Part II
Desire in Novel Relations
If Part I tracked a detour into the domains of the contextual, the extra-novelistic, then this Part returns to the pale of the textual, the intra-novelistic. Briefly, my aim is to sift through different representations of desire in Indian novels so as to explore their implication in normative cultural modes of socialisation and gender role differentiations. Conversely, I look to socio-cultural assignations of gender identities and roles, what Lauretis calls "technologies of gender," to illuminate the graph of desire in, of and for women in Indian novels. That archive of literature, of course, is both vast and varied, one that I can neither hope to exhaust nor sufficiently represent. What I do here is opt for the broad sweep of a thematic compass to help circumscribe the field somewhat. Individual subjectivity, a notional community (usually, the national) and domesticity, all, have, in one form or another, been the staple features of novelistic enterprise the world over. To this global threesome, I add the problematic of caste institutionality to arrive at the four thematic segments into which my study will be divided. While these by no means expend the variety of concerns that Indian novels have expressed down the years, they are an adequate configuration to the extent that most novels could be read through the optic of one or the other categories.

Each division will use one novel with which to explore the particular articulations of gendered desire it frames. All in all, quantitatively speaking, therefore, I am looking at a rather small miscellany of narratives determined by a coincidence of prior familiarity, fortuitous discovery and personal estimation of suitability to the work at hand. Obviously, these are too few in number and also as the selection will show, too dispersed in time and location, to justify any definitive statements on thematic takes, treatments, etc., over the years, and, in general. To avoid confusion let it be said, a chronological, diachronic study is not the motive behind the explorations, either. Rather, the analysis of novels is attempted simply as a sampling of the script of desire around some of the major domains of ideological contest to have preoccupied the form in question, domains in the constitution of which, as already mentioned, the genre has been substantially invested since its genesis.
A further point, in conclusion. Since the intent is not just to examine these texts through a feminist gaze but also to explore them for a feminist angle, it will be the added burden of the studies following, to demonstrate the central thesis of this dissertation—that desire exists only in its relations, in the contexts and conjunctures, forms and modalities in which it finds expression—put to the service of a feminist politics of reading. All the novels I work with, consequently, are well-known narratives that both have been perceived as having something to say of social import on gender/ed relations and fairly often subjected to interpretation for that message. Each of them has been severally analysed yet still offers scope, with a change in emphasis, that is, to essay other readings, readings of desire.

280 Birthright might be the only exception here in terms of the exposure it has had in the English language. But here, too, despite its relatively recent appearance as a translated text, the novel has been reviewed in literary journals as well as national dailies. Then again, Vaasanthi is a popular writer in Tamil whose interest in gender issues is no secret outside the regional literary circuit.
Chapter 3: Nation, Community and Desire

To look at desire in conjunction with the categories of nation and community, both as it informs them and/or is informed by them, is inevitably to grapple with issues of identity, agency and interest along the twin axial scales of the personal-political and the individual-collective. It is to be aware, broadly speaking, of "[t]he tension between the pedagogical and the performative" that Homi Bhabha "identified in the narrative address of the nation" which "turns the reference to a 'people'—from whatever political or cultural position it is made—into a problem of knowledge that haunts the symbolic formation of social authority" (Nation and Narration 297). This chapter attempts to morph the graph of the "Nation" in Indian novels into a graph of multiple desires. That is, it concerns itself with some of the personationalities of desire that find graphic relief in the novel form. Lest there be any misunderstanding at this point, I should perhaps clarify that the word "community" is not explored here in its own right. Rather, it is deployed reductively in its potential constitution vis-à-vis the nation, whether as counter, prop, supplement, sublation or subreption.

As I see it, the idea of the Nation as a desirable formation of social polity began to take root in the Indian imaginary roughly in the second half of the nineteenth century. Since then, it has urged a dense concatenation of imaginings and inventions, investments and interests, expressions and impressions across the spectrum of social, political and cultural life in India (and continues to do so); it has waxed and waned in its capacity to fire the imagination of the "citizens" it has undertaken to represent from time to time and place to place in its career-graph; and it has assumed anything from a slightly to a vastly different cast in each of its articulations depending on the particularities of the inspirations drawn from and the aspirations drawn towards. In turn, it has also diversely but recursively ordered the public/political/cultural/private domains of human activity and

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281 Of course, I am not the only one who sees it as such. There is a sizeable body of scholarship that sees it much the same way, too numerous here to cite individually. And yes, this flies in the face of certain primordialist and perennialist readings of the Indian nation but I am okay with that. For a helpful introduction to some of the different kinds of nationalism, refer to Montserrat Guibernau and John Hutchinson edited, Understanding Nationalism.
habitation, prescribing and proscribing, assimilating and evacuating, fixing and unsettling subject positions according to the changing tenor of its utopian auguries. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya, the sahiya samrat of nineteenth century Bengal (Roy, Anandamath 16), is generally acknowledged to be one of the earliest and most influential “prophets” of a nascent Indian nationalism. And it is through his widely read novel Anandamath that I wish to explore this phenomenon.

**Anandamath: The Future Perfect**

Bankim’s Anandamath is a novel wholly dedicated to the chiliastic vision spelt out in its title. “Anandamath” or the “Abbey of Bliss,” as it is translated into English, is simply the ideal Indian nation. Of course, the manner in which it comes to embody this vision is far from simple. Consequently, and as a kind of scaffolding for the arguments that follow, I would like to introduce my engagement with the novel here by unfolding some way the throng of ideas, identities, affects and valuations wrapped into this semiotic pack.

To begin with, “Anandamath” is not just a trope that proleptically imagines the nation. In the novel it is also the idyllic hideout of the revolutionaries that in its secret location in the heart of the jungle, in its complete inaccessibility to strangers (read the uninitiated), in its aura of mystique, of almost sacral

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282 Nationalism as an “ideology” of the nation, as opposed to merely an “idea” of the nation, that is. Aurobindo Ghosh, for instance, proclaiming Bankim’s role as one of the “Makers of Modern India” writes that he gave to Indians the “mantra” for the “religion of patriotism” (as ctd. in Paranjape, “The Allegory of Rajmohan’s Wife” 144-45).

