**Introduction**

We could not see without inventing what we saw.... we had to try because the alternative wasn't blankness—it only meant that if we didn’t try ourselves, we would never be free of other peoples inventions.

—Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*

Every thought... senses itself to be from the very beginning a rejoinder in an unfinished dialogue. Such thought is not impelled towards a well-rounded, finalized, systematically monologic whole. It lives a tense life on the borders of someone else’s consciousness.

—Mikhail Bakhtin

Ever since I have been female, as far back as I can remember I have also been feminist.¹ And “growing up” has meant, at different stages, fathoming the form of the carrot and the stick in a gender-differentiated patriarchal social order that itself is far from fixed or homogeneous. At the time of registering for the PhD Programme at CLE, JNU, I had through literature and criticism, grappled more or less doggedly with the “sticky” side of things, with notions of power, justice, success, rights, and arrived, albeit inchoately, at a conception of desire. That is to say, unsatisfied with the returns of my lopsided focus, I was moved to consider, also, the “carrot” part of the equation. This thesis is the issue of that shift in perspective. In its composition, it is an amalgamation of three broad sets of concerns—those that mull on the relation of desire and women; those that mull on the nature of desire; and those that mull on the character and function of literary representation.² As it happens, each of these concerns crystallises from a brew of many questions.

The perplexities consolidating the first set of interests, for instance, pertain to questions such as, who desires women? How are women desired? Indeed, are women desired? What makes women desirable? What makes certain

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¹ To say this is not to posit any necessary correspondence. Neither is it to posit an unchanging condition. How I use the terms female and feminist will become clearer some way into this Introduction and dissertation.

² What it studiously forgets to mull on, of course, is the institutional carrot that is an academic degree, in this case, a PhD, for those who look to make their bread, if not butter, from higher education.
tendencies/qualities desirable in one woman but not in another? Why is the manifestation of certain desires countenanced in some women but not in others? Then again, do women desire? If so, what do women desire? How do women desire? Why do women desire? Must women desire? And so on.

Those that constellate the second set of concerns wonder, among other things, about the nature of desire: are desires purely instinctual, pre-social, i.e., uninscribed by socio-cultural and economic imperatives, and ahistorical? Are desires simply expressions of psycho-biological needs or are they cultivable/fashionable? How do desires square with the discourse of “rights?” Are subjective desires identical with an individual’s interests? If not, what role does desire have to play in eliciting consent to hegemonic systems and structures of socialisation? Are women’s desires susceptible to complete social engineering, for example, by patriarchal cultures? Is there something called collective desire/social desire? If so, how does this impact upon an individual’s desires? Are they mutually exclusive? If not, what is the nature of the interaction between them? What is the relationship between a subject’s desires and agency? Is the expression/fulfilment of desires always indicative of agentic subjectivity or can desires, at times, compromise/conflict with self-conscious empowerment? Are the enactments of desire descriptions of power? Or does desire afford a counter to the prescriptions of power? In other words, what is the nature of the transaction between power and desire?

Finally, the third grouping comprises a cluster of queries regarding issues of representation. What is the nature of literary representation? What are its contexts and what relation does it bear to them? What is its epistemic value? What, and how, does it mean? Is the language in which it is inscribed simply mimetic and transparent? Is exact representation, perfect translation between different orders of re/cognition possible? Or is it complexly productive and multivalent because intrinsically opaque? If literary representation is not “authentic,” if it, and linguistic representation in general, is inevitably at second remove from reality, is
there any way out of this nominalism? Any way of expressing, communicating, understanding, that is, following Lacan, unmediated by the "defiles of the signifier?" Put differently, is language always and inescapably representational yet unreal? Or is there commonly available, and availed, a non-representational language? If language is self-referential, and hence non- and/or anti-representational, how do we understand linguistic representations, literature? Is linguistic representation as literature an anomaly, an aberration, a lie, or another order of truth? Additionally how does the understanding of the nature of literature impinge upon the role of literary criticism and interpretation?

While my thesis does not undertake to answer any of these questions very directly or systematically, I value and offer them here as preliminary probings that have helped clarify my thoughts and organise my field of inquiry; that have given my work a broad framework within which to find shape, in other words.

II

Proposing to use "desire" as a heuristic aid for any scholarly study in the present decade and century, of course, means inevitably to confront the spectre of historical belatedness. Bluntly put, the scope for original theorisation is slight. The term, or what it today can be made to stand for, has been so long and variously explored (even when just taking the Western cultures and traditions of thought, more specifically, those that are available in the English language, into account) that more likely as not, somebody, somewhere has already said your piece. What follows is my specific version of the critical conceit, which makes persistence seem justifiable in the face of overwhelming evidence for its obsolescence: the belief that while originality may be out of reach, a new inflection may yet be possible and productive. It tracks a somewhat circuitous, experimentalist route to conceptual and methodological resolution.

\[3\] For a capsule course on some of the more notable of Western philosophical conceptualisations of desire, refer to Hugh J. Silverman's *Philosophy & Desire*. The editor's Introduction also offers a helpful plotting of the track of desire on "the Continent" down the ages.
My first sustained encounter with the word as an analytical category was as it appeared in the universe and symbology of Freudian and Lacanian Psychoanalysis. If the OED is consulted, desire means, among other things, "an unsatisfied longing or craving," "an expression of this," "sexual appetite, lust." Etymologically, it is given that the word derives from the Latin desiderare or desiderate in archaic English, which meant, "feel to be missing; regret the absence of; wish to have." Clearly, desire as the experience of a certain lack, then, is neither a new nor an uncommon thought, at least in the English language.\(^4\) The discourse of Psychoanalysis is both substantially premised on such an understanding of desire, and, has in no mean measure consolidated its currency in modern vocabularies. Indeed, in the Lacanian inspired revisions of Freudian verities, this orientation emerges quite as the idée fixe.

As the very name suggests, Psychoanalysis, is centrally concerned with the study of psychic distemper. But, the self and subjectivity whose disease it analyses is not the Descartean cogito, fully self-conscious, stable and in control. Rather what it discovers is an ego—in harness, and "driven" by an inscrutable unconscious.\(^5\) That is to say, the conscious self, in Psychoanalytical parlance, is constitutively

\(^4\) Dictionaries, after all, do standardise word meanings and, in so doing, come to reflect as much as resolve standard usages.

\(^5\) This, of course, is a reversal of the analogy Freud offers in his The Ego and the Id. There the ego is actually likened to a rider and the id to the horse that must be ridden. In the way things play out, however, in the Psychoanalytic frame, it often seems the opposite is the case. Hence my misprision. With regard to the conceptualisation of the ego, Elizabeth Grosz states there are two versions available in Freud. She calls the horse-riding version Freud’s “realist ego”—“an agency which intervenes in the conflict between anti-social, endogenous, sexual impulses or wishes, which originate in the id, and the demands of reality, which impinge on the organism from the outside…. It is an agency serving two masters” (Jacques Lacan, 25). The other conception of ego found in Freud, she calls the “narcissistic ego”—“a storehouse of libido, a kind of psychic repository or dam where libido can be stored from its various sources throughout the body in the anticipation of finding appropriate objects in which it could be invested…. On this model, the ego has no direct relation to reality and no privileged access to the data of perception. Its primary relations are libidinal, based on pleasure rather than the dictates of reality. It is not an entity, agency or psychical content, for the ego is constituted by relations with others” (Jacques Lacan 29).
partial, unsettled and out of control. And “desire” is the name given to its compulsive and ceaseless search for self-sufficiency. The genesis of this desire, thus, is inextricably tied up with the same originary moment in which the ego-self comes into being: the moment of “primary repression,” the moment of primordial splitting, the moment of definitive lack. What’s more, the desire is thereafter considered necessarily and entirely coeval with the existence of this self. It is, broadly speaking, in these terms I understand the Lacanian contentions, that: 

...the unconscious is ‘discours de l’Autre’ (discourse of the Other).... (Ecrits 345)

... man’s desire is the désir de l’Autre (the desire of the Other).... (Ecrits 345)

... the state of nescience in which man remains in relation to his desire is not so much a nescience of what he demands ... as a nescience as to where he desires. (Ecrits 345; emphasis added)

... desire is neither the appetite for satisfaction, nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second, the phenomenon of their splitting (Spaltung). (Ecrits 318)

In other words, the self is always-already Other; it is marked by a radical non-coincidence of being; and desire is both caused by, and experienced as, this lack (of self-adequacy). As such desire is, by definition, also incapable of ever being really sated, except in the eventuality of its own dissolution. And how does this bear on the understanding and organisation of gender relations?

In a nutshell, much of Freudian and Lacanian Psychoanalysis is conceptually phallocentric. If the discovery of the lack of the penis in the little girl is the

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6 While Freud states, “The ego is no longer master of its own house” (as ctd. in Grosz, Jacques Lacan 13), and “Where id was, there Ego shall be” (as ctd. in Simms 53), Lacan famously parodies the Descartean dictum, with his, “I think where I am not, therefore I am where I do not think” (Ecrits 183).

7 The self is driven by the fantasy of a united self. Of course, this moment is in the prehistory of the self and union is a myth. So, for all practical purposes this is an insatiable desire and a necessary condition, at that. For, as Kaja Silverman explaining both the Freudian and Lacanian contentions notes, “If ... we have no choice but to go forward, this is not merely because the backward path is blocked [Freud]. It is, in addition, because there is nothing to return to—because no primally lost object awaits us [Lacan]” (World Spectators 16).

8 “Desire must always be satisfied, insofar as it can be satisfied, by symbolic substitutes for that which it can never possess [i.e., the Other]” (Vincent Crapanzano as paraphrased in Hawthorn, A Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory 72).
critical moment of gendered self-recognition/self-resolution for children in Freud, then, for Lacan, the phallus is the privileged signifier of the Symbolic order of language governed by the Name of the Father. I do not wish to cavil here about whether this bias is prescriptive or descriptive. Either way what you have is human psychic development being measured by a phallic yardstick: one according to which the theme of the story is the threat of castration in male psychic development and the fact of castration and resultant penisneid in female psychic development. Freud’s comment, “one gets an impression that a man’s love and a woman’s are a phase apart psychologically” (“Femininity” as ctd. in Gallop 22),

9 Freud notoriously reads the little girl as a “little man” with her “atrophied penis,” while Lacan reads women as “not all.”

