takes stock of the various “peculiarities” or cultural differences in the Orient, exaggerates them to the level of grotesquerie, and thereby re-affirms its own cultural normativity. Said’s description of the Orient as a “living tableau of queerness” is thus a sardonic comment on the Orientalist gaze that reduces and construes the Orient as the Other to the Self of the West. However this very same sentence can be used to describe very closely the proliferating representations of same-sex desire in India after 1991. This deliberate misreading is made possible by the other connotation of the word “queer,” which I take at this point to simply mean same-sex desire and intimacy, or sexualities and gender expressions that cannot be circumscribed under the category of heterosexuality.
Literary and cultural texts that depicted this “peculiarity” of queerness became more prevalent in public cultures of post-1991 India. *Bombay Dost,* India’s first gay magazine, started appearing under the editorship of activist Ashok Row Kavi from 1990. Vikram Seth’s novel of epic proportions, *A Suitable Boy* (1993), featured a thinly disguised homoerotic friendship between two important characters, Maan and Firoz. In 1997, transvestite and *hijra* 1 characters became the central focus in three films: Amol Palekar’s *Daayra (The Square Hole),* Kalpana Lajmi’s *Darmiyaan (In Between),* and Mahesh Bhatt’s *Tamanna (Desire).* 2

And in 1998, Deepa Mehta’s film *Fire* featured the love affair between two lesbian characters as the central narrative, igniting a hailstorm of protests and inciting an unprecedented and vibrant discourse on sexuality. It does not seem an overstatement to affirm now that after the release of *Fire,* the resulting controversies that dogged the film for months finally made it impossible to ignore the existence of same-sex desire in public cultures of India. Suddenly the love that dared not speak its name—or only dared to speak its name in hushed and veiled tones in underground subcultures—became public knowledge. By the time the end of the millennium approached, words like “gay,” “lesbian,” and

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1 Hijras are the most visible queer community in the Indian subcontinent. In Western sexual epistemological terms, they are variously described as transgender, transsexual, intersexual, or transvestites. That so many disparate descriptors can be used to categorize hijras is a very good indicator of how difficult it is to arrive at a precise definition. Serena Nanda in her iconic first ethnography on hijras takes hijras’ own definition as “neither man nor woman” to highlight the interstitial space occupied by the community. A large section of the first chapter of this dissertation will clarify the definitional issues in more detail.

2 As noted by Shohini Ghosh in “Queer Pleasures for Queer People: Film, Television, and Queer Sexuality in India.”
“homophobia” had entered the public vocabulary and enjoyed significant purchase.

As the public sphere came to resemble “a living tableau of queerness,” momentous changes were happening economically under the aegis of Prime Minister P.V. Narsimha Rao and Finance Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh. In an effort to revitalize the dreadfully depleted foreign currency reserves, and to meet the conditionality of loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Rao government decided to launch a massive liberalization of the economy. The economic policies instituted by the first Prime Minister of independent India, Jawaharlal Nehru, had favored a model of “mixed economy” that approximated the welfare state model, with only limited and controlled interactions with the world market at large. The 1991 policies marked a decisive break from this Nehruvian model, and ushered in changes that are the cornerstones of economic liberalization: greater deregulation, privatization, and gradual dismantling of welfare state social provisions. The theory of political economy that provides ideological support for these changes is called neoliberalism, and has been defined by David Harvey as a set of “practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (2). As a theory of political economy, neoliberalism places a high premium on the individual, and is invested in protecting, celebrating, and safeguarding the individual’s right to freedom and
potential to achieve material success. In practice, neoliberal ways of living encourage a thoroughgoing integration of the individual as a consumer, coding “freedom” as the right to consume and entailing what Harvey calls a careful “creative destruction” of other modes of living and being that do not conform to this model.

I claim in this dissertation that there is not only a strong link between the liberalization of the Indian economy and the simultaneous emergence of a “living tableau of queerness” in Indian public culture, but that these two occurrences are informed by each other. I begin with the assumption that economic changes such as the ones described above cannot take place without correspondingly changing the sociocultural landscape significantly. It is inevitable that certain trends and patterns should emerge in the literary and cultural domains that will bear witness to the fact that material conditions of living have changed irrevocably due to the liberalization process. The public sphere, including all cultural productions, constitutes the essential means to create—even manufacture—consent for such tremendous changes in economic policy that affect the lives of all. The process of manufacturing consent in this way leads to noticeable changes in the already extant discourse.³ I propose to track the changes that took place in the discourse with respect to representations of same-

³ I use the term “discourse” here to mean “language-in-use.” Representation of same-sex desire cannot take place in a linguistic vacuum. Any and every contemporary representation calls forth previous representations, a collective cultural memory of what has gone before. This “discourse” is both academic and lay.
sex desire in four selected texts produced after 1991. I follow these changes in discourse with the following main objectives in mind:

a) to examine how the neoliberal emphasis on the individual—especially ideas of individual freedom and individual initiative—affects the representation of same-sex desire in sociocultural terms,

b) to analyze the specific ways in which material conditions of living produced in a neoliberal world affect representations of same-sex desire, and

c) to bring the sociocultural mode of analysis in conversation with the materialist mode of analysis in order to see how they inform each other.

It is necessary to situate the discourse of same-sex desire I am talking about before tracking any changes produced by the seismic shift in economic policies of 1991. This requires providing a background of the discourse across two specific disciplinary fields, postcolonial studies and queer studies, and then mapping the possibility of a materialist methodology of critique with respect to these two disciplinary bases. I will approach this task of providing a review by first situating the “queer” in “postcolonial”; move on to a discussion of the established trends in queer materialist critique; and then contextualize these two conversations with respect to the policy shift towards neoliberalism in India. For reasons of clarity, the discussion is formatted to move from the global/metropolitan discourses to specific moldings of those debates with respect to India.
Locating the Queer in Postcolonial

Locating the queer in postcolonial is a fraught exercise that necessitates unpacking the gendered metaphors of colonial dominance in Orientalist discourse first, since they lead to the implications in terms of sexuality later. The metaphor of sexual conquest, domination, even rape, has been used fairly often to symbolize the material and discursive domination of the colonized domain that occurs through colonization. For example, Said reads Flaubert’s representations of Kuchuk Hanem⁴ as a symbolic act of colonial dominance:

Flaubert’s encounter with an Egyptian courtesan produced a widely influential model of the Oriental woman; she never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history. He spoke for and represented her. He was foreign, comparatively wealthy, male, and these were historical facts of domination that allowed him to not only possess Kuchuk Hanem physically but to speak for her and to tell his readers in what way she was “typically Oriental.” My argument is that Flaubert’s situation of strength in relation to Kuchuk Hanem was not an isolated instance. It fairly stands for the pattern of relative strength between East and West, and the discourse about the Orient that it enabled. (6)

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⁴ Flaubert’s account of his journey to the “Orient” can be found in his letters to Louis Bouilhet, published as *Cinq Lettres d’Egyptes*. Kuchuk Hanem was a famous Egyptian dancer and courtesan Flaubert met during his travels.

⁵ Said’s emphasis.
Reading colonization as a gendered act of domination and control in this manner has a long history. Further, when the Orient is imagined as a “reservoir of infinite peculiarity” by certain Western writers, it is frequently seen that this peculiarity becomes coded in terms of a sexual encounter that ends with colonizing the culturally unfamiliar body of the colonized. The “peculiarity” of the colonized is exaggerated to the level of grotesquerie, which is then constructed as “Oriental.” Thus according to Said, “Oriental” as a category is simultaneously feminized and produced as a zone marked with unfamiliarity in cultural terms.

Revathi Krishnaswamy identifies a significant limitation in Said’s thesis. According to her, the undue emphasis “on the metaphor of gender tends to dehistoricize the semantics of sexuality, disconnecting it from the varied yet specific contexts in which Orientalism developed and deployed a whole array of sexual stereotypes” (2). That is to say, while reading colonialism through the metaphor of sexual domination, Said always constructs the colonizer as the male aggressor while the colonized assumes the position of the violated female. Krishnaswamy contends that automatic feminization of the colonized figure obfuscates the more important domination of the colonized male through emasculation:

Ravishment is often more about emasculating a male than about possessing a female. The ultimate goal of authorizing a European claim to ownership through a feminization of India(n) was to establish the dominance of white men not over brown women but over brown men,
who were seen as the legitimate owners of brown women and as the real objects of colonial rule. In other words, I am suggesting that the real goal of feminization is effeminization—a process in which colonizing men use women/womanhood to delegitimize, discredit, and disempower colonized men. (3)

Krishnaswamy then goes on to reclaim the figure of the effeminized male in colonial discourse to claim that it can be read not only as an alternative ideal of masculinity, but also as a radical interrogation of colonial ideology. Although Krishnaswamy’s critique rightly notes the limitations of Said’s analysis in not following through with the metaphor of sexual domination in terms of sexuality as well as gender, she replicates the same limitation in her own counterargument. Even though the object of sexual domination in Krishnaswamy’s analysis is not Kuchuk Hanem but the effeminized brown man, she persists in talking about this encounter in terms of different masculinities, i.e. in terms of gender, and not sexuality. The “ravishment” of the colonial male is discursive, and can be countered by a redemptive reading of his masculinity as “alternative.”

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6 Krishnaswamy is not alone in attempting this reclamation. The various psychological imbrications between colonialism and masculinity have been analyzed by Ashis Nandy in the widely cited *The Intimate Enemy* (1983). Mrinalini Sinha has given a painstakingly historical analysis of the construction of the “manly Englishman” and the “effeminate Bengali” in *Colonial Masculinity* (1995).

7 Although a more thorough discussion of it is beyond the scope of this project, I am concerned with Krishnaswamy’s model of discursive sexual domination on another count: it completely removes the colonized woman from the discourse, while not even mentioning the collusion or resistance of colonizer women in the process of colonization. The reading that we get of the colonizing project is therefore irredeemably masculine on both sides—a frightening act of erasure of all women from the narrative as men parade their various masculinities, whether as tools of colonial domination or anticolonial interrogation.
Masculinity, for Krishnaswamy, is a site of conflict between colonizer and colonized, while the sexuality of the differently masculine, colonized male remains unmentioned.

Krishnaswamy’s critique is representative of what can be called the queer gap in most postcolonial scholarship, one that has been addressed only recently. The Orientalist discourse that Said described, defined, and critiqued forwarded an imaginative geography of the Orient as a space where the sexual pleasures unobtainable in the Occident become available. Later commentators like Joseph Boone and Joseph Massad have noted that Said’s analysis stopped short of exploring the non-heterosexual dimensions of these so-called forbidden sexual pleasures. Scholars like Boone have addressed this lack in Said’s analysis. As Boone notes in his article “Vacation Cruises”:

For many Western men the act of exploring, writing about, and theorizing an eroticized Near and Middle East is coterminous with unlocking a Pandora’s box of phantasmic homoerotic desire, desire whose propensity to spread without check threatens to contaminate, indeed re-orient, the heterosexual “essence” of occidental male subjectivity. (59)

In other words, this “phantasmic homoerotic desire” is part of the peculiarity of the Orient. Thus, Boone’s analysis brings together the two denotations of the word “queer” so that the deliberate misreading I began with is no longer a misreading. Once this Pandora’s Box of homoeroticism is opened, it leads to some very interesting discursive plays and counterplays. The possibility of having
a discussion of same-sex desire outside the global North becomes fraught with tension produced due to the Orientalism and cultural imperialism of the West. As the title of Boone’s article suggests, sometimes these discussions can seem like taking a vacation to the global South and *discovering* same-sex desire, or uncritically analyzing local same-sex formations using Western sexual epistemological categories. Even using words like “gay,” “lesbian,” and “queer” can favor a flattening universalization.

Dennis Altman notes this tendency to universalize in his article “Global Gaze/Global Gays” when he observes that “Western lesbian/gay theorists and activists are beginning to perceive the problems of claiming a universality for an identity that developed out of certain historical specificities” (97). To claim universality of identity-categories like “gay” and “lesbian” is to expect and demand everyone to fit into the same mold regardless of these historical specificities. Altman criticizes the contributors to Michael Warner’s influential volume *Fear of a Queer Planet* for not being more alert to these historical specificities, concluding that “American ‘queer theory’ remains as relentlessly Atlantic-centric in its view of the world as the mainstream culture it critiques” (98). While “Atlantic-centric” may be a more charitable description of the directional orientation of Western queer theory when looked at from the vantage-point of the West, the term “neocolonial” is what comes to mind when measuring the impact of this theory on same-sex formations in and from the global South. What does the impact of this neocolonial queer theory look like
from the global South? What kind of counterdiscursive movement, if any, does it generate? Joseph Massad provides the answers to these questions with respect to Arab cultures, and for this reason, Massad’s *Desiring Arabs* is an important intervention in recent scholarly discourse.

According to Massad, discourse about same-sex desire in Arab civilizations can be mostly contained in two broad strands: the Orientalist and the Nativist. Directly taking off from Edward Said, Massad traces the neocolonial discourse about same-sex desire back to Orientalism. In Orientalist discourses, attempts are made to cordon off the imagined geography of the Orient as an uncivilized, backward space of sexual license and unfettered debauchery that is at odds with the civilized, rational, more socially evolved Western space. The Nativist discourses that developed in reaction to such Orientalist thinking, on the other hand, demarcate the “West” as a space characterized by a shameless lack of principles with respect to sexual mores, which threaten to destroy the traditional culture and social values of Arab societies. Massad notes how the Nativist counterdiscursive move on the part of the Arab thinkers continues to engage in the same temporal schema set by Orientalist discourse. While in Orientalist discourses, the non-Western other is depicted as being less socially evolved, less modern and thereby less civilized in contrast to Western “civilization,” Nativist discourses valorize this same lack as being more traditional and hence more moral, especially with respect to sexual mores. Massad demonstrates that this kind of discursive interplay has dominated the field of scholarship. His analyses
of Orientalist and Nativist discourses show that these discourses have always turned on a temporal scale heavily influenced by a Social Darwinist model in which the Western telos of modernity as the temporally advanced and ahead is always implicitly accepted. If the West is always already more modern and more civilized, the rest can only hope to take the attributes that make them less modern and less civilized and try to reclaim them as tradition.

Meanwhile, as Jasbir Puar points out in *Terrorist Assemblages*, the conception of the Orient just as the land of forbidden sexual pleasures has changed:

The Orient, once conceived in Foucault’s *ars erotica* and Said’s deconstructive work as the place of original release and unfettered sin, and acts with no attendant identities or consequences, now symbolizes the space of repression *and* perversion, and the site of freedom has been relocated to western identity.⁸

The simultaneous coding of non-Western societies as repressed and perverse might seem contradictory at first, but the idea coheres when it is remembered that as a result of both, the Orient is easily labeled “less modern” or lacking in civilizational principles with respect to the West. To use Said’s words in *Orientalism*: “Once we begin to think of Orientalism as a kind of Western projection onto and will to govern over the Orient, we will encounter few surprises” (95). The discourse is either driven by an impetus to ascribe exclusively

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⁸ Puar’s italics.
subversive (same-sex) desires onto the “backward” Oriental space, or dominated by a Nativist counterdiscursive ploy that seeks to situate the source of the perverse contagion of homosexuality squarely in the so-called “civilized” and “progressive” Occident, only transmitted as a neocolonial ploy to destroy the traditional fabric of precolonial “pure” society. The end result, Massad argues, fails to escape the temporal schema which is always already laden with a Eurocentric telos of defining modernity. Said’s seminal deconstruction of Orientalist imaginative geography explained how discursive constructions of the “Orient” were instrumental in furthering a dual objective: that of self-definition against the non-Western other, and exploitation of the same by colonial forces. Massad builds on one crucial aspect of Said’s work—that of defining “civilization” with respect to sexual behavior—and deconstructs the terms of the debate in terms of temporality, explaining why the debate has never yielded anything rather than a tired interplay of familiar logic. Puar’s analysis builds on both Said and Massad, alerting us to the newer mutations of Orientalist racism that are coded in the language of sexual freedom or lack thereof.

It must be remembered that the Eurocentric notion of modernity is very heavily imbued with notions of economic progress in which accumulation of wealth in a post-industrial society is key to defining who is backward and who shall be counted as civilized or modern—words that become almost interchangeable in this context. More importantly, as Massad points out, sexual desire and gender roles cannot be studied “in isolation from the institutions
within which they are enveloped and the overall socioeconomic system that makes them possible” (2). It is now that we arrive at another crucial juncture in the discourse that is mostly overlooked. While an attempt to locate the queer in postcolonial reveals very complex interplays of cultural logic, it is an exercise often carried out in perfect dissociation from the material conditions that inform both the category of “postcolonial” and “queer.” One of the most important reasons for this is probably the uneasy relationship between a materialist methodology and queer critique. This uneasy relationship creates a lacuna of under-theorization that is hard to navigate in itself, let alone when varied forms of postcoloniality are added to the equation. The other reason is that neoliberal ideology actively works to obscure the connections between issues of race, gender, sexuality, (post)coloniality, and the material conditions that inform them. It is necessary to look at a brief history of queer theory’s engagement with materialist methodologies to get a clearer understanding of these two reasons.

**Queer Critique and Materialist Methodology**

While it is not absolutely impossible to find scholarship that uses a materialist methodology to approach queer issues, it remains a scarcity. In the context of the global North, John D’Emilio’s analysis of how the introduction of the capitalist modes of production influenced the coalescing of a visible gay

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9 A recent special issue of *GLQ* entitled “Queer Studies and the Crises of Capitalism” (18: 1, 2012) addresses this scarcity.
identity in the mid-nineteenth century U.S. is one of the first that comes to mind. D’Emilio observes that in the late nineteenth century U.S., the family lost its significance as the primary unit of production due to the development of a market economy and capitalism. As a result of the industrialized economy that made the individual members of the family wage earners, the traditional interdependent nature of family-based production was lost and the family re-coded itself as the primary center of affective bonds and emotional security. D’Emilio notes that financial independence of the family members, in alliance with migration that an industrial economy sometimes necessitated, paved the way for a formulation of identities based on homosexual behavior. He draws a clear distinction between homosexual behavior and identity, the former of which was always present, but the latter only became consolidated when the economic pre-conditions for its occurrence were met. He notes that capitalism thus has a complex relationship with the identity-formation and sustenance of queer life: on the one hand it makes such identities possible and tenable by providing the economic pre-condition for their emergence and by de-emphasizing the family as an interdependent unit; on the other, it encourages men and women to form heterosexual attachments within the confines of the family, even so long as to bring forth the next generation, in effect validating and sustaining heterosexism and by extension, homophobia.

While D’Emilio’s work is useful to understand the emergence of an LGBT identitarian politics in the U.S. in the context of its specific material conditions in
history, we need similar scholarship that unravels the contemporary connections between queer issues and the material conditions that inform them. This has been hard to do since Marxist theory, one of the most influential modes of materialist critique, has a troubled relationship with queer concerns because of its emphasis on totality. Kevin Floyd, in *The Reification of Desire*, summarizes the concern of queer critics about this tendency noting that “queer skepticism about Marxian efforts to think totality has... been more than justified in the face of a persistent Marxian tendency to deprioritize questions of sexuality when these questions were acknowledged at all, to subordinate these questions to other, more “total” concerns—to represent sexuality, in other words, not only as “merely cultural” but as always already localized and particularized” (5). As a mode of analysis, totality thinking relies on the bigger picture that subsumes the local and the particular, and often, queer issues are not integrated because they are not considered total enough. The “merely cultural” coding of queer issues10 often prevents a more engaged analysis of queer issues through a Marxist lens.

Despite this methodological problem, some recent scholarship has addressed queer issues from a materialist perspective. M. V. Lee Badgett’s book *Money, Myths, and Change* deconstructs the popular myths about gay privilege, e.g. that gay men and lesbian are affluent, and are more likely to accumulate wealth since they have no family responsibilities (1). Badgett analyzes these myths against the reality of discrimination that gay men and lesbians face in the

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10 Floyd borrows the phrase “merely cultural” here from Judith Butler.
workplace, but also notes that there is an increasing trend towards what she calls “queer conspicuous consumption,” i.e. the emergence of a new consumer group based on sexuality that has become a target consumer profile (102). Alexandra Chasin’s *Selling Out* presents a similar analysis, even going so far as to say that representations of gay- and lesbian-identified modes of life are fast becoming commodified: “While gay people now appear as consumers, our coming-out stories now appear as plots, our styles as *the* styles, our stuff as *the* stuff to buy” (238). This commodification results in “selling out” for Chasin, i.e. compromising for a kind of provisionary acceptance that depends on vigorous participation in the market as consumers. It also diffuses to a large extent the radical potential of a queer movement that strives for equal rights. This diffusion takes place by dissociating the agenda of economic and social justice from a vision of the world in which equal rights have been achieved.

Heidi Nast’s controversial article “Queer Patriarchies, Queer Racisms, International” takes this sinister de-linking of queer issues from concerns of economic justice another step forward. Nast claims that certain gay white men have benefited enormously from the postindustrial sectors that depend on white supremacy and heteropatriarchy. In other words: it does get better, but only for certain white men with disposable income and a lifestyle that suits conservative models of wealth accumulation and conspicuous consumption. The material conditions that Nast identifies as “postindustrial” are in fact much better described in political economic terms as neoliberal.
The Neoliberal Turn

In order to better elaborate on the connections I am trying to draw, it is important to first give a more elaborate description of the highly amorphous notion of neoliberalism itself. I use, for the most part, David Harvey’s general description in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Harvey’s definition emphasizes private property rights and the existence of a free market with no restrictions on movement of capital. He goes on to say that the role of the neoliberal state is to

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11 There are two reasons to choose Harvey’s description of neoliberalism in this context. Firstly, a lot of rigorous scholarship on neoliberalism tends to have a very specific scope of analysis: it analyzes the effects of neoliberal tenets (like deregulation and privatization, among others) on the economy with respect to a particular national or regional frame. For example, the volume *Contesting Neoliberalism: Urban Frontiers* edited by Helga Leitner, et al. contains in-depth analyses of neoliberalism in specific urban areas of South Africa, New Zealand, Mexico, Canada, the U.S. and the U.K. It makes a lot of sense to limit the scope of the analysis in this way since, as the articles by Wendy Larner and Maria Butler, and Patrick Bond and Peter McInnes demonstrate, implementation of neoliberal principles can have very divergent effects on an economy based on its regional particularities. Secondly, analyses that are not limited by a specific regional emphasis or context may focus strictly on the economic effects of neoliberalism, leaving out or underprivileging its political-economic dimensions. Gérard Duménil and Dominique Lévy’s *The Crisis of Neoliberalism* is an example of this kind of inquiry, in which they undertake an investigation of how the inherent contradictions in the strategy of neoliberalism resulted in the 2007 loan crash (1). The authors explicitly distance themselves from a more ideological or social mode of analysis: “Neoliberalism is not about principles or ideology but a social order aiming at the power and income of the upper classes. Ideology is a political instrument ... That a deep and lasting structural crisis might usher in a new social order, the expression of distinct class hierarchies and compromises, is another issue” (228). Since I am not interested in neoliberalism only as an economic precept but as a theory of political economy that has significant influences on the sociocultural, it would be as erroneous to abstract a regionally situated description to serve a more global purpose (or apply the insights gained from one regional description to a different region—too reminiscent of an Orientalist flattening of the other) as to rely on descriptions that are admittedly averse to this goal. Harvey’s description has a global scope, and he uses examples from all over the world (China, India, the U.S. and the U.K.) to illustrate and describe the features of neoliberalism in political-economic terms. I complement his analyses frequently with scholarship that is more finely tuned with respect to scope whenever it is necessary to do so. For example, I use Mike Davis’s *Planet of Slums* in the second chapter to explain the ecological and geo-spatial effects of neoliberalism in the context of the city space; Kapur and Pendakur’s observations on the effects of globalization on Hindi cinema as a symptom of the liberalization of the Indian economy in the third chapter; and Lisa Duggan’s discussion of how neoliberalism manages to fold queer life into the homonormative throughout.
ensure—by creating and/or preserving—an institutional framework appropriate to uphold these tenets of a neoliberal ideology. The best way to do this is by removing all obstacles to ensure the free movement of capital, especially by curtailing acts of governmental intervention. Harvey traces the origin of neoliberalism as a theory of political economy to the ideas of a handful of academics, Milton Friedman and his followers at the University of Chicago being the most influential among them, and gives a comprehensive timeline of major instances of liberalization in various strategic geopolitical locales around the world: China under Deng Xiaopeng beginning in 1978-80; the U.K. under Margaret Thatcher beginning in 1979; the U.S. under Ronald Reagan beginning in 1980 (8, 1). The state’s effort to “create” a framework conducive to the functioning of a neoliberal market system (for example, creating a market where none existed before through state action in areas like land, water, environmental pollution) often necessitates what Harvey calls the “creative destruction” not just of prior institutional frameworks “but also of divisions of labour, social relations, welfare provisions, technological mixes, ways of life and thought, reproductive activities, attachments to the land and habits of the heart” (3). So although neoliberalism predicates non-interference from the state in regulating market forces, it depends on and demands such state action as will ensure and enlarge the reach and scope of the very same market forces.

The results of the shift towards neoliberalism, effected through a liberalization of economies, have been an unmitigated redistribution of wealth
and capital accumulation to the ruling elite classes: “After the implementation of
neoliberal policies in the late 1970s, the share of national income of the top 1 per
cent of income earners in the US soared, to reach 15 per cent [by the end of the
century]... The US is not alone in this: the top 1 percent of income earners in
Britain have doubled their share of the national income from 6.5 per cent to 13
per cent since 1982” (Harvey 16-17). Meanwhile, as can be expected, this sharp
increase in income inequality gave rise to a corresponding increase in social
inequities. The income gap as the rich got richer and the poor got poorer not
only manifested itself in the global North, but also by consolidating the global
North-South divide by increasing the dependence of developing nations on
institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Loans taken from the IMF
generally came with the conditionality to liberalize the economy of the debtor
country-state, thereby sealing all doors of exit from the self-perpetuating primacy
of the neoliberal order.

The allied cost in human terms for such political economic enterprises
often runs high, although this undesirable outcome is energetically obscured by
the cornerstone of neoliberal philosophy which Harvey describes in the following
terms: “[Neoliberalism] holds that the social good will be maximized by
maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions, and it seeks to bring
all human action into the domain of the market” (3). One of the ways to ensure
that all human action is brought under the purview of the market, and also to
obscure the process of commodification that this encroachment by the market
entails, is by emphasizing the choice and the freedom of the individual actor or agent: “The assumption that individual freedoms are guaranteed by the freedom of the market and of trade is a cardinal feature of neoliberal thinking…” (Harvey 7). Thus, individualism, freedom, choice—all buzzwords of classical liberalism, now become appropriated by neoliberal thinking by making individual freedoms conditional on the freedom of the market.

It is when we consider this emphasis on celebrating the individual as an independent actor whose freedom and volition depends on the freedom of the market, that the full implications of Nast, Badgett, and Chasin’s analyses are understood. If the material conditions of capitalism helped create “gay” and “lesbian” identities (not homosexual behavior, but identities predicated on those behaviors) as D’Emilio suggested, and those very same identities are now being used, marshaled, motivated to prop up the neoliberal encroachment into new areas of life and justify the normativity of neoliberal thought, Nast’s conclusion does not seem as controversial any more. Indeed, one of the ways she says the “queer white patriarchy” has constituted its privilege is by depending on the “market virility” or purchasing power that enables gay white men to have better access to means of reproduction (through surrogacy) or circuits of transnational adoption. A mode of analysis that bears in mind the neoliberal encroachment of the market into hitherto unexplored territory (surrogacy) would clarify, in this instance, the connections between processes of commodification that enable sustenance of this queer white patriarchy. The individual choice of the gay white
couple to have a child may become a cause for celebration and a marker of social progress, while the “choice” of the surrogate to hire out her womb may be celebrated as a selfless act that is undertaken voluntarily. The material conditions that led to this voluntary decision-making of the surrogate, possibly economic hardship and class affiliation, or lack of racial privilege that contributed to the class affiliation, may be obscured entirely.¹²

Lisa Duggan explains the rationale behind this kind of obscuring in *The Twilight of Equality?* (the italics are hers):

*Neoliberalism was constructed in and through cultural and identity politics and cannot be undone by a movement without constituencies and analyses that respond directly to that fact. Nor will it be possible to build a new social movement that might be strong, creative, and diverse enough to engage the work of reinventing global politics for the new millennium as long as cultural and identity issues are separated, analytically and organizationally, from the political economy in which they are embedded.*

What the progressive-left must understand is this: Neoliberalism, a late twentieth-century incarnation of Liberalism, organizes material and political life *in terms of* race, gender, and sexuality as well as economic class and nationality, or ethnicity and religion. But the categories through which Liberalism (and thus also neoliberalism) classifies human activity

¹² For a more detailed analysis of this, see David Eng’s “Transnational Adoption and Queer Diasporas” in *Social Text*, 21: 376 (Fall 2003): 1-37.
and relationships *actively obscure* the connections among these organizing terms. (3)

In other words, since neoliberalism appropriates concepts like individual freedom and choice, and utilizes axes of identity-based political organization (like race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality) traditionally used to militate for rights that were articulated through those concepts, it becomes extremely difficult to re-imagine social movements that can act against the dehumanizing excesses of neoliberal exploitation unless we combine cultural and identity politics with issues of economic justice.