283 Refer to Meenakshi Mukherjee’s Realism and Reality for some of the translations of the novel into different Indian languages (197; n17). The latest translation of the novel into English is by Julius J. Lipner, called Anandamath, or The Sacred Brotherhood. In addition to Lipner’s text, I have consulted Aurobindo’s and Barindra Kumar Ghosh’s joint translation of the novel, Aurobindo’s unfinished individual venture available as part of his Complete Works, and Basanta Koomar Roy’s translation and adaptation of the text. Wherever I make direct use of these texts in my analysis, I cite them individually. I have desisted from taking Roy’s version to base my interpretations on, since this adaptation takes considerable liberties with the text, no doubt, to suit the nationalistic mood in 1941 when it was first published with the title “Dawn Over India.”

284 Incidentally, the phrase used as title by Naresh Chandra Sen-Gupta, in his translation of the novel into English.
inviolability effectively rehearses the grammar of Hindu temple architecture where the sanctum sanctorum or *garbagriha* that houses the principal deity is likewise situated deep in the recesses of the building, sheltering it, as it were, from the profanity of a too-humdrum sighting. The implications of this conflation of the idioms of the political and the religious, no doubt, are far reaching and, to my mind, central to the novel; however, more on that later. For the moment, the one point I wish to clarify is that “Anandamath” functions in the novel not only as a concept ripe for ideological mobilisation towards a desirable future but equally as a site and experience of lived reality set for amplificatory replication in a desiring present. And that’s not all either, since it is also described in the novel as “a great monastery engirt with ruined masses of stone” (Aurobindo 484); in other words, a surviving but largely forgotten relic of the past. The fact that “[a]rchaeologists would tell us that this was formerly a monastic retreat of the Buddhists and afterwards became a Hindu monastery” (Aurobindo 484), only suggests its composite identity, underlining its adaptability, its evident history of successively accommodating, supporting and symbolically representing disparate regimes of religious consolidation. Needless to say, in this capacity “Anandamath” is emblematic of India’s identity in and through her past, her syncretic culture, her capacity to assimilate and nurture diverse faiths as well as her ability to contain seemingly dissonant identities without fissuring into anomic catatonia. As an ancient ruin, it also stands for India’s derelict condition in the temporal present that engages the novel. Thus, India as the nation-that-was, as the nation-that-is and as the nation-that-will-be, all, find representation in the versatile expressions of “Anandamath.”

What’s more, its semantic pitch acquires another range altogether in the discursive echolalia set up with that other powerful trope in the novel, viz., the

285 I will be reading this embedding of “Anandamath” deep in the bowels of an impenetrable forest in a slightly different, but not unrelated, light a little later on.

286 That this is not achieved by way of simply confounding the past, present and future in an indistinguishable and eternal identity but, rather, by allowing their specificities to remain as part of a mutually constitutive, interactive continuum, is probably obvious.
“Mother.” Through metaleptic facilitation, both “Anandamath” and the “Mother” feed into the wealth of suggestions condensed in each other; that is, they become mutually implicated, though not by that reason simply identified. As mentioned before, this association gives a whole new dimension to the word, one that principally solicits my interest in the text here. After all, it is this very linkage that makes issues of gender central to any engagement with “Anandamath” and all that it stands for—issues that otherwise might well have remained latent or required laboured justification.

Then again, apart from the foregoing extrinsic reasons, “Anandamath” is signifecund because of its intrinsic lexical configuration as well. Being a portmanteau term it is redolent with the traces of meanings invoked independently by the components in its make-up viz., ananda and math. These vestigial attachments serve to vitally and substantially broaden the spectrum of signification available to the word as a whole. I’ll begin with ananda.

Often rendered into English as “bliss” this word, however, loses quite a bit of its resonance in translation, especially when coupled with an insensitivity to its cultural extraction.287 As a matter of fact, the word ananda has a hoary lineage, its provenance and currency in the philosophico-spiritual traditions of India making it a richly connotative term in its homegrown cultural context. Narendra Nath Bhattacharyya glosses it thus: “ananda[—]Bliss or pure bliss-consciousness in which the distinction of subject and object ceases. It is the state of mukti, moksha or nirvana in which the self becomes free from all fetters. In all Indian religious or philosophical traditions ananda or bliss is a characteristic of Brahman…” (Glossary 15).288 Indeed, it frequently appears as the suffix in metaphysical conceptual compounds such as satcitananda, brahmananda, etc. Vis-à-vis

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287 Admitted, “bliss” is an evocative word in its own right, frequently associated in western cultures with surcharged experiences of ecstasy, jouissance and such like. The Sanskrit emphasis though is better described as enstasy rather than ecstasy.

288 And if further reinforcements are needed, in Vedantic thought anandamayakosa is the highest of the panchakosha understanding of reality.
Bankim’s novel, the _ananda_ in “Anandamath” it should be clear then is not just a casual reference to some sort of ordinary political happiness, a vague and mundane sense of secular well-being, that would follow and prevail presumably in the wake of national independence (although such a condition is not necessarily precluded).\(^{289}\) It can equally, perhaps more keenly and compellingly, point to another order of reality where _ananda_ is only to be achieved when national independence itself becomes identified with the state of _satchitananda_ and political sovereignty means nothing short of the highest, actinic state of Self-realisation for a people. In this way, the word _ananda_ can be said to perform, at the very least, a dual function. On the one hand, it helps hail a utopia in the title. On the other, it embeds a definite orientation to the utopia so hailed.

Coming to the second part of this syzygy, here, too, it is evident that the cultural significance of “math” is somewhat flattened when we uncritically accept the common English translation of it as an adequate substitute. “Abbey,” it is true, retains the idea of a religious/spiritual establishment where monks/nuns, i.e., those who have undertaken a life of spiritual austerities, reside. And like with “math” so strongly identified with the vision of its founder, abbey, derived from the Aramaic word “abba” or father, also suggests the close association between the order concerned and the abbot/abbess that heads it. What gets etiolated, if not lost, however, is a sense of “mission” immediately available to Indian sensibilities in the word _math_.\(^{290}\) For, historically, _maths_ in India have never just been monasteries or ashrams where acolytes live soteriologically grounded lives practicing various spiritual _vratas_ in hermetic seclusion from the world around them. Rather, they have often functioned as spiritual seeding grounds that “train”

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\(^{289}\) Indeed, bliss itself should warn us against such a reading. National freedom must needs be untethered from its merely political circumscription for it to justify the inflationary description of bliss, leave alone, _ananda_.