10 According to Juliet Mitchell, for instance, Freudian Psychoanalysis is not a rationalisation of a system but clarification of it. To quote her, “Freudian theory offered an explanation of how the sexes constructed and lived themselves differently. The premise was the differential effects of the Oedipus and castration complexes. This is not a theory of why one group is dominant over another; it is a theory about how that dominance is lived at the lowest, most generalized, common denominator” (“Psychoanalysis and Feminism at the Millennium” 13). Quite apart from the fact that I am extremely suspicious of the claims of “pure” description, tout court, I am not convinced here with Mitchell’s characterisation of Freudian pronouncements, in particular. To me, the discourse she so defends seems to be a symptomatic reading of patriarchal sexual organisation that even as it describes phallocentrism, practices, confirms and also normalises, if not naturalises, the same. Indeed, how it could avoid prescription when simultaneously it also sought to “cure,” quite defeats me.

11 Luce Irigaray offers a useful exposé of this phenomenon in Psychoanalytic discourse. She believes that: ‘penis envy’ must above all be interpreted as a symptomatic index—laid down as a law of the economy of woman’s sexuality—of the pregnancy of the desire for the same, whose guarantee, and transcendental signifier or signified, will be the phallus. The Phallus. If it were not so, why not also analyze the ‘envy’ for the vagina? Or the uterus? Or the vulva? Etc. The desire felt by each pole of sexual difference ‘to have something like it too’? The resentment at being faulty, lacking with respect to a heterogene, to an other? The ‘disadvantage’ mother nature puts you to by providing only one sex organ? All of this would require, entail, demand an other sex, a different sex—a sex that shared in the same while remaining different—for sexual pleasure to be possible. But … in Freud, sexual pleasure boils down to being plus or minus one sex organ: the penis. And sexual ‘otherness’ comes down to ‘not having it.’ Thus, woman’s lack of penis and her envy of the penis ensure the function of the negative, serve as representative of the negative, in what could be called a phallocentric—or phallotropic—dialectic. (“Another ‘Cause’—Castration,” Feminisms 434)

12 According to Jane Gallop in Civilization and Its Discontents, “[h]e writes that when the need for genital satisfaction was no longer periodic as it is in other mammals, ‘the male acquired a motive for keeping the female … near him; while the female, who did not want to be separated from her helpless young, was obliged, in their interests, to remain with the stronger male.’ The man wants
only underscores the fundamentally asymmetrical nature of gender/ed experiences that is decreed by this phallocratic dispensation. As for Lacan, it is true he insists that the penis is not to be confused with the phallus. To quote Cora Kaplan:

In Lacan, the phallus ... is the "missing" signifier to which both sexes must reconcile their relationship. Full entry into the Symbolic does not depend on having or not having a penis, but on the symbolic interpretation a child places on its absence or presence in him/herself and in the two powerful figures of the mother and the father. ("Language and Gender" 61-62)

But his redoubtable protestations notwithstanding, it cannot be denied that "... if we accept the phallus as a privileged signification (a meaning which does relate to something outside itself)[13] ... we see that the little girl's access to the Symbolic, that is to language as the embodiment of cultural law, is always negative, or more neutrally, eccentric" (Kaplan 62) because "[i]n order for women to identify finally with their mothers and take their place as female in culture they must accept the missing phallus as a permanent loss in themselves" (Kaplan 61-62; emphasis added).14

... to be with his woman; the woman stays 'for the sake of the children.' This is not a balanced, symmetrical dual relation, but one of three parties. The child is to the woman what the woman is to the man. The reciprocity is skewed. A few years after writing Civilization and its Discontents Freud will say: 'How often it happens ... that it is only his son who obtains what he himself aspired to: one gets an impression that a man's love and a woman's are a phase apart psychologically'" (23-24).

13 Indeed, Lacan's own explanation for taking the phallus to be the privileged signifier of the Symbolic order belie both his scopophilic sexism as also his expostulations against identifying the penis with the phallus. To quote him, "It can be said that this signifier is chosen because it is the most tangible element in the real of sexual copulation, and also the most symbolic in the literal (typographical) sense of the term, since it is the equivalent there to the (logical) copula. It might also be said that, by virtue of its turgidity, it is the image of the vital flow as it is transmitted in generation..." (Ecrits 318-19).

14 Or as Jane Gallop puts it, in Lacan's paradigm,

The phallus is both the (dis)proportion between the sexes, and the (dis)proportion between any sexed being by virtue of being sexed (having parts, being partial) and human totality. So the man is "castrated" by not being total, just as the woman is "castrated" by not being a man. Whatever relation of lack man feels, lack of wholeness, lack in/of being, is projected onto woman's lack of phallus, lack of maleness. Woman is then the figuration of phallic "lack"; she is a hole. By these mean and extreme phallic proportions, the whole is to man as woman is to the hole. (Gallop 22)

"The Signification of the Phallus" (Ecrits 311-22) offers an account of "being" and "having" the Phallus that is the Lacanian resolution of feminine and masculine positionality within the Symbolic order governed by the patriarchal law. Refer to Judith Butler's Gender Trouble for a feminist gloss of the same, especially pp. 49-73.
Obviously female subjectivity charts a wayward track in such Psychoanalytic roadmaps of the ego-self. The feminine, understood as one pole of a binary sex-gender system, can only ever be Other than a phallomorphic identity-ideal. The identification, between the feminine, the semiotic, the imaginary, the unconscious,\(^{15}\) on the one hand, and the masculine, symbolic, conscious orders, on the other, then, only seems a logical next-step.\(^ {16}\) But, of course, once this glissement occurs, any positive conceptualisation of the feminine becomes an absurdity. Feminine desire, feminine speech, alike become a contradiction in terms. They become pathological.\(^ {17}\) And what translates this already negative location of femininity into an ever-present and schismatic condition of women's lives is the further, all too common, and perhaps inevitable, slippage between the cultural-linguistic feminine/masculine, and the biological—"natural"—female/male. In this elision, women become the bearers of the significant burdens of femininity. As such, female speech, female desire, becomes acutely problematic. Indeed they are hysterisised.\(^ {18}\) And women are constrained to play out their lives either as acquiescent catoptric d/mummies\(^ {19}\) or as aberrant dysfunctional ventriloquists.\(^ {20}\) Thus, these phallic theorisations conceive a compounded identity crisis in the lives of women since female subjectivity can only come to be/become

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15 All of these terms share in the inability to be positively asserted in their own right in the Symbolic order of language/culture.

16 An equation, which, because of its pandemic use (implicit or explicit), by theorists and critics alike, has achieved an almost axiomatic status in present-day philosophical discourse.

17 For instance, thus, Juliet Mitchell opines, "I do not believe there is such a thing as female writing, a 'woman's voice.' There is the hysteric's voice which is the woman's masculine language (one has to speak 'masculinely' in a phallocentric world) talking about feminine experience" ("Femininity, Narrative and Psychoanalysis" 427).

18 Juliet Mitchell understands hysteria to be "the woman's simultaneous acceptance and refusal of the organization of sexuality under patriarchal capitalism. It is simultaneously what a woman can do both to be feminine and to refuse femininity, within patriarchal discourse" ("Femininity, Narrative and Psychoanalysis" 427).

19 As Simon Patrick Walter notes, when the Freudian Othering of women "because she lacks a penis ... is translated into the structure of signification in Lacanian linguistics, Woman finds herself deprived of meaningful articulation. Her relationship to representation becomes passive, and she must content herself with a mimetic designation as mere mirror, reflecting the activity of male subjectivity" ("Situating Irigaray" 115).

20 The other option, of course, is to be stark raving mad.
as Other (masculine/symbolic/conscious).\textsuperscript{21} Of course, the situation would not have been so utterly hopeless but for the fact that Psychoanalysis also implicitly assumes the halo of universality for its tendentious pronouncements. It postures as the elucidation of absolute, immutable, and natural (or in the Lacanian order, cultural) laws, thereby effectively foreclosing the potential for any substantial intervention in its psycho-structural schematic.\textsuperscript{22}

Luckily, if Western traditions of thought are emphatic about identifying desire with lack,\textsuperscript{23} then they are hardly timorous about equating desire with power.\textsuperscript{24} That is to say, instead of expressing want, a condition of impoverishment and powerlessness, desire is understood to be potent, to be fundamentally, abundantly, continuously and multiply productive.\textsuperscript{25} This idea, arguably, finds its most famous, lucid, and one might add, ludic, expression in Anti-Oedipus, that

\textsuperscript{21} As Christine Battersby notes, “for Lacan, there is no speaking or viewing position which is that of woman. Indeed, in so far as women speak or gaze—or, rather, can linguistically (and hence conceptually) register vision—they are positioned as masculinized. ‘Woman’ and the ‘feminine’ do not exist, except in so far as they act as the necessary limit to the oedipalized self. Women can speak; but they cannot speak (consciously) from the position of woman.... ‘Woman’ and the ‘feminine’ are associated with that which is repressed.... Explicitly in Lacan ... ‘woman’ falls outside the horizons of the ‘I,’ and instead stands alongside the object against which the (masculinized) self is constructed as self...”(87-88).

\textsuperscript{22} Freud is infamous for his “anatomy is destiny” edict and though Lacan is not so barefaced in his declarations, his formulations are equally efficient at foreclosing real change. For Lacan, language speaks the subject, and the unconscious is both in charge and definitionally inscrutable. It is also unavailable for conscious manipulation. Thus any chance of exercising autonomous agency (perforce limited to the Symbolic order) is always-already an impossibility since the Symbolic is “driven” by the “discourse of the Other.”

\textsuperscript{23} From Plato to Hegel, Freud, Sartre and Lacan, for instance.

\textsuperscript{24} From Schopenhauer, Spinoza, Nietzsche and Deleuze, etc. Needless to say, these lines of descent are far from neat and unchanging. Rather, they are contingent upon the terms of particular theorisations that seek to delineate them. Thus, against my rendering of desire in terms of lack and power where Hegel and Freud appear on the same side, Hugh J. Silverman believes “Freud (sex) and Hegel (power): With respect to the question of desire, twentieth-century continental philosophy has been preoccupied with two alternative formulations—desire as sex and desire as power” (Philosophy & Desire 1). Then again, as Prof. Udaya Kumar pointed out on reading an earlier version of this bit, it is possible to read Freud as a partial legatee of Nietzsche’s pronouncements against Christian morality and Enlightenment pieties.

