Silences on Hindu lesbian subjectivity

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This paper attempts to identify the roots of the perception and status of female same-sex re-lationships in contemporary Hindu India. After analyzing the development of Vedic and yogic mythologies, I compare the contingent valuation of sexual identity that exists within the ancient Hindu framework with the imported political and moral normativity of imperial Britain. This pa-per analyses the contribution of British colonialism to shaping the understanding of 'India' as a meaningful entity, of the concept of the 'Indian woman,' and thereby of 'Hindu lesbian.' Section 377 of the Indian Penal code, which established the criminal nature of sodomy in 1861 and is still in effect today, illustrates the colonial framing of public language, law and politics in India. The brief revocation of this Section between July 2009 and December 2013 reveals some strat-egies of 20th century Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual (LGB) movements, but also the inadequacies of these LGB movements' re-conceptualization of Hindu pre-colonial narratives. I contend that if heterosexuality dominates in Hindu Indian society today as the norm, there seems to be no such thing as 'traditional Hindu heteronormativity.' I apply the general argument of this paper through a critique of Deepa Mehta's film Fire (1995). While the film attempts to tackle the issue of female same-sex love in Hindu India, it also reveals how diasporic discourses on homosexual subjectivity actually narrow the possibilities for investigation into the plurality of histories of Hindu Indian women who love women, and consistently restrict political and linguistic options for re-thinking homosexuality in India beyond neo-colonial or nationalist constraints.

KEY WORDS   Indian politics, Hinduism, same-sex relationships

Extensive research has been undertaken on women's rights and movements, their perspectives for empowerment, and the forms of leadership they can access in modern Indian society (for instance, Agnihotri and Mazumdar 1995; Spary 2007). This means that there has often been a focus on women's conditions on political, symbolic, and structural levels in the family and the public realm, often within the framework of identity politics, and in an India often conceived of as a univocal and heteronormative society. Therefore, the emotional and affective dimensions of this topic have sometimes been excluded from political and socio-cultural analysis. Indeed, fewer researchers have turned to issues of desire and love. This has undermined the debate around same-sex relationships. This paper looks into the foundations of the silence surrounding female

homosexuality in Hindu Indian society even as scholars, the press. and governmental action show that the issue of homosexuality is somehow being addressed. As the aim is to find alternative methodologies of analysis to understand where and why this silence reigns, the notion of subjectivity should be problematized from the outset. Subjectivity as a phenomenon is essentially constructed and in construction because it is a negotiation of positionalities through structural and agentic processes (Butler 2006:197). The subject-object dichotomy established in early modern Western philosophy prevents an analysis of that interpenetration in the articulation of the subject because it posits the pre-existence of the 'I' (Butler 2006:196), which facilitates an "epistemology" of identity rather than an investigation into the "signifying practices" of subjectivity (Butler 2006:197). This paper adopts the latter conception of the gendered self, in order to investigate the genealogy of the normalization of female homosexuality in India and to understand how and for which reasons certain forms of female desire and sexuality are being silenced.

Although the term 'lesbian' may seem inappropriate in a Hindu context because it is an English word characterizing an identity, this paper will use that term insofar as it is written in English. The aim of the general argument is to resist the use of Western signs and try to avoid a language of identity politics adopted by a number of researchers studying India. However, Ruth Vanita makes a sensible point when she writes that if we were to be perfectly clear with significations, "the only honest strategy would be to write about historical texts entirely in their own language" (Vanita 2002:5), which few people would be able to do in the cases of Sanskrit and Urdu. 'Sexuality' will be used in the sense of the sexualized intentions and attitudes that subjects can have or adopt, in which the biological sex or genitalia (regardless of its category) is a central locus of pleasure, but which also refer to emotional and erotic attraction to another or one's own body. However, the term will be used in a Foucauldian sense, that is, as a discursive strategy (Foucault 1990), in the analysis of the formation of colonial discourses. Throughout the paper, references to sexuality and economies of desire will have descriptive value, and thus no claim to truth.

In this paper I argue that in spite of existing investigations into the genealogy of the articulation of sexuality and its relationship to love, it is still crucial to develop the idea that Hindu lesbian subjectivity cannot be advocated as an identity in the Western, Euro-American liberal sense, inasmuch as Hinduism can rather be said to engender contingent subjectivities. Indeed, this can reveal an alternative framing of the term 'lesbian', as will be discussed in the next section. Politicians, legislators, and scholars often search for a monolithic norm of either acceptance, tolerance, or rejection of female homosexuality in order to dispel all doubts about its place in Hindu Indian society. The multidimensional nature of Hinduism is not acknowledged and the militant arguments made in support of it, in spite of their otherwise pertinent and efficient dimensions, somehow fail to take root as a result.