\(^{290}\) The Indian faithscape is dotted with a plethora of _maths_ that span both historical and geographical location and continue to do so even today. Hence it is part of a continuous tradition of sorts. The most famous of these is the Shankaracharya _maths_ from older times and the Ramakrishna _maths_ from more recent times.
novitiates, who go, or get sent,\textsuperscript{291} out into the world to perfect their sadhana. Indeed, the spiritual discipline of saints and seekers attached to various maths has frequently trod the path of a dispassionate kriya or karma yoga, so that instead of an otherworldly renunciation, what has time and again been witnessed is an ascetic but active engagement with the affairs of this world. And the remarkable thing about this engagement is that quite apart from the expected fundamental tasks of providing spiritual and material succour to the needy, teaching and guiding, helping with various kinds of conservative social reform initiatives, etc., it also includes, in some form or another, that most calumnised of missionary activities, viz., "conversion." To reiterate the point made earlier, this, then, is the record of dedicated social service that is evocatively registered in the word math. Needless to say, in this instance, the word "math" as part of the title proves invaluable insofar as it helps validate and embed the entire syntax of disciplined-spiritual-adepts-with-a-mission that is so central to the novel in a civilisational ethos that is definitely indigenous, though not necessarily unique to India. By extension, in so doing, it also indigenises the struggle for independence undertaken by the Santans in the novel. That is to say, the word "math" can be seen to serve at least two interlinked functions: one, it opens up an enabling backdrop against which the action detailed in the novel gains coherence; and two, it works as a hyphen linking the ascetic revolutionaries of the novel to a pedigreed swadeshi lineage of spiritual activism.\textsuperscript{292}

All in all, therefore, "Anandamath" serves as the central leitmotif in the novel—one that not only unfolds a vision but also enfolds a world-view; one that not only constitutes an idea but also embodies a reality; one that not only translates as the "Abbey of Bliss" but equally well signifies as the "Mission of Bliss"; one that not only links and traverses the past, present and future of India but also represents and inhabits these fluid temporalities. And if the question is still posed as to what

\textsuperscript{291}Etymologically the word "mission" can be traced back to the root word "send."

\textsuperscript{292}For historical accounts of martial ascetic orders in India, refer to William R. Pinch's "Soldier Monks and Militant Sadhus" and David N. Lorenzen's "Warrior Ascetics in Indian History" in \textit{Who Invented Hinduism}?
avail such polysemia for the kind of study envisaged here, then, in answer, I re-
turn attention to what was suggested earlier, what, in fact, chiefly urged me to
initiate this exploration of the novel with a seemingly digressive scrutiny of its
title. I refer, of course, to the potential utility of the title, more specifically, to its
complex inscription, as a rough grid for delineating the flows of desire that
insufflate the narration of Anandamath.293 And so, to the novel.

Who that has read Anandamath can in any fairness deny that desire is key to it.
Indeed, its very prologue establishes as much. What may not be so free of
contention though is the kind, or more pertinently, kinds of desire that is signified
and their relative worth on the axiological scale that measures the novel. It is this
uncertain terrain that I try to resolve into some sort of clarity here. However, since
a detailed survey is all but ruled out by the scope of the present inquiry, I route
my analysis through a possible taxonomy for sorting out the tangle of desires and
their manifold issue in Bankim’s text.

As it seems to me, desire in Anandamath, can be conveniently slotted into three
broad categories, categories that are distinct yet not by that reason either discrete
or mutually antagonistic. These are, a) metaphysical desire, b) desire attached to
the nation, and c) other/quotidian kinds of desire.294 At the risk of anticipating

293 Julius Lipner’s translation of the novel, recently out, has an entirely different take of the title’s
significance. According to him “Abbey of Bliss is an “inappropriate translation of the Bengali
title.” While granting that the novel has a group of monks staying in a monastery, he believes,
“their base can hardly be described as an abbey of ‘bliss.’ The novel does not concern itself with
an active prayer life of this community of monks, and when the author on occasion describes the
meditations of some of the leading protagonists, these hardly evince a life of quiet mysticism or
blissfulness. On the contrary. These monks are activists, temporary crusaders in a patriotic cause.
They sally forth to fight, kill, loot ... and then return to their abbey. They do not reside in an abbey
of bliss” (44-45). Instead, Lipner holds that “from the point of nomenclature,” the monks were “an
elite of Anandas who, by definition, lived in ‘a monastery of Anandas’” (45). A footnote in his
Introduction goes on to say that according with his interpretation, “the compound anandamath
would resolve as follows: anandanam mathah, ‘The Monastery/Abbey of the Anandas’” (45; n79). This is a plausible though vapid interpretation doing nothing to the semantics of the text.
Moreover, as I hope to demonstrate, it turns on a limited reading of the word ananda, if not a
misunderstanding.

294 These categories extend beyond the desires to all the implications of the desires as well.
myself somewhat, I would further say that structurally desire attached to the nation holds centre-stage while metaphysical desire flanks it at either end in the novel and the other/quotidian kinds of desire exist as so many fillers in the narrative sequence. Likewise, functionally, desire attached to the nation serves as the dominant mobilising force, i.e., it is the magnetic field in and around which the other kinds of desire mentioned above gather and interact with each other. While what I call metaphysical desire, implications and all, reveals the novel’s fundamental moral-ethical universe, i.e., it is the ultimate touchstone and barometer of right conduct in Anandamath. And the third category, in its diverse elaborations, is useful as a convenient point of contrast and/or reinforcement for the other two kinds of desires detailed in the novel, i.e., it has utility as a foil against which the other desires gain a sharper focus. In what follows, I intend to take up each of these categories of desire for further elaboration in the order in which they have been listed. Needless to say, this ordering itself is far from accidental; it, in fact, precisely reflects my reading of the hierarchy of valuations that work the novel.

Metaphysical Desire

According to Christine Battersby, in Aristotelian traditions of thought “Metaphysics” is “synonymous with that which transcends the physical, and with the study of ‘being,’ ‘substance,’ ‘time,’ ‘space,’ ‘cause,’ ‘essence’ and identity” (The Phenomenal Woman 5). My use of the word “metaphysical” here is in some consonance with such a deployment of it. That is, by the word “metaphysical” I chiefly refer to a concern with the prakriti of life and being. And when it is tethered to desire, as it is here, I further imply a palpable move (impulsion/compulsion as well as strategy) towards an ontological resolution of some sort.

This is not to say that metaphysical desire and all that it is supposed to comprehend here is not available in the body of the text. As mentioned before, there is a consistent conflation of the religious and the political idiom in this novel. My point is that at the terminal points of the novel, metaphysical desire stands disengaged from its enmeshment with other desires and is thus available and visible independently.
As mentioned before, both the Prologue as well the ending of the novel appear to me to be centrally pre/occupied by such desire. I’ll begin with the Prologue.