Duggan gives an example of how this appropriation compromises queer critique by coining the neologism “the new homonormativity.” The word homonormativity, Duggan explains, is derived from Michael Warner’s term heteronormativity, which he uses in the introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet* to connote the “totalizing tendency” of “heterosexual privilege [that] lies in heterosexual culture’s exclusive ability to interpret itself as society” (8). While Warner’s term made it possible to articulate the aspect of heterosexual privilege that enables a naturalization of heterosexual coupling and establishing it as the norm, Duggan’s revision of the term proposes to name the normative politics that does not contest such heteronormativity—“it is a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity
and consumption” (50). More than anything else, it is the anchoring of this politics in domesticity and consumption practices that is mobilized by neoliberalism. This is exactly what identitarian LGBT politics voided of its commitment to social justice looks like. Meanwhile, the emphasis on individuality is maintained not only by the identitarian basis of this politics, but also by the privatization of a culture that is then made accessible to all through consumption practices. The illusion of freedom and individuality masks the reality that this commodified and depoliticized gay culture is provisional and only accessible to those who can afford it.

Now that we have a picture of how interaction between the queer and the postcolonial is interrupted, and of how the lacuna between materialist methodology and queer issues is produced in and through neoliberal thinking, we can formulate how these concerns play out in the specific context of post-1991 India. The following two sections will provide a brief history of the liberalization of the Indian economy, and then trace how the “cultural” critiques with respect to postcolonial queer issues have followed a predictably non-materialist methodology.

**Liberalization in India**

The ninth Prime Minister of independent India, P. V. Narsimha Rao, took office at a politically turbulent time, soon after the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi
had left a yawning power vacuum at the highest echelons of the ruling Congress Party. He inherited an economy on the brink of disaster: “India’s debt to foreign lenders had nearly doubled between 1985 and 1991, and a series of external shocks—including the sudden spike in oil prices that accompanied the Gulf War—had reduced India’s foreign currency reserves to less than the amount required to finance two weeks of imports” (Jose). Faced with this dire situation, Rao and Singh decided to depart from the Nehruvian model of mixed economy and inaugurate a liberalization of the Indian economy. This liberalization included measures like deregulation (most notably by way of ending license requirements for new investments—a practice that was known as license raj in popular parlance), opening up the Indian markets to the investment of foreign capital, greater privatization, and IMF-monitored structural adjustment programs (SAP). Nandita Shah et al point out that since the opening up of the markets was not entirely unprecedented, the 1991 policy announcements should not be seen “as a beginning of economic liberalization but its inevitable consolidation” (146). While it is certainly true that the processes of liberalization were happening slowly and surely over time, it cannot be denied that the sudden swerve in economic policies

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13 Jawaharlal Nehru’s economic model went hand in hand with his foreign policy. Under Nehru, India became a founder-member of the Non-Alignment Movement (NAM) along with Indonesia, Egypt, Ghana, and Yugoslavia. In a world neatly bifurcated into two dominant power blocs, each espousing an economic ideology that is starkly different than the other, Nehru decided to follow a middle course that advocated equal distance from both the blocs (for more details, see A.P. Rana, “The Intellectual Dimensions of India’s Nonalignment,” and Itty Abraham’s ”From Bandung to NAM”). This is seen in his economic policies which primarily followed a welfare-state model, but with intermittent and controlled allowance of foreign capital and limited interaction with the world market at large (see Helga Leitner, et al. “Contesting Urban Futures: Decentering Neoliberalism,” 7).
under the Rao government in 1991 marked a watershed moment in recent Indian history.

The tempered vision of Shah et al is not easy to locate in Vinod Jose’s rather dramatic rendering of events, or the famous quote from Manmohan Singh that Jose includes in his account. It is worth quoting the entire passage in full:

On 24 July, a few weeks after presiding over a two-stage devaluation of the rupee, Singh stood up in the Lok Sabha to present his first budget, which laid out a series of structural reforms and fiscal adjustments: relaxation of industrial licensing, abolition of export subsidies, reduction in fund transfers to public enterprises and massive cuts in fertiliser subsidies and welfare programmes. At the close of his two-hour speech, the novice politician demonstrated a flair for rhetorical drama, uttering the lines that would be repeated in thousands of subsequent articles about Singh and the breakthrough of 1991: “I do not minimise the difficulties that lie ahead on the long and arduous journey on which we have embarked. But as Victor Hugo once said, ‘No power on earth can stop an idea whose time has come.’ I suggest to this august House that the emergence of India as a major economic power in the world happens to be one such idea. Let the whole world hear it loud and clear. India is now wide awake. We shall prevail. We shall overcome.” (Jose)

14 Lok Sabha (literally, “the House of the People”) is the lower house of the bicameral Indian legislature. The Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha (literally, “the Council of States”) together constitute the Indian Parliament.
The nationalistic fervor in the last lines is not incidental. The ruling Congress Party’s political ideology hinges strongly on nationalist and nation-building discourses that have a direct root in India’s struggle for independence from colonial rule. What is remarkable is the designation of neoliberalism as an ideology that validates this nationalism.

A closer look at the budget speech reveals how this curious amalgamation between neoliberalism and nationalism is possible. In the same budget speech, Dr. Manmohan Singh warns that “there can be no adjustment without pain. The people must be prepared to make necessary sacrifices to preserve our economic independence and restore the health of our economy.” The promise of economic power through liberalization of the economy speaks volumes about the intended audience of this speech. Can it be that “the people” being called on to withstand the pain of economic restructuring are the indigenous populations of India who depend on access to forest land that is being privatized by the state so that multinational corporations can extract minerals from the soil? Is it possible that the audience specifically denotes the millions of people who will be uprooted from their traditional ways of life if the Narmada Valley Project is completed to meet the increasing demands of hydroelectricity and the dammed water floods their land? As liberalization benefits the upper and the middle classes more than the “poorer segments of our population” in whose name it is carried out, it is clear that the burden of sacrifice does not fall equally on all Indians. Thus, the

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15 For a standard and detailed account, see Sumit Sarkar’s Modern India 1885-1947 (1983).
fusion of nationalistic fervor and neoliberal ideas can only occur through a violent erasure of the poor in whose name the process of liberalization is carried out.

The support for liberalization is not limited to the Congress party, but extends to the electoral base of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). E. Sridharan provides the following data about the 1999 general elections, in which the BJP-led coalition called National Democratic Alliance (NDA) was voted into power:

According to a CSDS [the Delhi-based Centre for the Study of Developing Societies] survey conducted after India’s 1999 general election, the BJP received 60% of upper caste Hindu votes, 52% of the vote among dominant Hindu peasant castes such as Jats, Marathas, Patidars, Reddys, and Kammas, which are not classified as OBCs [Other Backward Castes, eligible for special protection and programs of affirmative action under the Indian Constitution]. Indeed, the further down the caste hierarchy we look, the smaller the BJP’s share of the vote. The BJP’s vote share also correlates positively with class status, its vote share falling linearly as one goes down the ladder of economic status and educational attainment. The BJP’s base, though spreading to rural areas, remained disproportionately urban. The BJP’s electoral base, in other words, is largely composed of upper castes and dominant castes, which also make up a disproportionately large part of the upper income groups. (423)
Although the support for BJP may also mean an endorsement of its rightwing Hindu supremacist agenda, the bottom line remains that the NDA government continued with the process of liberalization inaugurated under previous Congress governments.\textsuperscript{16} Although the NDA failed to win the 2004 general elections after running a vigorously pro-reform neoliberal campaign, by then the central tenets of neoliberalism were established as self-evident principles for economic progress to a broad middle-class base.\textsuperscript{17} Further, both the anticolonial nationalism of Congress and the Hindu supremacist nationalism of BJP had incorporated neoliberalism into their political ideology.

\textbf{Cultural Archives of Queer Bodies: Postcolonial and Queer in India}

In her article "Homophobic Fiction/ Homoerotic Advertising," Ruth Vanita writes that "(i)n twentieth-century Indian fiction published in India, same-sex desire is almost always imbricated with notions not only of gender but also of "Indianness" and "foreignness." The popular myth that homosexuality was imported to India by invading West Asian Muslims or colonizing Europeans has

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{16} The NDA government created the aptly named Department of Disinvestment on 10 December 1999, which was later renamed as Ministry of Disinvestment from 6 December 2001. The sole purpose of this ministry is to sell off central government equities to the private sector, and according to its website, to add “market discipline to the functioning of Central Public Sector Enterprises.” A more nakedly neoliberal endeavor is hard to imagine.

\textsuperscript{17} For more on the rise of the middle classes and the simultaneous coding of neoliberal tenets as self-evident “common sense,” see Ruchira Ganguly-Scrase and Timothy J. Scrase’s \textit{Globalisation and the Middle Classes in India}, Rohit Chopra’s “Neoliberalism as Doxa: Bourdieu’s Theory of the State and the Contemporary Indian Discourse on Globalization and Liberalization”; Rupal Oza’s \textit{The Making of Neoliberal India: Nationalism, Gender, and the Paradoxes of Globalization}.}
been stated and re-stated by both left-wing and right-wing nationalists, from at least the late nineteenth century onward” (Vanita 127). Vanita’s observation points out that it has become impossible to discuss issues related to same-sex desire in contemporary India without invoking a parallel and allied discourse of cultural origin and authenticity—a situation that continues to influence and overdetermine the terms of the debate when it comes to discussing issues related to same-sex desire in most postcolonial and/or diasporic settings. The myth that homosexuality is a foreign import has created the need to assemble archives consisting of indigenous artifacts instantiating that same-sex desire existed in colonized societies long before those societies were colonized or faced “foreign” influence. Vanita and Kidwai’s archival volume Same-Sex Love in India culls material dating from the second century BCE and continues on to 1997 in several Indian languages (translated into English). The editors note in the “Preface” that: “The myth that same-sex love is a disease imported into India contributes to an atmosphere of ignorance that proves dangerous for many Indians. In such an atmosphere, homoerotically inclined people often hate themselves, live in shamed secrecy, try to “cure” themselves by resorting to quacks or forcing themselves into marriage, and even attempt suicide,

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18 This is a commonplace in the largely homophobic Indian political rhetoric. Vanita cites in the “Preface” to Same-Sex Love in India two political figures of very different ideological persuasions—Vimla Farooqi of National Federation of Indian Women (the women’s front of the Communist Party of India) who claims that homosexuality is a result of decadent Western influences, and Bal Thackeray of Shiv Sena (a right-wing Hindu nationalist party) who notes that it is “not part of Indian culture.” (xxiii-xxiv). Very recently at an AIDS conference held in New Delhi, Ghulam Nabi Azad, then Health Minister of India, reiterated the notion that gay sex is “unnatural” and that homosexuality is a disease imported from “foreign shores” (“Homosexuality is Unnatural”).
individually or jointly....We hope this book will help assure homoerotically inclined Indians that large numbers of their ancestors throughout history and in all parts of the country shared their inclinations and were honored and successful members of society who contributed in major ways to thought, literature, and the general good” (xxiv). So this archive—and similar ones like it—has the very important practical use of demonstrating to the postcolonial subject that s/he is not “diseased” or has caught the contagion of homosexuality from being too Westernized. In other words, the fact of visibility of same-sex love and alliances in historical, literary, and cultural artifacts is supposed to grant the kind of validity desired by the contemporary queer Indian. It is also important here to observe that locating the “West” as the source of this disease/contagion of homosexuality also serves the purpose of bolstering the idea that same-sex desire was unknown in India and other postcolonial societies before foreign influence arrived through colonization. As such, these archives also belie and work against this simplistic and ahistorical assumption by pointing to the cracks of heteropatriarchal historiography and emphasizing the queer narratives that tend to get erased or conveniently forgotten in the process of imagining a heteronormative postcolonial nation into being.

19 Giti Thadani’s *Sakhiyani* is another similar attempt, although it is much lesser-known. *Bombay Dost*, the first gay magazine to be published in India, under the editorship of Ashok Row Kavi, also assembles personal narratives from readers that can be said to function as an archive of erotoautobiography that assures its readers that they are not alone in being “homoerotically inclined.”
However, while providing a useful and important counterdiscourse to the heteropatriarchal erasure of non-heterosexual erotics in the history of colonized peoples, archives of this kind are problematic in the sense that they implicitly gesture toward a cultural authenticity. That is to say, by pointing towards the unearthed history of same-sex desire through the ages, these archives argue for the validity and legitimacy of present-day same-sex erotic formations and alliances in these societies. This is problematic because tracing the provenance and existence of same-sex alliances in history might not lead to a validation of present-day same-sex relations. On the other hand, this time-locked argument may have the inadvertent outcome of mandating a culturally authentic way of being “homoerotically inclined” that will exclude other ways of expressing and feeling same-sex desire. An undesirable outcome of this might also be that a “more Indian” way of expressing or feeling same-sex desire as opposed to a “more Western” way of doing so comes into being, replicating and resurrecting the myth of the cultural origin of homosexuality, but in new terms.

Too much emphasis on establishing a visibility of same-sex desire through archived history has the consequence of confining, precluding, or reducing the scope of analyses that discuss representations of such desire with respect to relevant socioeconomic conditions in which they are embedded. Meanwhile, there is a recent rise in representations of same-sex desire in the postcolonial and diasporic literatures of the Indian sub-continent that corresponds directly to the increasing liberalization of the post-1990s Indian
economy. This disembedding of the socioeconomic from the sociocultural is a symptom of neoliberalism coding itself as axiomatic. Following Lisa Duggan’s observation, noted above, that neoliberalism may organize material and political life in terms of race, gender, sexual difference so that the connections between these terms and the socioeconomic is actively obscured (The Twilight of Equality? 3), the prevalent trend of archival scholarship can be explained as a result of the growing neoliberal hegemony in India after 1991. In other words, the academic interest in the sociocultural at the expense of a more materialist method of inquiry is an indication of how deeply influential the neoliberal rhetoric can be.

Although I have commented on Ruth Vanita’s scholarship so far, academic work that mostly eschews a materialist methodology and is mostly concerned with sociocultural analyses of sexual difference is not confined to Vanita’s scholarship. Vanita and Kidwai’s archival volume Same-Sex Love in India, along with Queering India (ed. Vanita) are probably the two most well-known and influential anthologies on gay and lesbian studies in the Indian context. Hoshang Merchant’s anthology Yaraana: Gay Writing from South Asia was first published in 1999, a year before Same-Sex Love in India. Giti Thadani’s Sakhiyani was published in 1996. Both of these earlier volumes are sex-specific and hence limited in scope: Merchant’s volume attempts to create an archive of gay male writing in South Asia, while Thadani’s volume is very specifically concerned with making lesbian desire legible in ancient and modern Indian texts. What Merchant and Thadani have in common is an academic interest in sifting out those
instances of same-sex desire which frequently remain unmentioned in the literary
canon through homophobic erasure. In Queering India (2002), Vanita goes a step
further to present a collection of articles that seek to critically engage with
literary and cultural productions dealing with same-sex desire, whether overtly or
as a subtext. In doing so, Vanita’s central aim is to trace “the way colonialists and
nationalists attempt to rewrite mutivocal traditions into a univocal, uniform
tradition” (3). The univocal tradition in this context refers to a forcible
heterosexualization of literary and cultural productions, while the reality of a
multivocal, queer tradition is erased. Remarkably, except for Vanita’s own article
in the volume (“Homophobic Fiction/ Homoerotic Advertising: The Pleasures and
Perils of Twentieth-Century Indianness”), none of the essays even remotely
approaches the variety of queer concerns from a materialist perspective.

And how does the field of postcolonial queer studies look from the
metropolitan center of the global North? Geeta Patel offers a valuable critique of
the lay of the field in her article “Home, Homo, Hybrid” with respect to
proliferating emphases on the figure of the hijra or aravani: “Queer theory, on the
occasions when its territorializing impulses depart the US, does tour South Asia,
though quickly, settling on the figure of a third, the anthropologized other, ‘the’
hijra” (“Home” 139). The hijra thus becomes a “scholarly fetish object, marshaled
by the desire to discover, trace, barter, and sell sexual value” for the Western
academic (“Risky Subjects” 26). That is to say, the emphasis on the sociocultural
to the exclusion of the socioeconomic becomes more pronounced due to the
Orientalist underpinnings of queer theory in the global North. There are several implications of this cultural coding of the sexual difference of the Indian third gender: the queer Indian comes to be almost synonymous with the *hijra* in Western academia, the rest of the non-heteronormative people remaining in the background for not being culturally “different” enough and therefore not interesting enough to study; the chosen figure of the *hijra* becomes a token presence in the metropolitan discourse so that more engaged analyses that move beyond the merely sociocultural and venture into the troubled waters of the socioeconomic become a thing of rarity.\(^{20}\)

In this context, analyses of queer issues that pose questions of economic justice are still rare in postcolonial queer critique. Geeta Patel’s work is an example that such scholarship is possible. For instance, Patel’s article “Risky Subjects” provides a very telling illustration of a human action that was previously beyond the domain of neoliberal market forces, but is now being brought under its methodical transaction system. Patel begins the essay by quoting a Calcutta newspaper in which the official rate for visits paid by the local

\(^{20}\) As I will discuss in the first chapter, Serena Nanda’s ethnographic study *Neither Man nor Woman* (1990) (excerpted in Abelove, et al eds. *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*) initiated an academic interest about the *hijras* in the global North. This interest can also be seen in some earlier works, e.g. G. Morris Carstairs’s *The Twice-Born* (1957), Morris E. Opler’s “The Hijara (sic) of India and Indian National Character” (1960), and Lawrence Preston’s “A Right to Exist: Eunuchs and the State in Nineteenth-Century India” (1987). The non-academic and more sensational accounts of *hijras* are too numerous to account for here. For a more thorough bibliography, see Lawrence Cohen’s “The Pleasures of Castration” (1995) and Gayatri Reddy’s *With Respect to Sex* (2005).
aravani\textsuperscript{21} (the Indian transgender community who are seen to be beyond the pale of traditional male-female sexual categorization) on occasions like birth and weddings were listed. The aravani, or the hijra as they are more commonly called, are a community of transgender people who earn money by blessing the new-born or the newly-wed, receiving payment for the act of blessing. Patel demonstrates in her essay how bringing such transactions and codifying them within a system that socializes economic risk-taking bolsters heteronormativity even from marginal non-heteronormative agents whose very agency stems from being outside the pale of such heteronormative behavior. The payment to the aravani, when codified through rate cards, seems more like an insurance against the risk of obscene behavior than a payment in recognition of traditional services. It would probably be erroneous to suggest that bringing the transaction within a consolidated market system entails “creative destruction” of all traditional values ascribed to it, but it is certainly undeniable that the act constitutes bringing a kind of human action into the domain of the market that was not there before. I have tried to forge a methodology that, similarly, takes up analysis of queer issues with respect to both the sociocultural and the socioeconomic.

\textsuperscript{21} Patel uses the term aravani for hijra, arguing that this is the word used within the hijra community. I have retained use of the word hijra for the purpose of simplicity. More details on the politics of naming the hijra can be found in chapter 1. Apart from being a sexual minority, the hijras are also one of the most disenfranchised groups in contemporary India.
Methodology: A Note on the Term “Queer”

My methodology borrows from postcolonial and queer theory equally, while highlighting the materialist concerns legible in the queer issues I examine. The choice to use the term “queer” is deliberate on my part. Before I explain my decision to use the term, it is necessary to provide a historical account of it.

Scholars like Jeremy Escoffier and Lisa Duggan have linked the emergence of the term in criticism and theory with the founding in 1991 of the activist group Queer Nation. Escoffier observes that the term came to indicate “a revolution in lesbian and gay studies,” and as such marks a clear departure from the kind of political strategy and activism prevalent before the emergence of Queer Nation.

Escoffier’s gloss of the term and its significance are very lucid:

The term “queer” plays on the double entendre of its pejorative meaning in relation to homosexuals and its more benign implication of “odd” or “marginal”; together, the two types of connotations assert the relation of the stigmatized “queer” to the dominant “normal.” The name “queer theory” appeals to those in the field because it moves away from the simple assertion of identity politics indicated by the name “lesbian and gay studies,” and includes all hybrid forms of identity that are different from hegemonic heterosexual identities. “Queer” includes those who identify as homosexual, lesbian, or gay; those men (who may not identify as homosexuals) who have sex with men, and those women who have sex with women; bisexuals; transvestites, transsexuals, and transgendered
people; sadomasochists and leather people; and all those who have a
sexual preference that is not normative … “Queer” privileges that which is
“not normal”—it defends the different, the marginal, and the oppositional.

(174)

As Escoffier suggests, there are three major ways in which “queer” seems
different from signs like “lesbian” or “gay”: it is not based on a rigid
conceptualization of identity; its non-identitarian quality gives the term more
fluidity and a potential for inclusiveness; it favors a more confrontational mode of
activism and politics than the identitarian “lesbian and gay” politics. In upsetting
the identitarian fixities that “lesbian and gay” politics rely on, “queer” undertakes
a more thorough examination and subversion of dominant social formations that
make sex- and gender-based oppression possible. As Escoffier and Allan Bérubé
note in one of the first essays to characterize Queer Nation, “This new generation
calls itself queer, not lesbian, gay, and bisexual—awkward, narrow, and perhaps
compromised words. Queer is meant to be confrontational—opposed to gay
assimilationists and straight oppressors while inclusive of people who have been
marginalized by anyone in power”\(^\text{22}\) (202). The taint of “compromise” in “gay” or
“lesbian” then, comes from the desire to assimilate into straight society and its
manifold privileges while “queer” denotes the kind of struggle that aims at
dismantling the conditions that make those privileges possible. Further, not
being invested in a “narrow” conception of who counts as “gay” or “lesbian”

\(^{22}\) Escoffier and Bérubé’s emphases.
allows “queer” to form alliances with those who may not be directly affected by the oppressions and stigma that non-heterosexuals face.

Escoffier and Bérubé’s comment that lesbian and gay have become terms associated with assimilation rather than confrontation is further corroborated in Michael Warner’s introduction to the influential volume *Fear of a Queer Planet*.

Every person who comes to a queer self-understanding knows in one way or another that her stigmatization is connected with gender, the family, notions of individual freedom, the state, public speech, consumption and desire, nature and culture, maturation, reproductive politics, racial and national fantasy, class identity, truth and trust, censorship, intimate life and social display, terror and violence, health care, and deep cultural norms about the bearing of the body. Being queer means fighting about these issues all the time, locally and piecemeal but always with consequences ...

Because the logic of the sexual order is so deeply embedded by now in an indescribably wide range of social institutions, and is embedded in the most standard accounts of the world, queer struggles aim not just at toleration or equal status but at challenging those institutions and accounts. (xiii)

Warner’s exhaustive list of “social institutions” that are permeated by homophobia and the presumed naturalness of heterosexuality (what he defines as heteronormativity later in the introduction) indicates why Escoffier and Bérubé’s appraisal of the limitations of lesbian and gay politics rings true. Mere
inclusion into the network of privileges that are accorded to heterosexuals cannot be the goal of a politics that truly aim to achieve equality. The notion of equality, when interpreted as mere inclusion becomes—to use Urvashi Vaid’s term—“virtual,” a poor facsimile of the kind of equality imagined by queer politics.  

It is possible to argue that the grander, greater vision of equality imagined by queer politics and activism is made possible due to its non-identitarian emphasis. The identitarianism of gay and lesbian politics, meanwhile, can be read as essentialism inasmuch as it depends on an essence of who counts as gay or lesbian. It is this essentialism of gay and lesbian politics that impedes any imagining of a greater, queerer equality. Lisa Duggan aligns “queer” with “the constructionist turn” in lesbian and gay politics: “Constructionist theories ... recognize the (constrained) mobility of desire and support a critical relation to gender. They stake out a new stance of opposition, which many theorists now call “queer.” This stance is constituted through its dissent from the hegemonic, structured relations and meanings of sexuality and gender, but its actual

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24 This is a strongly controversial terrain that is defined by how much emphasis one places on the difference of non-heterosexuals and their political interests as a group. Warner comments on it in the introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet* by noting the strain of “postmodern, postidentitarian” politics that acknowledges how “liberationist agendas have required utopian metanarratives that obscure differences among gays and lesbians, who might in fact have nothing in common” (xi). Judith Butler, while addressing the significance of the act of “coming out” alights on the same problem of defining a differential essence or specificity of a lesbian experience. Butler concludes that efforts to elucidate this difference “have only and always produced a set of contests and refusals which should by now make it clear that there is no necessarily common element among lesbians, except perhaps that we all know something about how homophobia works against women—although, even then, the language and the analysis we use will differ” (“Imitation and Gender Insubordination” 310).
historical forms and positions are open, constantly subject to negotiation and renegotiation” (“Making it Perfectly Queer” 167). Duggan’s description clarifies that it is exactly this constructionist basis of “queer” that allows it to remain an open category, subject to change and fluidity.25

However, this does not mean that as a term “queer” has remained uncontested. The very fluidity and non-essentialist quality of the term may seem to make it impractical for grassroots organizing and activist work. This is a curious problem to face since the history of the term is firmly grounded in the activist work of Queer Nation. But as Duggan observes, later academic discussions using the word have given rise to an activism vs. academia dichotomy: “The challenge for queer theory as it emerges from the academic ghetto is to engage intellectually with the political project in the best sense of ‘theory,’ while avoiding jargon and obscurantism in the worst sense of ‘academic’” (“Making it Perfectly Queer” 170). While the charge of being obscure academics locked in an ivory tower engaged in self-perpetuating in-house exchanges is hardly unique to the field of queer theory, it is a crucially important point to make when very literally, the lives of queer people may be at stake. A far more basic criticism of queer theory’s project has been voiced by Escoffier that has to do with its utopic vision of dismantling social norms and institutions.

According to Escoffier, the attempt to resist the social process of normalization is

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25 Duggan notes the contradiction inherent in the oxymoronic construction “Queer Nation” that touts a militant nationalism while also claiming all the constructionism the term “queer” affords, but she does not analyze the implications of this contradiction or its effects on activist work at length in her article.
“hopelessly romantic” and “sociologically impossible” since no form of social life can exist without some sort of norms (174). Sociologically speaking, this is a valid argument, although one that assumes a value-based equivalence between the (hetero)norms queer politics aim to dismantle and the norms that conceivably come to replace them (since an absence of norms is sociologically impossible) once the hopelessly romantic project of queer politics is completed. It also takes for granted the immutability of queer politics over time and its methodology of always opposing social norms no matter whether those norms are reactionary or utopic in nature.