\textsuperscript{25} In Michel Foucault’s telling, “power ... produces positive effects at the level of desire ...” (Power/Knowledge 59).
signature tome of revolutionary schizoanalysis by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari offered as a specific counter to the psychoanalytic codifications of desire.

According to *Anti-Oedipus*:

Desire does not lack anything... Desire and its object are one and the same thing: the machine, as a machine of a machine. Desire is a machine, and the object of desire is another machine connected to it... The objective being of desire is the Real in and of itself... Desire is not bolstered by needs, but rather the contrary; needs are derived from desire,... Lack is a countereffect of desire,... Lack (manque) is created, planned, and organized in and through social production,... The truth of the matter is that *social production is purely and simply desiring-production itself under determinate conditions*. We maintain that the social field is immediately invested by desire, that it is the historically determined product of desire, and that libido has no need of any mediation or sublimation, any psychic operation, any transformation, in order to invade and invest the productive forces and the relations of production. *There is only desire and the social, and nothing else*. [As for its methodology, d]esire constantly couples continuous flows and partial objects that are by nature fragmentary and fragmented. Desire causes the current to flow, itself flows in turn, and breaks the flows... (26-29, 5)

That is to say, desire is all. It is the life force: non-human and a flow that invades and invests every reality. Its prime motive is copular, not acquisitive, that is, it works by way of couplings and connections. And instead of being power-repressed, it is power-expressed. As Claire Colebrook explains it, this is because “[d]esire begins from connection; life strives to preserve and enhance itself and does so by connecting with other desires. These connections and productions eventually form social wholes; when bodies connect with other bodies to enhance their power they eventually form communities or societies. Power is, therefore, not the repression of desire but the expansion of desire” (91).

At the same time, Deleuze and Guattari, as well as other thinkers, also claim that “anti-Oedipal” schizoanalysis forges a radical politics of desire: one that is intrinsically disruptive of the institutionalised occupations of power. 27 For

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26 To quote the text, “A machine may be defined as a *system of interruptions* or breaks (*coupures*). These breaks should in no way be considered as a separation from reality; rather they operate along lines that vary according to whatever aspect of them we are considering,... In a word every machine functions as a break in the flow in relation to the machine to which it is connected, but at the same time is also a flow itself, or the production of a flow, in relation to the machine connected to it. This is the law of the production of production” (*Anti-Oedipus* 36).

27 Schizoanalysis is the practice Deleuze and Guattari posit against disciplinary Psychoanalysis: whereas the latter is fixated upon the Oedipal “daddy-mommy-me” triangle (*Anti-Oedipus* 23), the
instance, according to Foucault, "Anti-Oedipus is an *Introduction to the Non-Fascist Life*... [one that teaches] Do not demand of politics that it restore the 'rights' of the individual, as philosophy has defined them. The individual is a product of power. What is needed is to 'de-individualize' by means of multiplication and displacement, diverse combinations. The group must not be the organic bond uniting hierarchized individuals, but a constant generator of de-individualization" (*Anti-Oedipus* xiii-xiv). Similarly for Mark Seem, "Against the Oedipal and oedipalized territorialities (Family, Church, School, Nation, Party), and especially the territoriality of the individual, *Anti-Oedipus* seeks to discover the 'de-territorialized' flow of desire, the flows that have not been reduced to the Oedipal codes and the neuroticized territorialities, the *desiring-machines* that escape such codes as *lines of escape* leading elsewhere" (xvii). So what does all this rendering of desire radically nomadic, non-human, anti-egoic/anti-oedipal, revolutionary, etc., amount to in the negotiation of gender relations understood as an exercise and etching of power?

If Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's opinions are anything to go by, then, not much. In her benchmark essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak glosses this delineation of desire thus: "An undifferentiated desire is the agent, and power slips in to create the effects of desire..." (68-69). She calls it "the new hegemony of desire" (69) and faults it for "not alter[ing] the specificity of the desiring

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former assiduously believes, "to each its own sexes" (*Anti-Oedipus* 296). The way they tell it, "The great discovery of psychoanalysis was that of the production of desire, of the production of the unconscious. But once Oedipus entered the picture, this discovery was soon buried beneath a new brand of idealism: a classical theatre was substituted for the unconscious as a factory; representation was substituted for the units of production of the unconscious; and an unconscious that was capable of nothing but expressing itself—in myth, tragedy, dreams—was substituted for the productive unconscious" (*Anti-Oedipus* 24). The task of schizoanalysis in such a scenario consists, among other things, in "destroying beliefs and representations, theatrical scenes" (*Anti-Oedipus* 314). In *A Thousand Plateaus*, while introducing the rhizomatic model of con/figuration, they return to this difference saying, Psychoanalysis "subjects the unconscious to arborescent structures, hierarchical graphs, recapitulatory memories, central organs, the phallus, the phallus-tree—not only its theory but also in its practice of calculation and treatment. Psychoanalysis cannot change its method in this regard: it bases its own dictatorial power upon a dictatorial conception of the unconscious. Psychoanalysis's margin of maneuverability is therefore very limited. Schizoanalysis, on the other hand, treats the unconscious as an acentred system, in other words, as a machinic network of finite automata (a rhizome), and thus arrives at an entirely different state of the unconscious" (17-18).
subject (or leftover subject-effect) that attaches to specific instances of desire or to production of the desiring machine.... when the connection between desire and the subject is taken as irrelevant or merely reversed, the subject-effect that emerges is much like the generalized ideological subject of the theorist” (68). By their failure to “consider the relations between desire, power and subjectivity” (68) as well as their refusal to “entertain the thought of constitutive contradiction” (69); by their careless sliding of the two senses of representation (as vertreten—proxy and darstellen—portrait, respectively) and utter disregard for the workings of ideology, they are guilty of reintroducing “[i]n the name of desire ... the undivided subject into the discourse of power” (69). Clearly, for Spivak, this position signals a spurious radicalism: one that is ill-equipped to offer a useful theory of interests which is a prerequisite to even begin to think of the conditions of possibility in which the “subaltern” may speak.28 Rather, in her telling, power, blind to its own privileges, speaks this desire (and repression/repetition is as much a part of its script as revolution/production).

On a separate count, Deleuze and Guattari, with their championing of a radically decentred notion of subjectivity as “schizzes,” stand censured as part of the general turn towards anti-foundationalism executed by different poststructuralist and postmodernist writings. There is a considerable body of feminist thought, for instance, that is singularly unimpressed by the extreme anti-humanism, and, what Baudrillard would call, the “fractal” logic of postal discourses in general.29

28 However such a category is posited by context and conjuncture.

29 Christine Di Stefano summarises feminist unease with postmodern tenets thus:
First, that postmodernism expresses the claims and needs of a constituency (white, privileged men of the industrialized West) that has already had an Enlightenment for itself and that is now ready and willing to subject that legacy to critical scrutiny. Secondly, that the objects of postmodernism's various critical and deconstructive efforts have been the creations of a similarly specific and partial constituency... Third, that mainstream postmodern theory ... has been remarkably blind and insensitive to questions of gender ... Finally, that the postmodernist project, if seriously adopted by feminists, would make any semblance of a feminist politics impossible. To the extent that feminist politics is bound up with a specific constituency or subject, namely, women, the postmodernist prohibition against subject-centred inquiry and theory undermines the legitimacy of a broad-based
According to them, the relentlessly atomistic thrust of such endeavours dissipates whatever emancipatory potential they might have by consistently deconstructing the idea of a coherent subject. Moreover, exclusive eloquence on the micropolitics of desire, its play and plurality, they allege, only precipitates an oppressive silence on the macropolitics of power, its refereeing of the games that are played. For women, constrained in asymmetrical gender-power relations such postal strategies, thus, are seen to reify as gags precisely at the historical “moment when [they] have just begun to remember their selves and claim an agentic subjectivity” (Nancy Hartsock as ctd. in Stefano 75).

Of course, the foregoing by no means exhausts the gender related responses to this understanding of power-desire. The growing tribe of “postfeminist” thinkers serve as sufficient testimony to the contrary. In keeping with the centrifugal impetus of postal writs most of these variously profess the efficacy of a transgender approach—one in which gender as a critical category is not taken as an unproblematic, homogenous, neatly dichotomous and/or coherent given.30 In fact, oftentimes in these analyses the very notion of gender as a valid critical and categorical marker/premise of difference simply collapses because of an implosive stress on irreducible discontinuities or because of the overall sway of, what Rosi Braidotti calls, the “teratological imaginary.”31

organized movement dedicated to articulating and implementing the goals of such a constituency. (75-76)

30 Donna Haraway and her “A Manifesto for Cyborgs” comes to mind almost immediately. The way she phrases it, “A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (191) Moreover, “[t]he cyborg is a creature in a postgender world; it has no truck with bisexuality, pre-Oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labour, or other seductions to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity” (Feminism/Postmodernism 192). Indeed, “[b]y the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics...” (191).