First of all, an analogy between women and lesbians can be made in the Hindu Indian context, because of the extent to which the experiences of women in both the private and public realms can be lesbian women's experiences. This paper will therefore focus on cisgender women and lesbians. I look into how femininity and female homosexuality were articulated, first in ancient and pre-colonial Hindu symbolism and mythological narratives, and then in colonial and anti-colonial discourses. The case of the revocation of Section 377

of the Indian Penal Code is used as a synthesizing illustration. Based on that background, the strategies of contemporary LGB and specifically lesbian movements in India are analysed and some of their ambiguities are addressed. Finally, I integrate this reflexion in a critique of Deepa Mehta's film *Fire* (1995). The importance of this film lays not only in its choice of subject matter, that is, love between two sister-in-laws, but also in the radical reactions to its theatrical release in India (Bachmann 2002:234; Patel 2002:226). This work is in this sense useful in order to contextualize and evaluate a diasporic Indian's rendition of the theme of female same-sex relationships in Hindu India, and to understand the power and limitations of such an account for the recognition of female same-sex love in India on its own terms.

Lesbians = Women?

Monique Wittig argues that the deployments of sexuality inform and constitute "our concepts, our laws, our institutions, our history, our cultures" and impregnate the self (1992:XII). If sex and gender determine social positionality, then it is important to ask the question: is 'lesbian' more readily identifiable with 'woman' or does 'lesbian' form a distinct "category of sex" (Wittig 1992:25)? Being a lesbian means to refuse the "role" and the discourse determining this role, that is, in Butlerian terms, refusing to signify and embody the "practices of signification" ascribed by the ideology that articulates sexuality (Butler 2006:196). In other words, lesbian subjectivity is attained beyond the label of 'woman' through an escape from the heteronormative system (Wittig 1992:19).

In spite of this (Western feminist) theoretical agenda, in practical terms, Hindu women who come to realize that they desire same-sex relationships are first and foremost subject to the same pressures and contained by the same restrictions to their agency as heterosexual women are, as India, like other modern nation-states, relies on a dichotomic notion of gender based on sex. So, it is crucial to understand how the idea of womanhood is articulated in order to identify the conditions under which female individuals who desire other female individuals negotiate their sexual identity. Situating Hindu lesbians' experiences within the context of women's subordination and gender roles in the India of the era of the *Hindutva*, the Hindu political Right, allows some insight into how sexuality has been normalized and is deployed.

As Mahdu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita (1987) show, traditional Hindu marriage rules still apply to many women, without regard for their sexual 'orientation' and desires in general; caste and class violence targets first and foremost women, especially *dalit* (Untouchable) and lower-class women, and family violence is still significant. While women's movements have succeeded in overcoming "ideological differences" to achieve strategic aims in a spirit of "unity in action" (Agnihotri and Mazumdar 1995:1876), they have gained power and slowly changed women's conditions. Yet, overall, women's movements have rejected lesbians and the idea of homosexuality for "'strategic' purposes" (Butler 2006:6). First, their anti-colonial stance led them to reject what they saw as 'white feminism' in emerging lesbian groups (Dave 2010:599). Adding to this ideological scission, women's movements also fought for legitimacy in Indian society and political institutions through a discourse of national and local interests (Dave 2010:598), which dismissed female homosexuality as a second-order or even inexistent concern. So, the

biological connection between 'woman' and 'lesbian' must be acknowledged at the practical level, even if 'lesbians' as a militant category seem to bear independent significance, as will be studied below, and confirm Wittig's conception of sex/sexuality as inherently political.

The Vedic woman, the yoga, and sexual multiplicity

Hindu mythology is not to be regarded only as the domain of legends and fictional narratives, because that myriad of texts constitutes a primary basis on which collective life is conceptualized in pre-modern Hindu societies. A parallel can be made between the role of narratives about and representations of Greek mythological figures in Ancient Greece and foundational Sanskrit myths in the Indian sub-continent. The *Illiad* and the *Odyssey* on the one hand, and the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* on the other hand, provide not only aesthetic and poetic norms, but also some frameworks for justifying social and political structures through half historical, half mythical stories of warfare between competing kingdoms, or a hero's destiny. By analogy with the foundational role of Homeric texts, such Sanskrit narratives may be considered to provide essential discursive tools in Hindu thought, and so some key concepts should be understood in order to think about the articulation of sexuality in Hinduism.

The mythology of Vishnu, one of the gods most central to Hindu mythology, introduces the idea of "the wheel of reincarnation" (Zimmer 1951:18). All beings are caught in a perpetual circle of birth and rebirth, and their condition is always-already transitional. This notion is supported by the concept of 'universe' itself: the word *jagat* is formed from the root *gam-* that means 'to go' or 'to move'; so *jagat* signifies "what is moving, the transitional, the ever-changing." (Zimmer 1951:30). The symbol of the wheel and the idea of *jagat* are mirrored in the way mythological/historical narratives evolve, as their orality or enigmatic nature blurs the definition of authenticity and truth, thereby implying the production of multiple significations.