It is easy, of course, to appraise Escoffier’s reservations now with the benefit of hindsight, especially in the light of strong critiques of the term “queer” in the works of later commentators like José Esteban Muñoz, Cathy Cohen, and Jasbir Puar. All of these critiques underscore the normativities that have been (unintentionally or not) co-opted into the strongly anti-normative agenda of queer politics in spite of itself. Both Muñoz and Cohen point out the “racial myopia” (Muñoz’s term) that informs queer critique. In “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens,” an article published in 1997, Cohen raises questions about the radical potential of queer politics if it fails to include “the nonnormative and marginal position of punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens”26 (201). Cohen observes that queer theory is perceived to stand in contrast and in opposition to the identity-based politics of gay and lesbian activism, and thereby holds “great

26 Cohen’s emphasis.
political promise” to “embody sustained and multisited resistance” to oppressions faced by queers of color (202-203). However, Cohen also notes that “the present form of queer politics” has not lived up to that promise by focusing too narrowly on the homo/ hetero binary, and not taking other factors like race and class privilege that inform that binary formation into account:

In its current rendition, queer politics is coded with class, gender, and race privilege, and may have lost its potential to be a politically expedient organizing tool for addressing the needs—and mobilizing the bodies—of people of color. As some queer theorists and activists call for the destruction of stable sexual categories, for example, moving instead toward a more fluid understanding of sexual behavior, left unspoken is the class privilege that allows for such fluidity (212).

Muñoz voices similar concerns that remain unspoken in discussions of queer theory in *Disidentifications*: “Most of the cornerstones of queer theory that are taught, cited, and canonized in gay and lesbian studies classrooms, publications, and conferences are decidedly directed toward analyzing white lesbians and gay men” (10). What becomes apparent from Cohen and Muñoz’s work is that the sign “queer,” however utopian, radical and anti-normative may it seem in theory, has been co-opted into normativities of class and race despite itself in practice.27

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27 Michael Warner anticipates this turn of events in his introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet*. Directing the reader’s attention to Steven Seidman’s article in the volume, he observes how the “common ground” for queer theory too often has been a matrix of dominant positions: white, male, and middle-class. Urging to break out of this pattern, he says that “queer social theory must also reflect on the conditions that make the current practices of queer politics possible” (xvi). That
Jasbir Puar’s *Terrorist Assemblages* clarifies the co-opting of normativities under the sign of “queer” in a more global context. Puar shows how the term has become imbricated in neocolonial and Orientalist rhetoric that works to maintain the sexual exceptionalism of the U.S. (the liberated and liberatory land of sexual freedoms) while simultaneously reading the lack of those freedoms in the global South as a cause for imperialist aggression masked as neocolonial saving missions. Meanwhile, it works to solidify a racial hierarchy within the U.S. whereby whiteness is deemed to be the norm towards which all queers of color should aspire. According to Puar, it is the transgressive potential of the term “queer” and its connotation as singularly radical, that helps in this deployment of *queer as regulatory*: “Some may strenuously object to the suggestion that queer identities, like their ‘less radical’ counterparts, homosexual, gay, and lesbian identities, are also implicated in ascendant white American nationalist formations, preferring to see queerness as singularly transgressive of identity norms. This focus on transgression, however, is precisely the term by which queerness narrates its own sexual exceptionalism … Queerness here is the modality through which ‘freedom from norms’ becomes a regulatory queer ideal that demarcates the ideal queer” (21-22). The question at this point is if “queer” as a term has been so strongly compromised, how can it be possible to use it and

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Cohen and Muñoz have to make the same point a few years later prove that this call was not heeded with as much attention as it should have been.

28 Puar clarifies that “whiteness” here is not exclusive to white subjects: “...the ascendancy of whiteness ... is not strictly limited to white subjects, though it is bound to multiculturalism as defined and deployed by whiteness” (31).
not gesture toward its complicated history of collusion with various 
normativities?

I can offer two principal reasons. Firstly, I acknowledge that it is not a 
perfect choice, but simply put, a more preferable one. Since I see words like “gay” 
and “lesbian” to be more easily invested in furthering a neoliberal identity-based 
agenda, “queer,” with its original confrontational emphasis on dismantling 
processes of normalization seems a more apt choice. Ruth Vanita sees hesitations 
of this sort to be “the left-wing counterpart of the right-wing claim that 
homosexuality is an import from the ‘West’ “ (“Homoerotics of Travel” 99). 
Although I have no qualms in aligning myself with a left-wing agenda, I am still 
wary of the universalizing imperative concealed in the usage of terms like “gay” 
and “lesbian.” Vanita herself uses more neutral and more lugubrious terminology 
like “same-sex love” and “homoerotically inclined” in some of her writings. Since 
such meticulousness sometimes becomes an impediment to clarity, I have settled 
for the term “queer” as a compromise in hopes that its greater fluidity, much 
constricted because of misuse or appropriation, can be revitalized to reflect a 
commitment to economic as well as social justice that is free of racial and other 
kinds of “myopia.”

Secondly, the brief account of how the term “queer” has been used 
indicates that it is a very fluid, amorphous, and open-ended category. With this in 
mind, I decided to use “queer” as a sort of antidote to neoliberal rhetoric. This 
resulted in deploying the term “queer” with slightly different denotations from
chapter to chapter. All of these denotations call forth some of the redemptive meanings of the term I have described in the section above. I wish to make it clear that the term “queer,” whenever it appears in the dissertation, is not merely used as a shorthand that subsumes all non-heterosexual social and corporeal formations. That would be a totalizing imperative in itself. I would add that the conscious decision to use the term “queer” should not be taken as any kind of dismissal of the powerful critiques of the term provided by Cohen, Muñoz, and Puar. While explaining his use of the term in *The Trouble with Normal*, Michael Warner explains that he uses the term in a “deliberately capacious way ... to suggest how many ways people can find themselves at odds with straight culture” (38). My effort throughout the dissertation was to find as many ways as possible (or at least, to make those possibilities possible) to be at odds with straight as well as homonormative and neoliberal culture. I hope this effort is recognizable in the ways I found to use the term “queer."

**Structure of the Dissertation**

I have chosen texts that represent different identity-based “queer” subjects that neoliberal ideology has supported, affected, or contested after the liberalization of the Indian economy in 1991: *hijras*, gay men, and lesbians. As the first chapter will elaborate, it is not possible to talk of same-sex desire in the context of India without talking about *hijras*. Kotak’s play, even though not very
well-known to audiences in India, has enjoyed several successful productions in the UK and the US. It was first performed as a co-production at the Theatre Royal Plymouth (19 Oct 2000), and then at The Bush Theatre (15 Nov 2000) in London, getting mostly positive reviews. The play received its American premiere in the New Conservatory Theatre Center of New York City in May 2006. As one of the few texts that place the *hijra* figure at the narrative center, it provides a suitable template to discuss the academic and popular discourses regarding *hijras*. I use Kotak’s play to show how the playwright’s representation grapples with the discourse regarding *hijras* in popular cultural productions. As the figure of the *hijra* proves inassimilable to the neocolonial fetishization of culturally unfamiliar queer corporeality in the play, it is gradually disappeared, and a spectral presence representing the hijra stands in to be assimilated into the neoliberal framework of individual freedom. A simultaneous depoliticization of the other queer characters is also effected through locating their subjectivity in entrepreneurial skills. I argue that this trajectory represents how the figure of the *hijra* has been analyzed in academic discourses. In this chapter, I use “queer” to indicate not only the marginal position of the *hijras* on account of their sexual difference, but also their lack of social and economic capital.

Neel Mukherjee’s novel *Past Continuous* garnered critical acclaim and won several awards upon publication. The Indian edition of the novel was joint winner of the Vodafone-Crossword Award in 2008 along with Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies*. For a debutant author, to be mentioned in the same category as Amitav
Ghosh is a remarkable feat. The UK edition of the novel (published as *A Life Apart*) was published in 2010, and ended up being chosen as the “Book of the Year” by several leading newspapers. Mukherjee’s complex narrative technique and decision to make his protagonist an illegal immigrant proved helpful for my analysis of the cultural correlates of neoliberal ideology. I read the novel against the grain of the narrative to argue that the central narrative conceit employed in the novel attempts to consolidate neoliberal promises of freedom in the global North for the illegal queer immigrant, but eventually capitulates to the material realities by showing the underlying necropolitics that sustain such a ruse. In this chapter, I use the term “queer” to gesture towards the possibility of a life for non-heterosexual-identified people that is not circumscribed by neoliberal logic.

The third chapter is an analysis of *Dostana* (Friendships), the popular Hindi film that claimed to represent same-sex desire for the first time in a mainstream production. I became interested in *Dostana* because of the huge dissimilarity between its public reception, and that of Deepa Mehta’s small-scale venture *Fire*. While *Fire* evoked a hailstorm of protests when it was released in 1998, *Dostana* proved to be hugely popular, and evoked no adverse reactions at all. I analyze the movie to demonstrate how neocolonial and neoliberal ideologies work in tandem to represent same-sex desire and maintain a façade of inclusion while contributing little to forward social justice. In this chapter – as well as the final chapter – I use the term “queer” to signal erotic possibilities that escape the homo/ hetero binary.
The last chapter deals with Tilottama Majumdar’s novel *Chander Gaye Chand* (Moon on Moon), published in 2003. Since both *Past Continuous* and *Dostana* represented same-sex desire in men, I wanted the last chapter to focus on same-sex desire in women. Majumdar is a fairly well-known author in Bengali. Her first novel *Basudhara* was serialized in *Desh* (a prominent literary magazine in Bengali) in 2001. It went on to win the prestigious Ananda award in 2003, firmly establishing her as one of the new literary talents working in Bengali. I argue that Majumdar’s representation of the lesbian figure in *Chander Gaye Chand* posits same-sex desire in women as the limit of neoliberal individuation that occurs through an “emancipated” participation in the neoliberal market.

This dissertation attempts to make a distinctive break from the established discourse on postcolonial queer critique by tracing the implications of neoliberal ideology in discussing issues of same-sex desire and corporeality in the Indian context. While I do not propose a solution to solve the problems that I analyze here, I am also very conscious that we cannot begin to think of any solutions unless the problem itself has been identified. One of the ways in which neoliberalism maintains its discursive normativity is by making its reach and penetration into the discourse invisible. I hope that this analysis will be a significant step in identifying the ways in which such invisibility has enabled normativity, so that we can come up with creative ways to counter neoliberal “creative destruction” that make modes of queer life impossible in India.
CHAPTER 1

Hijra as Spectacle, Hijra as Specter: Ash Kotak’s *Hijra* and the Politics of Representing Hijras

The Spectacle and the Specter

It is not possible to talk about the queer economy of same-sex desire in the South Asian context without talking about *hijras*. For those acquainted with issues of same-sex desire in South Asia, not talking about *hijras* as a community would seem to be a curious omission, and rightly so. There are several reasons for this: the unruly bodies of *hijras* do not fit the male-female sexual categorization; their labor cannot be detached from the context of their corporeality; their historic lack of social capital, which is a result of their corporeality, places them on the fringes of society as far as access to class privilege is concerned. Thus, *hijras* are a marginal group both in social and economic terms. When I use the term “queer” in this chapter, I intend to convey this marginal position of *hijras* across two interrelated axes: social and economic.

Nevertheless, the *hijras* are an important, and certainly the most visible, queer community in the region. The academic field is so saturated with studies of *hijras* from various disciplinary perspectives that making more than a perfunctory mention of the *hijras* while talking about same-sex desire in South Asia is
inevitable. For those interested in issues of sexual difference but uninitiated in specific South Asian contexts to frame those interests, the very entrance of the foreign, italicized word into the text creates a need for definitions and footnotes. An explanation for the proliferating academic interest in *hijras* on the part of the scholarly community (mostly from and/or situated in the global North) may be this need to define and understand the unfamiliar, in this case, a certain corporeality and subjectivity that lies outside the pale of the heteronorm29 in a specific cultural location. However, the endless stream of academic and semi-academic articles, dissertations, book-length ethnographies, memoirs, travelogues, news features, and special interest stories on *hijras* ranging in tone from the serious to the sensational, can hardly be explained as a purely benign quest for knowledge. No such explanation could suffice to account for enlisting *hijras* as just another group in what Lawrence Cohen terms the “grand touristics of gender difference” in the various anthologies on lesbian and gay subjectivities and identity-formations along with the *bakla, xanith, berdache, mah’u*—to name only a few (278).30

29 Michael Warner describes heteronormativity in his influential introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet* as the matrix of social and cultural relations that accord primacy to heterosexuality and heterosexual coupling as normative and natural. Taking Warner’s cue, I use the term heteronorm here to denote those social and cultural practices that take heterosexuality as the norm.

30 *Bakla* (alternatively, *bakkla*) is the term used for effeminate men in Philippines (for more details, see Garcia); *xanith* refers to the Omani male transsexual category (for more details, see Wikan); *berdache* or the two-spirit people form a part of Native American traditions and participate in what Carolyn Epple broadly terms “other-gender behaviors” (267); *mah’u* denotes those males who engaged in gender-variant behavior in the islands of Polynesia (for details, see Matzner; Elliston). For an account of how globalization has included and affected these actors in the “global drama of subversive sexuality” (Gayatri Reddy’s phrase, 31), see Dennis Altman’s *Global
While it is not hard to arrive at a single-axis definition of the term *hijra* based on sexual difference, an exploration of discursive issues related to definition of the category gives a very good idea of its fluidity and approximately where such fluidity becomes untenable. Gayatri Reddy’s definition in her ethnography on the *hijras* is very precise: “For the most part, hijras are phenotypic men who wear female clothing and, ideally, renounce sexual desire and practice by undergoing a sacrificial emasculation—that is, an excision of the penis and testicles—dedicated to the goddess Bedhraj Mata. Subsequently they are believed to be endowed with the power to confer fertility on newlyweds or newborn children” (2). Traditional belief counts the blessings of the *hijra*\(^\text{31}\) to newlyweds and newborn children auspicious, and most often, the *hijra* also perform song and dance routines to usher in and celebrate the joy of the occasion. However, these blessings come at a price, and the refusal to pay may result in imprecations and curses, which are believed to be extremely effective. Denial of payment also frequently results in the songs and the dances becoming obscene, and in extreme cases, accompanied by lewd gestures like lifting up of the skirt (or the sari) to reveal the source of the *hijra*’s occult power: non-heteronormative sexual difference.\(^\text{32}\) The lack of male genitalia on the post-

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\(^{31}\) *Sex*; Peter A. Jackson’s “Capitalism and Global Queering;” M. Jacqui Alexander’s “Imperial Desire/Sexual Utopias.”

\(^{32}\) The choice to stop italicizing after the first definition has been given is deliberate on my part. The italics, besides being distracting and inconvenient, contribute to upholding the *hijra* as the object of metropolitan sensationalist gaze.

\(^{32}\) Heterosexuality and heterosexual coupling depends on the biological male-female sexual categorization. If the coherence of this male-female sexual categorization is interrupted,
operative hijra body invests the body with the power to confer fertility according to traditional belief.\(^{33}\) Revealing the mark of this excision in public is not just a breach of propriety, it is also supposed to curse the viewer with impotence.\(^{34}\)

Reddy’s insistence that the hijras are phenotypic men is significant, because it emphasizes not just the hijras’ choice to undergo the *nirvan* operation and the corporeal reality of having a post-operative body devoid of male genitalia, but also the gender of the performance in hijras’ traditionally feminine sartorial preference and behavior. It is by virtue of the post-operative body in addition to the feminine gender performance that hijras are located outside the—to use Anne Fausto-Sterling’s word—“dimorphic” sexual categorization in the South Asian context.\(^{35}\) It is precisely this interstitial location of the hijra that is simultaneously between and beyond the two sexes that has captured the imagination of the metropolitan academics. The approach has been mostly to view this liminal “third sex” location of hijras through a reductive socio-cultural frame to define and interpret hijra subjectivity. Geeta Patel comments on this trend in her article “Home, Homo, Hybrid”: “Queer theory, on the occasions when

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\(^{33}\) Referring to the *nirvan* operation, i.e. the ritual excision of penis and testicles from the phenotypic male body of the hijra, Reddy observes that “[a]t one level, the operation is proof of a hijra’s impotence/ asexuality, while at another… it is the source of ritual power and sacred legitimacy” (96).

\(^{34}\) “The sight of the post-operative hole—the seal of the hijra’s impotence—is paradoxically potent, causing impotence in the man who is exposed to it” (Cohen 296).

\(^{35}\) Anne Fausto-Sterling proposes an expansion of the male-female dimorphic sexual categorization in “The Five Sexes: Why Male and Female are not Enough” to include at least three separate interstitial biological sexes that lie between male and female.
its territorializing impulses depart the US, does tour South Asia, though quickly, settling on the figure of a third, the anthropologized other, "the" hijra" ("Home" 139). Taking hijras as the chosen subject to be analyzed, dissected, and studied gestures towards an exoticization of difference in cultural terms (what Patel indicates by using the neologism “anthropologize”), possible only if the metropolitan academics pursue the supercilious approach predicated by the “Area Studies” lens. The hijra then becomes a “scholarly fetish object, marshaled by the desire to discover, trace, barter, and sell sexual value” for the Western academic (“Risky Subjects” 26). This process of fetishization affords a spectacle of the hijra visible enough to add another figure to the roll-call of similar identities that uphold the cherished fiction of a global LGBTQ unity through diversity.

The reified figure of the hijra as the “scholarly fetish object” has been used to sell sexual value not just in Western academia, but also in mainstream Hindi films and South Asian texts targeted for mass consumption both in and out of the global North. It was not (and still is not) uncommon to see hijras flitting in and out of the screen in Hindi movies for a single song-and-dance routine while the main narrative of the film does not afford any significant screen time to hijras

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36 Rey Chow has contended that “the shift of the center of the geopolitical power to America and an increasingly English-language-dominant world” needs to be historicized in the post-World War II context in conjunction with the dropping of atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki (14). Taking such an historicized look at the patterns of knowledge production in the U.S. academia reveals “area studies” to be “the peacetime information-retrieval machinery that complements the United States’ self-aggrandizing foreign policy” (14). While it is not my intention to emphasize the martial underpinnings of “area studies” proposed by Chow while discussing exoticization of the hijra, I wholeheartedly agree with Chow that the gaze of area studies in this context has always returned "the results of knowing other cultures to the point of origin, the "eye"/ "I" that is the American state and society" (14-15).
as actual characters. It is possible to say that this tendency of using and selling the sexual difference of the hijra has created and consolidated a discursive pattern such that even texts with access to a much smaller audience have to address the issue of exoticizing the hijra. The simultaneous reification and fetishization of hijra corporeality alerts us to what Gayatri Reddy has termed a curious “hyper(in)visibility” of the hijra figure. In other words, such extensive scholarly and discursive attention on the figure of the hijra somehow only manages to affirm its status as a discursive fetish object. Even as the sign of “hijra” becomes more visible, the signified behind the sign recedes into invisibility. The spectacle of the hijra somehow always ends up being a mere specter of the hijra. I will analyze the British playwright Ash Kotak’s relatively less-known play Hijra (2000) to contend that it offers a spectacle of the hijra as a culturally different, exotic form of drag to a metropolitan audience. In doing so, Kotak represents not the corporeality of the hijra figure, but the difficulty of representing this corporeality. As a result, the spectacle of the hijra figure is literally reduced to a specter, thereby becoming a parallel of the discursive hyper(in)visibility. I read this hyper(in)visibility as a direct consequence of Kotak’s attempt to integrate the hijra figure into a neoliberal mode of subjectivity.

37 Songs like “Tayyab Ali Pyar ka Dushman” (Tayyab Ali, the enemy of love) in films like Amar Akbar Anthony (1977; Dir. Manmohan Desai) come first to mind. Although, it can be argued that the more usual way to refer to hijras in Hindi films without even affording an actual screen presence to them was to offer the spectacle of phenotypic male characters (most commonly, the male lead character) in traditionally feminine clothing for comic effect. There is a long line of such “hijra” appearances by proxy—from Amitabh Bachchan in Lawaaris (1981; Dir. Prakash Mehra) to Aamir Khan in Baazi (1995; Dir. Ashutosh Gowarikar).
The representation of hijras in Kotak’s play produces the hyper(in)visibility of the hijra figure in two principal ways: by following in the tradition of popular Hindi films, (and thereby attempting to integrate the queer corporeality of the hijra into the bourgeois genre of romantic comedy); and by following the discursive tradition of academic fetishization and reification of the hijra figure. Since the queer corporeality of hijras is marginal in socioeconomic terms, the bourgeois format of a romantic comedy cannot accommodate such representations, and only succeeds in making the hijra figure in the text hyper(in)visible. Tracing exactly how Kotak’s play is similar to the academic representations of the hijra figure is a much more complex and nuanced venture, if only because it is difficult to prove exactly which academic texts Kotak used as research before writing the play. However, since I do not intend to suggest an exact provenance of ideas, but only to demonstrate a similarity in how certain ideas come to be deemed dominant, a brief survey of the most important strands of thought regarding the hijra in significant academic texts should suffice. Finally, I follow Kotak’s attempt to assimilate hijra corporeality and subjectivity into the neoliberal ideology of individuality and personal responsibility conceived in political economic terms. Kotak tries to do this by trying to inaugurate a hijra subjectivity that is amenable to a depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption, to use Lisa Duggan’s term, a subjectivity that is homonormative and does not oppose heternormativity. This is a very difficult, if not impossible task, since the unruly queer corporeality of the hijra has been
historically on the margins of heteronormative bourgeois society. I show how only a spectacle/specter of the hijra can withstand such assimilation, thereby necessitating the hyper(in)visibility of the hijra figure in the play.

**Kotak’s Hijra and Bourgeois Hyper(in)visibility**

The two main characters in Kotak’s play are Nils Mehta, a young British MBA of Indian origin who has a job in London, and Raj, his Indian lover, who as “a vulnerable boy” with “lovely rosy cheeks” was rescued from a life of prostitution by a community of hijras and raised by them in Mumbai (17, 18). While Nils’s mother Madhu is preoccupied in arranging a marriage for Nils as they both attend a wedding in Mumbai, he falls for Raj. With the help of the Guru Hijra, the leader of the hijra community and his adoptive mother-figure, Raj hatches a plan to dress up as a woman and pose as Nils’s wife Rani to be with him in London. Raj and Nils get married at the hijra house in Bombay where Raj has grown up, and the two arrive in London as a married couple. Nils’s neighbors get suspicious when they get to London, Raj is found out to be a man—or rather, not to be a woman—and in order to escape the scandal of a gay relationship in the close-knit diasporic South Asian community, he pretends to be a hijra named Rani, thereby invoking the sacred legitimacy accorded to the more culturally recognizable hijra corporeality and silence the nosey neighbors. The neighbors flee in terror as they think Rani the hijra is casting a spell on them.
Thereafter, Rani establishes a very profitable “Hijra-R-Us” with Madhu, having found a “gap in the market” for giving out hijra blessings in U.K., where “there are too many Asians” and hence “[w]hatever [other] business there is to do, they have already saturated it” (77). The situation troubles Nils, who had agreed to Raj dressing up as a woman as a matter of convenience and not of course. The permanence of Raj’s hijra enactment as Rani creates a rift in his relationship with Nils. A desperate Nils takes matters into his own hands, crashes a gathering of Raaslila38 dressed in drag where Rani is also present to bless the occasion, and they hug and kiss in plain view. This public display of same-sex desire scandalizes all present, but Nils seems determined to assert the possibility of a sexual desire that is beyond the traditional bounds of heterosexuality. When an onlooker angrily asks who they think they are, Nils calmly replies “We’re lesbians” and walks offstage after blowing them all a kiss. This parting shot, while supposed to be comic, also reveals Nils’s belief that gender presentation should match the sex assigned at birth. As a man in drag, he then becomes a “woman,” which makes the kiss a display of affection between lesbians, and not two men in drag. The play ends with both Raj and Nils stripped down to their boxer shorts, restored to their normative male bodies without any disguise before the audience, signaling that they have finally become “happy homos,” a status they have been trying to achieve through their trials and misadventures. Developed in tandem with the major plot is the story of Sheila, the woman Madhu chooses to

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38 A religious Hindu ceremony.
be Nils’s wife. Nils had been engaged to Sheila with the active encouragement of her mother Indira, but their engagement is broken off when the news that Nils has married a “woman” called Rani becomes common knowledge. Sheila ends up in a mutually beneficial relationship with Bobby, Nils’s perpetually horny friend who is a lawyer with “good prospects” (81).

In an interview, Kotak says that the inspiration behind the play was to cover the contentious subject of homosexuality in the Asian community (in Britain) as a comedy: “It’s a feel-good, all’s-well-that-end’s-well type of play. I am dealing with subject matter that might be a bit challenging for some audiences but by having it as a romantic comedy I hope people will laugh and go with it” (“Hijra”). Kotak’s classification of the play as a “romantic comedy” invokes a host of expectations for a traditional boy-meets-girl narrative readily identified with a specific kind of Hollywood movie. But his own admission that the choice of the genre is supposed to put the audience at ease while asked to confront a “challenging” subject matter needs to be contextualized also with reference to the formal aspects of what M. Madhava Prasad has called the “feudal family romance” in his iconic study of the ideological underpinnings of Hindi cinema. Originally a form popularized by Parsi theatre in India, Prasad observes that it became the “dominant textual form of the popular Hindi cinema” during the 1950s and carried its influence through the 1970s (30). The features of this narrative structure have consolidated and evolved over time such that it can be

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39 Kotak’s italics.
argued that it still remains the principal form in use in most popular Hindi films. It is worth quoting Prasad at length to summarize the basic features:

The feudal family romance employs a narrative structure that goes back to the “romances” that preceded the advent of modern realist fiction in the capitalist west. The romance was typically a tale of love and adventure, in which a high-born figure, usually a prince, underwent trials that tested his courage and at the end of which he would return to inherit his father’s position and to marry. This narrative structure occurs, not in its original form, but in the form that it acquired in popular theatre, where the entertainment programme would include the narrative interspersed with other elements like the comic routine, music and dance, etc...At its most stable, this form included a version of the romance narrative, a comedy track, an average of six songs per film, as well as recognizable character types. Narrative closure usually consisted in the restoration of a threatened moral/social order by the hero. (30-31)

As a form, the “feudal family romance” is extremely reactionary, where temporary threats to the status quo are interpreted as problems, and as such, resolved during the dénouement to pave the way for a smooth intergenerational transfer of authority and capital. This transfer is cemented and celebrated through marriage, the institution that is supposed to ensure the social reproduction of the next generation of prince-figures. The “feel-good” factor of the audience depends on resolving threats to the status quo. This resolution is the “narrative
closure” ushered in through restoration of a threatened social/moral order. The marriage at the end thus becomes a trope for the feeling of “all’s-well-that’s-ends-well” because it circumscribes the possibilities of legitimate social reproduction that helps consolidate the status quo.

The threat to the social/moral order in this play is of course, homosexuality. It is Kotak’s declared objective to assimilate this threat in the close mimicry of heteronormative formal aspects of a feudal family romance. He does this by reifying the highly disruptive and subversive hijra corporeality—I discuss this in detail later—and using the very recognizable mold of a neoliberal consumer-citizen to neutralize the threat posed by the non-reproductive gay characters. There is a heavy emphasis in underlining the docility of the gay characters in the play. The homosexuality of the main characters, understood as a threat because they are unable to perpetuate the capitalist status quo, is mitigated and effectively superseded by their willing participation and inclusion in the neoliberal market and their firm belief in central tenets of neoliberal ideology like individualism and personal responsibility. What further reassures the audience and heightens the “feel-good” factor is the comedic element of the play. Although comedy can be used as a highly potent instrument of subversion and critique, here it is employed as a sugarcoating device.

Nils can be taken as the prince-figure of the narrative in Kotak’s play. Sheila’s mother Indira mentions that Nils’s father is a “very rich, big businessman “in Act 1, scene 1, while in Scene 2, Raj is seen to complain to the Guru Hijra, his
adoptive mother-figure and the head of a hijra community, that they “don’t have enough money” (Kotak 9, 17). This sets the stage for one of the enduring narrative features of the feudal family romance—the difference in class status between the prince-figure and his beloved, with the additional impediment that the beloved is also a man in this case. The homonormativity and adherence to neoliberal ideology in Nils and Raj expresses itself in different ways. Nils is very resistant to give up or compromise any privilege he is accorded as the son of a rich businessman father and only heir to his large fortune. When Raj’s impersonation of hijra corporeality goes beyond a temporary recourse and begins to take on a life of its own, it bothers Nils not just because the hijra corporeality veers away from the cis-male embodiment he explicitly desires, but also because it betrays an historical lack of access to social capital.