31 Commenting on the “feminist culture in the 1990s” in the West, Braidotti focusses on “the extent to which feminism came to show some of the same ‘perverse’ features as late postindustrial societies in the West.... In general, feminism came to share the flair for sexual indeterminacy, hybrid identities, transfigured bodies, and mutant sexualities that so much of the contemporary ‘technoculture’ also promoted.” According to her, “Feminism shares the social imaginary of late postmodernity in the West by being in the grip of a teratological imaginary” (“Becoming-Woman”
Interestingly, as against these generalised responses, Braidotti actually offers a specific critique of the Deleuze and Guattari notion of “becoming-woman,” even as she derives from them to posit the “nomad” with its “as-if” politics as a desirable model of feminist subjectivity (Nomadic Subjects 6-7). According to Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*,

> What we term a molar entity is, for example, the woman as defined by her form, endowed with organs and functions and assigned as a subject. Becoming-woman is not imitating this entity or even transforming oneself into it... but emitting particles that enter the relation of movement and rest or the zone of proximity, of a microfemininity, in other words, that produce in us a molecular woman, create the molecular woman. We do not mean to say that creation of this kind is the prerogative of the man, but on the contrary that the woman as a molar entity has to become-woman in order that the man also becomes- or can become-woman. (275-76)

As for various feminist ventures, they say:

> It is, of course, indispensable for women to conduct a molar politics, with a view to winning back their own organism, their own history, their own subjectivity: “we as women...” makes its appearance as a subject of enunciation. But it is dangerous to confine oneself to such a subject, which does not function without drying up a spring or stopping a flow. The song of life is often intoned by the driest of women, moved by ressentiment, the will to power and cold mothering.... It is no more adequate to say that each sex contains the other and must develop the opposite pole in itself. Bisexuality is no better a concept than the separateness of the sexes. It is as deplorable to miniaturize, internalize the binary machine as it is to exacerbate it; it does not extricate us from it. it is thus necessary to conceive of a molecular women’s politics that slips into molar confrontations, and passes under or through them. (*A Thousand Plateaus* 276)

Braidotti points out how “[t]he reference to ‘woman’ in the process of ‘becoming-woman’... does not refer to empirical females but rather to topological positions, levels or degrees of affirmation of positive forces, and levels of nomadic, rhizomatic consciousness” (Nomadic Subjects 114). She takes issue with the writers on three related counts: “(1) an inconsistent approach to the issue of ‘becoming-woman’; (2) the reduction of sexual difference to one variable among

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32 It is, of course, possible to criticise this “figuration” in its own turn, for being “touristy,” where a tourist ontology stands, among other things, for pleasure without participation, access without accountability, consumption without care.
many, which can and should be dissolved into a generalized and gender-free becoming; and (3) an assumption of symmetry in the speaking stances of the two sexes” (*Nomadic Subjects* 117). According to her, “becoming-woman” amalgamates men and women into new, supposedly beyond gender, sexuality; this is problematic because it clashes with women’s sense of their own historical struggles…. The more I read Deleuze, the more I am struck by the very real, that is, conceptually plausible notion that the process of becoming, far from being the dissolution of all identities in a flux where different forms and connections will emerge, may itself be sex-specific, sexually differentiated, and consequently take different forms according to different gendered positions. (*Nomadic Subjects* 120)

But it is Luce Irigaray who bucks the postal anti-humanist, transgendarerist trend in what I find to be crucial and productive ways from a feminist perspective. In elaborating her “ethics of sexual difference” she not only questions the political utility of Deleuze’s and Guattari’s idea of becoming-woman/molecular/body without organs, etc., for women but also, and pace them, imagines “a new poetics” (*An Ethics of Sexual Difference* 7) in which the “song of life” far from drying up, can be heard, rich and thrilling, as a song of love.

Briefly, Irigaray posits a libidinal economy of flows all right, but she is not shy of affixing a gender tag to her fluid theorisations. She calls it the feminine

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33 Irigaray’s critique of Deleuze’s and Guattari’s project of revolutionary becoming stems from an acute awareness of the hegemonic constructions of the feminine in Western philosophical and political texts. As she wonders, “do women rediscover their pleasure in this ‘economy’ of the multiple? When I ask what may be happening on the women’s side, I am certainly not seeking to wipe out multiplicity, since women’s pleasure does not occur without that. But isn’t a multiplicity that does not entail a rearticulation of the difference between the sexes bound to block or take away something of women’s pleasure? In other words, is the feminine capable at present, of attaining this desire, which is neutral precisely from the viewpoint of sexual difference? Except by miming masculine desire once again. And doesn’t the ‘desiring machine’ still partly take the place of the woman and the feminine? Isn’t it a sort of metaphor for her, that men can use? Especially in terms of their relation to the techno-cratic?” Moreover, “[t]o turn the ‘body without organs’ into a ‘cause’ of sexual pleasure, isn’t it necessary to have had a relation to language and to sex—to the organs—that women have never had?” (Irigaray as ctd. in Whitford, “Rereading Irigaray” 112-13).

34 In this context, perhaps, Emmanuel Levinas’ elaboration of an ethical “desire without lack” merits some mention as an analogous conceptualisation, if not an actual influence. As against a “philosophy of immanence” “where the other in manifesting itself as a being, loses its alterity” (177), where “a transcendence revealed is inverted into immanence, the extraordinary is inserted into an order, the other is absorbed into the same” (182), and against an anti-humanism where the subject itself is repudiated, Levinas posits an understanding of desire that both unsettles the exclusive primacy of the self and simultaneously preserves its ontological validity by arguing for
economy and pits it against the dominant solidary phallocentric and “homosexual” economy. As she sees it:

Female sexuality has always been theorized within masculine parameters. Thus, the opposition “viril” clitoral activity/“feminine” vaginal passivity which Freud—and many others—claims are alternative behaviors or steps in the process of becoming a sexually normal woman, seems prescribed more by the practice of masculine sexuality than anything else. For the clitoris is thought of as a little penis ... while the vagina derives its value from the “home” it offers the male penis.... According to these theorists, women’s erogenous zones are ... a nonsex organ or a masculine sex organ turned inside out in order to caress itself. Women and her pleasure are not mentioned in this conception of the sexual relationship. (“This Sex Which is Not One” 99)

And it is her avowed aim to try and shatter this semiotic/semantic hegemony of an oedipalised male sexuality by coming up with a strategically positive and self-defined alternative conceptualisation of the feminine mode of being;35 to unsettle the tyranny of the same with an economy in which sexual difference is possible. It is to this end that she brilliantly deploys the metaphor of the two “lips” as an

35 Elizabeth Grosz provides a neat summary of various critics who have laid the charge of essentialism against Irigaray. According to her, these constitute a “profound misreading of Irigaray’s claims. They substantialise or ontologise what, for Irigaray, is a discursive or deconstructive strategy” (Sexual Subversions 241n7). Irigaray deals with morphology not with anatomy. “Bodies are not conceived by Irigaray as biologically or anatomically given, inert, brute objects, fixed by nature once and for all. She sees them as the bearers of meanings and social values, the products of social inscription, always inherently social” (Sexual Subversions 112). Positing an “isomorphism between male sexuality and patriarchal language, an intricate mirroring and entwining of phallocentric discourses and oedipalised forms of male sexuality” (Sexual Subversions 111), Grosz holds that Irigaray’s attempt is to reconceive “the female body as a positivity rather than a lack” (Sexual Subversions 110). For other interesting meditations on Irigaray’s writings, read Dorothy Leland’s “Irigaray’s Discourse on Feminine Desire” (Philosophy & Desire 125-39) and Margaret Whitford’s “Rereading Irigaray” (Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis 106-26) and Sarah Kofman’s extracted “The Enigma of Woman” (Continental Philosophy 416-20) The last piece, in fact, is a defense of Freud via his postulations of human bisexuality against Irigaray’s charges of phallogocentrism.
iconographic representation of feminine sexuality, of “the sex which is not one.”

As she asserts:

woman does not have a sex. She has at least two of them, but they cannot be identified as ones. Indeed she has many more of them than that. Her sexuality, always at least double, is in fact plural.... woman has sex organs just about everywhere.... the geography of her pleasure is much more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle than is imagined—in an imaginary centered a bit too much one and the same. (“This Sex Which Is Not One” 102-03)

She believes that this alternative is a paradigm in which a non-oppressive intercourse with the Other is possible; where the alterity of the other is recognised and respected:

Between our lips, yours and mine, several voices, several ways of speaking resound endlessly, back forth. One is never separable from the other. l/you: we are always several at once. And how could one dominate the other? [I]mpose her voice, her tone, her meaning? One cannot be distinguished from the other; which does not mean that they are indistinct.... (as ctd. in Grosz, Sexual Subversions 132)

Furthermore, it is a non-acquisitive, non-possessive economy; a generous economy where hetero-sexual exchange would be characterised by a flowing forth rather than a holding back “Where the most valuable would also be the least held in reserve. Where nature would spend itself without exhaustion, trade without labor, give of itself ... for nothing: there would be free enjoyment, well-being without suffering, pleasure without possession” (Irigaray “When the Goods Get Together” 110). A world, that is, where “man and woman may once again or at

36 The sign of the two “lips” is simultaneously for Irigaray, the symbolic possibility for an alternative ethics and politics. In her elliptic, lyrical prose,

The link uniting or reuniting masculine and feminine must be horizontal and vertical, terrestrial and heavenly.... this requires.... a remaking of immanence and transcendence, notably through this threshold which has never been examined as such: the female sex. The threshold that gives access to the mucous. Beyond classical oppositions of love and hate, liquid and ice—a threshold that is always half-open. The threshold of the lips, which are strangers to dichotomy and opposition. Gathered one against the other but without any possible suture, at least of a real kind. They do not absorb the world into or through themselves, provided they are not misused and reduced to a means of consumption or consummation. They offer a shape of welcome but do not assimilate, or reduce or swallow up. A sort of doorway to voluptuousness?.... Both the threshold and reception of exchange, the sealed up secret of wisdom, belief and faith in all truths?.... Two sets of lips that, moreover, cross over each other like the arms of the cross, the prototype of the crossroads between. The mouth lips and the genital lips do not point in the same direction.... In this approach, where the borders of the body are wed in an embrace that transcends all limits—without, however, risking engulfment, thanks to the fecundity of the porous—in the most extreme experience of sensation, which is also always in the future, each one discovers the self in that experience which is inexpressible yet forms the supple grounding of life and language. For this “God” is necessary, or a love so attentive that it is divine. (An Ethics of Sexual Difference 17-18)
last live together, meet, and sometimes inhabit the same place” (*An Ethics of Sexual Difference* 17).

Clearly, these theorisations of desire, along with the critical attention they have attracted, prise open a range of positions from which to further explore the concept. For feminists, and subjects gendered women, more generally, Irigaray’s two “lips,” especially, can execute a gratifying kiss-off to unhappy immurement in the Freudo-Lacanian paradox which determines the very haecceity of femaleness to be lack, negativity, a symbolic void, a no/thing. Simply put, if people are discontented with, yet captive to the aforesaid Psychoanalytic writs for want of a different conceptual frame, a semiotic “outside,” from which to engage the same, Irigaray’s labial decipherments, by offering a positive, alternative morphology of the feminine to counter the symbology of the phallic, can effect their deliverance from that critical but reactive bind. In the process, it can also leave them free to engage with what may be of value in Freudian and Lacanian formulations, without resentment, oppression or defensiveness. None of which is to signal any pat recruitment of these theories to my proposed study, however.