Another central concept is that of *mâyâ*. While it literally means 'art' in the sense of 'what is made,' *mâyâ* is a creative force, but it also means the artificial, and thereby, it is an equally deceptive power (Zimmer 1951:32). Gods are associated with *mâyâ* because they have the capacity to adopt different shapes; but it is crucially associated with woman. In the Vedic myth, Indra (the king of gods) convinces the earth and women to share the guilt of a crime he committed, and as lovers, women accept; their punishment is to bleed each month as a reminder of their impurity. So women represent *mâyâ* as symbols of ambiguity, that is, of both love and corruption (Angot 2003:10). Besides, in the dichotomy between 'what is real' –fixed and reliable– and 'what is unreal' –deceptive and illusory– the latter is *mâyâ*, that is, feminine, while the former is masculine (Zimmer 1951:31). A mingling of the two is necessary for creation; if only the deceptive is in movement, and the constant is sterile, then only the uncertain is fertile (Angot 2003:25). Therefore, there is an imperative of love and more specifically erotic intercourse for creation to happen. After the times of the Veda, Hinduism became more influenced by the ideas of the yoga, which gradually gained more influence until the Mughal invasion (that is, the arrival of Islam) of the sub-continent (Angot 2003:18). This is important because the yoga adopted a monist discourse of renunciation, solitary meditation, and drying out of the source of carnal desire (Angot

2003:13), rather than one of duality, ambiguity, and complementarity that implies creation. It was thus associated with a rather misogynistic stance.

It should not be negated that heterosexuality is a norm of Hindu tradition, as Hindu social structure is inherently partiarchal. For instance, various stories circulate that teach the key moral features women should relate to. These are described as sacrifice, modesty and maternity in Parikh and Garg's analysis (1987). This image coincides with the myth of Sita's trial. When Rama comes back to her after a long period of absence, Sita promises that she remained faithful, but he wants to test the truth of her words and asks that she stand amidst a fire. The flames will not hurt her if she is pure. Sita accepts and walks courageously through the fire, without being harmed. Rama nevertheless sends her to exile. This conception of woman as the unreliable facilitates their "bio-social exploitation" as objects in the household, and contributes to their (pre)social status (Parikh and Garg 1987:23). While these selected Hindu narratives seldom show women performing agency (Parikh and Garg 1987:62), it appears that Hinduism is inherently misogynistic, and that consequently there could not possibly be active intercourse without the presence of at least one penis. It is important to note that male homosexuality is traditionally more present in Hindu narratives and practices, for instance through the hijra community of biological males and eunuchs who abandon their male gender to perform in religious ceremonies and, especially in present-day India, who are associated with homosexual prostitution (Nanda 1986:49).

Nevertheless, as mentioned above, the form of Hindu narration implies that "myths and symbols of India resist intellectualization and reduction to fixed significations" (Zimmer 1951:46). Although Parikh and Garg focus on mythological texts which converge towards the idea of woman as the subordinate and the invisible, the polymorphy of Hindu signifying practices reveals that one could also find alternative signs. A variety of words have been found in Sanskrit texts to designate female same-sex love, such as *swayamvara sakhi,* which literally means "self-chosen female friend" (Vanita 2002:2). Sculpture, which is a central mode of representation in Hindu temples (Angot 2003:24), is used to symbolize homosexuality, with solitary and collective masturbation scenes, for example in the temples of Khajuraho and Konarek (Ratti 1993:13). Yet, particular instances do not suffice to establish a rule (Vanita 2002:3) and it seems more pertinent to acknowledge the contingency of interpretations within the broad framework of Hinduism. Ruth Vanita points to the fact that it is difficult to access historical and straightforward reference to female homosexuality, which, it is worth mentioning, forces a researcher to look into mythological material, but also emphasizes the role of interpretation, as opposed to explanation. She analyses how three versions of the same myth lead to different visions of female same-sex love and intercourse. In that myth, after the king dies, the god *Kama* (Love) intervenes in the queen and another royal woman's relation for the purpose of engendering a legitimate descendence. Two versions highlight the sense of necessity determining the intercourse (Vanita 2011:121). Also, they stress the malformity of the child engendered, which echoes the idea developed in medieval medical texts that the alliance of feminine fluids lacks the essential 'bony' part given by the male (Vanita 2011:125). Importantly, *mâyâ* is often expressed as water, the fluid and contradictory element (Zimmer 1951:41), so the alliance of two sexes whose secretions are similar to water seems to reinforce the idea of female impurity. However, the myth shows the existence of female desire through the use of the same symbolism of water, which

echoes notions of orgasm and "female ejaculation" that are addressed in the same medical texts (Vanita 2011:126). In the third version of the myth, the presence of *Kama* and the idea of water as a purifying force reinforce the sacrality of the act; the two women's sexes are described as lotuses, watery plants, which links femininity to purity (Vanita 2011:128). Several narratives in Hindu mythology mention the honour associated with having two mothers (Vanita 2011:127), which confirms the profound duality of femininity.

In Hindu mythology, perpetual creation creates an imperative of love that is, even though it 'only' regards gods and upper-caste humans (*brahmins*), realized through variable encounters, which are often but not always heterosexual. Besides, gods change sex, bear different names, evolve through time (within narratives), and change their meaning; in Vedic texts, they are nomadic, which adds to the fungibility of their being (Angot 2003:24). Thus, the omnipresence of desire and of the sexualized body defines gods' subjectivity. More importantly, desire is the central component of sexuality, which contrasts with the articulation of sexuality as a necessary subject of scrutiny and regulation and 'the sex' as taboo yet omnipresent in post-seventeenth century Christian discourses (Foucault 1990:58, 83). When putting aside the trend commenced by the yoga, the clitoris is recognized as a locus of desire and it is less regulated than worshipped as a potential creative force. There is not so much a possibility for the hysterization of female bodies from 'sex', but rather from what is then ascribed to the female sex in the social realm. As highlighted by Parikh and Garg, the notion of duty makes up a criterion for normality, and it can be argued that it is from this notion of duty rather than from the discourse of sex that Hindu women are denied desire and sexual affirmation.