Nils the gay prince charming is as close to the original straight prince charming as Kotak can possibly make him. He rejects the possibility of Raj as Rani the hijra several times in the course of the play, but his most direct comment comes at the very end of the play after they scandalize the guests at the Raaslila and come back to the Mehta home. He says to Raj, who is still dressed as Rani: “I don’t want you like that. It’s just that I like blokes. If I wanted a woman I would have got married” (86). The last comment is somewhat unexpected, since it

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40 A cis-male or cis-female embodiment denotes someone whose gender identity as a man or woman respectively, matches the sex of the body assigned at birth. This match between the sex assigned at birth (male or female) and gender identity (man or woman) is not there for transgender persons. Since hijra corporeality is outside the dimorphic sexual categorization, such alignment of sex assigned at birth and gender identity is not there.
comes at the end of the play, after Raj and Nils have been married at the hijra house in Bombay. This curious pronouncement that he is still unmarried is not resisted by Raj at all, who announces that he is not going to appear as a hijra in public any more, effectively giving in to Nils’s desire. From the description of the wedding ceremony in Act 1, Scene 9, it is clear that it was as close to a man-woman marriage ritualistically as it possibly can be. For Nils then, marriage as an institution cannot be queered out of its stringent heteronormative emphasis on heterosexual coupling. The ceremony that happened at the hijra house was an ineffectual mimicry of heteronormative customs. By not contesting Nils’s view in any way, Kotak’s play effectively endorses it. While it is true that arguments for same-sex marriage in the global North often reiterate, in one form or other, a plea to access heteronormative privileges that do not forward—or worse, shift attention away from—the cause of actual equality, here the refusal to even acknowledge the marriage between Nils and Raj comes off as an act of erasure. It is a significant erasure on the part of Kotak, especially since marriage is the trope of resolution that seals the dénouement in a feudal family romance. By denying this narrative closure for his gay characters, Kotak makes it possible for the audience to be assured that really, no significant change in the capitalist status quo has taken place.

Nils is uncomfortable with Raj’s impersonation of hijra corporeality also because it veers away from his ideal homosexual relationship, that of two masculine gay men. Effeminate gay men, or gay men who do not perform gender
in normative ways that clearly mark them off as “straight-acting,” are not acceptable. For Nils, the gender of the performance in Raj’s hijra impersonation is an impediment to his ideal of two masculine gay men together. Nils’s effeminophobia predictably manifests itself as casual misogyny at times, since both are based on an effective rejection of the “feminine.” He has no scruples while leading Sheila on, to the extent of getting engaged with her. In the first scene that we see Nils and Raj interact with each other in their real personas, contemplating the hopelessness of their situation and trying to figure out a possible way to be together, Raj suggests that he should tell everyone the truth. In a statement that can be read as proof of Nils’s investment in mimicking the straight prince-figure, he replies: “I should just marry a girl and have the occasional shag with a guy. Then everyone will be happy” (24). The notion of everyone being happy immediately invokes the ideal dénouement of a feudal family romance, when everyone in the audience would leave happy, assured that the status quo and social/moral order has been restored after a transitory crisis that threatened it once again, a crisis that produced mere dramatic tension but no lasting subversion. Nils’s initial incredulity at the idea that Raj be disguised as a woman and taken to the U.K. with a false passport as his wife gradually settles into a disdain for this perpetual state of drag. If his initial agreement to the plan is because he reads it as an innovative ploy to consolidate his fantasy of conforming to the straight male prince-figure as closely as possible, his later disdain can be explained by his lack of desire to be stuck with a “boy dressed in
drag” (50). The idea that hijra is “drag” that can be taken on and off at will presents its own unique set of problems, which I will take up later on.

The class division between Nils the prince-figure and Raj the beloved from the underclass comes across as more acute during Raj’s hijra impersonation. Geeta Patel has commented on how discretely the relationality between sexuality and capital has been discussed in most academic studies. Reddy also notes that the prevailing emphasis on the hijras as “a sexual or gendered category” has prevented more complex ways of approaching the subjectivation of hijra through other axes like kinship, religion, class and hierarchies of respect (2). As Reddy observes: “For many Indians—both upper- and middle-class—hijras exist (and to some extent have always existed) at the periphery of their imaginaries, making them visible only on certain circumscribed ritual occasions” (3). These ritual occasions are when hijras perform their routines of song and dance and are paid for their service, or when they make themselves visible in economic terms by their labor. That is to say, the only times hijras are implicated in an heteronormative political economy are when they are visible as both a sexual minority and as labor that has no other means of production than their bodies. These bodies in turn become spectacularly visible only because they are beyond the pale of heteronormative dimorphic sexual categorization. This dialogic relationship between capital and sexuality has been traditionally ignored in discussions about hijras. I mean to emphasize that the periphery of the imaginary they inhabit is not just from the heteronormative center, but also peripheral in
terms of class location. While Nils as the privileged (both as a phenotypic male non-hijra, and the son of a rich businessman) prince-figure represents the center, Raj’s location as someone brought up by hijras, and temporarily enacting hijra subjectivity, is peripheral also in terms of this historic lack of a hijra’s access to social and actual capital. That is to say, while Raj’s hijra impersonation cannot inhabit the queerness of the hijra corporeality, it does approximate the queerness of the hijra due to lack of access to social capital and class affiliation.

The distance between the center and periphery thus needs to be measured not just in terms of homonormativity, but also social capital and class privilege. This is evident after Rani the hijra is discovered to be Raj in disguise by Nils’s mother Madhu. When Raj tells Nils that Madhu has accepted their relationship and has advised him to go back to India and re-enter the U.K. as a student, Nils immediately suggests that what Raj needs is a career. Raj’s suggestions that he become a hairdresser or an air steward—both occupations that lie several rungs lower in social status than Nils the MBA—are rejected by Nils. To Raj’s very pertinent question whether the choice of these professions would embarrass him, Nils replies: “Everyone might accept us if we both are successful, sober and respectable...I want us to be normal blokes with normal lives. What’s wrong with that? Can’t you see? It’ll help us fit in more” (75). The ideal of homonormative inclusion as straight-acting, economically successful, socially productive, masculine gay men is Nils’ version of being “happy homos”—a utopic state of fully integrated homosexuality that both Nils and Raj aspire to in
the play. While Nils’s path to this inclusion is easily imagined and accessed due to his class affiliation, Raj’s way is through an implication into the neoliberal economy. He finds a gap in the market, sets up a Hijra-R-Us with the help of Madhu, and becomes an instant success story—another face of the much-lauded neoliberal business ethic that emphasizes personal responsibility and individual initiative.

It is worth noting that although Raj’s business flourishes, he is not actually a hijra. It is impossible to inaugurate a hijra homonormative neoliberal subject that is authentic—only a fake, a reified semblance of the hijra embodiment can be included in this state of being a happy homo. While Nils and Raj’s terms of inclusion in this homonormative neoliberal fantasy may be widely different, neither sets of terms effectively subvert the status quo to include queer subjects. It is for this very reason that Kotak is able to give a stable dénouement to his version of the feudal family romance despite dealing with the “challenging” subject matter of homosexuality without offending his audience. The homonormativity of his representation of homosexuality mitigates its subversive potential.

Kotak’s Hijra and Academic Hyper(in)visibility

In order to explore how the hyper(in)visibility of academic discourses manifests itself in Kotak’s play, it is necessary to give a brief overview of the
metropolitan academic discourses about hijras. The ethnographic study by Serena Nanda called *Neither Man nor Woman* (1990; second edition in 1999) is widely acknowledged to be the first significant work that focused western, metropolitan academics’ attention on the hijra. The second chapter of Nanda’s study, which explored hijras’ interstitial location in the dimorphic sexual categorization as “neither man nor woman” was anthologized in Abelove, Barale and Halperin eds. *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* and had a far-reaching effect. Most later contributors to the field like Gayatri Reddy and Lawrence Cohen allude to the iconic status of Nanda’s work as the first of its kind before putting forward their more nuanced and problematized perspectives. The sense that these later contributions are made possible by Nanda’s mother-text is always very clear.\(^{41}\)

The first-person accounts of hijras in the second chapter of Serena Nanda’s ethnographic study painstakingly underline the non-heteronormativity of the queer corporeality of the hijra. She observes that “hijras who exclaim that they are neither man nor woman always begin with an explanation of how they are *not men*” (15). Krishna, a hijra she interviews, is very clear about how this lack of maleness can be described: “We are not men with the ordinary desires of men.

\(^{41}\)Reddy recounts, with a tone of amused self-deprecation, how she began her fieldwork with the hijras in Hyderabad that led to her ethnography *With Respect to Sex* (2005) “armed with Serena Nanda’s book on hijras” and goes on to mention how it helped explain to the hijras she first met her “agenda” of writing a similar book (18). She credits the photographs of the hijras in the book for being “sufficiently intriguing” to them so that they would “entertain [her] early efforts at fieldwork” (238). Cohen notes how Nanda’s work “challeng[ed] decades of sensationalist description by non-*hijras* through her close attention to *hijra* narratives” and “inaugurated a flood of sympathetic dissertations, documentaries, news reports, and other professional writing” (276). The italics in the quoted phrases from Cohen are his.
to get married and have families. Otherwise, why would we choose this life” (16)? The case for hijras to be considered “not women” has a more biological basis, but eventually comes down to the question of fertility or ability to bear children. While noting that it is the absence of menstruation that is the most important indication that a person who has been assigned to the female sex at birth and raised as such is a hijra, Nanda explains the prevalent notion that the hijra “do not have female reproductive organs, and because they cannot have children they cannot be considered real women” (18). Thus, the interstitial space occupied by the hijra is one that cannot be contained within dimorphic sexual categorization: “If they are clearly not men by virtue of anatomy, appearance, and psychology, they are also not women, though they are ‘like’ women” (18).

What seems troubling in these accounts is that the only aspect separating the hijra from a dimorphic sexual embodiment seems to be a lack of desire to follow the heteronormative script of getting married and having a family, and the biological ability to procreate. It may seem quite astonishing that analyses that aim to situate the exceptional corporeality of the hijra outside the explicitly heteronormative dimorphic sexual categorization should rely so much on heteronormative expectations of what the cis-male and the cis-female bodies should be able to do. But it should not be so surprising for two reasons. Firstly, there is no reason to assume that hijras, just by the virtue of their sexual difference, will be free of socialized heteronormative expectations even if hijra corporeality is by definition not expected to conform to these expectations.
Secondly, as Lawrence Cohen shows, the interstitial location or the “thirdness” of hijras can serve to actually consolidate the dimorphic sexual categorization by drawing attention to itself as the exception to the rule. Rather than being challenged by it, the fiction of heteronormative sexual categorization coheres through the corporeality of the hijra. Academics who have taken up the task of analyzing hijra corporeality and subjectivity have rarely remembered to contextualize their discussions in these terms.

Since the exceptional body of the hijra is visible only because it remains beyond heteronormative dimorphic sexual categorization, it has consolidated a trend in academia of containing or concentrating all non-heteronormativity in the South Asian context in the hijra figure. Gayatri Reddy notes this when she refers to hijras as “metonymic figures of Indian sexual difference” (2). So, hijras are the hypervisible third sex who as sexual others, consolidate the dimorphic sexual categorization in the Indian context, while all non-heteronormativity is discursively made to contain within this liminal figure. This leaves non-heteronormative Indian spaces where it is possible to exist without being a hijra not just unmentioned, but erased. It is as if the non-heteronormative space has been contained, classified, and designated in the corporeality of hijra, so that it can be monitored, controlled, and fetishized more effectively.

But if hijras are hypervisible as the only non-heteronormative group in the South Asian context, they are also invisible in any other axes of analysis. Just as the labor of hijra bodies is legible only when it cleaves and attaches to their
exceptional corporeality, hijras themselves have been visible in academia only as objects of fetishized curiosity—as another item in the list of a global laundry list of identity or behavior-groups who are marked only by their sexual difference. This simultaneous hypervisibility and effective invisibility is pointed out by Reddy when she talks about the “hyper(in)visibility” of the hijras, something Patel also touches upon when she questions the “territorialising impulse” of metropolitan academics whose gaze is continually arrested by this figure of alternative “third sex” that cannot be gendered in the “usual North American or European way” ("Risky Subjects" 26). Hijras become the subaltern to the metropolitan academic: they cannot be heard when they speak, but provide the corporeality marked by sexual difference and reified in academic and cultural discourse in the global North.

Ash Kotak’s play exists in a reticulum of these problematic discourses about hijras. It is the reason that although he sets out to write a play about homosexuality in the Asian community, he comes up with a play called *Hijra*. On carefully examining the play, however, we see that the spotlight is always on characters who are not hijra in body or by self-awareness. This distinction between hijra embodiment and hijra self-awareness is necessary and significant here. Although we have seen that sexual difference and labor are never discrete in the case of hijras, one being predicated on the other, Lawrence Cohen reminds us that the hijra corporeality (i.e. their sexual difference) should be defined processually and not as an already-happened embodiment. That is to say, any
definition or description of hijra embodiment that recognizes only post-operative
hijra corporeality risks erasing pre-operative hijra identification. Noting how
“hijras locate their essential difference processually, along a path of self-
awareness,” Cohen observes that in most accounts, like that by Nanda, hijras are
conceived to be always already hijras, and the operation itself becomes a
practical detail (299). In Kotak’s play, the spotlight is seldom on characters that
identify as hijra in body or by self-awareness. Instead, the figure of the hijra
appears only through mimicry and spectral presence, which I argue is completely
in agreement with the hyper(in)visibility of the hijra figure in academic
discourses.

Guru Hijra, the adoptive mother-figure of Raj, and the only important hijra
character in the play (minor hijra characters are seen dancing and singing and
enter and exit the stage as the occasion demands), appears in person in only
three scenes (out of nine) in the first act. Guru Hijra’s second appearance in scene
6 of the first act is carefully orchestrated so she can explain to Nils the occult
power of hijras rooted in mythology and cultural belief.42 The choice to have
Guru Hijra appear in conversation with Nils fulfils the need to provide footnotes
about the cultural specificity of hijras as a community in South Asia to a
metropolitan audience.43 But the most telling representation of the

42 I use “she” here because hijras typically refer to themselves as feminine while speaking Hindi or
other Indian languages.
43 The play was first performed as a co-production at the Theatre Royal Plymouth (19 Oct 2000),
and then at The Bush Theatre (15 Nov 2000). The play was also performed from February 9-March
9 2001 at the Courtyard Theatre at the West Yorkshire Playhouse.
hyper(in)visibility of hijras is seen in Act 2, when Guru Hijra appears onstage as a spectral dream-like presence to advise and encourage Raj when necessary.

Before Raj leaves with Nils, the Guru Hijra had told him that she will watch over him (Kotak 43). After their marriage, Raj and Nils move to London while Raj is dressed as a woman. As the news that Nils has arrived after getting married to an unidentified woman spreads in the gossip-prone diasporic South Asian community, all the interested parties—Nils’s friend Bobby, Nils’s mother Madhu, the nosey neighbor Mrs Patel, Sheila’s mother Indira— make an appearance onstage to see if the gossip is true. By now, Bobby, Nils’s lawyer friend, has explained that Raj must stay in drag as Rani to ensure that their lie is not caught by immigration officials. When faced with the possibility that he might have to stay in drag for two years, Raj’s patience starts to wear thin. It is now that Guru Hijra makes an appearance, after Raj has an argument with Nils:

RANI: Bhus. Oh chup. It’s easy for you.

They both fall silent as the music to ‘Chalte Chalte’ is heard softly.

The GURU HIJRA enters, walks to RAJ and massages his forehead.

She stops and steps back.

GURU: I told you I’d be with you. (63)

Thereafter, Guru Hijra is a frequent presence onstage, reacting to the action, but never a part of it. No one can hear or talk to her except Raj, and it seems that she exists only as an extension of his imagination. And yet she takes a crucial role in solving the dilemma when Mrs. Patel and Indira show up at the Mehta household,
furious that Nils has brought a “homo” in their respectable community. Guru Hijra “loans” the “gift” of being a hijra to Rani (Raj in drag) and she starts to dance like a hijra, making the neighbors flee in terror because they think she is cursing them. So the spectral presence of Guru Hijra has some agency, but remains at the periphery of the main action as a minor but instrumental character.

Rani occupies the center stage for most of the second act, but cannot be called a hijra. It is only temporarily that she has been given the “gift” of enacting the role of hijra as a profession. This betrays Kotak’s inadequate understanding of how labor and sexuality can never be discrete for a hijra. Since Rani is not a hijra either corporeally or by self-awareness, it should be impossible for her to take up hijra as only a profession. However, Rani takes full advantage of this “gift,” finding a gap in the market or effectively inaugurating a market where none existed before, and achieving a successful career using individual effort and personal initiative—all hallmarks of a consumer-citizen subject in a neoliberal economy. However, Rani’s presence in the play does not qualify as representation of hijra corporeality, whether defined corporeally or in terms of processual self-awareness. Raj’s hijra enactment as Rani is very problematic when placed in context of the academic discourse. In trying to represent the hijra corporeality, Kotak repeatedly conflates hijra corporeality with the gender performance of drag, which is more easily recognizable to a metropolitan audience. This is done
by subsuming Raj’s impersonation of the hijra figure into various recognizable performative acts familiar to the Western audience as drag.

By making it seem like the hijra enactment can be handed over as an occult gift, Kotak seems to imply that it is easy to slip in and out of the role of being hijra. So Raj sets out to be Rani, a woman, but when his performance falls short, he settles into Rani’s luminal, hijra corporeality. Kotak treats the body of the hijra as what Geeta Patel calls a “fetish object” by adhering to an easy conflation of the physiological with the performative, which underemphasizes the queer corporeality of the hijra by suggesting that it is a role that may be taken on and off at will. At the beginning of Act 2, Raj and Nils successfully arrive in the U.K., having fooled immigration into believing that “Rani” is a woman. Soon after they start celebrating their short-lived relief at not getting caught: “NILS goes over to RAJ and takes his wig off” (45). De-wigging is a very familiar metaphorical act of transition used in drag performances to convey genderplay. This instantly makes “Rani” legible as a drag act to an audience situated in the global North. There is no visual difference between “Rani” as drag and Rani the hijra who has received Guru Hijra’s occult loan of hijra identity. This can be interpreted as Kotak’s codification of the body as perpetually being in drag, making it fit into Western paradigms of gender-play. So the only way it becomes unfamiliar is as cultural difference, i.e. “It is not just a man in drag, but an Indian man in drag.” This aligns hijra corporeality with drag while simultaneously highlighting its exoticized difference.
Gayatri Reddy ends her ethnography on hijras by noting that “whether intentionally or not, hijras are being incorporated into a wider, transnational, gay world. The intensity of their engagement with this world appears to have increased, even if their actual experiences of modernity may not have changed significantly” (229). The “actual experience of modernity” that Reddy argues has remained unchanged has very strong economic and political underpinnings. Although hijras are being incorporated into the transnational gay network of identities, and most of this incorporation is happening discursively due to the interested participation of metropolitan academics, we need to examine and reflect on the discursive processes through which this inclusion is taking place. The neoliberal terms of engagement have dictated, cordoned off, and foreclosed possibilities of experiencing this modernity for hijras such that it is difficult to break out of the pattern of hyper(in)visibility that hijras have been subjected to in academic or other cultural domains.
CHAPTER 2

The Queer Immigrant and Neoliberal Necropolitics in Neel Mukherjee’s *Past Continuous*

**Western Sexual Exceptionalism and the Liberatory Paradigm**

The idea that we are now in a post-feminist age in which equality of women has been achieved in the global North, is well-represented in literature, media, and other cultural productions. Conversely, the global South as a space culturally conducive to patriarchal oppression and unmitigated gender disparity still enjoys considerable purchase in conservative and liberal circles alike. The constant comparison between the status of women in the U.S. and in Afghanistan or Iraq, for example, consolidates this Orientalist imaginary geography which marks off entire global zones as already liberated and certain others in need of liberation. Old colonial logic is kept alive discursively by neocolonial motivations, and it is not uncommon to see reflections of this logic in literature. For instance, virtually every novel by Bharati Mukherjee explores the trajectory of trauma (caused by religious riots; oppressive and limiting social conditioning into gender roles designed to uphold patriarchy; lack of access to education; opportunity for upward social mobility) faced by the Indian female protagonist that causes her to
immigrate to the United States. Often undertaken at great personal risk, the immigration of the protagonist finally enables her to individuate into a free agent and subject in the New World, despite the petty humiliations of racism and sexism.

Indeed, the global North is described not just as a liberated domain, but also as a liberatory one—the magical frontier where the stranglehold of patriarchy and sexist oppression loosens due to culturally produced ideals of freedom and individuality. Following and consolidating this liberatory paradigm in a similar manner, Monica Ali’s novel Brick Lane ends with Nazneen, the Bangladeshi immigrant protagonist, expressing doubt over whether she can skate in a sari, only to be told by her friend Razia that “This is England....You can do whatever you like”(369). The simple act of skating in a sari in this case comes to stand for a new beginning for Nazneen, signifying access to a kind of freedom available only in the global North—namely, freedom from oppressive social structures like arranged marriages and from an hegemonic understanding of women’s role in society only via “dependency relationships vis-à-vis men,” e.g. as mother, daughter, sister, and so on (Mohanty 25).

The imaginative geography of the West as liberated and liberatory, and the Rest which must follow the West’s example, has tremendously important effects. This liberatory paradigm shores up the moral superiority of supposedly

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44 I use Kate Millett’s classical definition of “patriarchy” throughout, a system in which “sex is a status category with political implications” with its first principal feature being that “male shall dominate female” (24, 25).
Western cultural values (like individuality, freedom, personal responsibility, secularism) while simultaneously coding the relative lack of these very values in specific cultural formations prevalent in the global South, be it the practice of wearing headscarves or *hijab*, or arranged marriages. The liberatory paradigm reinforces the expectation that for women in the global South, immigration to the global North is a wholesale package deal that ensures their emancipation and equality in one broad stroke. In this respect, this liberatory paradigm and its emancipatory trajectory is a direct logical correlate of that ancient excuse for imperialist interventions, well-expressed in Gayatri Spivak’s famous formulation in “Can the Subaltern Speak?”: “White men are saving brown women from brown men” (92). The missionary zeal to save women in the global South from horrific practices like *sati* (self-immolation of Hindu widows on their dead husbands’ funeral pyre) that was used as an excuse for justifying colonization is still operative in the assumption that since women “here” are better off than women “there,” immigration to the liberated realm of the West “saves” brown women from brown men. It used to be that the missionary zeal of white men would save brown women from brown men at the price of colonization. Now brown women just need to figure out how to relocate where all the white men are and all their troubles will be over.

The liberatory paradigm we discuss has not remained confined to celebrating the relative freedom of women in the global North, but has extended
itself to include gay and lesbian subjects in the conversation. As Jasbir Puar notes:

Liberal feminism has long been accused of needing the oppression of the native woman in order to achieve its own liberatory trajectory. "How well do you treat your women?" became a key measure of the ability of a colonised or developing country to self-govern. While "the Woman Question" has hardly disappeared, we can now find its amendment in "the Homosexual Question", or "How well do you treat your homosexuals?", as a current paradigm through which nations, populations and cultures are evaluated in terms of their ability to conform to a universalised notion of civilisation. Rescue fantasies and projections about endangered homosexuality "elsewhere" are aspects of liberal gay rights frames, functioning in order to support the predominance of gay and lesbian proper subjects "here".

Puar’s analysis follows the evolution and re-coding of the liberatory paradigm in recent times with respect to gay and lesbian subjects worldwide. "The Woman Question" has not lost its relevance now to "the Homosexual Question;" they are now employed together in the service of the liberatory paradigm. Taken together, they validate what Puar has called the "sexual exceptionalism" of the U.S.—the idea that the U.S. is characterized by the exceptional sexual freedoms

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45 As Joseph Massad cautions us in Desiring Arabs, which subjects are understood to be "gay" or "lesbian" in this context is dependent on Western sexual epistemology that does not take into account "same-sex desires and practices that refuse to be assimilated" into this epistemology (163).
that are at once superior and singular (*Terrorist Assemblages* 5). But superior and singular in comparison to whom? Thus we arrive at the central problematic at the heart of all Orientalist logic: the need to control, dominate, and delineate the Other so the Western Self can be shored up. The U.S. can be the land of exceptional sexual liberty only if the rest of the world is lagging behind on that count. Paradoxically, the U.S. is hardly alone in claiming this liberatory sexual exceptionalism. The trend extends to other nation-states attempting to claim their own exceptionalisms. As it turns out, exceptionalism is not that exceptional after all. Moreover, there is a very real consequence for failing to match the exceptional standards of these liberatory paradigms, especially when considered with the universalizing human rights framework.

On December 6, 2011, then U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton delivered a landmark address at the United Nations headquarters at Geneva vigorously advocating for the human rights of LGBT people, “one group of people whose human rights are still denied in too many parts of the world today” ("Video and Transcript"). Clinton’s unequivocal proclamation that “gay rights are human rights, and human rights are gay rights” was a watershed moment of sorts. By making “gay rights” and “human rights” coterminous in a chiasmic turn of phrase, Clinton officially confirmed the presence of gay and lesbian subjects in the same human rights discourse that has been historically defined by the philosophical traditions that produced the liberatory paradigm.
A few months before Clinton’s speech, at the end of October, the U.K. Prime Minister David Cameron had suggested that as “one of the premier aid givers in the world,” Britain will take into account the human rights records of the recipient countries with respect to gay and lesbian people (Rao). The idea that Western nations like the U.S. and the U.K. can have a moral claim to act as an advocate and global defender of the human rights of non-heterosexual populations across the world is deeply rooted in the liberatory paradigm produced through narratives of sexual exceptionalisms. While Clinton’s speech was welcomed as a much-awaited act of solidarity towards LGBTQ people, some commentators like Maya Mikdashi wondered “how and why, exactly, the United States would monitor and regulate LGBTQ rights internationally. Would the American army, for example, start “enforcing” the rights of gay Iraqis or gay Afghans? Would the United States impose sanctions on governments that were non-homo friendly?” Although Mikdashi’s first impulse when it is time to imagine ways of enforcing gay rights across the world is to think in terms of military intervention, David Cameron’s clear enunciation of the ties between giving aid and considering human rights of gay and lesbian people encourages us to think in more materialist terms.

In fact, one of the principal ways in which this narrative of the sexual exceptionalism of the global North can result in a liberatory paradigm is in its intricate connection with the socioeconomic rather than the merely sociocultural. It is true that in claiming sexual exceptionalism, i.e. superiority and singularity on
a civilizational scale, the cultural formations prevalent in the West are exemplified as the norm towards which all should aspire. The emphasis on the cultural formations of the global South (veiling; arranged marriages; no access to traditionally heterosexual privileges like marriage) mark them out as singularly oppressive, thereby reading the lack of those exact oppressive structures in the global North as liberatory. This is problematic on several counts, but here I choose to focus on two.

Firstly, it attempts to occlude from view the fact that sexism or homophobia cannot be expected to be universal in their cultural manifestations any more than the category of “Third World Woman” can be monolithic or singular. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty alerts us, the production of the “Third World Woman” as “a stable category of analysis...assumes an ahistorical, universal unity between women based on a generalized notion of their subordination” (31). This is problematic because,

[i]nstead of analytically demonstrating the production of women as socioeconomic political groups within particular social contexts, this analytic move limits the definition of the female subject to gender identity, completely bypassing social class and ethnic identities. What characterizes women as a group is their gender (sociologically, not necessarily, biologically, defined) over and above everything else, indicating a monolithic sexual difference. (31)
What Mohanty cautions us against is a flattening of complex conditions that embed sexism against women in the global South into the singular category of sexual difference at the expense of all others. A consequence of this flattening is that the culturally different (different from the metropolitan observer) conditions that embed and inform this sexual difference are always read as peculiar and exceptional. If the West is exceptional because of its sexual freedoms, the Rest are exceptional by the very lack of them. Similarly, the expectation is that same-sex desire produces “gays” and “lesbians” in the same Western-influenced ways as we have come to recognize in the global North. In other words, I am extending Mohanty’s observation regarding “Third World” sexism to “Third World” homophobia to claim that neither can exist in a cultural vacuum. The expectation that a white middle-class suburban American woman must experience sexism in the same way as a poor Indian woman from one of the historically backward castes can only come from the assumption that one of these cultural backgrounds have been so naturalized that the other can be read only if we consider its “cultural specificity” first. The result is that attempts at criticizing patriarchal and sexist structures of the global South frequently lapse into an assertion of thinly veiled Eurocentric attitudes that do little except privilege the obvious fact that patriarchy exists in the global South.