The sole conviction I have been able to muster from my readings in different Western characterisations of desire is that the notion cannot be told apart from its articulation—articulation understood both as enunciation and as structuration in points of jointure. By way of reasoning, consider how the discursive apparatus of Psychoanalysis deployed a certain way yields the equation desire=lack, yet schizoanalysis theorising, arguably the same terrain, makes of desire a machinic flow, lacking in nothing and multiply productive. Even more to the point, my lucubrations above seem to suggest that only an understanding of desire as powerful and self-satisfying allows for plurality of being. But Judith Butler, taking off on the Lacanian postulation of lack, comes up with the idea of gender as performativity that is no less multivalent and fluid. According to Butler, no sign can “fully or exhaustively perform its referent”; in fact the signifying term only “gestures toward a referent it cannot capture” (*Excitable Speech* 108). Thus,
it is precisely the hiatus between sign and referent, or the lack of the sign that urges and facilitates continuous performativity. Then again, Deleuze and Guattari conceptualise a desiring economy of plenty that is non-gendered, indeed non-human/ist, whereas Irigaray offers a configuration of abundance that is not only gendered but intensely, passionately, even super-human/e. No one of them neatly coincides with another. Still, all of them, to an extent, and within the terms of their own discourse, work, without fully cancelling out each other. So to repeat my point, desire is inextricable from the site, style and setting of its signification. The very first preconception to stand jettisoned here, not surprisingly, is belief in some *a priori* universal of desire. Hand in hand with that voidance, great importance comes to attach to location. To broadly tag which, then, my purpose is to explore the locution of desire through the corpus of Indian novels.

**III**

As far as I can tell, existing research in the area of study concerned is scarce. On the one hand, desire has found some attention in the disciplinary registers of modern Indian sociology, psychology, philosophy, history, law and jurisprudence, the emerging archives of feminist and cultural studies, and the output of Indology, broadly termed. On the other, mythology, folklore, philosophy, classical writings, various aesthetic and devotional texts of pre-modern times, open a more traditional window on the subject. Yet there seems to be a distinct paucity of interpretive effort when it comes to using “desire” as a tool to get a handle on gender relations and the politics of the same in Indian novels, at least in the English language. What work exists, predominantly tends towards a descriptive study of the image of women in a handful of novels written by a few, select, women novelists. Similarly there is some research on the changes in the fictional representation of women over time; on the discourse of violence and its gendered enactment; on the figure of the woman outside the domestic space (especially the figure of the courtesan); as well as, on the girl child. More recently, there has been attention focussed, also, on the widow. Some of the writings available, then again, are only one-off pieces. Others do not restrict themselves to the novel form. And
when they do their scope, approach and focus of inquiry, and therefore, point of entry into texts, is considerably different from what is envisaged here. 37

The concept of desire does feature centrally in Sudhir Kakar’s elaboration of the “intimate relations” worked out in Rajinder Singh Bedi’s Ek Chadar Maili Si and Krishna Sobti’s Mitro Marjani. But both his premises as well as conclusions, elucidated through a more or less Freudian Psychoanalytic lens, I find unable to accept in toto.

Of his approach to these novels, Kakar writes:

I have approached them as the raw material of family case histories. Here, in the flow of events and the flux of feeling, I try to draw out some of their characters’ secrets which, psychoanalysts like to believe, the authors only half knew they knew. Indeed, what makes the man-woman relationship particularly fruitful for psychoanalytic inquiry is the fact, as Freud recognized long ago, that there is nothing about which our consciousness can be so incomplete or false as about the degrees of affection or dislike which we feel for another human being. If such an attempt involves approaching the fictional characters as if they were real men and women, we should not feel discomfitted. (Intimate Relations 7)

This lie-detecting, truth-revealing expertise that is the standard boast of traditional Psychoanalysis and implicit stance of a lot of literary criticism, including of the feminist sort, becomes acutely problematic because of the understanding of desire it promulgates. Kakar’s objective, as he admits, has been to circumvent “the second common weakness of most social theories—their lack of appreciation of the role of sexuality and the irrational in human affairs” (Intimate Relations 141). 38 The form his “appreciation” takes, leads him to argue:

Yet we know from psychoanalysis that sexual desire which compels men and women towards each other in promised fulfillment of a timeless yearning has another darker face. In desire, the body’s wanting and its violence, the mind’s yearning for sexual pleasure but also the need to rid itself of ancient pain and noxious hate, the excitement of orgasm and the fierce exultation of possession, all flow together. Forces of selfishness, destruction and ambivalence always accompany the quest for

37 The Bibliography appended has the works I consider in some wise related to my topic flagged with an asterisk.

38 The first one being the habit in social sciences “to see individual feelings, desires, and fears as an epiphenomena of macro forces located in genes, culture, history, social or sexual division of labor. Conflict between the sexes could then be attributed to one of the many theories in vogue: ‘programmed genetic traits,’ ‘system of patriarchy,’ ‘mode of production,’ and so on” (Intimate Relations 141). Kakar, Psychoanalysis, “theories in vogue”—oops!
sexual pleasure and spiritual union. In the coming together of the sexes, we resent the violation of the body's boundaries even while we want nothing more than to transcend them. We fear sexuality's threat to the tenuous order we have carved out for ourselves during the course of our development—even as we long for its dissolution into a veritable mahabhava, a "great feeling" that will allow us ecstasy and exaltation rather than the small joys and dribbles of pleasure we extract from our inner order. (Intimate Relations 142; first emphasis added)

With the corollary:

Little wonder, then, that theories of gender relations, especially as they pertain to the oppression of women, founder on the ambiguities and ambivalences of sexuality. Although oppressed in many societies, women still cannot be likened to any other exploited group, such as the blacks in South Africa or the "untouchable" castes in India. Blacks and whites, low and high castes do not have to deal with the conscious and unconscious exigencies of a mutual desire which is both a promise of self-enhancement, even transcendence, and a threat of disintegration to the self. Nor do they, or any other pairing of the oppressor and the oppressed, need each other—in Plato's comment on his myth of the origin of sexes—for "re-uniting our original nature, making one of two, healing the state of man." (Intimate Relations 142)

Quite apart from the purblind heteronormativity of these views, quite apart from the implicit fetishisation of the body and its boundaries which turns modern prejudices on the matter into a universal human condition, quite apart from the thin veneer disguising the gender-specificity of its "we," with regard to the novels in question, such an orientation sees Kakar understand the incidents of mental and physical domestic violence and the continued female participation in a conjugal exchange that abuses them so, as owing to the "desired intimacy, forever subduing the antagonism between husband and wife, inherent in the division of the sexes and culturally exaggerated..." (Intimate Relations 23; emphasis added).

In describing the psychological state of Ek Chadar Maili Si's Rano after the inaugural beating she gets from her erstwhile brother-in-law and now husband, a

39 All the more unexpected in one who, both, draws a distinction between desire and sex, and, if his quotations are any indication, is familiar with the homoerotic cultural paradigm of classical Greece.

40 Itself having roots in the Enlightenment discourses of individualism and autonomy, which took the male subject and its experiences as their norm (refer, for instance, to Susan Bordo's "The Cartesian Masculinization of Thought and the Seventeenth-Century Flight from the Feminine" 354-69; and Ashis Nandy's "The Traditions of Technology" 77-94 from his Traditions, Tyranny, and Utopias). This last becomes particularly clear, for instance, by posing the question of women's bodily experience of pregnancy vis-à-vis the above-stated assertions. Then again, the fact that notions of shame, modesty, honour, for women, though almost always connected to their bodies, never overdetermines these in quite the same way, I believe, attests the culture- and time-specific character of our experience and perceptions of bodily integrity, bodily boundaries.
beating that is prelude to the delayed sexual consummation of their enforced marriage according to the custom of levirate betrothals, Kakar writes,

Afterwards, as she lies in bed, in excruciating pain from drunken blows, a repentant and tearful Mangla trying to staunch the flow of blood from a wound in her scalp received when he had flung her against a wall, Rano is filled with a deep satisfaction. In the preceding encounter, her body has ceased to be an object of avoidance. It has been man-handled, touched by Mangla as a husband. The marriage is consummated the same night and the couple begin to live together as husband and wife. (Intimate Relations 10)

Prior to this, according to him, in the run-up to the violence,

As [Mangla] opens the bottle and as Rano makes her first protests in an eerie repetition of similar scenes with her former husband, she feels both fear and a fierce exhilaration. She dimly senses that in the impending violence Mangla will beat her like a husband and she will fight back like a wife, finally establishing a conjugal relationship which till now has only existed in the community's will. (Intimate Relations 10)

My discomfort with these latter positions can be enumerated on two counts. On the one hand, they seem to make of antagonism between the sexes something of a quasi-mystic, elemental imperative, variously channelised and more or less aggravated by differing cultural writs but not, for all Kakar's genuflections in that direction, of cultural making.41 Secondly, by acknowledging but then downplaying the very real power differences that overdetermine such domestic "idylls" and women's part in them, Kakar seems to put men and women on an equal footing at base as antagonists, actors and agents in this perennial drama of one-upmanship.42 Clichéd misprisions such as "the war between the sexes" (Intimate Relations 22) only add to the original error. It is possible, of course, to grant "satisfaction" to Rano, a tortured, pyrrhic, satisfaction. In the build-up to the violence, it is even possible to cede a certain "exhilaration" in her feelings,

41 The nature/culture binary which informs Kakar's thinking (as indeed it does the sources he draws from) can be observed in how he maintains, on the one hand, that "Sexuality, in psychoanalysis, is a system of conscious and unconscious human fantasies, arising from various sources, seeking satisfaction in diverse ways, and involving a range of excitations and activities that aim to achieve pleasure that goes beyond the satisfaction of any basic somatic need," and, on the other, that "Cultural injunctions perhaps do not affect the act of coitus or regulate its transports. What they can do, though, is to increase the conflicts around sexuality, sour it for many, and generally contribute towards its impoverishment" (Intimate Relations 21).