This exordium presents a short mystical dialogue between a disembodied human voice and a non-human voice. It is set amidst a “wide interminable forest” and “in this interminable, impenetrable wilderness of blind gloom, it is night. The hour is midnight, and a very dark midnight...” (Aurobindo 471). The exchange itself is described thus:

In that limitless empty forest, in the solid darkness of that midnight, in that unimaginable silence there was a sound, “Shall the desire of my heart ever be fulfilled?” After that sound the forest sinks again into silence... A little while after, the sound came again, again the voice of man rang forth troubling the hush, “Shall the desire of my heart ever be fulfilled?” Three times the wide sea of darkness was thus shaken. Then the answer came, “What is the stake put down?” The first voice replied, “I have staked my life and all its riches.” The echo answered, “Life! It is a small thing which all can sacrifice.” What else is there? What more can I give?” This was the answer, “Thy soul’s worship.”

Critics are often wont to see this prologue as a narrative fragment extraneous to the plot of the novel but significantly texturing its meaning. As Sisir Kumar Das puts it:

Although this prologue does not have any nexus with the plot, it adds to the meaning of the text and focuses on the distinctive feature of Bankim’s patriotism, which is not only free from racial hatred and enhancement of prosperity of one’s own country at the cost of others’, but a manifestation of one’s love for mankind and God. (The Artist in Chains 130)

It is appreciated, in other words, for setting “the high serious tone of the novel” (The Artist in Chains 129). My own reading is at some variance with this critical consensus. For, I argue that the prologue is very much of a piece with the plot of the novel; indeed, that the other attributes ascribed to it are quite unsustainable, except at the most superfluous level and as a result of considerable over-reading and stilted accommodation, without such a connection.

To put it simply, the prologue, in my reckoning, constitutes the inaugural moment in the plot of the novel; the moment that makes it possible for the plot to unfold in the manner in which it does right till the end. What exactly do I mean by this? As has already been noted, this piece details what seems to be a communication of sorts between a human and a non-human voice. I read this cryptic exchange more
specifically as a dialogue between the questing self and the Soul, or the jiva and parmatman. That is to say, as an epiphanic moment which dispels the dark night of the soul. My reasons for doing so are two-fold and as follows. Firstly, the whole sequence in the prologue—from its setting in the forests to the insistent questioning of a lone human voice that culminates in the divinatory revelation—seems like a suggestive reproduction of the mystical experiences of the anchorites in the Upanishads. And secondly, this Upanishadic encounter comes with a twist in its tail/tale: the via illuminativa revealed is slightly different. Whereas for the sages of the Upanishads jnana is the way of enlightened being (jivanmukta); in the prologue of Anandamath it is bhakti (understood as devoted service) and a life of nishkama karma that is singled out as the means of fulfilling the “desire of my heart.” In other words, the soteriological ideal elaborated most famously in

296 Such a reading adds to “the high serious tone of the novel” since the dialogue in the prologue acquires the status of shruti—the highest and ultimate form of truth in Vedantic spiritual traditions.

297 In the Upanishads the atman (individual embodied soul) and parmatman (supreme Soul) are the same and the atman is believed to reside in the recesses of the heart. Thus, the question asked by the human voice “Shall the desire of my heart ever be fulfilled?” (Aurobindo 471) can plausibly be read as the desire of the atman for Self-Realisation. Such an interpretation is further buttressed by the fact that the voice that answers the question, though clearly non-human, is not given a supra human or even an explicitly Other identity. Rather, it is significantly called an “echo,” an echo of the voice of the heart’s desire. There is also enough textual evidence to suggest that this entire episode can equally well be read as a dramatisation of psychic inspace. After all, the aranya in Upanishads was valued not only because it was away from the distractions of the social (kshetra) but also because it was the tapovan, where you could submerge into the heart of darkness within and without and come up with the answers. The forest in the prologue seems to me to be an attempted recreation of this heart of darkness. Indeed, the analogy between the aranya and psychic space is explicitly available in the novel itself: “the beauty of the wood remained invisible like the beauty of soul in a poor man’s heart” (Aurobindo 480) This analogy recurs more suggestively in Part 1, chapter IV, where Kalyani goes into a trance and sees a vision, and in Part III, chapter 6 of the novel, where Bhavananda also enters “into the depths of the forest” and “deep thought” (Ghosh and Ghosh 135). The description provided of the forest here is comparable to the one in the prologue and he too is able to elicit a response to his heart’s desire. In fact, in this episode, the echo is specifically likened to the Infinite Spirit and the mystic Word of revelation/shruti. The novel seems, all in all, to suggest that in the forest, a seeker can find the correlation between dhyana and upasana, for, as the Gita (2.61) says, “In the dark night of all beings awakes to light the Tranquil man.”

298 But a bhakti and nishkama karma as we will see later that is based on jnana (knowledge) or right discrimination.
the Bhagvada Gita. As I see it, this intercalation of the Upanishadic Advaita Vedanta tradition with the variously Dvaita-Advaita doxology of the Vaishnava schools deriving from the Gita is important insofar as both these traditions offer powerful models for the kind of exchange depicted between self and Soul, bhakta and ishtadevata or seeker and Wise Preceptor in the prologue; insofar as together they provide an enabling context within which the affective and semantic range of the prologue can come into powerful play.

But that's not all. The conflation has another important function as well. It harnesses these traditions in a manner that makes them available for realistic use in an eighteenth century Bengali setting, i.e., the chronotope of the novel. And this brings us to the point on which I part ways with critical convention; on, and in which, is anchored my argument for an integrative understanding of the prologue. For, it is my contention that the questing soul/jiva/atman depicted in the prologue is none other than Mahatma Satyananda—the leader of the santans in the novel. That, it is he who having plunged deep into the heart of darkness and

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299 In fact, the analogy between forests and avidya or Maya is also there in the Gita (2.52), which talks about the mind leaving "behind its dark forest of delusion."