The second, more materialist reason is that in carrying on the conversation regarding sexual exceptionalisms and liberatory paradigms almost exclusively in sociocultural contexts, we forgo a more relevant discussion of the socioeconomic
relations in which they are embedded. For example, it has been possible in this discussion so far to not allude to the way in which features of a liberatory paradigm—an emphasis on individuality and individual freedoms, responsibility, and agency—are also central tenets of neoliberal rhetoric. David Harvey explicates the reason for this “foundational emphasis upon individual freedoms” in neoliberal rhetoric by linking it to the curtailment of the welfare state:

As the state withdraws from welfare provision and diminishes its role in arenas such as health care, public education, and social services, which were once so fundamental to embedded liberalism, it leaves larger and larger segments of the population exposed to impoverishment. The social safety net is reduced to a bare minimum in favour of a system that emphasizes personal responsibility. Personal failure is generally attributed to personal failings, and the victim is all too often blamed. (41; 76)

So the importance of emphasizing personal responsibility is not just in shoring up sexual exceptionalism and the liberatory paradigm of the global North, it is also wholly consistent with the neoliberal move to privatize social safety nets and gradually dismantle the welfare state. This consistency is far from coincidental or mutually exclusive. It can be argued that this consistency, this emphasis on personal responsibility, is reciprocally produced and bolstered by the socioeconomic and sociocultural correlates of the liberatory paradigm. The individual in the global North enjoys exceptional sexual liberty, but that perception of individual freedom, far from being dissociated from her
vulnerability as the citizen-subject of a nation-state that is curtailing social safety nets and facilitating increasing privatization, is made possible by and sustained through the same ideology and rhetoric that buttresses this privatization. To be liberal (socioculturally) and to be neoliberal (socioeconomically) are often predicated on the axiomatic acceptance of the same principles of individual freedom and personal responsibility.

The queer subject in the global North cannot be read in literature or popular culture without paying attention to how their subjectivity is constructed through the neoliberal emphasis on the individual’s axiomatic potential to be responsible. It is also not possible to talk about the queer subject in the global North without invoking—overtly or covertly—the queer subject in the global South, especially when the liberatory paradigm comes into play. The lack of freedom for the queer subject in the global South becomes the condition of possibility for the availability of those same freedoms for the queer subject in the global North.

The Queer Immigrant in Neel Mukherjee’s Past Continuous

The comparison between the queer subject “here” (global North) and “there” (global South) becomes extremely important while talking about the queer immigrant. What happens when a queer subject from the global South immigrates to the global North? The first impulse to answer this question—and
this should be a measure of how successful the liberatory paradigm has been—
might be to say “They become free to live their lives, or freer than they were before.” The global North as a safe zone cordoned off from homophobia, relatively speaking, as the imaginary geographic space where conditions of life for the queer immigrant becomes more possible than in the global South, is entrenched in and recapitulated by this queer liberatory paradigm. It is under this paradigm in these neoliberal times that the queer immigrant to the global North is becoming more and more legible as a figure that needs to be saved and protected. I will analyze Neel Mukherjee’s novel Past Continuous to explore to what extent it is necessary or tenable to engage and uphold this paradigm. I will argue that Mukherjee begins by upholding it through an enforced narrative conceit, but eventually cannot sustain this engagement as the realities of neoliberal necropolitics begin to impinge on his complex text. By necropolitics, I refer to Achille Mbembe’s concept of “practical conditions” that make possible “the right to kill, [the decision] to allow to live, or to expose to death” certain subjects (12).

Mukherjee’s novel presents two plots that unfold simultaneously—the first with the protagonist Ritwik, a young student who is born and brought up in Calcutta, and goes to read English at a London university after the death of both his parents; the second is centered around Maud Gilby, an English lady who comes to India at the turn of the century to take care of her brother James after the sudden death of his wife. As the novel progresses, we learn that Maud Gilby’s
narrative is taken from the novel that Ritwik is writing. The character of Maud Gilby is not Ritwik’s invention completely, but taken from Rabindranath Tagore’s canonical Bengali novel *Ghare Baire (The Home and the World)*, published in 1916. Miss Gilby (as she is called in *Ghare Baire*) is only a marginal character in Rabindranath’s novel; Ritwik tries to imagine her story in the novel that he is writing. Ritwik’s narrative functions as the frame in which Maud Gilby’s narrative is embedded.

As the characters of Ritwik and Maud Gilby develop simultaneously, certain similarities in their circumstances become clear. Ritwik is a young gay man in his twenties who comes to England as a student and feels he can be free in England like it would not have been possible in India. Maud Gilby discovers that as part of the colonizing minority in India, she can access certain privileges that enhance her agency as a woman. Both Ritwik and Miss Gilby find that they are no longer restricted by the social mores of their respective countries of origin, and can create their own rules. This shared circumstance of being a gendered minority (gay man, straight woman) in an unfamiliar cultural context seems to give both these characters a chance to individuate and to explore the

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46 The novel was first serialized in 1915 in the Bengali periodical *Sabuj Patra*, and published as a book in 1916. The novel was first translated into English as *The Home and the World* in 1919 by Surendranath Tagore. This translated version of the novel took liberties with the original text of 1916. I follow a new translation of the novel by Sreejata Guha that translates the 1916 text, and retains Surendranath’s English title.

47 This trend is not unheard of in postcolonial literature. Jean Rhys imagines the story of Rochester’s mad wife in *Wide Sargasso Sea* when she had been given only a marginal presence in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. The purpose is to reclaim marginalized voices in canonical texts.

48 I use “individuate” here to mean the process by which one arrives at a greater knowledge of one’s own self.
limits of their agency. Mukherjee chooses to let Ritwik uphold this central narrative conceit that underlines this similarity so that the Eurocentric liberatory paradigm is upheld through an emphasis on individual initiative.

The emphasis on individual initiative, as we have seen, is wholly consistent with the neoliberal rhetoric of personal responsibility. However, I claim that the dissimilarities in Ritwik and Maud Gilby’s circumstances are too great to be sustained by this narrative conceit. As a result, the narrative conceit inevitably falls apart at the end of the novel. Guided by the rhetoric of individual initiative, and believing in the queer liberatory potential of the global North (here, England specifically), Ritwik becomes an illegal immigrant in the UK. As an illegal immigrant, he is utterly disenfranchised in a neoliberal economy and gradually detached from conditions that make his life possible. His labor enters the illegal circuit of exploitation in the black market, and this exploitation occurs according to the neoliberal logic of profit maximization. I read Ritwik’s disenfranchisement using Mbembe’s theory of necropolitics to claim that the rhetoric of individual responsibility that bolsters the queer liberatory paradigm of the global North reveals itself as the same rhetoric that sustains the necropolitical disenfranchisement of illegal labor. I argue that it is at this crucial juncture of the novel that the two discrete narratives finally intersect and the narrative conceit falls apart.
The Frame Narrative: Orientalism and the Liberatory Paradigm

The frame narrative with Ritwik as the protagonist begins in Calcutta with the consecutive deaths of Ritwik’s parents. To establish the parallels with the novel-within-a-novel (the novel with Miss Gilby as the central character, the one we learn later that Ritwik is writing), the frame narrative goes back and forth in time. Descriptions of Ritwik’s life as a student in England are interspersed with flashbacks to his childhood marked with violent physical abuse at the hands of his mother. In addition, we learn of Ritwik’s dysfunctional family dynamic: four unemployed uncles who live off the small income of his father, warranting incessant verbal abuse from his father directed against his mother; his mother’s indiscriminate and severe tendency to vent her anger and frustration at her children (especially Ritwik); and his partially paralyzed maternal grandmother who suffers regular beatings at the hands of her four unemployed male children.

The graphic description of Ritwik’s physical abuse at the hands of his mother quickly establishes extreme physical violence as a thematic pattern in the text. The following description narrates the consequences when a six or seven year old Ritwik sticks chewing gum in the hair of a friend as an act of mischief:

The first kick caught him unawares; it happened in the instant of a blink and sent him nearly flying to the niche where the mortar and pestle stood. While losing his balance and skidding across the floor the peripheries of his field of vision caught the blur of his mother pulling his father’s belt
from the nylon line on which his father’s clothes hung, shabby and limp.

He lay on the floor, a foetal quiver of fear, as the first lash from the leather belt cleanly cut a menacing crack through the compact air and landed on him as the sting of fire. (53)

The threat of extreme physical violence is carried over into Ritwik’s life as a student at a prestigious Catholic missionary school, famous for its discipline. The discipline mostly seems to consist of frequent corporal punishment of the students at the hands of the teachers and the priests. While in London, Ritwik tells his friend Gavin about such an instance of discipline: “Shivaji Jana was beaten up so badly by Miss Lewis, in junior school, that he had a dislocated kidney” (92). When Gavin expresses surprise at how this situation was allowed to go on, Ritwik cynically replies that it is this very discipline, in conjunction with the fact that the medium of instruction in the school is English, that marks it as prestigious: “No, no, it was a very good school. English-medium, as we call it in India. That alone raises it to the first bracket. The education was top quality” (92).

In Mukherjee’s bleak Dickensian vision, extreme physical violence becomes a constant feature of the childhood memory of the protagonist.

It would not be far-fetched to read Ritwik’s extremely unhappy and unfortunate childhood in Calcutta as partial justification for Ritwik’s later decision to stay on in England illegally after his student visa expires. However, two other
reasons that loom large are extremely Orientalist\textsuperscript{49} depictions of the squalor in Calcutta, and the possibility of living life openly as a gay man in England. This possibility is used to consolidate the queer liberatory paradigm that in Puar’s words, measures the “ability to conform to a universalised notion of civilization”; the description of squalor is used to confirm stereotypical depictions of global South as an unsanitary hell hole where it is impossible to sustain civilized life. There are logical problems with both of these reasons that seem to have been conveniently overlooked by the author.

The descriptions of Calcutta as a city filled with filth and refuse are hardly original. They have precedents in recent literature.\textsuperscript{50} Nevertheless, it is not clear why or how Ritwik, a character who grew up in Calcutta, finds the quotidian unsanitary conditions so remarkably exceptional that he talks about it like an outsider. While describing the rain in England, Ritwik thinks of the monsoons in Calcutta. The comparison quickly escalates into a rant about the dirt and the filth one cannot escape in Calcutta. What is significant is that the filth and the unsanitary waterlogged state of Calcutta during the monsoons is not just described, but accompanied by value-ridden moral pronouncements. Torrential rain that neither has the extreme effect of ravaging and making refugees of two

\textsuperscript{49} I follow Edward Said’s definition of Orientalism here: “Orientalism…is knowledge of the Orient that places things Oriental in class, court, prison, or manual for scrutiny, study, judgment, discipline, or governing” (41).

\textsuperscript{50} The French author Dominique Lapierre’s \textit{La Cité de la joie} (1985) that was translated as \textit{The City of Joy} and made into a successful movie starring Patrick Swayze first comes to mind. Both the novel and the movie are replete with familiar Orientalist tropes: spectacular violence and poverty; a handsome, kind, and skilled white savior-figure who tries to improve the lives of the natives; and the simple, happy, and wise Indians who live in dreadful conditions but can appreciate the “joy” of life.
million people, nor has the “transforming romance of a Venice-like watercity,”
indicates a “festering mediocrity” that is typical of life in Calcutta (47).

After describing in meticulous detail the various items that make up the
mass of garbage that overflows onto the streets, Ritwik recognizes Calcutta as
hell:

Regardless of what they taught him in school, in his imagination at least
hell was not a place where fires burned and sinners roasted; hell was an
undry, grey, slightly sticky endlessness. Hell was here. (51)

I should make it clear that I am not arguing that descriptions of Calcutta in the
novel are so unrealistic that they may not be true. But verisimilitude in a work of
fiction is not devoid of politics. The choice of what aspects of reality to include
and what to excise, what to depict and what to avoid, rests with the author. I am
suggesting that Mukherjee’s depictions of Calcutta fit easily into the archive of
Orientalist explorations of the global South that selectively highlight filth, dirt,
and unsanitary living conditions to draw conclusions about the relative
civilizational progress and advancement in modernity. It goes without saying that
the West as a cultural aggregate is confirmed again and again to be the apogee
of this civilizational progress and advanced modernity that everyone else should
aspire towards. It is precisely for this reason that depictions of Calcutta in
Mukherjee’s novel can be read as part and parcel of the liberatory paradigm. If
Calcutta is hell, England by implication becomes heaven, or at the very least,
someplace better than hell.
In fact, as Mike Davis has shown in *Planet of Slums*, urban poverty and pollution is often conditioned and caused by the unholy nexus between illegal, unfettered, and unregulated industrialization, and governmental ineptitude and corruption. Meanwhile, the industrialization is dependent on large-scale migration of labor from rural to urban centers, and this migration results in the prevalence of slums that Davis calls “human dumps,” speaking both literally and figuratively: “the peripheral function of the Third World urban edge remains as a human dump. In some cases, urban waste and unwanted immigrants end up together, as in such “garbage slums” as the…huge Dhapa dump and slum on the fringe of Kolkata” (47). Thus, ironically, the (cultural) Orientalist narrative of civilizational progress is conditioned and caused by the (economic) unfettered movement of capital that is partly responsible for the filth and dirt that Mukherjee decries so vehemently in his Orientalist narrative. Here we see again how the economic conditions, when occluded from view, make certain features of the so-called Third World seem merely cultural.

The Orientalism does not stop with descriptions of rain in Calcutta, but spills over into stereotypical descriptions of culture shock. Ritwik’s first experience in the English university he attends is that of confusion and subsequent embarrassment, because he cannot understand the British accent.

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51 Davis uses the official name of Calcutta. The name was recently changed in 2001 to be consistent with Bengali pronunciation. I have retained use of the old name to avoid confusion since Mukherjee’s text refers to the city as Calcutta throughout.
Oh yes, he stood out, and the introduction set his ears aflame: “This is Ritwik Ghosh (she pronounced it ‘gosh’, the absence of the usual exclamation mark after the word only making it sound worse) who’s come from Calcutta to do the BA.” He tried to appear relaxed, knowing, in control....Suddenly he realised he had this panicky vacuum somewhere in his lower stomach, a hollow that pressed his insides intermittently: he did not understand simple English as spoken by true-blood English people. Occasionally, a soothing wisp of Dr Carter’s sentences reached him—“...about it, it gets better with practice...”, “...the Midlands dialect in which Langland wrote could pose...” and then it would be lost in the fizz and crackle of other Englishes. (60)

There are reasons why this episode seems to produce a direct contradiction in the text. Even while describing Ritwik’s dysfunctional family dynamic in detail, Mukherjee is careful to emphasize his gradual accumulation of cultural capital. When we see Ritwik in London, he is well-versed in Foucault, sardonically noting the “darkly Foucauldian” practice of having guest books in the dormitories that visitors have to sign in order to get in. Accounts of Ritwik’s childhood help us to understand how this accumulation of cultural capital might have taken place: “Whenever a book was demanded by Ritwik, it arrived. His father went and ordered it in Study, the tiny bookshop in Jadavpur central market, paid in advance, and the book appeared, wrapped in crisp brown paper, in a week or two” (146). This is how Ritwik is given the “Collins Concise Encyclopaedia,” which
becomes his refuge from the ugly realities of his life. As the quotidian ugliness of bickering between parents, physical violence, and trauma unfold around him, Ritwik concentrates on learning new words and ideas from the encyclopedia: “Ritwik listened to the shouting outside with horror. His mother had begun crying, deep, wretched sobs of frustration and anger....He squeezed his eyes shut, tight tight tight, till there were exploding colours inside his eyeballs, and let his voice articulate the words he had memorised from the page in front of him, to drown out the squabble: sonata form:...”(150). After such descriptions of Ritwik’s joy in poring over the brand new Collins encyclopedia, a rigorous English education in the Catholic missionary school, and familiarity with Foucault and Orwell, it seems hardly logical that he would not “understand simple English as spoken by true-blood English people.” This absurd attempt to forcibly make out Ritwik to be a bumpkin who does not know better is taken to a laughable extent when it is reported that he mistakes the Liverpool accent of a classmate as German.

It is not easy to make sense of Ritwik’s Orientalist impressions of Calcutta, or his unexplained lack of English skills, when he is a student accepted into a British university with a scholarship to study English. Both can be better understood, however, with Rey Chow’s concept of “coercive mimeticism”—“a process (identitarian, existential, cultural, or textual) in which those who are marginal to mainstream Western culture are expected...to resemble and replicate the very banal preconceptions that have been appended to them, a process in
which they are expected to objectify themselves in accordance with the already seen and thus to authenticate the familiar imagings of them as ethnics” (107). Mukherjee’s presentation of Ritwik’s impressions about Calcutta and his decision to portray Ritwik’s inexplicable inability to understand English are both part of this coercive mimeticism—forcible attempts to adhere to the expected cultural scripts that the metropolitan audience has come to demand from narratives coming out of the global South. Considering this mindless tendency to conform to the metropolitan audience’s expectations, it is little wonder that Ritwik uses his sexuality as an excuse to stay on in England illegally after his student visa expires.

The exchange between Ritwik and Gavin, his Brazilian-Scottish friend whom he asks for help in finding a place to live, is the only passage in the novel in which the reasons for making the decision to become an illegal immigrant are explored in detail.

The only certainty about him, intense as a blowtorch, was his determination not to go back. All his stories added up to an unhappy life, yes, there was no denying that, but there was something missing, some piece that was vital to Gavin to make the leap into helping Ritwik. The boy was withholding something.

“Is it also...also a...”—Gavin didn’t know how to express it delicately—“is it a matter of your sexuality as well that you don’t want to go back? I can’t imagine gays having a ball in India.”
Ritwik looked up. “Yes,” he hesitated, “yes, it’s partly that. I can be free here. No, you’re right, the opportunity to be myself here is something I value immensely.” (254)

Ritwik’s assertion that he can be free, and has the opportunity to be himself only in England is curious. He is never shown to be open about his sexual preferences with anyone in England. Whatever “opportunity” there is seems to consist of him cruising strangers in public restrooms for anonymous sex. I do not mean to suggest that a folding into the homonormative pattern of monogamous attachments rooted in domesticity and consumption is required to make full use of the freedoms and opportunities that seem to abound in the global North for the queer immigrant. But these series of anonymous sexual encounters are presented by the author as an exceptional privilege that can be accessed only now that Ritwik is in England. This is playing up the sexual exceptionalism of the queer liberatory paradigm in the global North most blatantly.

The implicit suggestion is that it is not possible to have anonymous sexual encounters or experience and act on same-sex desire in Calcutta. The problem with this implicit assumption is not just that it reaffirms and consigns the global South to that part of the civilizationally regressive imaginative geography where it is not possible to experience and act on same-sex desire, but that it is also simply not true in the context of the novel. A close reading of the passage in which Ritwik is cruised by a man on the street and decides to have sex with him is enough to confirm this:
There is that very familiar dryness in his mouth as he plays out the first movement of the suite with a stranger. It has its unerring, delicious shiver as always, but also an inchoate fear of the unknown: who knows, this is not Calcutta, this is the country of psychopathic serial killers, of thousands of AIDS-infected people, of twisted criminals the papers write about almost every day. (64)

This is not the description of someone’s first cruising experience. But since this episode occurs during Ritwik’s explorations of his new surroundings in England, it is clear that it is his first cruising experience after arriving at England. It is evident that Ritwik has experienced this “very familiar dryness in his mouth” and the “unerring, delicious shiver as always” before. The further observation that “this is not Calcutta” leaves us in no doubt as to where he might have had the opportunity to experience it before.\footnote{The sudden insertion of the three words “Those fucking Salesians” in italics (Salesians being the particular denomination of the Catholic church that ran the school) later may indicate that Ritwik is familiar with same-sex erotic contact due to the pedophilic tendencies of certain priests at Ritwik’s school. But if Mukherjee meant it to be interpreted this way, that presents us with another, more serious problem. The implication then seems to be that it is not possible to feel the “delicious shiver” of same-sex desire in the global South unless it is through pedophilic contact. Besides being a ludicrous suggestion, it also conflates same-sex desire with pedophilia.} How exactly is then the sexual exceptionalism of England justified in the novel? There is no answer given except the confident assumption on the part of the author that the reader will find it in an axiomatic acceptance of the queer liberatory potential of the global North.
Ritwik’s belief in the liberatory potential of England is not restricted to his own life, but extends to the novel he is writing with Maud Gilby as the central character. Miss Gilby, as she is called in Rabindranath’s novel, appears only in the first few pages of *Ghare Baire*. Her role in *Ghare Baire* is limited. Rabindranath’s novel takes the political turmoil of the British colonial rule in early twentieth century India as the backdrop. In 1905, the contemporary Viceroy of India, Lord Curzon, proposed to divide Bengal into two parts along religious lines such that one part will have a Hindu majority and the other will have a Muslim majority. This deliberate move on the part of the British ruling class was in accordance with the policy of Divide and Rule, and evoked widespread protests against colonial rule. Rabindranath’s novel explores the nationalistic fervor of the anti-colonial protests with a critical eye. The three main characters are Nikhilesh, the Hindu landlord of Nawabgunj, a Muslim-majority area of Bengal; Bimala, Nikhilesh’s purdah-observing wife who has never stepped out of the *andarmahal* or the inner chambers of the house according to the customs of the age; and Sandip, Nikhilesh’s friend and the charismatic revolutionary who is also a seductive charmer. Nikhilesh is a very liberal man, educated in modern Western ways, and wants his wife to step out of the *andarmahal* into public life. Miss Gilby is employed as teacher and companion to Bimala so she can learn English and be

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socialized into modern British ways of behaving like a lady. However, Miss Gilby’s stay at Nawabgunj does not last long. As the anti-colonial agitations accelerate, Miss Gilby is the victim of a petty crime of violence (a young dependent of Nikhilesh throws a stone at her), and leaves Nawabgunj.

Rabindranath’s peripheral character Miss Gilby becomes the central character in Ritwik’s novel. Ritwik’s Maud Gilby is very much an independent woman, who has internalized all the precepts about colonization being a benevolent saving of benighted natives. But her theoretical understanding of colonization as a saving mission receives a jolt when she arrives in India and begins to discover how much of it relies on institutionalized racism and economic exploitation. Ever the troublemaker, Maud Gilby flouts most rules of propriety in colonial India in her efforts to truly save Indians, especially Indian women. This provokes the ire of her brother and leads to social ostracism from the British colonial society in India.

It was not uncommon to find women like Maud Gilby in colonial India. Shampa Roy reminds us that Miss Gilby in Ghare Baire follows in “the tradition of the genteel English spinster for whom colonial India had opened up ‘opportunities’ in the form of teaching natives, especially native women” (59). For many unmarried British women during the Victorian age or even as late as the early twentieth century, the colonies offered an escape from the stifling patriarchy at home. The civilizing mission in terms of teaching natives was an honorable way to make an independent living when opportunities for self-
employment were extremely limited for unmarried women. Ritwik’s Maud Gilby comes to India to take care of her brother James, a recent widower, but soon realizes that she cannot remain confined to this role. She receives her first offer to be a teacher-companion to an Indian woman and decides to see it as an opportunity:

Besides, this was an opportunity Miss Gilby had been looking for all along, this chance to spread the knowledge not just of English but also of a different way of living, the knowledge of a whole new world, to Indian women, to forge contact with these unheard and dumb creatures, to hear them speak, to hear their lives. How could she have turned it down? (164)

The colonial desire to know and understand the incomprehensible natives, “those unheard and dumb creatures,” is only a step away from the desire to save them. The familiar trope of colonization as a saving mission, the European self-image of liberator and harbinger of post-Enlightenment “knowledge” reveals itself repeatedly in Maud Gilby’s attitude and ardent desire to educate Indian women.

Western education as a pathway to women’s emancipation was a contested but gradually strengthening idea in early twentieth century India. In Rabindranath’s novel, Nikhilesh’s softer, benevolent masculinity is constructed largely as a result of his progressive view that a wife should be helpmeet and companion to the husband. The character of Miss Gilby becomes a necessary addition to the novel as the agent of this transformation in Bimala from the meek, docile, purdah-observant wife to the worthy companion of Nikhilesh, the
progressive, Western-educated, modern husband. What remains implicit is “the assumption that an English woman’s influence and teaching are invariably emancipatory and that therefore the husband who makes them available to his wife is definitionally enlightened and progressive” (Roy 60). The exceptional liberatory potential of Western education is rooted in the axiomatic understanding of the colonizer’s culture as superior to that of the colonized.

The Narrative Conceit

It is not surprising for Ritwik to indicate Maud Gilby’s implication in the colonial civilizing mission and the liberatory paradigm, since not to do so would be to forward an impossibly romantic understanding of the colonization process. What seems surprising at first is Ritwik’s implicit suggestion that Maud Gilby and he share something crucial in common: their individual initiative in making use of the freedom available to them in a different cultural setting to be freer. Ritwik the gay Indian man can live his life freely in England in contemporary times; Maud Gilby the (straight) unmarried woman finds a similar freedom in colonial India that would not have been possible for her to access in England. Maud Gilby’s outright refusal to follow the rules a British woman was supposed to live by in colonial India is seen to have immense significance. Her smaller, insignificant revolts—like deciding to learn Bengali so she can communicate with the native
women who do not speak English, or the decision to take a walk by herself unchaperoned—give way to bigger infractions.

When she decides to leave her brother James and take up employment at the household of Nikhilesh, James sends a letter rebuking her thoroughly:

This sort of thing is not done. We have standards to maintain, an Empire to run; however small a cog in the great wheel we might be, we have our duty to it. What will everyone think? You’ve broken every single rule since you’ve been here. Tongues have wagged. You don’t need to be reminded of all this. And now you say you’re going to go and live in Calcutta. You behave as if you’re independent, as if you have no ties. (165)

Maud Gilby’s decision to teach Indian women English and a whole new way of living is apparently tantamount to threatening the very basis of British Empire. It is her independence, her individuality, her refusal to be just a “small cog in the great wheel,” her decision to be responsible for her own actions that is deemed to be an act of effective political dissidence.

The similarity in Maud Gilby’s situation and Ritwik’s imagination of his own condition in England can be considered in the light of the quoted passage above. What applies to Maud in the above lines can apply to Ritwik *mutatis mutandis*. Like Maud Gilby, he has done something that is not done. By being gay, he has broken rules; set tongues wagging; behaved as if he is independent; and as if he has no ties. What unites Ritwik and his creation is their mutual rebelliousness that
is rooted in their identity as a gendered minority, and their strong individual agency.

The glorification of Maud Gilby’s agency should not obfuscate from view that she is able to do what she wants because she is not financially constrained in any way. As the omniscient narrator in Ritwik’s novel wryly observes, commenting on the social ostracism of Maud Gilby and her friend Violet Cameron from the Anglo-Indian society: “…they were financially independent and sufficiently high up in the ladder for any of the mutterings and the whisperings and bad behaviour to really bite. They were unconventional because they could get away with it” (169). It is at this crucial juncture that we realize that Ritwik and Maud Gilby are very different because they do not have access to the same privileges. Therefore, Mukherjee’s narrative conceit is based on very shaky logical ground. As part of the colonial ruling class in British India, Maud Gilby is protected by a privilege in her new cultural surroundings that Ritwik does not have. She is financially independent and can literally afford to be unruly; Ritwik is in England on a student visa and a small scholarship, and has only a precarious foothold in the liberated domain where he thinks he has agency as a gay man.