The crucial point is that, while Hindu heteronormativity exists, it cannot be conflated with Western/Victorian heteronormativity, as Hindu femininity and homosexuality adopt a plurality of ambivalent and contradicting significations. If "homosexuality is as native to the Indian subcontinent as heterosexuality and cannot be dismissed as a Western import" (Ratti 1993:13), it seems that the emergence of the belief that Hinduism is essentially and univocally heteronormative and has historical roots that can be traced while looking into the era of colonization. Most importantly, while the *Hindutva* now holds that particular belief, this historical analysis undermines its claim to 'true Indian-ness.'

Hindu praxis, Victorian penetration, and the development of political rule

India is an inherently problematic idea as a name for a political entity. Its unity is controversial because it is essentially a hybrid space and a diverse whole (Manor 1990:21–22), as seen through the lens of Hindu mythology. The colonial creation of the 'Indian' political unit makes its reality "recent" (Angot 2003:2). Indeed, from the middle of the 19th century (although economic colonization had already begun in the 1750s) to 1947, the British authority administered the subcontinent as a monolithic whole, establishing a centralized bureaucracy (Corbridge 2000:5), which the Mughal authority had not tried to establish. The patterns of social belonging were mobile in the subcontinent's pre-colonial state. The internal dynamics and hierarchization of castes, families (jati), and cults evolved, as there was constant warfare between rival states, tribes, or dynasties, and as the nature of *bakhti* and *sufist* sects blurred the dichotomy between Islam and Hinduism proper (Corbridge 2000:7). Political processes and juridical verdicts also took different shapes that the British colonizer did not take into account.

For instance, in North India, political debate and trials in the village councils (*panchayats*) were circular deliberations aiming at a "compromise" that would respect the opponents' caste status and the history of disputes between the two *jatis* (Cohn 1959:90).

The form of such process is inherently in contradiction with the British form of rule. A premise of British justice is that all individuals are equal before the law. But the organization of societies in North India generally accepted the caste hierarchies and thereby acknowledged the fundamental inequality between individuals. Moreover, "the law" was not a single text or univocal list of morals, which rendered deliberations slow and contingent upon the content of conversation (Cohn 1959:83). Such system thus appears to resist liberal and (representative) democratic mechanisms that rely on clear conceptual categorization of subjects. The Victorian administration however used the "blunt categories of caste and religion" (Corbridge 2000:8) without taking into account the more complex pre-colonial fragmentation of society.

While two centuries of progressively indirect control triggered an accommodation of British forms of rule, one can also notice the liberal heritage in the nationalist resistance movement. For instance, the text of the India Constitution written in 1950 is very close to Western constitutions in that it emphasizes "Fundamental Rights" (Part III), and especially citizens' equality before the law (Part III, art. 14). The nature of Hindu parliamentary democracy thus testifies of actual and discursive British power. This is significant for an analysis of the legal and linguistic framing of sexual law, as conceptions of 'woman' and thus in a sense, of 'lesbian', would be permeated by the conceptual categories deployed under British rule.

'Indian woman' and 'Indian lesbians'

Not only is 'India' a historical and strategic construction, but 'woman' is also a concept whose use has evolved, especially during the 19th century. The identity of women in India is a part of this general framework of politics and culture. One can argue that the category of 'Indian woman' was primarily articulated as a discourse 'from above' as it echoes this pattern of compromise and adaptation of British concepts. The internalization (Narrain 2004:149) as well as strategic use of norms by individuals and groups facilitated the penetration of Victorian values. Similarly, the term 'Indian' or 'Hindu lesbianism' appears to be fundamentally ambiguous because of its constituting units of meaning. Not only is 'lesbian' a Western term and one that may erase Hindu multiplicity, but the idea of the 'Indian woman' or 'Hindu woman' is equally problematic. The articulation of a valid and functional concept of 'Indian woman' is inherently historical, and so it renders the search for a notion of lesbian subjectivity dependent on such methodology and on the meaning of 'woman' in language, law, religion, and the public sphere.

First of all, the colonial authority shaped the understanding of gender and the proper realization of sexuality through legislation. The most relevant example of that is Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. The motion indicated: "penetration is sufficient to constitute the carnal intercourse necessary to the offense described in this section" (Indian Penal Code 1860:XVI, 377). The idea of "the order of nature" (Indian Penal Code 1860:XVI, 377) not only justified the normalization of appropriate intercourse but also echoes Michel Foucault's analysis of the practice of regulation of sexuality and of the disciplining role of legislature in the "era of biopower" (1990:140). Discursive negotiation is apparent here through the fact

that only penetration is mentioned as an offense in Section 377; it is told that the Queen was so outraged by the very possibility of there being female-to-female desire and relationships that she refused the explicit reference to female homosexuality in the law. Such colonial deployments thus imply the erasure of female desire even in the domain of perversion. It is worth noticing that the work done at the level of concepts and language is mirrored by the policy of actual *destruction* of statues representing sexual intercourse in temples that facilitated the *production* of an alternative discourse on homosexuality (Shah 1993:120).