300 Sudipta Kaviraj in his "The Two Histories of Literary Culture in Bengal" mentions the premodern literary genre of mangalkavyas that were part of Bengali culture. According to him, these were "legends composed in celebration of deities that were meant to bring religious merit to the lives of their devotees... The goddesses Manasa and Candi were the most popular subjects of mangalkavya composition, though there were instances of kavyas of the same genre to the glory of Dharma and other gods" (516). In the eighteenth century, he says, Bharatcandra Raygunakar's work, Annadamangal, continued "the tradition of the medieval mangalkavya, but its focus on Annada, or Annapurna, divine figure from the central Sakta canon, rather than on a relatively marginal goddess, reflects its adaptation to the high Brahmancial religion" (528). For more details, refer to the essay. Bankim's Anandamath, I would like to suggest, is a nineteenth-century navalkavya dedicated to a deified Motherland that draws inspiration from this adaptive tradition of composition. Then again, according to Tapan Raychaudhuri the pre-nineteenth century Bengali religious sensibility was an admixture of a "domesticated religiosity," "ecstatic devotion of the Chaitanya movement," "the mysticism of folk cults like the Bauls and Sahajiyas...informed by 'god-madness,' an other-worldly indifference to material concerns," "the ascetic-esoteric traditions of tantra and yoga...marked by the mystical quest for ultimate realization as well as a lust for miraculous powers. The religious consciousness of an individual could simultaneously contain one or more of these traits ranging from simple-hearted piety to ambitious striving after supreme knowledge" (Perceptions, Emotions, Sensibilities 98-99). In other words, more or less, the faithscape of the warrior ascetics who become the purveyors of the metaphysics Bankim advances.
heard the Truth that echoes therein, proceeds to try and realise this metaphysical "satchitananda" in objective and political terms as "Anandamath."

Of course, apart from the many textual factors\textsuperscript{301} that make such a reading plausible, what clinches the matter for me is the way in which this perspective explains the entire action of the novel from beginning to end. The finale that has elicited embarrassed deprecations and flummoxed dismissals from critics who have judged it against the diktats of a narrow "realism,"\textsuperscript{302} seems neither outré nor

\textsuperscript{301} There are many factors that favour such a reading. For one, it can be argued that his name Mahatma Satyananda, roughly translated as Great Soul Truth Bliss, refers to his having glimpsed the truth. Secondly, his mission is in accordance with the principles of bhakti and nishkama karma mentioned in the prologue. Thirdly, his hideout/ashram or anandamath is also in the midst of a thick forest, thus providing an externalised substantiation of the sequence mentioned in the prologue.

\textsuperscript{302} According to Sisir Kumar Das, "the appearance of this strange physician is the height of illogicality, which not only spoils the grandeur of the structure so meticulously built, but effaces the historicity of the action and introduces an irrelevance in the narrative" (The Artist in Chains 136). Tapan Raychaudhuri says, Anandamath "is a story of national failure on which an emotionally acceptable explanation is forced artificially, possibly for political reasons" (Europe Reconsidered 129). Another one writes, the powerfully conceived and wisely executed plan of the book points to only one conclusion: the establishment of an empire by the Santans. No other indication occurs in the whole range of the text about a surrender of power to the British..... It is a tragic debacle of art and life. The story does not move to a finale of compulsion by its own laws.... The craft has become stagey, flawed and patched up in the process... this is a real false exit.... (Banerjee, Bankim Chandra 126-127)

I believe such conclusions result because of a) a narrow understanding of the craft of the Indian novel. In this regard a conversation between Mulk Raj Anand and Rabindranath Tagore on the subject of Bankim's Anandamath might prove instructive. Referring to Anandamath, Tagore says:

MRA: Fable—That is the right definition. \textit{It is not a novel in the English tradition.} Most modern British novel are realistic!... All naturalistic...
Tagore: Bankim Chandra's sanyasis are fabulous men, rather like characters in \textit{mahabharata}—where God Krishna appears as a character among princes, Princesses, sages, heroes, noblemen, evil courtiers, soldiers! So this novel is a legend of the struggle for freedom against John Company's extortionate rule of the 18th century...
MRA: It's a recital then and not a novel....
Tagore: ... like our epic recitals.... \textit{It may be read as a legendary folk tale of the 18th century!} (Roy, Anandamath 10; emphasis mine)

As I mentioned above, a navalkavya. And b) a misrecognition of the thematic crux of the novel. Anandamath is not just about India's political swaraj. It is about a people finding true Self-realisation. To this extent, its focus is more dharmic rather than nationalistic as this word is commonly understood.
otiose when viewed in such a light. In fact, it can be seen adding a certain symmetry to the novel’s structure. Let me explain.

The chapter in question depicts an encounter between a mysterious Sage and Mahatma Satyananda. The enigmatic stranger is clearly invested with a mystic aura and authority. From his interactions with Satyananda, it is further clear that he is not only known to the latter but also wields considerable influence over him. The exact nature of their relationship, however, is not made explicit. Their final meeting occurs in the immediate aftermath of the Santan victory in the battle against the British, and centres round a conflict of understanding. The Sage counsels Satyananda to give up his crusade against the British because

“Unless the English rule this land, there is no chance of the renaissance of the eternal religion.... The true Hindu religion is based on knowledge, not on action. That knowledge is of two kinds;—secular or external and spiritual or internal. The inner spiritual knowledge is the chief part of true religion. But unless secular knowledge about the outside world comes the other knowledge about the inner world cannot grow.... There is not much material knowledge in the country now, there is none capable of teaching it.... The English are past masters in the knowledge, pertaining to the material world. They are adepts in the art of teaching. So we shall make the British our rulers... so long as the Hindus do not become wise, worthy and strong, British rule will endure.”(Ghosh and Ghosh 191-92)

Satyananda, however demurs and their last exchange is described thus:

As if sparks flew from Satyananda’s eyes. He said, “I shall drench the mother earth with the enemy’s blood and thus make her fruitful.”

The Sage said, “You will die in ignorance? Come, attain knowledge first. There is the Mother’s temple on the peak of the Himalayas, from there I shall reveal and show you her true form.”

Saying this the sage grasped Satyananda’s hand. How sublime! In that magnificent Vishnu temple before the huge four-handed image in dim light stood the two great personalities—talent and genius incarnate—one holding the hand of the other. Who has gripped whom? Knowledge stands wedded to devotion—religion has embraced Karma or action—renunciation is coupled with success—Kalyani has

303 At the end of Part III when Satyananda is alone, an unidentified personage comes to him. The way in which he announces his presence—“touching [Satyananda’s] head”(Ghosh and Ghosh 160), the way in which Satyananda reacts, as well as the exchange that takes place between them, suggests it’s the same Sage. Their dialogue there is as follows. The unnamed person says, “I have come.” In response to which Satyananda “got up, started and said eagerly, ‘Have you come? Why?’ The one who had come said, ‘The appointed time is completed.’ The Brahmachari [Satyananda] said, ‘Oh my Lord! Excuse me today. On the next full moon day in the month of Magh I shall do what you require of me.’” (Ghosh and Ghosh 160). Without fixing in any wise the mysterious stranger’s identity, the language of the sage here is teasingly suggestive of Yama, the god of Death as well as Justice—the one that comes for souls when their appointed time is over. This association is further fleetingly suggested in the episode between Shanti, Jibananda and the mysterious Healer in the penultimate chapter, but more on that later.
grasped the hand of Santi. This Satyananda is Santi; this Sage is Kalyani. Satyananda is success, and this Saint stands for renunciation. Renunciation came and took success away. (Ghosh and Ghosh 193-194)