Neoliberal Necropolitics

Hereafter, Mukherjee’s narrative conceit gradually starts to fall apart, and both the narratives hurtle toward parallel ends that promise to be violent in
keeping with the thematic prominence of violence and death in the novel so far. The first step towards these violent ends is taken when Ritwik decides to stay on in England illegally. I have shown how his decision to choose to remain in England illegally and not go back to India is a result of his axiomatic acceptance of the queer liberatory paradigm. The queer liberatory paradigm is the sociocultural correlate of the neoliberal rhetoric that emphasizes personal responsibility and individual initiative. It is Ritwik's erroneous reading of Maud Gilby's individual initiative that enables Mukherjee to sustain the narrative conceit between Ritwik's life and Ritwik's imagination of Maud Gilby's life. It is only a matter of time before this narrative conceit falls apart after Ritwik decides to stay on illegally. The same neoliberal principles that aided and abetted Mukherjee's fantastic narrative conceit and the foregrounding of axiomatic belief in the queer liberatory paradigm, now work against Ritwik as he becomes disenfranchised labor. A feature of this disenfranchisement is his necropolitical detachment from conditions of life in a neoliberal economy. By necropolitics, I mean Mbembe’s concept of “practical conditions” that make possible “the right to kill, [the decision] to allow to live, or to expose to death” certain subjects (12). It is necessary to quote the passage when Mukherjee describes how Ritwik’s life undergoes a necropolitical rupture:

They talk of burnt bridges. Sometimes it is a choice, at other times, enforced, but more often than not the fall of the die takes in both. There are documents, stamps, official insignia, computer-held records,
databases, monitors of exits and entries, date stamps, place stamps, ports of entry, records, papers, hard disks, officers, institutions, regulations, limitations, hedge after hedge, wall after wall, moat after moat regulating movements in and out, out and in ...To give all this the slip is to drop out of official, recorded life, of validated life. It is to move from life to existence. On the 21st of December, Ritwik Ghosh will do exactly that: he will silently let his leave to remain in England expire and become a virtual prisoner in this new land. He will not have access to banking, medical care, foreign travel, proper jobs, the welfare state, benefits, nothing. (307)

The very considerable differences between Maud Gilby and Ritwik become clear in this passage. In Ritwik’s novel, Maud Gilby is savagely beaten and sustains traumatic head injuries, after which she decides to leave Nawabgunj and go stay with a friend. Maud Gilby, although propelled by individual enterprise and noble ideas of freedom and gender equality, can recuperate and retreat into the safe haven of her privileged existence when need be. For Ritwik, the desire to have individual freedom and access to the constructed queer liberatory paradigm exact a terrible price. By “drop[ping] out of official, recorded life,” he is also forgoing any validation of that life, and moving “from life to existence.”

Ritwik’s connection to the social safety nets of the welfare state and its paraphernalia of technological-financial-social networks is gone. He becomes part of the disenfranchised labor that is not needed in a neoliberal economic system. This system does not need his labor, but nevertheless benefits from it
since it only aims to maximize profit. He becomes one of the many undocumented laborers in the black economy of England, doing physically strenuous work like picking strawberries all day to earn money. His pursuit of anonymous sex gradually devolves into sex work. To save on rent, he moves in with Anne Cameron, a senile old woman who lives alone. In exchange for being Anne’s caregiver, he does not have to pay rent. This arrangement between Ritwik and Ann is significant. Anne’s precarious hold on life (in the absence of a welfare state) mirrors the process of Ritwik’s gradual detachment from conditions that make life possible.

Ritwik’s gradual detachment from conditions of life as an illegal migrant worker, whose labor is required but not valued, can be understood in the light of Achille Mbembe’s observations about the necropolitical condition of the slave in the plantation economy. The slave condition, Mbembe writes, results from a triple loss: the loss of home, the loss of rights over his/her body, and the loss of political status (21). It can be argued that the illegal migrant worker experiences some form of all three losses. Ritwik has no access to home—whether in actual physical terms of going back to India, or in affective terms of having a sense of belonging to a specific place. He has not completely lost the rights over his body, but now he has to use it for sex work. This is a significant change from his voluntary pursuit of sexual pleasure in anonymous encounters. Obviously, as an illegal worker with no work permit and no visa, he has no political status in England anymore.
Commenting on the slave’s condition of life, Mbembe notes: “As an instrument of labor, the slave has a price. As a property, he or she has a value. His or her labor is needed and used. The slave is therefore kept alive but in a state of injury, in a phantom-like world of horrors and intense cruelty and profanity... Slave life, in many ways, is a form of death-in-life.” (21). This seems to be an apt description of Ritwik’s life after he becomes an illegal migrant worker in England. When I claim that Ritwik is being detached from the conditions that make his life possible, I allude to this constant state of injury, this form of death-in-life. This is how neoliberal necropolitics come to function in his life. It should be remembered that the very same principles of individual liberty and agency that he so wished to find in the queer liberatory potential of the global North (socioculturally) lead him to this necropolitical state of injury when he becomes disenfranchised labor (socioeconomically).

Now that Ritwik’s cherished dream of individual agency turns into a nightmare, the narrative conceit of similarity between the two parallel plots falls apart. Mukherjee gradually makes the two plots intersect, and characters from one spill over into the other. The reader is left to put together the pieces of a puzzle, and it becomes apparent that Anne, Ritwik’s landlady, may actually be the descendant of Violet Cameron, Maud Gilby’s rebellious friend. As the distinction between Ritwik’s actual life and the fictional narrative he is writing fades, the novel seems to edge closer to “a phantom-like world of horrors and intense

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54 Mbembe’s italics.
“cruelty.” Ritwik goes from picking fruit to becoming a professional sex worker, constantly at peril of being beaten by dangerous customers or at the mercy of pimps who guard their territory with threats of physical violence and acid bulbs. The only culmination to this process that would make Ritwik’s slow but steady inclusion into the state of injury overt is an act of actual violence against his person.

This act of violence is what occurs at the end of the frame narrative. Ritwik is the victim of a violent attack in which he is repeatedly stabbed and left to die by the street. In what reads like a poignant last attempt on the part of Mukherjee to establish the agency of the individual, it is reported that the night Ritwik gets attacked, he did not want to have sex for money: “Tonight, he will go with anyone and not ask for any money. Tonight, it is faceless pleasure he is after” (459). Thus, the first time that Ritwik decides to act as an individual agent after entering the necropolitical state of constant injury is the time his last precarious attachment to life is violently severed. Thus ultimately, the narrative conceit in Mukherjee’s novel that is made possible and produced through various aspects of the neoliberal rhetoric cannot be sustained. The structural violence inscribed in an ideology that consigns whole populations to a necropolitical detachment from conditions of life, is directly at odds with the nominal nobility of neoliberal rhetoric such as individual initiative and agency, freedom, and personal responsibility—all of which promise a queer life by upholding exceptional sexual freedoms. Mukherjee’s novel, in trying to uphold a narrative conceit that renders
these aspects of neoliberal ideology as culturally axiomatic, can thus be read
against its grain as a cautionary tale that despite itself, makes the necropolitical
arrangement of life under neoliberalism legible.
CHAPTER 3

Legibility, Erasure, and the Neoliberal Assimilation of Same-Sex Desire in *Dostana*

The multilingual Indian film industry is the largest in the world. The annual report of Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) shows that 1255 Indian feature films were released in India during the year 2011 (3). Shohini Ghosh notes that Indian movies reach a global audience of 3.6 billion viewers each year (419). The CBFC report clarifies that production of the feature films is mostly done in the private sector, with no government control during production (5). It is to be expected then, that the liberalization of the Indian economy in 1991, with its drive for greater privatization and less restrictions on inflow of foreign capital, should have an indelible effect on the films produced in this thriving industry. The Hindi film industry, based in Bombay,\(^5^5\) is one of the largest in India, and certainly the one with the greatest global market. After 1991, scholars pointed out two developments in the Hindi film industry: there were more depictions of

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\(^5^5\) The city was renamed Mumbai (its name in Marathi, the local language) in November 1995 by Shiv Sena, the right-wing Hindu fundamentalist party. It had been called Bombay since the seventeenth century. I have retained the name Bombay here for the sake of simplicity, and to politically distance myself from the chauvinist politics of Shiv Sena. For more on the naming issue, see Jyotsna Kapur and Manjunath Pendakur, “The Strange Disappearance of Bombay From its Own Cinema,” p. 44.
same-sex desire onscreen than ever before (Ghosh 419); and the city of Bombay had suddenly disappeared as the setting of most of the movies, with exotic and beautiful locations like Switzerland, various cities in the U.S. or Europe, or a generic city space without any identifiable landmarks taking its place (Kapur et al.). Taken individually, these changes may signal the inevitable effects of globalization. In this chapter, I will analyze Tarun Mansukhani’s film Dostana (Friendship, 2008) to show how these simultaneous changes are compatible not only with each other, but also with neoliberal ideology.

Released in 2008, Tarun Mansukhani’s comedy of errors Dostana (Friendship) broached the topic of homosexuality directly in its main plot. This was one of the first times that a homosexual relationship between the two male leads in a mainstream Hindi feature film was directly insinuated, although the representation was done in the format of comedy. Even though Deepa Mehta’s Fire had created a furor after its release in 1998 with its serious depiction of same-sex desire between two women, Dostana did not inspire any such protests. Instead of concluding that this miraculous shift in public reception is proof that sometimes it gets better in ten years, I argue that successful representation of same-sex desire in texts like Dostana is possible as long they do not threaten to validate any non-normative sexuality. However, something as subversive as same-sex desire once seen and represented cannot be unseen or unrepresented. That is to say, any representation of same-sex desire in a mainstream cultural production where little or none existed before can count as incitement to
discourse; therefore, this ever-present threat of inadvertently validating non-normative sexuality has to be contained within a complex structure of simultaneous legibility and erasure. I claim that *Dostana* makes same-sex desire legible in two ways: by placing itself squarely in the tradition of homosocial “buddy” films in Bollywood, and by repeatedly upsetting the heterosexual male gaze in the way it represents same-sex desire. The acts of erasure consist of the ways in which the film overtly underscores the impossibility of same-sex desire with repeated gestures of disavowal. The most significant disavowal occurs by assimilating it in a neoliberal narrative, in which same-sex desire becomes just another aspect of urban life that the neoliberal consumer-subject may encounter while trying to achieve the dream of “making it in the big city” and living a luxurious life marked by conspicuous consumption. In effect, the reason *Dostana* can be received in the public culture and the discourse of same-sex desire in India without causing any uproar is because its ultimate collusion with the neoliberal rhetoric prevents the possibility of any real validation of queer life.

The plot of the narrative and the use of comedy as a genre help considerably in aiding this simultaneous process of legibility and erasure. The narrative begins by introducing two straight Indian expatriate men, Sameer (Abhishek Bachchan) and Kunal (John Abraham), who are both living in Miami. Sameer is a nurse and Kunal is a fashion photographer. They keep running into each other, and discover that they are in a common predicament—both have to find a permanent place to live in Miami as soon as possible. They find the perfect
apartment, but the landlady (identified as “Aunty” throughout the movie, played by Sushmita Bundela Mukherjee) informs them that the place is open only to women since her niece lives there alone. Desperate to get in, Sameer and Kunal decide to pretend that they are gay, and as such pose no threat to the modesty of the niece. The niece is then revealed to be the extremely beautiful Neha (Priyanka Chopra), who works at a prestigious fashion magazine. Predictably, both Sameer and Kunal fall for her, but have to keep up the ruse in order to keep the apartment and have a chance to woo Neha. Despite the circumstances, soon a strong friendship develops among the three. As Sameer and Kunal’s lie gets more elaborate, more potential situations are created for comedy. The narrative moves through a series of complications towards a dénouement that sees both of the impostors suitably chastised for their mischievous lie, while Abhimanyu (Bobby Deol), Neha’s boss and the virtuous “straight guy” in this comedy of errors, ends up with the girl.

Legibility: Queering the “Buddy” Film Genre

As Shohini Sengupta points out, “Bombay cinema has had a longstanding preoccupation with the theme of friendship and the love between two friends” (418). She gives examples of iconic films like Anand (Joy, 1970), Namak Haram (The Traitor, 1973), and Main Khiladi Tu Anari (I’m the Player and You’re the Amateur, 1994). This list can be endlessly expanded. The one common pattern to
emerge on even a preliminary introspection of these films is that they all deal with friendships among men. The “buddy” film genre in Bombay has always focused on male-male friendships, and the very intensity of the love between these friends can be characterized as homosocial, and at times, even homoerotic.\textsuperscript{56} \textit{Dostana} marks a clear departure from this trend in expanding the male-male friendship axis into a triangle that includes a woman. What could have been a space of homosocial camaraderie between Sameer and Kunal is transformed by the inclusion of Neha into the triangle.

I read this inclusion as an attempt to queer the “buddy” film genre. While this inclusion has been rightly read as a ploy to underscore the heterosexuality of the two main characters whose being gay is just pretence,\textsuperscript{57} it can also bring about a queering through a multi-directional flow of desires. This can be seen in the sequences filmed to the song “Jaane Kyun” (I Don’t Know Why) towards the beginning of the film. As Sameer and Kunal move into Neha’s apartment, the trio is gradually shown to become the best of friends. The chorus to the song repeats the refrain “I don’t know why/ My heart knows that if you’re around, I’ll be all right” as the three friends are seen to bond with each other while hanging out in the beaches of Miami, watching a scary movie together, going out for a night of

\textsuperscript{56} This feature is not unique to mainstream Hindi films. For an account of similar homosocial attachments between men, see Muraleedharan T., “Queer Bonds: Male Friendships in Contemporary Malayalam Cinema” and Thomas Waugh’s “‘I Sleep Behind You’: Male Homosociality and Homoeroticism in Indian Parallel Cinema.” Both articles can be found in Ruth Vanita ed. \textit{Queering India}.

\textsuperscript{57} For this reading, see Rohit K. Dasgupta, “The Queer Rhetoric of Bollywood: A case of Mistaken Identity.”
drinking and partying, or merely inhabiting the public city space. It is not clear who the “I” in the song is supposed to represent. It may easily be Sameer or Kunal, gradually falling for Neha even more as they get to know each other better, or it may be Neha, happy to have gained two new friends when she rented out her apartment. This lack of a two-way male-female directional pathway for affection between friends translates over into the unacknowledged flow of erotic desire among them.

The scene at the beach that goes with the song captures this perfectly: Neha gets out of water after swimming in the ocean, the camera takes on the gaze of the two mesmerized men watching her, and as Neha positions herself to sunbathe between them, Sameer and Kunal are shown to quietly hide their erections with the magazines they are reading. As they look at Neha, their gaze lands on each other as much as it does on her. The camaraderie of two straight men aroused by a straight woman is queered by the directional flow of their gazes. This reading would have to be against the grain of the text if it were not for the ruse of being gay that the two men participate in. But since their homosociality has already been queered by the pretence of same-sex desire for each other, this reading becomes valid in the multi-directional flow of erotic desire. In fact, at the end of the movie, when Neha poses the question, “When you both were pretending to be gay, at any point did anything happen between the two of you?” to the two male friends, they are instantly uncomfortable, and are shown to go off the screen in different directions after exchanging an
awkward glance. This discomfort has the potential to be read as the unacknowledged presence of same-sex desire between them. Despite all protestations to the contrary, the central conceit of the text then becomes to perpetually keep the question “what if...?” alive when it comes to the possibility of same-sex erotic attachments.

**Legibility: Upsetting the Male Gaze**

The second important way in which the film makes same-sex desire legible is by upsetting the male gaze, which, to follow Laura Mulvey’s analysis of the term, designates the gaze that looks on the spectacle as always already (heterosexual) male. This gaze then informs the constitution of the spectacle to produce viewing pleasure, or “scopophilia.” I want to analyze the first scene in the narrative of the film when the viewer is introduced to the two male lead characters, and expectations with respect to the audience’s scopophilia are set. It is useful to revisit Laura Mulvey’s concept of “structure of spectation” (or how the spectator views a spectacle) before beginning a discussion of the first scene. The “structure of spectation” in this scene is best described as what Christian Metz has called “unauthorized scopophilia:” “Although the film is really being shown, is there to be seen, conditions of screening and narrative conventions give the

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58 The movie begins with a song and dance sequence in which John Abraham’s sculpted and nearly naked body is fetishized. Song and dance sequences are generally not counted nor expected to be part of the narrative structure of the film according to the aesthetic practices that have predominated in mainstream Hindi films for a long time. For more details, see M. Madhava Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film*. 
spectator an illusion of looking in on a private world” (Prasad 73). This is especially true if the audience is pre-figured as queer, and by that I intend to suggest anyone who is likely to derive visual pleasure from being placed in a queer scopophilic relation with the spectacle/ subject on the screen. As Andrea Weiss has pointed out, queer spectatorship encapsulates a perpetual problematic: the desire to see while being invisible (qtd. in Ghosh 417).

The unauthorized scopophilia of the queer spectator is fully mobilized in the first scene: as the camera longingly lingers on the bodies of the male leads of the film (Abhishek Bachchan and John Abraham), and as the spectator looks on in his assumed role of the unauthorized scopophilic observant, a homoerotic tension is produced between the audience and the actors. The sense of unauthorized scopophilia is especially strong because as the camera follows Sameer and Kunal in that order, it is made clear that they are seen waking up in the same apartment after spending the night with two different women, who are presumably roommates. By making the viewer witness an unguarded private moment in the lives of these characters, especially in the case of Kunal, on whose nearly naked body (Fig. 1) the camera lingers for quite a while, the unauthorized scopophilia positions the audience as a voyeur. It also produces a queer tension between the audience and the object of scopophilia onscreen.
When they meet each other and Kunal tries to introduce himself to Sameer, he surprises Kunal by saying he already knows his name. When Kunal asks how, Sameer mimics Kunal’s partner’s sexual pleasure while she was crying out the latter’s name last night. This act of mimicry by Sameer makes overt the queer tension that had been building up in the unauthorized scopophilia of the audience. Sameer’s mimicking of the pleasure that Kunal’s sexual partner felt last night places him in a direct performative sexual relation with Kunal by substitution (i.e. making it seem like he is the one deriving pleasure from having sex with Kunal). This alignment between Sameer and Kunal in which either or both are positioned to receive or provide sexual pleasure to the other is proleptic and is repeated throughout the duration of the movie. However, it is qualified.
and made to fit the heterosexual order of deriving sexual pleasure by underlining the “real” context of the eminently heterosexual encounter (between Kunal and his unnamed sexual partner) that produced that same pleasure. Thus, the possibility of same-sex desire, while acknowledged, is also immediately qualified by producing it as a copy of heterosexual encounter. This mimicry can produce laughter, but has no real significance beyond the context of heterosexual coupling without which it is illegible.

The cyclical process of making same-sex desire legible, and the simultaneous evacuation of any “reality” of the context that produces this legibility, is repeated over and over in the film. After Neha and her Aunty conclude that they are gay, Sameer and Kunal are asked to narrate how they met. This opens the narrative to the possibility of incorporating an invented same-sex love story. Sameer takes this opportunity to narrate a highly dramatic story of how he and Kunal came to be together after meeting by chance in Venice three years ago. As we see a comically exaggerated spoof of clichéd heterosexual “boy meets girl” narratives that are easily recognizable to a regular audience of Hindi cinema (or any avid consumer of romantic comedies), it is always clear that this fictional narrative is just that—a fiction. Further, as a spoof of popular “boy meets girl” narratives, it is again a derivative of heterosexual romances. Since the purpose is to mock the clichéd scripts of ‘boy meets girl’ narratives, any and every “reality” behind this clearly marked “boy meets boy” story is doubly evacuated. In other words, whatever produces homoerotic tension, or threatens
to make same-sex desire legible within the text has to be squarely placed in a comic or otherwise non-real and purely imaginative context, so that any serious sexual-political content can be disavowed and evacuated.

Disavowal within and without the text

The disavowal of same-sex desire in the film acts independently of the legibility-erasure dynamic. The disavowal is also represented overtly, in comically exaggerated homophobic reactions to same-sex desire. The film presents two significant gay characters that are truly gay. One of them is Murali or M (Boman Irani), who is Neha’s boss until he receives a better offer from a rival fashion magazine. Murali is replaced by Abhimanyu, who eventually ends up with Neha. The other gay character is an unnamed American immigration officer. He enters the narrative when Sameer and Kunal decide to file for a joint petition as a gay couple to get residency status in the U.S.\(^{59}\) What is significant about these authentically gay characters in the text is that they are both distinctly feminine in their gender performance. The idea that gay men are bound to be feminine is presented also in instances whenever Kunal or Sameer decide to “act” gay in order to make their ruse believable. The femininity of gay men is seen as axiomatic in the film. This conflation of gender and sexuality is necessary for the

\(^{59}\) This is, of course, not legal because of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA). More on the politics of this inaccuracy later.
film, because otherwise the traditional masculinity of heterosexual men becomes indistinguishable from the masculinity of gay men. The ultimate result of this conflation that treats gender and sexuality as collapsible categories, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has noted, is effeminophobia—a specialized form of homophobia that targets gay men who are perceived to be feminine (20). The effeminophobia of the characters in the film is a necessary pre-condition for the comically exaggerated disavowal of same-sex desire and non-conforming gender behavior.

This femininity of gay men produces disgust, amusement, and surprise—emotions that evoke and validate homophobic responses from the other characters. This is nowhere more evident than in the reactions of Sameer’s conservative mother (Kiron Kher), who is scandalized when her son’s paper work for U.S. residency as part of a gay couple mistakenly ends up getting mailed to her in London. She shows up in Miami, unable to believe that her son is gay. A discussion of Kher’s skill and superb comic timing is unfortunately beyond the scope of this chapter, but both are evident in the exaggerated expressions she produces (Fig. 2, 3, 4) that register disgust and disbelief, fear, and surprise respectively.
The disavowal is carried out beyond the film as well. The actors are careful to be dismissive and evasive when talking about the “homosexual” content of the film. In the special feature titled “The Making of the Film,” Abhishek Bachchan says: “there’s no gay theme in the film. It’s an aspect of the story. And a very funny one. It’s just a requirement of the script, which is very funny and that’s where it should be left at.” Bachchan’s impulse to distance himself from the theme of the film, as well as play it down as “just comedy” is evident. John Abraham, while speaking about his co-star Bachchan is jokingly evasive: “I love Abhishek, but not in the Dostana way.” Tarun Mansukhani (the director) and Karan Johar (the producer), are on record expressing the view that the only way to represent homosexuality in mainstream Hindi films is through comic or other
non-real means such that there is no risk of seriously validating a queer presence onscreen. Karan Johar says in an interview: “We have to leave behind the tone of the films we made in the 80s and the 90s. But is India ready for a big, serious film like *Brokeback Mountain* yet? I would say it won’t go down too well yet. But we will open the doors for other filmmakers in the future” (“I Don’t Care”).

*Figure 3: Screen shot showing fear of Sameer’s mother (Kiron Kher) at a solicitous M (Boman Irani), as she is held by Sameer (Abhishek Bachchan) on the right.*
Assimilation into the Neoliberal Imaginary

The most significant erasure of any possibility of queer life in *Dostana* occurs because of its absolute assimilation into neoliberal ideology. I tease out the ways in which the film colludes with neoliberal ideology in two interrelated ways: by contextualization of the film in the fast-changing material realities of the Indian population after liberalization in 1991, and an analysis of how these trends are reflected, catered to, and accounted for in the plot and in the narrative trajectory of the film. This analysis, when considered along with the dynamic of legibility and disavowal we have already discussed, makes it clear why *Dostana* did not inspire any protests or controversy like Mehta’s *Fire*.

One of the reflections of the material reality of liberalization was the mysterious disappearance of Bombay from its own cinema:
Beginning in the 1990s, a peculiar absence started to show up in popular Indian cinema: the city of Bombay, the hometown of this very cinema, disappeared as a location. Even when films were supposedly set in Bombay they showed not Bombay but a studio set, a generic city dressed up in the brand names of late twentieth century capital. (Kapur and Pendakur 43)

What can explain this peculiar absence? With the liberalization of the economy and infusion of foreign capital into the private sector of the Hindi film industry, the budgetary constraints of keeping shooting confined to studios in Bombay was removed, opening up the possibility of shooting the song and dance sequences in a movie in picturesque international locations. This was made possible by the narrative conventions of commercial Hindi cinema.

Mainstream commercial Hindi cinema has never pretended to have too fastidious a concern with verisimilitude. It is perfectly natural in the aesthetic logic of mainstream Hindi films to have a narrative break in order to include song and dance routines that may show the characters transported to another physical space. A romantic song may suddenly show the male and female leads of the film to be on a beach, and in the next instant, dancing on a snow-covered mountain peak. With an increase in production budgets of films, it was possible to shoot

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60 As Kapur and Pendakur write: "Commercial Bombay cinema has never made any pretenses of realism. Its aesthetic, characterized as the "cinema of interruptions" by Lalitha Gopalan (2002), or the masala film by Pendakur (2003) following the industry’s own label of choice, blatantly flouts rules of transparency and verisimilitude. It is perfectly logical within the realm of Bombay film aesthetics that lovers would break into a song in the midst of a conversation and be transported
on locations all around the world. But the emerging trend of shooting in European or North American cities cannot be explained just by pointing out the material conditions that favored it. We have to ask who the intended audience of these images may be. In other words, why would an average consumer of Hindi films want to see these unfamiliar urban spaces in lieu of familiar Indian locations as setting? The answer lies in the general rise in the visibility of the middle classes in India after liberalization, and in practices of representation that carry an exclusionary bias towards vulnerable sections of the society.

The idea that urban spatial reconfigurations (in keeping with neoliberal policies) carry exclusionary biases based on class affiliations is not new. In the Indian context, Leela Fernandes has related the trend of spatial reconfiguration with the increasingly visible discursive representations of the middle classes. Simultaneously, the poor and the economically disadvantaged sections of the population are erased through what Fernandes terms “the politics of forgetting:”

The growing visibility of the new Indian middle class has resulted in what Indian scholar Rajni Kothari (1993) has referred to as a ‘growing amnesia’ towards poverty and the poor in liberalising India. The visibility of the urban middle classes sets into motion a politics of forgetting with regard to locations completely unrestrained by material or physical constraints. Madhava Prasad’s Marxist analysis in Ideology of Hindi Film names this aesthetic practice “textual heteronomy” and contextualizes it in the material practices of how commercial films are produced in the Hindi film industry.

61 For example, Martin Manalansan shows how the neoliberal zoning policies in the city of New York carried such exclusionary biases against queers of color in “Race, Violence, and the Neoliberal Spatial Politics in the Global City.”
to social groups that are marginalised by India’s increased integration into the global economy. (2416)

If the poor and the vulnerable sections of society are occluded from view, and a dream-like, pristine, sanitized urban city space is the setting of the films, what we see on screen is effectively a neoliberal imagination of what could be, which then works to validate neoliberal ideology to the section of the population that stands to benefit most from neoliberal restructuring of the economy: the bourgeois middle classes.

This is exactly why the representation of Miami becomes relevant in the context of the film. The representation of the urban space in Dostana cleaves to popular tropes about the city as a space marked by economic opportunity; a liberated and liberatory space where individuality and individualism is celebrated, where dreams of upward social mobility come true. The underlining unifying factor is always the freedom of the individual—the most important identifiable trait of the neoliberal subject. As David Harvey has noted, “The assumption that individual freedoms are guaranteed by the freedom of the market and of trade is a cardinal feature of neoliberal thinking...” (Harvey 7). The neoliberal city becomes the rarefied space where such freedoms are heightened. The city becomes a space that guarantees the dreams of “becoming someone,” i.e. one that supports individual freedoms which in turn mobilize neoliberal subjectivity.

Neha can pursue her dreams of becoming the editor-in-chief of a prestigious fashion magazine; Kunal can pursue his childhood dream of becoming a fashion
photographer; and Sameer, despite being the object of ridicule, can be a male nurse.