Besides, English and Anglo-Indian feminists wrote about the state of the colonized territory and the conditions of women there in the 19th and first half of the 20th century. In *Mother India* (1927), Katherine Mayo blames Hindu culture for the troubles of Indian society and the banality of violence against women and discards the Indian nationalist project (Sinha 2008:453). Martineau's *British Rule in India* (1857) critically analyzes aspects of governance in India under colonial authority through a feminist lens (Ray 2000:52). Both texts shape a particular identity of woman in an ambiguous way. British Rule in India is essentially a "textual production" of India (Ray 2000:54), because it constitutes a source of knowledge about India for the *British public in Great Britain.* Importantly, such narrative creates the third world woman as a victim of violent traditions. The hyperbolic emphasis on sati, the rule that says that a widow should burn on the pyre with her husband, makes the Hindu woman subordinate to a certain Western feminist emancipatory force (Ray 2000:54). This reveals that even though the author adopts an apparently anti-imperialist discourse through a feminist critique, imperialism and Western feminism are complicitous in disseminating Western hegemony (Ray 2000:50), which implies the inconsistency of Western feminism as deployed in colonial narratives. The denunciation of sati alienates Hindu men and may in a sense attract Hindu women, but imperialism and feminism merged in creating racial and national hierarchies in gender practices that alienated Hindu women. What is important to my argument is that "the problem of locating 'Indian womanhood'" in the colonial context essentially resides in that the experience of gender is inseparable from class, national, racial, and caste "positionalities" (Sinha 2008:453).

It can be viewed as either paradoxical or perfectly logical that Hindu nationalist women reproduced that rhetoric for their own purposes. Nationalist women mobilized the idea of 'woman' as an embodiment of the nation's value, in continuum with Western feminists, in order to justify the homogeneity and political validity of the Hindu community (Ray 2000:126). The category of 'lesbian' appears on the one hand to depend on this recuperation and intertwining of colonial and anti-imperialist strategies, all whilst being essentially alien to the construction of the 'nation-as-woman.' In addition, the self-determination of 'woman' *by women* illustrates that feminine subjectivity is not only imposed on female subjects but also formulated by them (Sinha 2008:454), which reinforces the exclusion of lesbian individuals.

Illustration: Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code

In July 2009, Section 377 in the Indian Penal Code, which criminalized homosexual intercourse, was revoked. It was subsequently reintroduced in December 2013 by the Supreme Court of India, which prompted visible protest especially from the part of human rights

activists (Sathyanarayana Rao and Jacob 2014:1). However, one may focus on the active effort of activist groups and NGOs in India to revoke the Section in 2009.

Section 377 illustrates the discourse of 'the sex' and the saturation of society with sexual normalization in the context of colonial legal deployments, which Michel Foucault identifies in their European forms but does not extend to colonial phenomena in the *History of Sexuality* (1990). Indeed, Foucault rather relies on the dimension of *ars erotica* of mythological India/Asia. Although this constitutes a subject for a whole different discussion, it is worth mentioning that the case of Section 377 allows an investigation into the specific colonial ramifications of the Victorian politics of sexuality that Foucault criticizes.

One should therefore look at Section 377 as a synthesizing revelator of the interplay of Hindu and British legislation. In the extract cited above from the section, sexual intercourse is normalized within the virtuous framework of procreation, as opposed to "carnal intercourse" which can be defined as sexual activity for pleasure or another non-functional purpose. However, as penetration is central in the explanation of the criminality of homosexuality, female same-sex intercourse is dismissed as an object of legislation, therefore implying the secondary status of female sexuality and subjectivity as a reality as well as a political issue. This clause thus dismissed both sexual pleasure as motivation for intercourse and a woman's capacity for pleasure and agency in general, which justifies in a sense the perverse "hysterization of women's bodies" as the unknown and thus the uncontrollable (Foucault 1990:104). Section 377 suppressed the possibility for female same-sex love and intercourse through that semiotic framing.

In the struggle that preceded and triggered its revocation, which had started in the 1990s, a convergence of feminist organizations, LGB associations, and other (often transnational) NGOs was observed, as a rallying discourse of rights and human dignity was adopted (Misra 2009:20). Even if they also appealed to a sense of traditional "inclusiveness" (Misra 2009:24) inherent to Indian society, this change also exemplifies the trend of modernization à la Western that dominates Indian politics. Of course, the revocation is significant as a sign of progress for lesbian as well as gay individuals, especially with regards to access to institutions such as health and social services. It succeeded in making sexuality a political issue and constitutional matter. Indeed, the term "sexual citizenship" was coined so as to represent the idea that sexual orientation was now a politicized concept (Misra 2009:27).

Besides, the revocation also represented a victory for identity politics. While it has been shown in what sense 'identity' can be said to be problematic within a Hindu framework of thought, the case of Section 377 confirms that contemporary public policy, all whilst progressive, may also hinder genuine reflexion on female same-sex subjectivity in Hindu terms. Indeed, policies undermine a discussion of it that acknowledges the mobility and fungibility of concepts within that religious, mythological, and cultural framework. In that sense, such legal change might only scratch the surface of the problem insofar as the general notion Hindu lesbian subjectivity is left untouched. Indeed, a certain social malaise persists with regards to lesbian sexuality, as the dominance of patriarchy continues to hinder a feminist struggle in general, and also, because such de-penalization fails to problematize the place of female homosexuality in Indian society (Bhaskaran 2002:26). More importantly, it showed that a liberal discourse of minority rights and identity politics was 'the only way' to legally advance the cause of 'gay' and 'lesbian' people.