As I see it, this chapter constitutes a sequel as well as a return to the prologue. It’s a sequel inasmuch as it furthers what is set in motion by the prologue; it’s a return insofar as it constitutes a re-presentation of the prologue. That is to say, in more ways than one, this chapter gives shape to what was meta-physical in the prologue. After all, if the prologue stages a dialogue between two disembodied voices; then the dialogue is between incarnate beings in the conclusion (if Mahatma Satyananda is the questing soul of the prologue, then the Sage is simply the echo he had heard, the Mystic Word). Similarly, if the former dramatises psychic interiority and subjectivity then the latter exteriorises and objectifies them. And if the former is laconic in the answer it holds out as an ontological resolution for metaphysical desire, then the latter is almost prolix in its clarification of the same. Indeed, even at the formal level, the incorporation of the prologue (a feature that would be conventionally deemed metaphysical to the corpus of the novel proper), its integration into the body of the text, is facilitated and validated considerably by the conclusion.

Thus, in my opinion, both the prologue and the conclusion are centrally concerned with questions of metaphysical desire. In fact, since they are organically linked

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304 The first speech of the sage quoted above provides a clear-cut expatiation on the right way of being. That is, the metaphysical desire that prompted the exchange in the prologue to begin with. The conclusion further emphasises that bhakti and nishkama karma must be based on knowledge of the truth. This is where Satyananda is shown to have gone wrong. His bhakti becomes shortsighted and alloyed with attachment to the fruit of action, i.e., freeing the Motherland from foreign domination. This clouds his powers of discrimination. In fact, as a suggestive frame for the exchanges between Satyananda and the sage, I believe, S. B. Chandekar’s views might be helpful. According to him,

[An] individual’s experience generally tends to mysticism. It is subjective and hence it is called svanubhava or paroksa jnana. Very often svanubhava is mistaken for anubhava or aparoksanubhuti. But svanubhava requires to be tested on the objective plane under the guidance of a tattvadarsin who enlightens the individual talent and sets him in harmony with the universe. This tattvadarsin is Sadguru, the universal Man who demonstrates the basic unity of individual and the universe and imparts the direct vision of Truth. Prajna which is purified enough to receive Sadguru’s vision is regarded as Rambhara prajna. Sadguru’s anubhava is known as divine vision: Divya-caksu or Divya-drsti. Divya-caksu is the climax of the evolution of human consciousness. (“Evolution of Human Consciousness”)

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with each other through the body of the novel, what they achieve is a progressive realisation/materialisation of the "metaphysical," a normalisation of the "paranormal," an incorporation of the "spiritual" in the regular scheme of things; revealing this as integral to a condition of entelechy, in the process.305

Desire Attached to the Nation

According to Geoffrey Bennington, "At the origin of the nation, we find a story of the nation’s origin" ("Postal Politics and the Institution of the Nation" 121). One of the stories we are certain to find at the origin of the Indian nation is that which is inscribed in Bankim’s Anandamath. This novel is rightly (dis?)credited for the early institution and dissemination of that cultural, political and religious icon we popularly know today as Mother India or Bharat Mata.306 My aim here is to focus on the kind of desires that coalesce in and around this figuration in Anandamath.

What’s immediately noteworthy in this regard is that though there is uniformity in the anthropomorphization of the nation as Mother, Mother herself, as

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305 In this regard, it might be profitable to recall what Bankim wrote about the role of religion/dharma in ancient Hinduism:

For, religion to the ancient Hindu had no name because his conception of it was so broad so as to dispense with the necessity of a name.... To the Hindu his whole life was religion. To other people’s, their relation to God and to the spiritual world are things sharply distinguished from their relations to man and to the temporal world. To the Hindu, his relations to God and his relations to man, his spiritual life and his temporal life are incapable of being so distinguished. They form one compact and harmonious whole to separate which into its component parts is to break the entire fabric. (as qtd. in Banerjee “Bankimchandra on Dharma and Anusilan” 75)

306 As Sabyasachi Bhattacharya points out, there are indigenous traditions linking land and mother. To quote him, “The saying ‘Janani janma-bhumischa swargadapi gariyasi’ (the mother and land of birth are greater than heaven) occurred in the versions of Valmiki’s Ramayana current in Bengal. And Bankim in one of his essays quotes from Manu’s text a passage where the earth is likened to the mother” (78) The endnote to that statement identifies “Dyava-Prithvi” as the essay in question (117; n19). This is important to remember since the convention among critics is to see in Bankim’s nationalism mainly the influence of Western ideologies. For instance, refer to Jasodhara Bagchi’s essay “Positivism and Nationalism,” where she reads Bankim’s writings only in light of an “invention of tradition” facilitated and catalysed by Western ideologies (Ideals, Images and Real Lives 184-189). In the interests of accuracy, it will only be fair to mention that the novel never explicitly calls its figuration Mother India. The Mother is motherland, identified only by association in the cultural imaginary with Bengal and India. Here, I have throughout accepted that association of the Mother with the nation.
represented, has many faces, dons many guises in the novel. As such any analysis of this trope must necessarily take into account its different facets.

At a rough estimate, I would say that the “Mother” is represented to us in at least seven different ways. It goes without saying, of course, that none of these are absolutely different. Rather, the difference is best understood as the elaboration of a multifaceted yet integrated vision anchored in a synthetic Hindu ethos. For, as Makarand Paranjape observes, “[w]hat Bankim does” throughout the novel “is to identify India as Mother herself, the consort and energy of Vishnu, the sustainer of the Universe” (“The Spirit of the Nation”).