Fernandes also contends that the “forms of local spatial politics point to the production of an exclusionary form of cultural citizenship in which the urban Indian middle classes are constructed as consumer-citizens in liberalizing India” (2416-7). In other words, insofar as these spatial politics favor specific forms of being a citizen based on who can consume how much and how visibly in the neoliberal urban market, the Indian middle classes emerge as the clear frontrunner in being represented as the first among equals. This is seen in Dostana when conspicuous consumption goes hand in hand with pursuing dreams of “becoming someone.” The reason why Neha needs roommates in her luxurious apartment is because she cannot afford it herself. As she explains to Sameer and Kunal, she had bought the apartment without thinking, and now she cannot pay the installments of the bank loan on her own. The characters draw attention to other forms of conspicuous consumption as well, as if to instruct the new bourgeois middles classes in India on how to spend their disposable incomes. For example, in the fictional narrative Sameer recounts to satisfy Aunty’s curiosity about how he met Kunal, he notes how he prepared to go on a date with him: “I immediately put on my Gucci shoes and Armani jacket and set off towards my destiny.” Sameer’s expensive taste in clothes also becomes a signifier of his stereotypical gay identity that is supposed to convince Aunty of the veracity of his tall tale.
The urban setting almost demands inclusion of same-sex desire in the narrative. In the sexually liberated, Westernized cityscape imagined through and by neoliberal economic imperatives, it is inevitable to have token representations of gay characters so that they add on to the cosmopolitan flavor of the urban social milieu as sexual dissidents. When Sameer asks Neha towards the beginning of the film whether she is okay with “the gay stuff,” she responds enthusiastically that she is okay with “gay rights.” Neha’s familiarity with the words “gay rights” immediately connotes this cosmopolitanism in her behavior that is more the norm than the exception. Same-sex desire is thus coded as one of the many (sexual) freedoms available to the neoliberal subject in a cityscape, while exposure to its existence and subsequent tolerance of it defines the neoliberal subject as particularly cosmopolitan.

Kwame Anthony Appiah defines cosmopolitanism as being equipped with those “ideas and institutions that will allow us to live together as the global tribe we have become” (xiii). However, as often happens, what is deemed “global” reveals itself to be “Western” with the strong validating presence of globalized capital behind it.62 This liberated and liberatory Western space, marked with an exceptional tolerance and acceptance of same-sex desire, gives rise to a very curious narrative inaccuracy. Sameer and Kunal are seen to file a joint petition to get U.S. residency as a gay couple. This is possible in the alternate reality of the

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62 One of the central tenets of neoliberal theory is to remove obstacles across national markets for free movement of capital.
film which can disengage itself from all claims of verisimilitude as a comedy in which anything goes. However, this particular inaccuracy is politically motivated, and imagines a world in which foreign same-sex couples are not only allowed to apply for U.S. residency, but their applications are expedited. This is in stark contrast to reality where existence of the Defense of the Marriage Act (DOMA) prevents bi-national married couples (of whom one is a U.S. citizen) the right to apply for residency status in the U.S., let alone foreign couples whose relationship is not codified in any way by the U.S. state apparatus.\(^{63}\) This marvelous invention in the narrative thus shores up the Western urban cityscape’s reputation as one of the most tolerant and free places possible, where individual liberties are sacrosanct.

No amount of individual liberty or gestures of cultural cosmopolitanism are enough however, to prevent the mandatory heterosexual coupling that concludes the film. Sameer and Kunal’s lie is revealed in a dramatic dénouement, which almost destroys the friendship among the three characters. However, since all has to end well, Sameer and Kunal, the two miscreants, are instrumental in bringing together Neha and Abhimanyu in a final selfless act of expiation. As

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\(^{63}\) The binational same-sex couple is one minority group that has become especially vulnerable to anti-immigrant measures. Nineteen countries currently allow lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender citizens to sponsor their partners for the purposes of immigration, but the United States is not one of them. Although same-sex marriage has been legalized in Massachusetts, Vermont, and, more recently, Iowa, New Hampshire, and Connecticut [this list has changed since the appearance of this article], marriages performed within these states fail to have an impact upon federal immigration law, due to the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act” (Lewis 90). Also see *Family, Unvalued*, the widely circulated report by Human Rights Watch and Immigration Equality on the subject. For critiques of the neoliberal coding of “family” into citizenship laws and immigration practices, see Amy Brandzel, “Queering Citizenship?”; Chandan Reddy, “Asian Diasporas, Neoliberalism, and Family”; Karma R. Chávez, “Border (In)Securities.”
punishment for their mischievous lie, they are forced to kiss each other in public to prove they are sorry. The kiss is supposed to be the final comic gesture that makes same-sex desire legible in the film.

The visibility of queer life and same-sex desire in the film, however, does not lead to any real gains in terms of equal rights. In fact, this very visibility can be useful to mobilize a particular kind of provisional gay politics called homonormativity that does not challenge the normativity of heterosexuality (Duggan 50). Duggan defines homonormativity as a politics that holds out the promise of a depoliticized gay constituency in the future, while sustaining and upholding dominant heteronormative assumptions.64 As sexual politics, homonormativity is very consistent with neoliberal rhetoric, and is in fact produced and mandated by it. It emphasizes a privatized gay culture that is anchored in domesticity and consumption. I have shown how Dostana forwards a schema of visibility of same-sex desire that is ardently homonormative, while in failing to validate any serious possibility of queer life, does not forward the cause of equal rights. In the absence of this validation, and by offering a paradigm that privileges visibility but not rights, it joins the ranks of cultural productions that are created in and through neoliberal rhetoric and ideology to sustain itself, while colonizing the space for effective dialogue that can effect social and economic justice.

64 Duggan uses Michael Warner’s term heteronormativity here, which denotes all that works to emphasize heterosexual coupling as primary and normative.
CHAPTER 4

The Lesbian Limit of Neoliberal Individuation in Tilottama Majumdar’s 
*Chander Gaye Chand*

**Liberalization, Liberation, and the Lesbian**

The liberalization of the Indian economy in 1991 was not only a decisive break from the economic policies of the past; it was also hailed as one of the key changes that would usher in a new India that was socially progressive. As we have seen in the last two chapters, liberalization in economic terms often carries the expectation that a concomitant process of liberation or social progress will take place as well. More often than not, the liberation or emancipation of women comes to the foreground as a template to measure this progress in sociocultural terms. In the Indian context, liberalization led to greater participation of a certain class of women in the workforce, resulting in celebratory discourses about “modern” women’s newfound autonomy or independence. Shari Daya comments on the specific nature of this autonomy:

> Of interest in the representations of modern womanhood in *India Today* [a news magazine] and women’s novels, however, is not simply the centrality
of autonomy, but rather the mode\textsuperscript{65} through which such autonomy is seen to be manifested. Specifically, the modern self of the "new woman" is expressed in these sources as primarily through her autonomous sexuality (99).

In other words, the sexual autonomy of women, or their right to make choices about their own body and sexuality, is a central referent of progress and modernity; this modernity in turn, is informed by the liberalization of the economy. Thus, the extent of women’s sexual autonomy in modern India comes to function as one of the most important means to judge the efficacy of neoliberal ideology.

The reason why liberalization could be so inextricably linked to the discursive emergence of the "new woman" is the compatibility between the neoliberal emphasis on individuality and the feminist rhetoric of sexual autonomy. The idea of sexual autonomy is wholly consistent with markers of neoliberal subjectivity: individual initiative, personal responsibility, and agency. However, as Gayatri Gopinath notes while discussing the reception of Deepa Mehta’s film \textit{Fire}, imagining this subversive sexual autonomy “never extends beyond the boundaries of heterosexuality” (136).\textsuperscript{66} The figure of the lesbian can

\textsuperscript{65}Daya’s emphasis.

\textsuperscript{66}Deepa Mehta’s \textit{Fire} (1998) has become the ur-text of lesbian representation in post-liberalization India. It depicts two middle-class women in a joint-family setting turning to each other for emotional support and sex. Upon its release in 1998, it met with vehement and violent protests from the right-wing political parties, most notably Shiv Sena. Screenings of the movie were stopped, theaters were stormed by angry mobs, posters were burnt and torn off, and property vandalized. The forces on the Hindu right deemed it a direct attack on “Indian culture.”
signify the very farthest possibility of sexual autonomy. In the trajectory of women staking a claim for a more prominent participation in the neoliberal public sphere, the figure of the lesbian, I argue, has come to function as a discursive interruption. While on the one hand the neoliberal promise of sexual autonomy offers to realize feminist goals of agency and emancipation, the gendered coding of Indian women as traditional and respectable mitigates the extent of this realization. The stakes in this tension between opposed forces become clear when considered from a materialist angle.

The sexual autonomy of the modern woman is not just a cultural correlate of the liberalization of the economy, but a direct result of the material conditions of the liberalization process. The bourgeois middle class stands to benefit most from liberalization, and as such, the sexual autonomy of middle-class women becomes the central focus of Tilottama Majumdar’s novel *Chander Gaye Chand* (2003). The lesbian becomes the figure in which two contradictory forces converge: the promise of self-actualization and individuation for middle-class women through participation in the neoliberal economy, and the constant threat of losing respectability through an excess of sexual autonomy that is the result of this individuation. Meanwhile, the neoliberal imperative of proliferating narratives that vaunt individuality and agency make it impossible to fully erase the figure of

On the other hand, leftist and liberal humanist advocates cited freedom of speech and artistic license to voice their support for the movie. It was the first large-scale incitement to discourse with respect to sexuality in India after 1991. These incitements and their politics of representation with respect to *Fire* have been narrated and analyzed in several articles. For more details see, Geeta Patel, “On Fire: Sexuality and its Incitements” and Monica Bachmann, “After the Fire” in Ruth Vanita ed. *Queering India* (Routledge, 2001).
the lesbian from view. I will examine how the tension of these contradictory forces affects the representation of the lesbian figure in *Chander Gaye Chand* (2003).

### The Narrative Structure of Majumdar’s Novel

*Chander Gaye Chand* (the title literally translates as “moon upon moon”) is structured as a coming-of-age narrative. The protagonist is Shruti, a middle-class girl from an unidentified and remote small town in West Bengal. Shruti’s family consists of her mentally disabled younger brother (Olu), and her father, who is the only earning member of the family. The novel begins with Shruti leaving her small town to earn a degree in philosophy from a college in Calcutta. Shruti arrives in a single-sex residential hostel in Calcutta with grand dreams of doing well academically and taking advantage of all the opportunities the city has to offer, but soon understands that the big city offers danger and distraction as freely as opportunities. Two of Shruti’s roommates in the hostel, Debrupa and Shreyasi, are involved in a passionate affair, and when Shruti refuses to acknowledge the existence of the affair to the hostel administration, the ensuing scandal leads to the expulsion of all three of them. Shruti’s dreams of being financially independent are strongly compromised, and in the second part of the novel, we see her as a poorly paid employee in an NGO that specializes in

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67 Majumdar’s novel was written in Bengali and has not been translated into English yet. All quotations from the book that appear here are my translations.
working with homeless street children. Debrupa joins the same NGO, and Shruti is forced to confront her past and how it has been molded by the persistent presence of same-sex desire in her life. The novel ends with Shruti walking in on Debrupa having sex with an effeminate male adolescent the NGO has rescued, which leads to a final epiphany for Shruti.

The narrative structure of the novel is tailor-made to highlight the protagonist’s coming of age. The novel is divided into two unequal parts: the first part is called “Purbashruti” and takes up about two-thirds of its length; the rest is the second part called “Parashruti.” In the first part, Majumdar uses a third person omniscient narrator, who frequently addresses the reader directly and interjects with long philosophical ruminations while narrating the action. In the second part, the narrative voice is given over to Shruti, and the readers access the action through the pages of her personal journal. The kind of narrator-figure Majumdar uses in the first part of the novel is not uncommon in Indian literary traditions. Majumdar’s omniscient narrator can be traced back to the narrative convention of the kathak or sutradhar figure. As per this convention, the kathak would offer not just a recital of events, but would indicate possible interpretations for the audience. This kind of narrative technique has roots in oral culture, when stories were heard and told rather than read and written.68

68 The descriptors kathak (“narrator”) and sutradhar (“the one who holds the strings [of narration]”) are an indication of the functions of this figure. Manohar Laxman Varadpande provides a comprehensive historical account of the function of the sutradhar figure in the introduction to History of Indian Theatre, vol. 2: “In the Indian folk theatre, Sutradhara, who is known by different names in the different regional varities, holds [the] most important position in
The names for the two parts of the novel significantly gesture toward this oral culture through double entendres. The words “Purbashruti” and “Parashruti” are both compound words, a very common linguistic feature of Bengali. Typically, the meaning of such compound words derives from an interaction between and coalescing of the meaning of the two or more component words. The first compound word “Purbashruti” is made up of two words, purba (“before”) and shruti (“that which has been heard” to connote “legend” and “mythology”). While “Purbashruti” may mean “that which has been heard of before,” in this context it also alludes to the name of the protagonist. Similarly, the second compound word contains the words para (“after”) and shruti. The literal meaning of the second compound word is “that which was heard after.” Since both the compound words allude to the protagonist Shruti, they also construct a before/after chronology with respect to her individuation in the novel. The shift in the narrative voice from the kathak-figure to Shruti signifies that Shruti has achieved control over her narrative, and that she has an agency that she did not have in the first part of the novel. In effect, this narrative structure of the novel highlights the trajectory of Shruti as a middle-class woman coming into her own and finding her own voice after coming to the city.

the entire scheme of the play” (12). After noting that the sutradhar figure is sometimes respectfully called “the first character” as a result of his importance, Varadpande enumerates the different functions of the narrator figure in folk theatre: “He resorted to acting and playing different roles in the story all by himself in the course of his narration. He pressed into service puppets, picture-scrolls and even shadows on the screen ... Though he delegated some of his functions to the actors on the folk stage, he always retained his key position and held all the strings of play-production firmly in his hands” (12). Based on his function as the commentator on the narrative, Varadpande compares the sutradhar with “the ever-present Greek chorus in the orchestral ring” (12).
There are certain overarching features of the text that need to be pointed out: it presents the familiar trajectory of middle-class women working and living in a big city in the central plot; it represents significant lesbian characters; and in doing so, it has to negotiate the tension between the contradictory forces of tradition and modernity. I will argue that in Majumdar’s novel, the lesbian figure is used to contain the threat of subversive sexual autonomy promised to middle-class women in neoliberal India. The lesbian becomes the demonized abject, the foil to the protagonist whose agency through participation in the neoliberal economy is, in comparison, no longer seen as flouting traditional gender roles. I will also show how Majumdar’s text upholds heteronormativity and qualifies as homophobic not just by marginalizing the lesbian figure as the demonized abject, but also by validating the visceral aversion of the protagonist to instances of homosexuality in the text. Majumdar’s novel thus charts a roadmap for attaining safe (hetero)sexual autonomy in these neoliberal times, marshaling neoliberal ideology to the extent it can be manipulated to be consistent with not just heteronormativity, but also homophobia.

Shruti the Bhadramahila

The first part of the novel, “Purbashruti,” begins with a dilemma for Shruti’s family as she graduates from high school and is trying to decide if she should leave her small town to pursue higher education in Calcutta, the nearest
big city. She is reluctant to leave her aging father and disabled brother, and yet, a good education seems to be the best chance for an economically stable future for her family. Shruti’s father reminds her of the stakes:

Su, I am still healthy. But I won’t be so forever. And then? If you do not study, if you do not stand on your own two feet, what will happen then? What will happen to Olu, to you? Listen, Su. I want to be relieved as soon as possible. You go and study well. It’s important. Your leaving is very important. For all of us (22).

This emotional father-to-daughter plea situates Shruti and her family in the middle class, and also indicates that this class affiliation is dependent on Shruti being economically stable in the future. We are not told what kind of employment Shruti’s father has, but the detailed description of his age and general air of decrepitude he has acquired after his wife’s death alerts us to the highly contingent nature of the financial stability of this family. The threat of being de-classed is a very real possibility for Shruti and her family, and it is in this context that the issue of Shruti going to a big city becomes such an important event.

It is not possible to ignore the role of gender in Shruti’s decision-making process. Shruti’s situation is extremely symptomatic of how the mutually

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69 Shruti is sometimes referred to as “Su” by her family and close friends.
70 This can be seen in the paragraph when Shruti considers not going to Calcutta: “[Shruti] had once thought that she would not go to Calcutta. She had even told her father. He had looked up silently with his tired eyes. The skin below his eyes was wrinkled with age. From the corner of his eyes stretched out lines like outgoing rays of light...His look had a slight layer of despair in it...he had the expression of a dead man” (20).
constitutive dynamic of the socioeconomic and the sociocultural aspects of the category “middle class” has been affected in neoliberal India. Shruti’s hesitation in leaving her family is very much a product of her gendered socialization that mandates her to be the caregiver to the family as the sole female member after her mother’s death. Therefore, her decision to step out of the private domain into the public in pursuit of economic stability goes against the traditional class-specific gendering middle-class women are expected to adhere to. Paradoxically, it is this very same class affiliation that is endangered if she is not economically stable. A brief account of how the private/public binary was historically constituted is relevant here.

The construction of the private/public binary in late nineteenth century colonial India was predicated on the dual axes of class and gender. As a result, whenever the private/public binary is faced with reconstitution, renegotiation, or subversive dismantling processes in response to socioeconomic changes (like liberalization), a discussion of tradition and modernity in terms of class and gender becomes inevitable. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid urge us to recognize how class always informs the formulation of gender norms:

Not only are patriarchal systems class differentiated, open to constant and consistent reformulation, but defining gender seems to be crucial to the formation of classes and dominant ideologies...For example, men and women in the same class often have a differential access to forms of social privilege, to wages, and to the means of production...The lives of women
exist at the interface of caste and class inequality, especially since the
description and management of gender and female sexuality is involved in
the maintenance and reproduction of social inequality. (5)

In other words, one of the ways in which the middle class becomes recognizable
as the middle class is through its class-specific gendering. If this class-specific
gendering (e.g. “differential access to forms of social privilege”) is interrupted,
then the cultural perception or legibility of the class itself is brought into
question. What seems to be at stake in the participation of middle-class women
in the neoliberal economy is this “differential access”—a form of socioeconomic
privilege that was either unavailable or selectively available before the process of
liberalization.

In nineteenth-century colonial India, this “differential access” or restrictive
gendering of middle-class women was patriarchally coded in two major ways: as
tradition, and in terms of the private/public binary. The expectation that Shruti
should be the caregiver of the family has roots in the traditional gendering of
women during the social reform movements of colonial India. Srilata explains the
context to draw out the links of this gendering with bourgeois ideas of
respectability:

The woman’s movement in India has constantly had to struggle with
“commonsensical” perceptions about women as natural caregivers and
nurturers of families. These perceptions...are shaped by the emergence of
a middle-class culture during the social reform movement. This movement
marks a shift toward the gendered separation of the public and the private spheres and a construction of women based on notions of their domesticity. The collapsing of women’s interests with the interests of the family, the children, the husband, and the home can be traced back to this historical period. The family as an institution that reproduces national culture through the bodies of women emerges with the consolidation of the middle classes during the early decades of the twentieth century. (303-304)

Srilata uses Sumanta Banerjee’s scholarship on nineteenth-century colonial Bengal to clarify the processes that led to the gradual consolidation of middle-class culture in twentieth-century India. In nineteenth-century West Bengal, this consolidation entailed the “cultural homogenization of the urban middle class, called the bhadralok (literally, the respectable, good, people)” (Srilata 314). The bhadralok is a term that connotes a bourgeois class affiliation, with attendant cultural expectations of respectability and gentility. The notion of respectability, as we have seen, is heavily determined by adherence to gendered notions of what is considered respectable. That is to say, the gentility of the bhadralok depends significantly on how closely the bhadramahila (female members of the cultural formation called bhadralok) can adhere to accepted modes of behavior in the public and the private spheres.

The middle classes like the bhadralok became more visible in cultural representations with the opening of the market. Since they were poised to
receive most of the benefits and opportunities that the expansion of the private sector entailed, the middle classes came face to face with the expectation of becoming more “globalized” culturally. The terms of this cultural globalization were often influenced by a Western idea of modernity, or a cultural cosmopolitanism that challenged stable gender roles that make the middle classes legible as middle class. If the bhadramahila is now the “new woman,” can the bhadralok exist? The anxiety behind this question informs Majumdar’s representations of Shruti.

_Bhadramahila in the City_

Majumdar construes the effects of Shruti’s migration from the unnamed small town to the metropolis of Calcutta in terms of class- and gender-specific access to modernity and respectability. In this context, the easily discernible signs of Westernization come to function as markers of modernity. The first time the readers are introduced to the three central characters in the text, Majumdar uses a familiar method of measuring modernity—the extent to which they seem to be Westernized:

These three, their names may be Kalika, Kamini, Soudamini. Or Mokshada, Kshanaprabha, Madhurilata. The names change according to the times, as do hearts, modes of thinking and living. Times in which women are hair cut like boys, and visible thighs in skirts. Times in which women, women of
Bengal, women of India, are tight jeans and wrapped around the shoulders of their male friends; in these times, these three are called Shreyasi, Debrupa, and Shruti. (16)

The markers of Westernization are present in the names, clothes, and the behavior of the girls. The first two sets of alternative names Majumdar proposes for the characters are all archaic Bengali names for women that are not common any more. These older unfashionable names often have more than three syllables, and pose a difficulty in pronunciation for the Westernized native speaker of Bengali who may not be very well-versed in the language. In contrast, the shorter names in the novel (none of them exceed three syllables) are easier to pronounce, and more easily amenable to a Westernized native speaker. When it comes to their sartorial preference, it is hard to miss the seamless link between Westernization and modernization that Majumdar forwards. If wearing jeans and short skirts comes to signify modernity via Westernization, it is also supposed to indicate an increased sexual autonomy. The frightening objectification of the female body sustained in the curious use of the “be” verb in the last two sentences of the quote (these women are their short hair\textsuperscript{71}; they are what they wear and their “visible thighs”) culminates in a disapproving observation of how women now behave too familiarly with their male friends (“wrapped around the shoulders of their male friends”). This too-familiar behavior denotes opposite-sex

\textsuperscript{71} Short hair for women is not customary in India, and is generally perceived to be a practice that is too “Western” or “modern.”
contact that is at odds with notions of a traditional respectability, and is an indication of the kind of sexual autonomy that is coded as “Western” or “modern.” In neoliberal India, this kind of objectification has become the inevitable response to the gradual erosion of class-specific notions of respectability that always depended on policing women’s sexuality.

The reason that Shruti’s traditional respectability is perceived to be under threat in the text is because of her relocation to the city. Her decision to move to Calcutta to pursue higher studies is the first step in her individuation, and inaugurates the process of self-actualization of the female neoliberal subject. I use the term individuation to denote the process of renegotiation of traditional respectability of the bhadramahila. Individuation signifies the transition of the protagonist from a traditional, more respectable, family-oriented bourgeois ideal of femininity, to a modern, more Western, more individualistic, prototypical New Woman whose sexual autonomy grants legitimacy to the neoliberal ideology.

Srilata’s description of the New Woman mentions how the urban setting is a signifier of the public domain here: “As a member of the modern global upper middle class, this New Woman is distinct from the middle-class urban working woman or housewife….She is above all an individual with agency that is about being publicly visible…” (307). This figure of the New Woman is what Shruti aspires to be. Calcutta, as a city, comes to function as the public space marked with Westernized modernity in which danger and opportunity are equally present. The opportunities manifest themselves as resources:
It was not the first time she had been to Calcutta, but the city was changing in Shruti’s eyes because of her different purpose to come this time. “I will live here,” she was thinking. “I will study here.” There’s the National Library here. There’s the British Council, the American Center Library. There are big colleges and their big libraries here. An amazing world of books will open up to her, she was thinking. And she was planning to escape to College Street the moment she had some spare time.  

For Shruti then, Calcutta becomes a city marked with the opportunity to access and acquire academic capital, which she hopes will result in professional expertise, eventually leading to future employment. Calcutta is also the urban public space in which the individuality accorded by liberalization manifests itself as the promise of sexual autonomy.

The marking of public space with the promise of sexual autonomy is rooted in the historical policing and confinement of female sexuality within the private domain. Stepping outside the private space produces the threat of losing respectability, while also signifying liberation from tradition and becoming the New Woman. As Gopinath has observed in her gloss of Sangari and Vaid, the strict policing of female sexuality helps construct the figure of the “ideal woman” who is the carrier of tradition and a middle-class sexual morality that is coded as

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72 College Street has the biggest collection of bookstores in Calcutta where both new and used books are available. Some of the most prestigious colleges are also located in the area.
“respectable” (135). Historically, the imperative to maintain this respectability resulted in middle-class women being put under a stringent system of segregation based on sex: “A new kind of segregation is imposed on [middle-class] women, whose identity is now determined in opposition to women from lower economic strata. This process is not dissimilar to the one which pushed the middle class woman into the seclusion of the private sphere as a mark of class status and superiority (among other things) in Victorian England” (Sangari and Vaid, 11).

The only women who were excluded from this traditional private sphere, Sangari and Vaid note, were “either relatively independent and literate... or women from the lower strata, courtesans, and prostitutes, i.e. women who have hitherto had greater access to a ‘public’ sphere of street, marketplace, fair and festival” (11). Thus, the lack of differential access to participation in the economy could not have been coded as tradition for women of the working class, in whose case it was customary to participate in the economy.73 The bourgeois notion of tradition, heavily dependent on respectability, did not apply to working-class women. The access to the public constitutes class-specific gendering in their case. By the same token, they are also denied the middle-class respectability that attaches itself to forms of middle class living as an exclusive social privilege.

73 How the working-class women’s labor was (de)valued in the economy is also important here, although a discussion of that would take us too far afield.
I want to emphasize that the courtesans and prostitutes formed an important exception to the middle-class conception of the private that was coded as traditional and respectable. As women whose sexuality could not be managed or policed in the same ways as that of a middle-class woman, they were not respectable. As a result, middle-class women who step beyond the confines of traditional gendering and the private sphere make themselves vulnerable to social censure by aligning themselves with women who historically have been exceptions to the middle-class notion of respectability. For middle-class women who venture out into the public realm, the resulting lack of respectability can occur in two ways: either by being de-classed and relegated to a lower class stratum in which participation in the economy and stepping out into the public sphere for women is not a class taboo, or, by aligning themselves with prostitutes who are said to have a sexual autonomy that is too subversive or immoral.\textsuperscript{74}

\textit{Bhadramahila} and the Predatory Lesbian

In Shruti’s narrative of individuation, the threat of subversive sexual autonomy extends beyond the bounds of heterosexuality. After she moves to Calcutta, and finds accommodation in a students’ hostel for undergraduates, she is forced to confront the farthest possibility of this sexual autonomy in two of her

\textsuperscript{74} I do not mean to suggest that sex workers have complete agency over their body and possess full sexual autonomy. But since their sexuality cannot be managed in the same ways as that of middle-class women, they represent a threat to the notion of “respectability” that distinguishes gendering of middle-class women.
roommates: Debrupa, the seductive lesbian, who entices the pure and beautiful Shreyasi. The first description of Debrupa predictably insists on highlighting the markers of Westernized modernity in her clothes and demeanor:

She was sitting on her bed, leaning on the wall, her legs spread out. Her hair was cut, like boys. You could have called her thin. There was nothing noteworthy in her that could have been called beautiful. She was wearing a khaki-colored skirt and a blue tee-shirt. She was somewhat urban in her clothes and demeanor, yes. But she would not have been noticeable in a crowd. Anyone would have recognized her as another modern girl who thinks short and tight-fitted clothing is *smart.*

The construction of Debrupa as the predatory lesbian figure in the text overdetermines her physical characteristics. She is a stereotypical embodiment of everything that a traditionally beautiful Indian woman is not: too much at ease with her own body (she sits with her legs uncrossed); decidedly unfeminine in her physical attributes (short hair, too thin); and too Western in her choice of clothes and demeanor, which suggests a kind of excessive, urban modernity that is not excusable in a woman. If there is any doubt left regarding Debrupa’s lack of conventional femininity, it is dispelled when she uses a crass colloquialism while referring to another girl in the hostel. Shruti’s consternation at this incident is

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75 In Indian English, “smart” is an adjective more frequently used to describe the neatness of one’s appearance. The word is italicized in the quotation to indicate that Majumdar uses the English word in the text.