Lesbian movements: for which 'lesbians'?

Yet, in modern India, it would be erroneous to say that 'lesbians', or female individuals who love other female individuals, do not find ways to express themselves and get support in their own terms. LGB press has been developing since the 1970s, opening the debate around the existence of a specific Indian or South Asian lesbian subjectivity (Dave 2010:597). However, the discourses deployed by the majority of the main movements undermine the possibility for a subtle answer all whilst attempting to recover a heritage denied during colonization.

First, these journals and publications rarely use a language other than English, which is problematic, even though it seems a historical inevitability and a necessity for pan-Indian communication. The semiotic order implied by the English language conditions what can be thought about sexuality; that is, those journals, while using either the word 'lesbian' or paraphrasing its meaning, depend on a "Structural Unconscious" (Wittig 1992:22) that is impregnated with the discursive frameworks that are proper to that language. Although Indian individuals have appropriated the English language, which became part of contemporary Indian cultures, the use of English conditions the production of knowledge about South Asian phenomena in semantic and conceptual ways. This is not to assert linguistic relativism, but rather to highlight and problematize the use of language in attempts to post-colonial self-determination.

Moreover, the majority of movements and support networks are based in New Delhi or Bombay, when they are not international networks: historically, the major specifically lesbian journal for Indian women was the London-based *Shakti*. Other important journals are *Khush* ("happy", or "extatic pleasure" in Urdu and Hindi) and *Trikone* (referring to the triangle used to identify gays and lesbians), based in Toronto and San Jose respectively. More important is the fact that many queer theorists and scholars who study the politics of sex in South Asia or India are diasporic queer individuals. For instance, Rakesh Ratti purports to enhance the power of self-determination of South Asian gays and lesbians while increasing their visibility, in *A Lotus of Another Color: An Unfolding of the South Asian Gay and Lesbian Experience* which he edited in 1993. Yet this book's contribution depends on the fact that the author was brought up in California and now lives and works in Atlanta. This does not mean that he fails to present the reflection of individuals and scholars who speak from the perspective of grassroots movements or autobiographically. Rather, his being in touch with a global notion of homosexuality shows that it is his standpoint that enables him to conceive of the generalization "gays and lesbians in South Asia". While he criticizes the relative absence of concern for South Asian LGB community in the US as a group which has "a different life experience, different societal and familial influences, and different needs" and deplores that South Asian gays and lesbians "stand with one foot in the South Asian society, the other in the GL world" (Ratti 1993:14), he limits homosexualities in South Asia to a singular, univocal concept reducible to Hindu homosexuality, but also, as Jasbir Puar points out in her critique of *Lotus,* he ignores the odd combination of a discourse of grassroots recovery of history and a collection of 'coming out' stories—that is an essentially European and North American feature of gay and lesbian experience (Puar 1998:414).

Furthermore, lesbian networks within India fail in a sense to represent Indian lesbians beyond class/caste divisions. Naisargi Dave points to the exigency of politicization

(2010:606) that the redactors of LGB magazines formulate or imply implicitly in their selection of letters from individuals before publication. The search for individual pleasure is not considered a legitimate form of lesbian expression, neither is it a legitimate ground for participation in lesbian movements, as letters in which lesbians express the desire to meet other lesbians in their state or region are considered inappropriate (Dave 2010:608). Moreover, Indian LGB movements' founders and theorists have chosen to tackle issues of assertion within a human rights and liberal discourse to achieve representation in what is now 'modernizing' India all whilst intending to address the genealogy of the normalization of homosexuality. The rural–urban imbalance that exists between levels of education and globalization reveals a certain inadequacy of these movements in effectively representing the voices of Hindu Indians, as a form of South Asian "homonormativity" (Puar 2007:2) seems to emerge in response to hegemonic North American norms, at the expense of the plurality of South Asian 'identities.' The importance of the rural population of India highlights that progresses made in the urban, cosmopolitan sphere do not make up homogeneous change at the national level. Rural populations are most of the time unaware or rather kept ignorant of movements (Kishwar and Vanita 1985:70). Therefore, not only do law amendments, like abolishing the criminalization of homosexuality, not make up for social change, but also conceptual agendas may not directly trigger univocal and unanimous awakening of consciousness either.

What seems to emerge is a sense of vacuity, as the two forms of politicization of sexuality analyzed here both fall short of addressing the strategic silence on certain assemblages of desire, especially female same-sex relationships, primarily due to a lack of political(ly articulated) commitment to a critical re-evaluation of the premises of LGB discourses. In other words, female same-sex love as it is signified in practice within the framework of a global LGB rhetoric may actually narrow the possibilities for investigation into the plurality of histories of South Asian/Indian women who love women, but also consistently restrict political and linguistic options while imagining homosexuality in India beyond neo-colonial and nationalist semiotic frameworks.