Our very first introduction to this trope is in Part 1, Chapter 10 of the novel where Bhavananda, one of the Santans, breaks into a thrilling rhapsody, famous as “Bande Mataram.” This hymnody deifies and mythologises the ecological; it uses the “metaphor of landscape” to sketch “the inscape of national identity” (Homi K. Bhabha, “DissemiNations,” Nation and Narration 295). Its mediation in the text is predominantly oral-aural; that is, it lacks an immediately tangible visual correlative. This lack however is richly supplied by what I identify as representations two, three, four and five. I am referring, of course, to the set of idolatrous images revealed to Mahendra by Mahatma Satyananada within the garbagriha of his “Anandamath.” The first of these shows “an image of enchanting beauty, lovelier than Lakshmi and Saraswati, more splendid with opulence and lordship” who sat “on Vishnu’s lap.” “The Gandharva and Kinnara and God and elf and giant paid her homage” (Aurobindo 503). At this juncture, Mohendra’s bewildered “Who is she?” is only answered with the unhelpful “It is the Mother,” “She whose children we all are” and an assurance that “In time you will recognise her.” The next three images that Satyananda shows Mohendra are of the “Mother as she was,” i.e., the splendid Jagaddhatri “Protectress of the world, wonderful perfect rich with every ornament,” “the Mother as she now is,”

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307 Even Kali, a predominantly Shakta and/or Shaiva goddess is co-opted into this Vaishnava scheme where Vishnu is all in all.
i.e., “Kali enveloped in darkness, full of blackness and gloom. She is stripped of all, therefore naked. Today the whole country is a burial ground, therefore is the Mother garlanded with skulls. Her own God she tramples under her feet,” and the “Mother as she shall be,” i.e., the image of the “Ten-armed Goddess...laughing and radiant.... with the regions for her arms, wielder of manifold weapons, trampler down of her foes, with the lion-heart for the steed of her riding; on her right Lakshmi as Prosperity, on her left Speech, giver of learning and science, Kartikeya with her as Strength, Ganesh as Success” (Aurobindo 503-04). As mentioned before, these images are more complex in their modes of mediation, combining both the discursive as well as the scopic. This is followed up by the representation of Mother India available in the oneiric vision narrated by Kalyani. According to Kalyani she was transported in her dream to an ethereal realm of effulgence—later to be identified as Vaikuntha, the heavenly abode of Vishnu. It is here that she has her first vision of the Mother. As she recounts,

In front of the Four-Armed another woman’s form seemed to be standing. She too was luminous, but surrounded by clouds so that the light could not well manifest itself; it could only dimly be realised that one in the form of a woman wept, one full of heart’s distress, one worn and thin, but beautiful exceedingly.... It seemed to me that the worn and cloud-besieged woman pointed to me and said, “This is she, for whose sake Mohendra will not come to my bosom.” Then ...it seemed that the Four-Armed said to me “Leave your husband and come to Me. This is your Mother, your husband will serve her; but if you stay at your husband’s side, that service cannot be given” (Aurobindo 509-10)

This sequence is remarkable in that it completes the deification of Motherland by giving her a voice to go with the face she wears. And with dreams as the vehicle of its communication its mediation is mostly psychological and affective. As for the last of the representations I have identified in *Anandamath*, this is to be found in Part 3, chapter 7, when Mahatma Satyananda tells Shanti, “‘So far I have called only our country Mother, nothing else, for except for that land rich in waters and rich in fruit, we have no other mother. Now I call you Mother too; as a mother do the work of your child and bring it to fruition. Do that, and also protect Jibananda’s life and your own’” (Lipner 202). Shanti, through this address, is willy-nilly rendered the *sakshatrupa* of the Motherland, embodying it in her flesh and blood. Needless to say, this representation is primarily effectuated through a discursive transfer of affects and effects.
Given these subtle differentiations in the representations of the nation as Mother, it should come as no surprise that the desire they generate and corral around them, both independently as well as cumulatively, reveal a commensurate variation. What I propose now is to use Mohendra Singha’s reactions and responses to these representations as benchmarks for tracking the broad trend of desire attached to the nation in the novel. 308

As I see it, Mohendra’s conversion to patriotism reveals at least four stages in a developing trail of desire. Mohendra’s first encounter with the notion is in the song “Bande Mataram” sung by Bhavananda. Having heard a snatch of it, he says, “That is the country, it is not the Mother.” To which Bhavananda responds with the credo of the Santans,

We recognize no other Mother. Mother and Motherland is more than heaven itself. We say the motherland is our mother. We have neither mother, nor father, nor brother nor friend, wife nor son nor house nor home. We have her alone, the richly-watered, richly fruited, cool with delightful winds, rich with harvests. (Aurobindo 497)

The description that follows, reads “Then Mohendra understood and said, ‘Sing it again.’” By the end of the chapter, Mohendra is moved enough to think about joining the order of the Children but is held back because he baulks at the idea of giving up his wife and daughter. This reluctance, however, is overcome by the set of visual representations of the Mother he is shown soon after by Satyananda in ‘Anandamath.” From reverence for the image of Jagaddhatri, to fear at the image of Kali and “awe and love” for the image of the Mother as she shall be, Mohendra runs the gamut of emotions that finally convince him to say, “I shall take up this nightly vow.” 309 And in running this gamut, as mentioned before, he reveals the initial inspiration as well as the incremental specialisation and intensification of desire that suggests its particular pattern of development in the novel. That is to

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308 My choice of character is influenced by the fact that at the beginning of the novel he is the ideal type of the potential recruit to the cause of the Mother.

309 Even the dream sequence of Kalyani as it is narrated to him, only serves in the end to reinforce his graph of desire. After all, in this the Mother is shown actively soliciting her son’s services on her behalf.
say, at the most obvious and general level, the characterisation of the nation as Mother (e.g., in the song) appeals to the primal bonds that secure a mother-child relation. It significantly redefines and homogenises identities by addressing a heterogeneously affiliated people (in this case Mohendra) as the children (santans) of the Mother.310 The deification of this Mother works the further alchemy that turns a human and ultimately selfish attachment or a merely political projection into a purer spiritual love and devotion, i.e., bhakti. When this deified Mother is thought/shown to be woebegone, it follows that her children-devotees or santan-bhaktas should want to take it upon themselves to try and alleviate her sorrow (i.e., take to the path of action or karma yoga). And if this requires a time-bound, goal-bound renunciation of all else, then what surprise that such sacrifice should also be actively desired. In other words, the essential syntagma that goes into the making of a Santan.311

Other/Quotidian Kinds of Desire
As the heading suggests, my reference here is to all the mundane and/or physical kinds of desire that punctuate the narrative of Anandamath. Without putting too fine a point on it, I would say that these could be listed as falling under a) conjugal/familial desires, b) sexual desires, and c) other physical/material desires. In the first category would be included, inter alia, the expressions of conjugal love between Kalyani and Mohendra, the love they feel for their daughter Sukumari as parents, the sibling love between Nimi and Jibananda, the love of Nimi as the desiring mother for Sukumari. All these are in one way or another socially authorised expressions of desire. That is, they are in accordance with social customs and conventions, with lokadharma. The desires that move Shanti and Jibananda vis-à-vis each other would also fall under this classification, except

310 This is important, for attachment to a mother is a general experience, possible for men and women, rich and poor, high and low castes.