42 To be fair to him, the novel itself encourages such a reading, but given his asserted position of knowing better than the author, that little detail cannot be Kakar's alibi here.
desperate, twisted, in anticipation of catharsis, explosive, dangerous and painful as that may be. But “deep satisfaction”? 

Contra appearances, what is being rehearsed, is not the ontology of pain and feminist politics of resistant subjectivity that Rajeswari Sundar Rajan posits by way of it in the context of Sati deaths and debates. Down that route lies another unhelpful closure, which cannot admit of the constitutive contradiction that is pleasure in pain, except through negation or pain as pleasure deferred. The intent here is not to deny the possibility of desires that go by the name of sadism and masochism or sadomasochism in human subjects. My quarrel rather is with the slippages of a reading that recognises Rano’s longing for conjugal tenderness (Intimate Relations 11), not for blows and fisticuffs, note, yet attributes to her “deep satisfaction” in the experience and aftermath of battery. Why? Because, through its slides, masochism emerges reconfigured as the feminine (and

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43 Strategically, claiming “pain as a specific, gendered ground for subjectivity” that is identified “historically (or transitionally) rather than ontologically (or psychologically)” (Real and Imagined Women 34, 35), Rajan asserts that “the subject’s experience of pain is itself a sufficient condition for the move towards ‘no pain,’” and that such a reactivity must be read as a form of resistance to death by burning” (Real and Imagined Women 12). Moreover, she says, “the subjectivity of pain ... needs to be conceptualized as a dynamic rather than passive condition, on the premise that the subject in pain will be definitionally in transit towards a state of no-pain (even if this state is no more than a reflexivity). While the affect produced by a body in pain—pity, anger, sympathy, identification—is an important consideration in formulating a politics of intervention, it is important also to recognize that an inherent resistance to pain is what impels the individual or collective suffering subject towards freedom (Real and Imagined Women 22). In defense of her gender-coding of the subject in/of pain, she says, her claims “would be politically trivial if it were not for the abjectness of the subject-status of the female victim, of widowhood, rape, or wife-murder, in popular as well as, even, sometimes in feminine perception” (Real and Imagined Women 12). Problems of exclusion mentioned above, apart, I am not sure Rajan’s stance cuts it theoretically, on other counts, either. It just assumes too many things, like, if there is bodily pain, then that pain is the ground-zero for action, like, everyone’s threshold of bodily pain is the same, moreover, like, bodily pain is pre-cultural, and so on and so forth. The way I see it, while the impact of injury on the body may be similar—stabbing results in bleeding, starvation in emaciation, fire in burning, strangulation in asphyxia, etc.—how one “feels” and reacts to that pain, how one valuates that pain, need not be the same. Appeals to the “very materiality of pain—it is so incontestably and self-evidently there” (Real and Imagined Women 21) only underscore the discourse’s total belief in its own premises, not the validity of those premises.

44 Refer, for instance, to Spivak’s discussion of childbirth in her essay “Feminism and Critical Theory.” According to Spivak “The opposition pleasure-pain is questioned in the physiological normality of women” (The Spivak Reader 58). She holds that “pain does not operate in the same way in men and women” (The Spivak Reader 58). While I can’t say I want to be as positive as Spivak sounds on that score, I believe her views offer a necessary counter to Rajan’s generalisations.
therefore female) mode of desiring and digesting pleasure. A Freudian slip, if ever there was one!45 Having already addressed the gender/ed implications of the Freudo-Lacanian reading of desire, however, I believe an engagement with the general premises of Kakar’s hermeneutic would only yield a repetition, and so desist.

Another text that addresses desire prominently, or at least proclaims to do so, is a collection of essays edited by Brinda Bose, called Translating Desire. The essays are not all concerned with an exposition of desire in novels, nor indeed even in literature—having pieces on films, Hindutva masculinism, legal determinations of sexual violence, and such like. Actually, the venture is also somewhat misleadingly titled. To translate anything, even as transcreation, commonsense would suggest, requires some-which-way to perceive it first, to cognise it. With an appellative like “Translating Desire,” this means setting up legitimate expectations for being treated to various perceptions, styles and genera of desire in translation. Expectations, which, the book makes little shift to meet. The editorial Introduction without any attempt at theorising desire simply equates it with “sexuality and/or sexual desire” (Translating Desire xx) and then proceeds to expatiate on that at some length. Most of the individual essays also seem to take their cue from this editorial conflation, so that in retrospect it appears the collection would have been better named “translating sexuality.” To say this is not to dismiss the collection, however, only to place its emphasis more precisely. Indeed, as an exercise in cultural studies, its explorations of the politics and erotics of translation, the politics of erotics and sexuality, is both useful and thought-provoking.

Then again, within the constraints of its one-track pitch on desire—and here, too, the shadow of Psychoanalysis falls long—there are some essays that address the brief of “translating” desire, if only summarily, or elucidate sexual desire in ways

45 My reference, of course, is to Freud’s explicit characterisation of masochism, among others things, as the “feminine” pathology of men.
that can be fruitful ingress into a broader investigation of the subject: for the former, I have in mind, specifically, the fleeting attempt at theorising desire in Karen Gabriel’s “Designing Desire”; for the latter, can be cited the imbrication of fears and fantasies in the elaboration of sexuality explored by Nilanjana Gupta and the gender(ed) implications of food made flesh and vice versa discussed by Anjana Sharma. One piece that does both, and exemplarily so, is Udaya Kumar’s “Two Figures of Desire.” In his distilled prose, Kumar inscribes a many-sided engagement with the subject of desire in two works of Malayalam literature—O. Chandu Menon’s Indulekha (1891) and Kumaran Asan’s Leela (1914)—which nonetheless maintains fidelity to the overall slant of the collection by delineating his arguments through the form, frontier, film and filter of the body. To quote him as he stakes out his project,

Among other things, this discourse [on desire in the closing decades of the nineteenth century] sought to make it possible for the subject to recognise itself as a desiring subject and to act upon this recognition through various modes of agency. One may identify two moments as crucial in the articulation of this discourse—one is an examination of the nature of desire in general and human desire in particular, in terms of which the subject seeks to identify, understand and manage its desire, the other is a movement towards the inner, whereby interiority is seen as the true locus of desire. This is accompanied by a difficult repositioning of bodily experience. *(Translating Desire 132)*

A third text where the concept of desire appears pivotal to the exegesis attempted is Neela Bhattacharya Saxena’s *In the Beginning Is Desire*. Published in 2004, this book, as the subtitle informs, is about “tracing Kali’s footprints in Indian Literature,” where Kali stands understood “as the power of Desire” (2), as “pregnant nothingness” (2), as the matrix of being and becoming. In the process, it cuts a liberal swath across the narrative lay/s of the land: stretching from Rig Vedic times and texts to Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* written in the closing years of the last millennium, and including in its arc of exploration votive hymns and mystic chants as easily as secular literature in the form of plays and novels. This latter choice—the book has four chapters devoted to novels written by both men and women—in fact, makes it broadly cognate with my project, especially when considering its gynocentred heuristic, Indic mooring and
postcolonial sensitivities. But beyond an overall resemblance, there are marked
differences in the details of conceptualisation, objective as well as execution.

Most noticeably, Saxena’s text just takes for granted “the primacy of the Name of
the Mother” (1) it reads back into the Vedas, and forth into novels and plays, as
Kali. 46 Within the particular pitch of her enterprise, of course, this works, since
Saxena is frank in admitting that hers is a personal and spiritual journey into the
world of words. To quote her on it,

Instead of a systematic research, I have simply followed an intuitive path into texts
that gave meaning to my personal quest for selfhood. I do not and cannot claim
objectivity.... The scholarly aspects of the book are present as clarifications to
myself, not as an exercise of reading texts to prove or disprove one’s point. I often
read into texts ideas that are deeply personal, and therefore, may not have any
connection with a particular scholarly or even spiritual tradition.... (3; and passim)

Uncurbed by persnickety academic niceties and posturing, by disciplinary
decorum, then, Saxena commingles discontinuous culturo-religious texts and
traditions; with panache, she blends history, biography and literary criticism, to
posit innovative impressions of Kali as desire. The results are none more
interesting than in the exposition of the subject offered vis-à-vis Ismat Chughtai’s
Terhi Lakir, 47 more touching than in the reading of Na Hanyate through its
author’s own ill-fated cross-cultural love tangle. 48 The main distinction of the
work—its fresh and many-sided perceptions facilitated by a totally idiosyncratic

46 Elsewhere, clarifying her “description of this book as Gynocentric with a capital ‘G’ she writes,
“I do not posit Gynocentricism as opposed to androcentrism. Here Gynocentrism stands as a
metaphor for Kali, who encompasses all...” (39).

47 Through an opening parallel drawn between “the concepts of Jalal and Jamal, the majestic and
the beautiful, male and female” (176) as found in The Quran and the “symbolic dyadic figures”
(176) of Shiva and Shakti, continued through comparatist invocations of Sufi notions of hijab
(veil) and Vedantic Maya, of fana and zikr and Kashmir Shaivite pratyabhigya, of haqq and wajud
alongside svadharma and stridharma, Saxena reads Terhi Lakir as a powerful exploration of “a
woman’s desire to be fully human.” She reads Shamim, the novel’s heroine, as “naturally and
perennially a terhi lakir, or a crooked line—complex, rich, a hidden treasure, and unable to fit into
any straight jacket [sic] that a patriarchal society provides for women” (194).

48 Juxtaposing Maitreyi Devi’s Bengali novel, Na Hanyate (or It Does Not Die as it was self-
translated by the author into English) with Mircea Eliade’s Romanian novel Maitreyi (or Bengal
Nights in English), and fleshing out the background against which these [semi-autobiographical]
texts were written, published and marketed ... their unequal reception in the global marketplace,”
Saxena reads them “as convenient signifiers” of desire for “examining that fateful encounter
between India and the West, and the Orientalist underpinnings of this encounter” (209). Tellingly,
her chapter is titled “Desire Betrayed.”
and tensile postulation of Kali as desire—however, also remains its principal weak point.