The Politics of Fire

Deepa Mehta's film *Fire* (1995) can be considered as an exemplary illustration of these discursive and political issues with the framing of female same-sex relationships in the Hindu Indian context. While it attempts to tackle the issue of female same-sex love in Hindu India through the love story between Sita and Radha, the two main female characters, the film also sparked fierce social and cultural debate at the time of its release. In this sense, both the content and context of *Fire* highlight the argument made above.

The scene takes place in the house of Ashok, a middle-class Hindu who owns a video rental store as well as a food business. He is pious and spends an important part of his time at the temple where he listens to the advice of his yogic master Swamji. Ashok's brother Jatin works in the video rental store, and has established an underground trade of porn videos. He is in love with Julie, an Indo-Chinese hairdresser who is reluctant to marry and become a "baby-making machine," as Jatin says. Mundu, the lower caste servant, helps with the housekeeping and sometimes take care of Biji, Jatin's grandmother. She cannot speak nor walk but she agitates a bell to express her discontent or needs. Radha is

Ashok's wife; she helps Ashok in the shop and cares after Biji. When the film begins, Jatin has agreed to marry Sita, a young Hindu woman. Sita is welcomed in Ashok's house but she quickly realizes that her marriage makes her unhappy. The relation between Sita and Radha gains in intimacy, as Jatin is cheating on Sita and as we learn that Rahda is infertile, which motivated Ashok in his quest for the ideal state of the yoga, that is, to deny her sexual desire and resist emotional and physical contact. The two women question their condition and status in the home, under Biji's often disgusted looks. Once they stage a parody of a pop music hit and Sita wears Jatin's clothes to play a male part. One night, Ashok surprises the two sisters-in-law lying together, pleasuring themselves. Sita wants to leave with Radha, who, although hesitant, goes to Ashok and explains her true desires. While Ashok and Rahda fight, her sari catches fire. In the last scene, Sita and Radha meet under a pouring rain in front of a temple, ready to start a new life together.

Fire came out in 1996 in India, before the decriminalization of homosexuality in India. It was screened in major Indian cities without necessitating preliminary censorship. It was the first film of the trilogy *Elements* realized by Toronto-based Indian director Deepa Mehta. Each movie in the trilogy is filmed in English and focuses on an Indian dilemma; *Fire* addresses the issue of gender. As a "node of incitement" (Patel 2002:227), *Fire* was put to trial for both its apparent perversion of "morality" and its problematic "cultural validity," even though the name 'Sita' was changed to 'Neeta' before the release of the film in India, in order to anticipate protest (Kapur 2000:54–55). Protests were organized against as well as in support of the film, by groups with rival or divergent interests (Bachmann 2002:234), but importantly, right-wing opposition to screening of the film was most violent, with, for instance in 1998 in Calcutta, members of the Shiv Sena (a Hindu political party adhering to an ideology of extremist nationalism) attempting to prevent the film from being shown (Patel 2002:226). The *Hindutva* indeed perceived the depiction of the relation between the two sisters-in-law as unnatural and "alien" to Hindu culture (Narrain 2004:158), which clearly echoes the discourse on homosexuality deployed by the Victorian administration in Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code and illustrates the paradoxical continuum observed above. Moreover, the fact that the director is a diasporic Indian reinforced their argument that what is lesbian is Western.

However, that the debates incited by *Fire* did not only develop in India but were also "transnational" (Patel 2002:229) is also significant, as it reminds one of the fact that female homosexuality is problematically linked to the phenomenon of queer diaspora. Voices in Indian diasporic public expressed their indignation with the 'improper' representation of Hindu masculinity in the film (Patel 2002:223); Jatin is indeed pictured as weak and subordinate, as he remains silent while a Chinese director insults him and the entirety of the Indian people in the restaurant scene (John and Niranjana 1999:581). This emphasizes Mehta's attempt to show how caste/class, nationality, and sexuality intertwine. For instance, when Radha is absent, the servant, Mundu, replaces Biji's vhs of the Ramayana with porn videos in front of which he masturbates; when he is discovered he complains that he is denied desires and intimacy, and that nobody seems to care about what he feels. Crucially, Julie represents liberated sexuality outside the Hindu household. She is independent and she is able to create her own persona for her acting career.

The director thus presents highly sexualized characters all whilst depicting the Hindu family as a rigid and empty structure that erases sexuality as desire to replace it with

sexuality as procreation. This can be reframed with the yogic interpretation of morality, and Askok's pursuit of purity as abstinence also supports a reading of the character as a yogin. In that sense, it is crucial to situate Mehta's work not only within the framework of the lesbian taboo, but also to conceive it as a feminist enterprise (Bachmann 2002:237; Kapur 2000:61). Feminist scholars such as Mahdu Kishwar, who have refused labelling the film as such, are interestingly those who have attempted to reaffirm 'Indian womanhood' as inherently opposed to homosexuality (Bachmann 2002:239).