76 The term Debrupa uses (*maal* in the Bengali text) can be best rendered in English as “item.” The word *maal* is generally used to mean “commodity.” When the word is used to refer to a person, it
palpable: “She could not have even thought of such language, such intonation. Her eyebrows shot up. Debrupa was unperturbed, her face suffused with an easy enjoyment...she looked like a young boy” (59). The implication is that Debrupa’s speech, like her clothing and demeanor, is more masculine than feminine.

Masculinity in Debrupa functions as a failure to conform to class-specific gendering, to middle-class notions of respectability. As we have seen, historically middle-class men had ready access to the public while middle-class women were confined to the private. Debrupa’s masculine behavior is an indication that she is unduly comfortable in usurping this traditionally male privilege, and hence, cannot be considered respectable.

In contrast, Shreyasi is described as the exact antithesis of Debrupa—beautiful, well-mannered, and feminine. The first time Shruti sees Shreyasi, “[s]he was wearing a pink salwar kameez and walking slowly. Shruti thought that the goddess Saraswati herself was walking in a salwar kameez” (44).\textsuperscript{77} The comparison of Shreyasi to a goddess is not incidental. It is Shreyasi’s effortless and elegant mastery of middle-class femininity that invites such adulation on the part of Shruti. Shreyasi is the embodiment of class-specific notions of respectability that is always beyond Debrupa: while Shreyasi walks slowly with a

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item mostly has a pejorative connotation due to the implied reduction of this person to the status of an object. When used to refer to women, it acquires the added charge of commodification of women as (sexual) objects. Its use connotes a lack of class-specific refinement that is antithetical to the norms of middle-class respectability. Debrupa’s usage of the term comes as a shock to Shruti, who adheres to these norms very closely in her behavior and expects other middle-class women to do the same.
\item Saraswati is the goddess of music and learning in Hinduism. She is also the proverbial standard of traditional feminine beauty.
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feminine gait, Debrupa reportedly drives a scooter; while Shreyasi is naïve and hesitant when a male acquaintance asks her out, Debrupa carefully plans and then seduces a random male acquaintance of her own to make Shreyasi jealous (68-69, 119). It is important for the author to construct Shreyasi as docile, feminine, beautiful, and Debrupa as crass, masculine, plain. In the heterosexist schema of gendering Majumdar forwards, Shreyasi is immediately recognizable as the innocent straight woman while Debrupa becomes the predatory lesbian. This sort of absolute and uncomplicated characterization leaves no doubt as to who should be blamed when a clandestine lesbian relationship develops between Shreyasi and Debrupa.

The relationship between Debrupa and Shreyasi is entirely reported through Shruti’s perspective. Majumdar offers this cautionary tale of lesbian seduction as a fable explicating the dangers of neoliberal individuation for her naïve protagonist. Debrupa’s unapologetic sexual autonomy represents the extreme form of subversive agency women can achieve through neoliberal individuation. This sort of sexual autonomy and freedom are generally associated with men, not women. In this context, her masculinity is a necessary precondition to explain the aggressiveness with which she pursues Shreyasi. For example, when Debrupa comes to know that Shreyasi’s relationship with a male acquaintance is gradually getting serious, she confronts her aggressively. The reader is made a privy to the conversation from Shruti’s point of view.
Debrupa. ... Don’t you feel ashamed? What does he give to you, eh, what does he have to give that you love him so much?

Shreyasi. No one in the world has what he has.

Shruti heard the sound of a slap after this. (77)

This exchange again posits Shreyasi as the innocent straight woman, while Debrupa becomes the aggressive lesbian. The verbal dispute quickly escalates into physical aggression on Debrupa’s part when Shreyasi hints that her relationship with this acquaintance may have become sexual. Her jealousy, possessiveness, zealous pursuit of Shreyasi, and physical aggression all come together to construct Debrupa as the predatory lesbian in the text.

The construction of Debrupa as the predatory lesbian does not mean that the narrative focus is not always on Shruti’s individuation. The reader has no access to any detail of the affair between Debrupa and Shreyasi except through Shruti’s perspective. Long after it has been made clear to the reader that Debrupa and Shreyasi are engaged in a passionate physical relationship, Shruti continues to be willfully oblivious to what is going on. When confronted by a group of older residents at the hostel who forward gossip and hearsay of the affair and ask for Shruti’s confirmation, Shruti’s response is unequivocal: “I still do not think what you are thinking” (132). Shruti’s incredible naïveté about the possibility of same-sex desire is meant to be taken as a typical response to homosexuality by someone thoroughly conditioned by middle-class notions of respectability. It connotes an innocence or lack of sexual knowledge that is coded as “pure,” as
well as gender-appropriate behavior for a respectable \textit{bhadramahila}. However, it also serves to marginalize same-sex desire in the text. The presence of same-sex desire is simultaneously acknowledged and yet erased in the text since it is not recognized by the naïve protagonist. When it becomes impossible for Shruti to ignore the possibility of a same-sex relationship between Debrupa and Shreyasi, her immediate, affective response is unqualified homophobia. This is seen when one of the residents in the hostel comes to warn Shruti about Debrupa after word of the affair gets out: “I’m telling you, she’s \textit{lesbian}. She will \textit{seduce} every one of you. Then you will see whether I was right or not” (85). After looking up the words “seduce” and “lesbian” in the dictionary, Shruti’s reaction is visceral: “\textit{Oh my God! Homosexual, homosexual!} Debrupa is \textit{homosexual!} Shruti knows what \textit{homosexual} means. Shruti despises \textit{homosexual}. Shruti is afraid of \textit{homosexual}” (86).

For Majumdar, Shruti’s \textit{bhadramahila}-like refusal to acknowledge same-sex desire conditions her lack of knowledge of the English words “lesbian” and “seduce.” Majumdar here falls into the same trap that mainstream U.S. film critics did while commenting on Deepa Mehta’s \textit{Fire}. Gayatri Gopinath notes that when the two characters in Deepa Mehta’s \textit{Fire} observe that there is no word in Hindi to adequately describe same-sex desire, it was assumed by the mainstream U.S. reviewers and critics as “proof of the West’s cultural superiority” (142). The source

\footnote{The character uses the two English words “seduce” and “lesbian” while speaking in Bengali.}

\footnote{Words that appear in English in the original text have been italicized.}
of cultural superiority in this instance stems from the ability to articulate same-sex formations in language exactly as they exist in Western sexual epistemology. Absent such linguistic possibility of articulation, it is as if the signified of same-sex formation itself is obliterated from existence. This is an erroneous conclusion, as Gopinath notes, because it suggests that homosexuality becomes intelligible only when it can be incorporated into sexual epistemological categories prevalent in the West (142).

When seen in this light, Shruti’s lack of knowledge of the English words becomes political. Majumdar seems to suggest that for a small-town girl in West Bengal, the only way to understand the meaning of the words “lesbian” and “seduce” may be to look it up in a dictionary—as if a lack of knowledge of words is equivalent to an absolute unfamiliarity with the concepts they denote. The purpose of forwarding this astonishing error as axiomatic truth on the author’s part is not apparent unless we ask ourselves what it allows the author to do. Shruti’s lack of knowledge of the English words “lesbian” and “seduce” and the signifieds they denote allow her to be seen, once again, as the middle-class naïve girl whose process of individuation is not complete. She is still too much the bhadramahila and too little the New Woman. Verifiable knowledge of same-sex desire, the understanding that it is (which is absent in Shruti), needs to be dissociated from the intellectual understanding that it can be (which is present in Shruti but denied). Same-sex desire thus becomes the great unknown that needs to be discovered on the path to (hetero)sexual autonomy for the female
neoliberal subject. It also conveniently allows Shruti to disallow the possibility of same-sex desire between Shreyasi and Debrupa, thereby rendering such desire as marginal. Finally, the homophobic reaction this knowledge of homosexuality evokes in the protagonist then becomes a legitimate aspect of self-actualization. Homosexuality in general—and same-sex desire between women in particular—becomes the great taboo against which the dangers of sexual autonomy offered by the processes of neoliberal individuation for a woman must be measured.

The scene in which Shruti finally discovers the great unknown of same-sex desire among women is described in metaphorical language reminiscent of Kurtz’s journey into the heart of darkness. After she has looked up the terms “lesbian” and “seduce” in the dictionary, Shruti decides to switch on the light late that night:

She switched on the light and as soon as the lights were on, the room exploded. Explosion. Explosion. It was like an eruption of the Vesuvius...Even before she could understand what she was seeing, her memory copied the scene forever. And those who were constructing the scene, the ones who were the great creators of this night, they were so engrossed that they had not noticed the light. Shruti saw two moons, as if they were joined together. And on that spherical moon that was turned
over, a total of ten fingers were playing as if on a mridangam\(^80\) ... Shruti switched off the light and sat down on the floor. (133)

After witnessing Debrupa and Shreyasi having sex that night, Shruti is so traumatized that she does not leave the hostel for three days. Her trauma is described in terms that suggest extreme physical distress: “An insect entered her brain. Her skull erupted in pain” (134). Soon after that night, a meeting is called by the hostel superintendent to address rumors of the affair between Debrupa and Shreyasi. This meeting is attended by everyone in the hostel, representatives from the university, and concerned members from a local women’s group who are worried that this affair has polluted the moral environment of the neighborhood. Shruti still denies the affair, is termed a “voyeur” (another term that she is unfamiliar with, and has to look up in the dictionary), and Debrupa and Shreyasi are condemned publicly for their unnatural tendencies. The meeting, which reads more like an extrajudicial hearing, culminates in mayhem as those present turn violent, and Debrupa and Shreyasi are physically attacked. We learn much later in the second section of the novel that all three were expelled from the hostel following that meeting.

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\(^80\) A mridangam is a percussion instrument often used in classical Indian music.
The Abject Underclass in Need of (M)othering

The first part of the novel ends here. The second and the last part called “Parashruti” begins in Shruti’s own voice. The readers access the action through the pages of Shruti’s journal. It begins with an account of Shruti’s job as a social worker in an NGO that works with street children. The salary is meager, and from the details of Shruti’s remuneration and her expense plan, we learn the exact figure of her disposable income at the end of the month (Rs. 1000 per month, which is a paltry sum). Such exhaustive detail about Shruti’s disposable income leaves us in no doubt as to her class affiliation. She is still in the middle class, but barely so. However, as someone whose job is to help run a “drop-in center” or a place where itinerant or homeless adolescents can drop in any time, she is much more thoroughly established in the public domain than ever before. As part of her job, Shruti is in constant contact with the most vulnerable section of the so-called “underclass.” The children Shruti work with represent the population left behind in celebratory narratives of economic development.

The proponents of the neoliberal shift in 1991 credit deregulation and privatization to be the cornerstones of economic development. This narrative of development generally focuses on the growing middle class, the expansion of the reach and scope of the market, and markers like GDP that indicate the magnitude of the economy as a whole. Mostly absent from this narrative is any account of further impoverishment of those who are already poor, or those who
have been left out from reaping the benefits of the “opening up of the markets” due to historical disadvantages like caste or religion.

The exclusive visibility of the middle class is not incidental, but an ensuing effect of the liberalization of the economy. The opening of the markets not only provided opportunities for the middle class to gain material benefits, but also to use those material benefits in the form of disposable income. They became both the direct beneficiary of liberalization (especially through privatization and expansion of the private sector), and the projected consumer group that this liberalized market then catered to. This process of participating in the economy, as both labor and consumer, raised the visibility of the middle classes, and they became, in Satish Deshpande’s phrase, the new “darling of the national imagination” (qtd. in Srilata 306). This visibility plays a significant role in according normativity to neoliberal logic by two inter-related phenomena: firstly, the new enhanced visibility of the bhadralok tends to perpetuate the myth of individual effort and agency, thereby shoring up neoliberal logic; and simultaneously, it either writes off representations of the underclass that cannot participate in the economy because of historical constraints like caste or religion, constraints that are now solidified through class, or relegates them to fetishistic representations of the criminal poor. The underclass becomes invisible when their narrative of gradual and consistent impoverishment threatens to besmirch the neoliberal logic of individual agency; or they become the class “Other” to the
middle-class tales of achievement that always seem to be a result of individual
initiative and not institutional advantages accrued over time.

Shruti’s work with homeless or itinerant children, the most vulnerable
section of this population, brings her in close contact with this underclass for the
first time in her life. While reading Shruti’s narrative of self-actualization, it is hard
not to be struck by the irony of her situation. An inclusion into this underclass
threatened her at the beginning of the novel. Even when she has a job that
prevents this inclusion into the underclass, she is always in a position to be
reminded of how close she came to being de-classed. Shruti is not only aware of
the crisis she has averted in getting this job, she is also very clear on what
derailed her chances of getting better employment. After a grueling first day at
work, she reflects on her condition, overwhelmed with self-pity:

I have been accustomed to check back my tears for so long. But today, I
was feeling very sorry for myself. Why did God deny me so much?
Couldn’t I have been successful in just one part [of my life]? If only I had
studied well! Why did that incident have to happen to me at the hostel?

(162)

Shruti blames her current condition on the affair of her roommates at the hostel.
It should be noted how the affair, in her re-telling, becomes something that
happened to her. The trauma of exposure to the existence of same-sex desire is
the singular, most important experience in the individuation of the straight
protagonist. As a result, Shruti’s persistent homophobia is justified as a result of
this trauma. When she encounters a group of *hijras* on the train, her first instinct is to look away (201). When she forces herself to look again, she is overcome with the visceral sensation of nausea. Trying to ascertain the cause of this visceral response, she wonders about the non-normative gender performance of *hijras. “Is it their attempt to dress like women that gives rise to such nausea?” (202)

Shruti’s exposure to non-normative sexuality is not limited to homosexuality in adults any more. In her job as a social worker, she is forced to confront the reality that the children she works with are sexually active. The children receive condoms, sex education, and counseling from the NGO, and Shruti has to accept that the children are in crucial need of these services: “It has been really difficult for me to accept that these children have sex lives. Apart from having usual sex lives, the very young a**fuck\(^\text{81}\) each other. A**fuck—I have learned of this term from them. I have learned many possible and impossible swear words...Homosexuality is also prevalent in them” (196). For Shruti, the street children thus become not just the other in terms of class, but also on account of their sexual proclivities that include same-sex desire. Shruti, in contradistinction, becomes not only the one whose *bhadralok* respectability is intact despite the close proximity, but one who becomes even more respectable as the maternal savior figure of these children. As the mother-substitute, she fulfils the conditions of her gendering as a *bhadramahila* to be a benevolent

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\(^{81}\) A note on the translation: Majumdar refrains from using the full word for “ass” in Bengali in its crudest colloquial form. She stops after writing the first syllable of the word, leaving the reader to imagine the word. I have tried to approximate this as closely as possible in my translation.
caregiver. Thus, her individuation has successfully negotiated the treacherous balance between tradition and modernity, retaining the best of both worlds. As Srilata reminds us, “Tradition and Modernity can never have entirely separate forms because they are constantly jostling against and melting into one another. Both have equal claim to the contemporary moment; there is no position outside of modernity” (303). The neoliberal modernity Shruti arrives at is thus best understood as a mix of two ideally pure forms: the absolute traditional respectability, and the thoroughgoing modernity of the New Woman.

**Disavowal of Same-Sex Desire and Erasure of the Lesbian**

It is in this scenario that Debrupa re-enters the narrative. She is hired as a social worker in the same NGO, and immediately, Shruti’s homophobia and other feelings of acrimony regarding the events at the hostel come back. The narrative voice is now very much in Shruti’s control. Debrupa is reported to have hair that is a little longer, to be a little heavier in frame, and dressed in a sari—all indications that she has moved closer to a more traditional gender performance (206). However, despite being a social worker for much longer than Shruti, she is neither better than her at the job, nor more compassionate. She is cruel to the children, prone to discipline them with corporal punishment, so that when she shows any compassion, it becomes an immediate cause for suspicion. While at a field visit, Debrupa picks up a young girl of three or four in her arms, and kisses
her on the cheek. Shruti’s reaction at this physical display of affection is significant: “I thought she had become less of a snob after being at the center [the NGO] for a while. But I felt repulsed the very next instant: what if Debrupa picked up the child in her arms only because the child is a girl? (214). The alacrity with which Shruti’s charitable response toward Debrupa turns into repulsion, to the extent that homosexuality becomes indistinguishable with pedophilia, is a measure of how emphatically the lesbian figure in the text is destined to be the demonized abject.

Debrupa, as it turns out, is still very much the predatory lesbian. Shruti spies her fondling a co-worker at the NGO: “I think I saw Debrupa’s hand playing inside the blouse of Sangeeta. She removed her hands after seeing me. Sangeeta wears a sari, and uses the anchal82 to cover her body. Debrupa gets her hand in underneath the anchal. She hasn’t changed. She hasn’t changed one bit” (218). Debrupa’s re-entry in the narrative after Shruti’s individuation is complete serves the same purpose as the existence of the homeless children: to vaunt the class-specific respectability Shruti has achieved despite having to deal with the subversive threats that almost derailed the process of this attainment. Debrupa the predatory lesbian is necessary so we can understand how Shruti succeeded in her process of self-actualization as the respectable heterosexual woman. Debrupa’s subversive (homo)sexual autonomy is a reminder that however much Shruti has renegotiated the traditional bhadramahila gendering to activate a

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82 The tail end of the sari sometimes used to drape around oneself, as in this instance.
neoliberal subjectivity, at least she has not ended up like Debrupa. Same-sex desire becomes that which needs to be disavowed on the road to a heterosexual neoliberal individuation.

Nonetheless, Debrupa’s re-entry into the text to establish Shruti’s safe passage into a heterosexual neoliberal respectability is not enough. The threat of the predatory lesbian has to be quelled and made to fit into the heteronormative textual organization of desires. This is achieved at the end of the novel when the NGO rescues an effeminate boy (who is teasingly christened Lalita\(^{83}\) by the other children at the center), and Shruti walks in on Debrupa having sex with him:

Debrupa’s sari has gone up her waist. Her legs are spread. Lalita is on her lap, shirtless. His chest is covered with a piece of cloth. Debrupa’s hands are playing on his chest. Their faces are lowered on one side, their lips interlocked. Neither of them are aware. I suddenly thought, “What a wonderful sight! How wonderful!”...they have gone beyond body and nature. Mind has merged into nature. The eternal feminine has merged into the eternal masculine. Biological construction [of the body] has been no impediment here. A man in a woman’s body is wrapped around a woman in a man’s body. Nature has won! (225-6)

This marvelously incredible ending to the novel can be read as a revision of the previous sexual encounter Shruti chances upon in the hostel. The union between a biological male and a biological female re-establishes the heteronormative

\(^{83}\) Lalita is a girl’s name.
paradigm of male-female heterosexual coupling that had been upset by the same-sex encounter. The masculinity of Debrupa and the femininity of Lalita are taken to be an expression of their natural sexual identity as man and woman respectively. If Debrupa is really a man in a woman’s body, and Lalita is a woman in a man’s body, their union is heterosexual, both in actual physical terms and in their sexual object-choice. Both Debrupa and Lalita can then be said to have transcended their gender expressions, and made the correct (heterosexual) object-choice. Sexual object-choice thus trumps gender, resulting in a final irrelevance or transcendence of gender itself. The trauma Shruti sustained from the previous same-sex encounter between two physically female bodies, and the lingering homophobia it consolidates and evokes, are erased in the ecstasy of her witnessing a biologically heterosexual union. The figure of the predatory lesbian is expunged from the text.

If there is any residual non-normativity in the gender expression or performance of this male and female figure engaged in the act of sex, it is quickly explained away as a transcendence of gender itself. This sublimation of gender contains the threat of same-sex desire, lesbian subjectivity and its representation, and any deviation from heteronormativity most efficiently. The specter of homosexuality has served its purpose: it has re-established the normative position of heterosexuality. Majumdar’s text is thus a crucial example of the ways neoliberal ideology has proliferated representations of same-sex desire in
cultural productions in India after 1991, but without any real inclusion of non-heterosexual subjectivities in its homophobic and heteronormative paradigm.
CONCLUSION

When I planned this dissertation, I sought to address the lack of materialist scholarship about same-sex desire in postcolonial India. Since liberalization of the Indian economy is the singular, most important economic shift in recent times, a thorough discussion of the effect of neoliberal logic in changing the discourse about same-sex desire quickly became central to my project. I began by researching the effects of neoliberal logic on queer life in the global North, since scholarship that addressed these effects in the global South was not as common. The structure of the dissertation reflects this gradual shift in gaze from the global North to the global South. In this conclusion, I will trace the steps that led to the results of my inquiry in an effort to clarify the connections between them.

As we have seen, neoliberal logic emphasizes individualism, individual initiative, and personal responsibility. It imagines an individual subject who will uncomplainingly absorb the deleterious effects of dismantling safety nets of a welfare state, all the while understanding these effects as personal failure. This neoliberal subject will not oppose free movement of capital and increased privatization, processes that (to borrow Noam Chomsky’s phrase) put “profit over
people.” Instead, the neoliberal subject will aid and abet these processes by participating in the marketplace as a consumer. What happens when we imagine this neoliberal consumer-subject to be gay? Can we imagine the life of this fictive gay individual who believes earnestly that equality means freedom and the ability to consume just like his/her heterosexual-identified counterparts? It is this specific trajectory to be gay and yet imagine one to be part of the norm—in alliance with the normalized neoliberal logic—that Lisa Duggan calls the new homonormativity.

It might seem that the concept of homonormativity, with its emphasis on a depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption is relevant only when discussing issues regarding same-sex desire in the global North. However, as the homonormative trajectory is part of neoliberal logic, its effects can be observed even in the global South. As Jean Comaroff points out: “Across the world, as nation-states disengage from the regulation of processes of production, the political subject is defined less as a patriotic producer, homo faber, than as a consumer of services; the state, reciprocally, is expected to superintend service-delivery, security, and the conditions of healthy, untrammelled commerce” (199). Comaroff’s description of this new political consumer-subject in the newly liberalized economies of the global South is very similar to the fictive neoliberal subject described above. It is not surprising then,

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84 Chomsky uses the term in *Profit Over People: Neoliberalism and Global Order* (1999).
85 Comaroff’s emphasis.
that the discourses regarding same-sex desire in the global South will be influenced by a homonormative understanding of gay subjectivity.

The first two chapters of this dissertation address the problems of speaking about same-sex desire in the global South, i.e. a culturally “different” location. The neoliberal emphasis on individual freedom and personal responsibility codes the global North as a liberated and liberatory space where queer life is uniquely possible. The discursive ruse in this case conflates the socioeconomic (neoliberal conditions) with the sociocultural (individual freedom) under the sign of neoliberal logic. Since the global North is more liberalized (economically), it also becomes the site for greater personal freedom (socioculturally). Simultaneously, modes of queer life that are more prevalent in the global North are normalized as universal, with the result that same-sex desire and formations in the global South become something to be discovered, studied, and catalogued. I show in the first chapter how this holds true for representing hijras with respect to Ash Kotak’s play Hijra. My argument in that chapter directly follows from the observation that certain specific ways to be gay are becoming normalized in the neoliberal order in the global North, with the result that any instance of same-sex desire or non-heteronormative corporeality becomes legible only when approached through the lens of cultural difference. It is this very cultural difference that is coded as regressive and in need of liberation, with the result that the queer immigrant from the global South to the global North becomes the ideal subject poised to experience liberation from regressive and
homophobic cultural norms. However, as my reading of Neel Mukherjee’s novel *Past Continuous* in the second chapter shows, it is not always possible to mask the structural violence of neoliberal logic that works to make queer life impossible while paying lip-service to discourses of equality and freedom. Since the promise of equality is always contingent on an achievement of the homonormative ideal, the failure to be integrated into that ideal exposes the structural violence of the neoliberal regime against all other modes of queer life.

In the last two chapters, I examine what happens when this uncritically accepted homonormative ideal is taken to be the norm in the global South. In my reading of the popular Hindi film *Dostana* (Friendship), I show how an emphasis on practices of conspicuous consumption accompanies a representation of same-sex desire. The representations themselves are part of a complex structure of legibility and erasure such that the text sustains the possibility of disavowing any validation of same-sex desire as legitimate. In addition, by carefully associating same-sex desire with consumption, the film promotes the homonormative ideal. This association highlights one of the most important questions I had in mind while writing the dissertation: who is most likely to benefit from this constant association of same-sex desire with neoliberal logic? If neoliberal logic carefully promotes assimilation into the homonormative trajectory that proves to be unreachable for many, what happens to those who cannot access it but want to?
The last chapter was an attempt to answer these questions by examining the representation of same-sex desire in women in Tilottama Majumdar’s *Chander Gaye Chand* (Moon on Moon). The choice of a text that depicts same-sex desire among women was conscious on my part. As scholars of globalization like Saskia Sassen have noted, “households and whole communities are increasingly dependent on women for their survival” under the neoliberal socioeconomic order (506). The increased privatization, corporate tax breaks, and dismantling of social welfare programs under the neoliberal regime redistribute the costs of corporate profit maximization to the most vulnerable sections of the population. As part of this vulnerable section, women suffer more than men due to an increase in illegal trafficking, prostitution, and labor migration. The labor of women becomes pivotal in the illicit shadow economy that sustains sections of the population made vulnerable by neoliberal logic. Sassen calls this phenomenon the “feminization of survival” (506). Lisa Duggan corroborates this analysis when she notes that “women’s unpaid labor absorbs the lion’s share of the burden” that helps sustain the neoliberal order (65). I was interested to see how neoliberal narratives of personal responsibility and initiative affect the representation of same-sex desire in women in this context. My reading of Majumdar’s novel thus relies on gender as much as sexuality to ascertain the effect of neoliberal logic on the representation of lesbians. My analysis shows how construction of the neoliberal consumer-subject sometimes depends on imposing a limit to the freedoms accessible under the neoliberal regime. In
Majumdar’s text, the figure of the lesbian acts as this limit, an abject against which an acceptable heteronormative neoliberal consumer-subject is inaugurated.

If the pre-eminence of neoliberal logic seems unimpeachable from my analysis, this should not be taken as a cause for pessimistic resignation in the face of insurmountable odds. It is not possible to forward easily formulated answers to indicate counter-discursive moves against this neoliberal hegemony. However, an important part of hegemonic discourse is that it makes itself appear as the axiomatic norm. Its capacity to remain the invisible norm is part of the reason why it is so difficult to counter. As such, a thorough discussion of its workings may indeed be the best way to start the process of dismantling such hegemonic normativity. For example, it may start discussions about elitist occlusions of disadvantaged groups in activist work.

That such awareness is already being formed can be seen in Naisargi Dave’s recent book *Queer Activism in India*. While talking about the Bombay-based lesbian collective Sakhi, Dave notes that the group’s self-description underlines the fact that it is comprised of urban, upper- and middle-class women who are well-educated and independent (55). However, it is completely another matter how this self-awareness, once achieved, is utilized. While conducting field work for her ethnography *With Respect to Sex* in Hyderabad, Gayatri Reddy talks of the stringent class divide between hijras and self-identified gay men. While the group of hijras she studies live in temporary tenements under a water tank, the
self-identified gay men are marked by their “upper-class enactments of same-sex desire,” and are wealthier, more educated, and often English-speaking (64-65). In the course of her study, Reddy observes that a medical clinic established by a London-based gay activist for all non-heterosexual people caters to hijras only on Sundays, in order to maintain an appearance of respectability; it keeps its doors open for gay men, meanwhile, all days of the week (220). This outrageous instance of class apartheid comes back to haunt the reader towards the end of the book, when Reddy reveals that some of the participants from the group of hijras that she studied two years ago had died after contracting AIDS by the time she returned to the field in 2000. In the face of such very real consequences, perhaps more awareness of how neoliberal logic regulates discourses of same-sex desire will be helpful in creating models of coalition-based activist work that sustains queer life in all its forms. In the face of such very real consequences, perhaps more awareness of how neoliberal logic regulates discourses of same-sex desire will be helpful in creating models of coalition-based activist work that sustains queer life in all its forms. Simultaneously, at the academic level, more scholarship that address the lack of materialist studies regarding issues of same-sex desire in India would pave the way for a more nuanced understanding of what can be done to counter neoliberal hegemony.
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