For instance, Saxena repeatedly mentions it is female desire, especially, that is the focus of her attention (4, 48; and passim). Desire itself, she defines as “a tremendous effulgence of energy, longing to express itself” (78). “In the beginning,” she says:

desire takes the form of a first movement, or spanda, the primordial sound.... In the Beginning IS Desire reads this eternal movement as centered on the body of the Mother, who is changeless and changing at the same time. I read desire, especially female desire, both as primordial beginning, and in its human incarnation, as an instrument of Kali’s maya—the creative ideation of the universe and its ceaseless play of life and death within the same moment of IS-ness. (81-82)

Finally she also states that “Although the journey into literary texts is propelled by Kali, she, as a specific figure, vanishes in the process. I see the world of literature through Kali-colored glasses as she herself becomes bindurupa, dot-like, and hides as human, especially female desire in the literary works I read” (49). The point is all this emphasis on desire as Kali and that Kali, as primordial non-dual matrix of Reality, generates a paradoxical ambivalence vis-à-vis female desire; paradoxical, because even as female desire undergoes a magnificent amplification through linkage with cosmic Kamakhya, it is also progressively thinned out on its own account. Eventually, as a result, one is never very clear what is specifically “female” about the desire that Saxena tracks.

Another problematic aspect of the text is the way in which despite affirming a foundational and transcendent Gynocentred non-dualism, in the realm of mundane, material reality, it asserts the necessity of a dimorphic, heterosexist gender model. To quote Saxena:

The original That One (for which Kali is named), beyond and before all manifestation, reveals her self through primordial desire in the first condensed, interpenetrating duality that incorporates all creation—the duality of Shiva and Shakti. Therefore, the self’s turning toward the other has been celebrated in various dyadic units such as Shiva/Shakti, Yin/Yang, Yub/Yum or, within Sufi Islam, the two faces of God, the Jalal and Jamal aspects. (79)

Elsewhere, she says,

I posit Desire or Kamakhya as plenitude and effulgence. In the human realm it denotes a fluidity of the self that reaches out in tremendous joy to meet the other,
where the self pours out of its boundaries in an unconscious effort to realize the non-
dual reality of the universe—a universe where dualities are the stuff of play. For this
play, male and female are needed. For creation, desire is vital. (87)

Inasmuch as these pronouncements tend to naturalise masculine and feminine
difference and prioritise them as basal identity factors for all practical purposes,
through all time, in the mortal realm, I believe Saxena here can be seen as a
victim (or purveyor?) of what Nancy Armstrong calls, in another context, the
“metaphysics of sexuality” (25). 49

Thus while cumulatively all the writings catalogued above do end up constituting
some sort of body of knowledge about desire in scattered sites of modern Indian
literature, if only through strong suggestion, I repeat my earlier contention on the
lack of much sustained effort in the English language to read the politics of
gender relations in Indian novels through the instrumentality of desire. Such, in
any case, is the lacuna I perceive in the existing archive of literary criticism and
which I attempt to address through the current undertaking.

As at present, one of two tendencies, very broadly, can be said to inform the
discussions on desire in Indian literature. The “modern” trend by and large
collapses desire into sexuality and proceeds to theorise that as variously fulfilled
or frustrated, empowered or emasculated, social or pre-social, according to its
light. In more traditional scholarship, desire through a tacit critical consensus
stands largely billed an aesthetic issue and studied in tandem with other related
aesthetic concerns of beauty, love and pleasure. Since the realm of aesthetics is
also conventionally deemed off limits for “political” readings, on the whole, there
is not much attention given to the regimes of power that monitor the norms of
pleasure, the forms of beauty, the sports of love, the strifes of desire. Both types

49 According to Armstrong, “The gendering of human identity provided the metaphysical girders
of modern culture—its reigning mythology” (14). Since Saxena is working with traditional Tantric
and spirituo-philosophic categories of gender-coding, the specific paradigm of Armstrong’s
formulation, of course, does not quite apply to her enterprise. I use the phrase above, that is to say,
only as a felicitous but general description of the basic thrust of Saxena’s interpretive stance on
gender dualism. And furthermore, as a tangential registration of how this accords with the modern
tendency that Armstrong analyses.
eventually deflect or disguise a study of desire on its own terms, that is, albeit differently.

My aim is to examine the script of desire, but as it intersects with the novel genre. Taking the form to constitute a specific relation, a specific articulation of desire, in other words, I seek to explore how, on the one hand, the novel genre is refracted through the conceptual prismatic of desire, and, on the other, how the discourse of desire itself is mediated by the ideological hegemony of the form. I am especially interested in understanding how desire is caught up in the crisscrossing trajectories of power inscribing the novel form; how desire helps conduct the traffic in power relations that the form generates: is it reducible to a hegemonic role, that of obtaining consent to different status-quos, for instance, or can it be disruptionary and instrumental in jamming the networks of power? Needless to say, the entire exercise is geared towards arriving at a broad picture of the gender dynamics operationalised in, around and through the form so as to better serve the task of “de-siring women.” In fact, the chief advantage of routing such an investigation through the heuristic of desire, to my mind, lies in the way in which it makes questions of identity, agency, interests and sanction, and therefore of, gendered subject constitution and object formation well nigh impossible to ignore.

IV

Further clarification of my project perhaps had best begin with the thesis title. Breaking this up into four convenient units of explication—“De/Siring Women,” “Re-addressing,” “Gender Relations, and “Indian Novels”—I’ll run through them in their specific employment in reverse order.

With “Indian Novels,” I signpost the genre and gestalt of my study. No more need have been said if the phrase had served as clear-cut demarcation, as sufficient description of a sphere of inquiry. But this is wishful thinking on two counts. Firstly, the heterogeneity of the literary form in question: its continuing
popularity, its premium on originality and in-built thrust towards experimentation means that while the corpus overall is large and expanding, the limits are friable and the body somewhat shapeless at the edges. Per force then reference to “novels” can only point to a province of literary representation, not capture it. Secondly, the labile and contested qualifier that is Indian: what exactly does this mean? Does it refer to the bounded political reality that is the post-colonial nation-state, or does it signify a more amorphous civilizational identity that includes but infinitely exceeds the former? If the latter, what are the co-ordinates of this substantive; in other words, who is in, who is out of its ambit of belonging? Then again, is the adjective “Indian” principally tied to *desha* or *darshana*, is it tied to the passport, residency or outlook of the subject concerned? To pull all this back into the orbit of relevance, does “Indian novels” signal only productions by Indian citizens in modern India or does its meaning range more widely to include pre-colonial, colonial and/or diasporic ventures?

As with novels, the task of categorically marking out the pale of “India” and “Indian” is tricky work—one that, in fact, I am not attempting to do. My interest, rather, is in retaining the term as a sliding signifier that can, depending upon the context, convey all of the above senses. More to the point, in drawing the boundaries of my field of study, conceptually, I keep the meaning as loose as possible—setting down neither citizenship, nor domicile, nor perspective, as privileged referents of Indianness, but allowing any or a combination of them to stake a claim. PIOs, NRIs and all manner of hyphenated identities and hybridities, thus, can be accommodated as authors of “Indian” novels. Only, the case for their “Indianness” (ideological and/or material) needs to be spelt out and understood, each in its specificity, not simply assumed or asserted, across the board, on some nebulous *a priori* grounds. For purposes of actual perusal, however, I restrict my study to productions by, formerly, natives of colonial India, and latterly, citizens of the postcolonial nation-state, all, living in the region. The cross-cultural, hyphenated, and floating signature, in fact, finds recognition in my frame only as it occurs in the English language and Western context—originally, as forged
through displacements of imperialist expansion and domination, and subsequently, as notarised by global capitalist commodity and "consumer" flows. So "Indian novels," in my title, includes in its scope, if only peripherally, diasporic exertions occurring in native English speaking worlds, especially of the northern hemisphere, but does not cover corresponding migrant enterprise, say, on Malaysian soil or in the Tamil language. For the record, awareness of the one is demanded and ignorance of the other, permitted, I believe, by the historical and political conditions that currently attend and administer the delimited field of my investigations.

"Gender Relations" pinpoints my focus, theoretically as also practically. By gender I mean the socio-political disciplines and incentives operative at a given conjuncture that acculturate one to fundamental self-definition through sexual identity—its produced through the discursive over-determination of bodies (at least till now) as male, female or defective vis-à-vis a normativised reproductive function. "Relations" signifies both structural (including blood) ties and interactions premised upon differentiated positioning, and narratives. The phrase "gender relations" thus underscores my attention to the identities, roles and interactions of gendered subjects at one level and to the representations of the same, at another; indeed it is through the study of the latter I access the former. Then again, the use of the plural form for the latter term suggests not only that different relations, in the dual sense in which it has been used here, will be studied but also, secondarily, that different relations are possible—gender relations as not cast in stone but in custom.

50 For helpful clarification and various theorisations of the term, among others, refer to Genders edited by David Glover and Cora Kaplan and Gender edited by Carol C. Gould, respectively.

51 This process starts at birth with modern medicine not being shy of surgically reassigning the sex of a newborn and the modern state, with its book-keeping procedures demanding that a child be identified either "male" or "female" at the registry of birth.
The verb "Re-addressing," registers that the terrain to be studied is not a *tabula rasa*. That, in fact, my venture is an overwriting of different existing scripts. It implies a redirection of address in the re-situated addressed.

As for "De/Siring Women," on the one hand, it foregrounds the "siring" of desire in, of and for women, while, on the other, it stresses de-siring women, a freeing of the gendered subject from patriarchal authorisations. In other words, it simultaneously inscribes a claim and a call to re-address desire in the gender relations of Indian novels by re-(ad)dressing, significantly, their gendered relations. As a gerund phrase, it also provisionally extends substantive standing to the referent of the lexical compound. Then again, the cleft running through "de/siring" renders the word confusing, if not unrecognisable. This linguistic opacity, in certain ways, reflects my understanding of the constitutive inscrutability of desire to human experience except, that is, in the manner, modes, means and conditions that cognise, humanise, socialise, personalise, otherise, legitimise, systematise, realise, naturalise, process, articulate it. In conclusion, however, a caution: it would be an error to read too much into my morphological interventions. Ultimately, this is not the rationale for my thesis. It is only a tactical inscription of an anti-sexist project vis-à-vis desire, which works in the English language but resists meaningful transliteration in other scripts.

V

We in India ... have for the past few centuries been trying with pathetic earnestness to catch up with other people's yesterdays. If we are not forging ahead and can only catch up with yesterdays, it is time we caught up with our own yesterdays as even that makes for continuity.