Indeed, *Fire* rather criticizes Hindu 'tradition'. Sita mentions it as a "button", which if pressed, makes her respond "like a trained monkey." The subtext of transgression is omnipresent in the characters' behaviour. Sita transvestites herself twice, first alone in Jati's room, then with Radha in their musical parody, which breaks from the mythical Sita is sacrificing and devoted. Radha is infertile, which automatically deprives her of her claim to traditional femininity as motherhood. In a sense, Radha and Sita would illustrate Wittig's point explained above; as they debunk the requirements of femininity, they distinguish themselves from the label of 'women.' When Radha comes back, after being discovered with Sita, to tell Ashok what she feels, he shouts to her half angry, half panicked: "what kind of wife have you become? What kind of woman are you?" Ashok seems to validate this interpretation.

However, the film conveys in a more explicit way the impass Radha and Sita are in (John and Niranjana 1999). While Sita tells Radha: "There's no word in our language for what we are, what we feel for each other," Mehta grants the Hindu nationalists' point that lesbians need Western referents in order to exist as such. While it has been shown that this is not the case, for names for 'lesbian' exist, and that female homosexuality did exist as a possibility in Hindu myths that did not contradict the majority of heterosexuality, the director appears to suppress historical material that would actually support a postcolonial self-determination argument (Vanita 2002:6). She thereby seems unquestioning of the Victorian roots of the present-day mainstream discourse on (female) homosexuality. Her treatment of the Ramayana also reveals that her commitment to changing discourses is deceptive. She makes an explicit parallel between a certain view of Hinduism and Christianism while she puts a line from the Bible in the mouth of the yogin (Ashok): "What I saw in the bedroom is *a sin in the eyes of god and men*" (Vanita 2002:3, emphasis added). On the one hand, this conflation forgets about Vedic Hinduism, which indirectly annihilates the possibility for the idea of desiring femininity and thus for the existence of female homosexual desire within Hinduism. On the other hand, Hinduism is pictured as a univocally dogmatic religion, which it can be, as shown above, yet not necessarily. Mehta inserts the *Ramayana* four times in *Fire*; twice through Biji's VHS which is watched by Biji and Mundu, then by the whole family as a repentance from Mundu's 'sin', and once in live theatre at Ashok's temple. Mehta decided to show only the episode of Sita's sacrifice, which gives a sense of insistence on the only idea that the female subject is oppressed in that text, but such use of the epic also makes it *the* scripture of Hinduism. In that sense, Mehta actually "mirrors" (John and Niranjana 1999:581) the mainstream use of Hinduism as a "fossil culture" (Shah 1993:119), unquestioning the operations of colonial discourses and apparently failing to acknowledge the plurality of Hinduism.

Nevertheless, this critique does not completely address Mehta's treatment of 'the West.' Sita expresses the rejection of the strategy of coming out; Radha says: "Seeing is better."

As a possible reference to the diasporic literature on homosexuality, this line still allows arguing that Mehta is conscious of the downsides of globalization. Her uncompromising criticism of pornography as a corrupting force (John and Niranjana 1999:583) is done through the persona of Jatin, who stands out visually as an ambassador of the West through his clothing and ambitions.

All in all, the controversy *around* the film clearly exposes the need for going back in history, and re-reading the scriptures as a plural discourse of "imbrica[ted]" significations (Bachmann 2002:242). The interpretations of the film's message and of its depiction of 'Hinduness' diverge, as analysts' and protestors' aims and vision of Hindu culture are inherently or strategically different. One might also argue that Mehta expresses that need *within* her film; that she offers to re-interpret the classical myths, as it is not Sita but Radha's sari that catches fire, and as on the day of the fast, Radha sacrifices her glass of water for Sita, who should be the sacrificing figure. Mehta destabilizes the notion of culture as univocal and unchanging (Kapur 2000:62), which has generated reflection around Hindu female homosexuality already, as revealed by the amount of literature produced on the subject in the last decade. I argue that it is still essential, in order to trigger a deeper rethinking of Hindu possibilities.

Conclusion

While re-examining the discourses deployed by colonial and post-colonial agents I have attempted to shed light on the particular nature of Hindu narratives and rhetoric. Liberal discourses on rights and the inclusion of minorities create, in spite of their positive aspects, "an artificial set of questions about the knowability and recoverability of (the) Other" (Butler 2006:197). Understanding the 'subject' as a construction in evolution through changing "signifying practices" (Butler 2006:197) seems to coincide better with a Hindu notion of the individual as part and whole of a movement-universe (*jagat*). If heterosexuality dominates in Hindu Indian society as a norm today, an alternative reading of some foundational religious and mythical texts reveals the misleading character of 'traditional Hindu heteronormativity.' In such a reading, there is no way to infer that Hinduism or Hindu Indian society is traditionally heteronomative. The impact of colonization explains the roots of norms upheld by the Hindu political right and the rigidity of kinship structures, yet there is no dichotomic opposition between Hindu narratives and Victorian discourses, which would be to over simplify the multiple conflicts and overlaps between race, nationality, class, caste, and sex that reappear in contemporary lesbian movements.

I argue that thinking about female homosexuality in Hindu terms might require academic rhetorical. and conceptual tools to go beyond the problem of identity, but also a critical reading of language as well as the ways in which we are willing to think about queerness and subjectivity within our own academic spheres. On a more practical level, it is difficult to convincingly show that efforts made by South Asian females who love females and scholars to live their lesbian subjectivity in Hindu terms cannot be rewarding, as such provocative elements as *Fire* trigger a new invocation of history as well as a potentially post-colonial re-thinking of concepts and practices.

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