That's C. D. Narasimhaiah as cited by Sujit Mukherjee in his *Towards a Literary History of India* (44). Starting out on this project and a little way into it, I had no intention of doing any such thing. Indeed, busy tailgating (or at least trying to) the not-so-latest from "Western" academies, I had no real inkling of either the possibility or utility of such an exercise. Four things sort of changed that. Two of these have already been mentioned: the problematic through which I explore gender relations in Indian novels, i.e., desire, and the conviction, via my readings
in Western theorisations of the same, that desire is inextricable from the scene of its articulation, respectively. The third decisive point, the one that set my ball rolling the Narasimhaiah way, in fact, was the chosen field of study—Indian novels. For, by the logic of its own determination, I could not just consider novels written in English; I needed also to make account for the generic expression in other Indian languages. Finally, my feminist wish to unmask dominant social mores for their past and present gender oppressions, ironically enough, required that I minimally acquaint myself with the cast of “tradition” and “modernity” in India—so as to be at all convincing in my dissection of their sexism as this appears in the novels, but also, so as to be able to identify them, in the first place. Perhaps a little more explanation would not be out of order.

When I had first determined upon working on Indian novels for my thesis, both because of a sense of ennui with the pre-war British canon that had been the staple of my disciplinary training till then and a desire for being more relevant to my own location (euphemism for greater narcissistic affirmation?), I knew I was taking on a new field. What I grasped only vaguely, if that, at the time, though, was how new. In making my decision, I had based it on the reading of mainly a few modern novels in English, whose sense, if not sensibility, appeared largely familiar to me. Indeed, even the critical paraphernalia I had accumulated over the years from my exposure to Western texts and traditions seemed adequate to the task: how forced, after all, would it be to read Amitav Ghosh’s The Shadow Lines, for instance, through a Lacanian mirror swelling into an Irigarayan speculum of the other woman? Reading translated texts threw the proverbial spanner in the works of that sufficiency.

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52 On one occasion in the text, the narrator remembers how Tridib told him, “that one could never know anything except through desire, real desire, which was not the same thing as greed or lust; a pure, painful and primitive desire, a longing for everything that was not in oneself, a torment of the flesh, that carried one beyond the limits of one’s mind to other times and other places, and even, if one was lucky, to a place where there was no border between oneself and one’s image in the mirror” (The Shadow Lines 29). To me a passage like this, shows how Ghosh is both aware of, and working with, different post-structuralist insights to flesh out his narrative.
Being, for all practical purposes, literarily monolingual, texts translated into English were my principle recourse to gauge the shape and substance of generic production in other Indian languages—a necessary undertaking, as mentioned earlier, given my project. Reading these, did two things to and for me. On the one hand, they excited me because of the wider pool of themes, issues and milieus introduced. On the other, they nudged me out of my comfort zone as a reader.

Every time I picked up a novel in translation, went through it, went through the translator’s introduction, the author’s note or foreword, sometimes a glossary and/or a bibliography, that are more or less the accoutrements with which a translated text comes outfitted these days, and secondarily through such criticism on it as may be available in English, I was struck both by a) how, often, apart from a few big names, the attention given seemed paltry in quantity and quality, and b) how I was hamstrung in not being able to follow the text’s reception and review in its language of production. This last was a genuine gap in my knowledge; one, I confess, I have not been able to do much about, besides accepting and working with it, that is, through increased attention to what I did have access to, namely the translated text in question.

The catch, however, was that the increased attention produced a lingering sense of dissatisfaction with the way I was reading these texts, a dissatisfaction that replicated itself soon enough with some of the novels in English as well, so as to impress me as a full-blown methodological problem. To repeat myself, starting out, it had not occurred to me that along with a shift in the geo-cultural focus of attention I might in justice also need to reconsider my frames of analysis when studying Indian novels. Considering my theoretical models to be of aspecific discursive mintage and universal currency, in other words, I was running these texts through the same filters that I had learnt to use vis-à-vis Western novels; I

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53 Despite being dependent on English translations of various texts, I will not be engaging with the academic debates surrounding translation from one language into another, except desultorily. All I can say is that this does not quite fall within the purview of my study. Such an engagement would call for both a different focus as well as training from the one presently espoused and possessed.
was treating them as transparent sociological reads produced in a literary-cultural void and shorn of any intertextuality, any tonal, stylistic, formal, symbolic, aesthetic or philosophical context (or indeed content) worth the name. Needless to say, I was coming up with some sort of reading of the texts but the texts themselves seemed mostly missing from my readings. Given how desire is the sensor, stimulus and subject of my dissertation, given, moreover, how I understand it, this was clearly an untenable state of affairs. It required that I rework my interpretive strategies.

So, through trial and error, I came to adopt an approach I saw as more suitable to my overall agenda. In keeping with my freshly perceived apprehension that, modifying Spivak somewhat, the literary text is “caught not [just] in language, but in idiom” (A Critique of Postcolonial Reason 243; n70), the idea now was to place the genre and its relations of desire within a functional (not representative) approximation (not replication) of the literary-cultural matrix in which it developed, to read the specificity of the form and its inter-script with desire via a viable (not perfect) context. Predictably, I decided to proceed not by scrutinising texts primarily or exclusively through Western theorisations of desire, but by exploring them against the backdrop and, at times, through the mediation, of more culturally familiar characterisations of the term.

Since this entire concern is honed by, and to, my feminist agenda, no Introduction, of course, can be complete without some clarification of what I mean by feminism. Briefly, I move away from the bloc of feminist opinion, which holds that “feminism is a politics before it is an epistemology,” that “questions of representation [which] deal with who speaks for whom” take priority over “what is being said” (John 63). Such thinking, as I see it, shows logical propinquity with what, Spivak, via Marx, delineates as “class agency” in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Contending that for Marx, “The projects of class consciousness and of the transformation of consciousness are discontinuous issues,” that “the development of a transformative class ‘consciousness’ from a descriptive class
'position' is not in Marx a task engaging the ground level of consciousness," she says,

Full class agency (if there were such a thing) is not an ideological transformation of consciousness on the ground level, a desiring identity of the agents and their interest.... It is a contestatory replacement as well as an appropriation (a supplementation) of something that is "artificial" to begin with—"economic conditions of existence that separate their mode of life." (72)

Feminism that privileges politics over epistemology, mutatis mutandis accepts a like distinction between a transformative feminist consciousness developed from a descriptive gender position, and "the ground level of consciousness." Its energies are focussed on the former. Without in any wise taking away from its contribution to gender justice or indeed, denying its organisational force, such feminism runs the risk of degenerating over time into mere strategy and a play for power, hegemony and narrow self-promotion. Sometimes, that is to say, its proponents can become cynically or misguidedely accepting of their own, or their confriere's self-serving complicities and compromises with the scripts of privilege, their own prejudiced misrepresentations and exploitations of the circuits of power, all in the name of some always-already determined ideological solidarity. What I understand by feminism, and invoke here, is somewhat different. It is not just a politics or an epistemology, with one taking precedence over the other, but an ethical praxis54 committed to both dismantling institutionalised forms of social discrimination of whatever sort, though gender may be its starting point, as well as maintaining to the utmost of its capacity and engaging the complexities of relativity without lapsing into relativism, the absolute claims of "truth" over lies. Moreover, ideally, I believe it must be oriented towards self-redundancy rather than the obverse—feminism not as an end in itself but for the end of structural sexism that is simultaneously its own demise as legitimate expression. Needless to

54 Ethical feminism as a term is most famously associated with the writings of Drucilla Cornell. Though I have read some of these, and concur with her arguments at various points, I am not quite rehearsing her position. In her essay, "What Is Ethical Feminism?" for instance, Cornell elaborates her stance through a critical appropriation of Lacanian pronouncements on the Symbolic order and the condition of the feminine vis-à-vis the same. It works, however, only in the specific context of Western phallogocentrism. A simplistic importing of its politics to read the cultural scene/s in India would be epistemic violence of not a very useful sort. For, while India provides ample evidence of dualism, the feminine pole is not quite symbolically lacking as in the Western paradigm. Then again, non-dualism is a powerful component of its cultural landscape. My "ethical" hermeneutics would have to engage with the systematic gender discriminations obtaining in this slightly more multi-track local reality.
say, always, this feminism is concerned with the “ground level of consciousness,” of individuals and collectivities, as a work-in-process.

To sum up, then, the “reading” I hope to perform, seems to me, best described as contrapuntal and deconstructive. Its politics is both feminist and Indocentric. That is, it seeks to unsettle the hegemony of androcentric and Western-centric readings of desire by elucidating gynocentric as well as indigenous perspectives on it. The aim, however, is not to offer these alternatives as unproblematic givens, as “authentic,” and/or all-inclusive, representative sites for a new hegemony, in their own turn. Nor is it to abjure through them everything Western and/or male-authored. My location within the Indian English academy means they are a part of my training; willy-nilly, they will colour my reading. Without whitewashing the structures of domination that account for this state of affairs, I choose not to see this as a handicap but rather as a wider field of opportunity from which to theorise. The attempt overall, therefore, is to read the novel form and the articulations of desire in, around and through it for different sets of meanings than what they may yield when looked at through normative lenses by shifting the f/locus of interpretation. This does not completely rescind dominant meanings but I am hoping they will help to rescind, at least somewhat, the dominance of those meanings within the domain of Indian English literary criticism.

Structurally, my work is conceived in two parts with six chapters, without counting this Introduction and a Conclusion. Divided into a couple of chapters, the first part is variously theoretical, contextual and generic. Chapter One looks at a few pre-modern Indian conceptualisations of desire that antedate the novel form. That is to say, it looks at indigenous relations of desire that originated before the novel form. Chapter Two deals with the different factors that contributed to the emergence of the novel form in India as well as, that account for its popularity down to the present times. In other words, it explores different desires for the novel. This is followed up by the second part of the thesis, which is more specific, textual and demonstrative. It is divided into four chapters, each devoted to the
critical analysis of one novel that gets perused through the intersection of desire with other pre-determined categories of analysis deemed significant to the thematics of the novel genre. The emphasis here is on clarifying the trail of desire \textit{in} novels. Finally, the Conclusion, concludes…