311 Of course, in tracing the above graph of desire, I have engaged neither with its gendered, nor with its communal, implications. Apart from the fact that these will be taken up for analysis later, my present aim was only to identify the broad pattern of desire that is attached to the idea of the nation as it may be seen advanced in Anandamath.
that despite being within the sanctioned bounds of marriage, it skirts the transgressive: Jibananda's passion for Shanti after joining the Order of the Santans clearly violates his vow of renunciation, while Shanti's relation to Jibananda goes well beyond the pale of conventional stridharma. The second category refers to all manner of concupiscence deemed illegitimate by social diktat and therefore looked upon as licentious. Instances of this would include the passion entertained by Bhavananda for Kalyani, the importunate solicitations of the anonymous sanyasi for Shanti during the time she had run away from her marital home and joined a group of ascetics incognito, as also the salacious invitation extended to Shanti by Captain Thomas during their brief and incidental meeting in the woods. As for the third category, prominent inclusions in it would be the reported extremes of hunger at the beginning of the novel, the, once again, reported looting sprees of the Santans towards the end of the novel, as well as the actions of the robbers who abduct Kalyani. Insofar as these physical and material appetites are shown operating in extreme conditions of social anomie they represent a distorted and/or asuric form of quotidian desires.

As already stated, to my mind, the principal utility of the different desires assembled above is as a foil to the other two kinds of desire that have been identified. In this regard they occupy either one of two principal positions, that of feeder-prop or of counterforce. That is to say, the socially sanctioned desires of the conjugal/familial variety highlighting in their very ordinariness the extraordinary nature of the desires deemed metaphysical and nationalistic here, play the former role while the socially suspect desires edifying the same in a contrastive mode, play the latter. Given that both these functions seem only too evident to require a case-by-case elaboration, I will be taking up only one instance here for the purposes of an illustrative analysis. The instance I have in mind is the desires manifested by/in the band of robbers who kidnap Kalyani and her daughter.
According to the novel these thugs are “corpselike-figures,” “withered,” “black” and “naked” (Aurobindo 478), who not only kidnap Kalyani and her daughter, robbing them of all their possessions in the process, but who subsequently also turn upon their own leader in a frenzy of animalistic hunger. Having killed him, they immediately think of eating him. Soon, however, they give up the idea of feeding on his famished cadaver, tempted instead by the prospect of the more succulent repast available in their hapless hostages. It is with these cannibalistic appetites that the crew of ruffians resumes its search for Kalyani and her daughter, who, in the meanwhile had made good their escape.

Even this brief account is enough to highlight the salient ways in which this sequence functions as an effective counterpoint to the other kinds of desires classified above. Most obviously, while both the metaphysical and nationalistic desires reveal an ethico-spiritual base or dharmic adhaar, the desires of the robbers underscore and represent conditions of apadharma or social anomie.312 The novel admits as much when, alluding to the robbers and their conduct, it says, “In certain conditions man is no better than a ferocious wild beast” (Aurobindo 481). Thus, their grotesque selfishness, greed, cruelty and barbarism, all serve well to accentuate the bhakti, selflessness and nishkama karma that inspires the other two types of desire. Indeed, if anything, their function as a foil is even more pointed and extensive when they are seen in juxtaposition with the Santans.313 After all, like the Santans, the robbers too constitute a group of men who camp in the forest; they too live away from regular society; they too conduct heists and hoard up wealth (in fact, Mohendra Singha actually mistakes the Santans to be

312 The robbers are emblematic of a general populace that has lost its ethico-spiritual bearings. The first chapter gives us a graphic account of the devastation and deprivation caused by a famine of epidemic proportions and duration. It also describes a situation where anarchy prevails because the ruler who is by traditional writ responsible for protecting his praja and maintaining order in his realm through force of danda when necessary is guilty of dereliction of duty. That is to say, it describes a world where adharma runs loose. Later in the novel, this crisis-situation is evoked in the image of Kali, who, forgetting herself and all dictates of dharma, dances naked on the supine body of her own lord and master.

313 My reference here is only to the core group of Santans and their actions.
robbers before he learns better). But this is where their similarities end. For, while the robbers are shown preying on an abla nari, i.e., Kalyani, the Santans are shown coming together for the succour of another, i.e., Motherland;\(^{314}\) while the robbers are purely selfishly motivated, the Santans are mostly selflessly motivated; while the robbers abuse, beat and eventually kill their leader, the Santans show nothing but reverence, love and obedience to their leader; while the robbers inhabit the forests without either seeing it or appreciating it (they inhabit the forest as the heart of darkness), the Santans both know and appreciate the forest much better (the forest is locus of their “anandamath” \(^{315}\) ); while the robbers descend to the level of the sub-human and the beastly, the Santans, albeit in flashes, rise to the level of the super and/or supra human;\(^{316}\) while the robbers incarnate the depravities of adharma, the Santans flesh out the sublimities of dharma, and so on and so forth. All in all, thus the description of the robbers can be seen as facilitating a series of contrasts that subtly and effectively valorise everything that is antithetical to them.

That’s as far as my working taxonomy of desire in Anandamath goes. What remains, is to read more closely the idea of the nation that emerges through the mesh of these desires, especially with a view to teasing out some of the gendered implications that might lie therein.

In an article cited earlier, Makarand Paranjape makes out a case for looking at India’s political history through the eyeglasses of spirituality. As he puts it, “the birth of political freedom was an outcome of our spiritual expansion and self-apprehension” (“The Spirit of the Nation”), not vice-versa. Whatever its value and

\(^{314}\) Also, in the early parts of the novel, they rob the government treasuries because, as mentioned before, the rulers have forsaken their rajdharma, i.e., the responsible dispatch of their governmental duties.

\(^{315}\) In light of the reference earlier to the forest as the human heart that houses the soul in its recesses, such awareness, or lack thereof, is immensely significant.

\(^{316}\) The difference in their physical descriptions bear this out as well; especially in the contrastive descriptions of the leader of the robbers and the leader of the Santans.
feasibility for purposes of historiography, I believe Paranjape’s perspective supplies a useful insight into the ideological underpinnings of Bankim’s *Anandamath*. For, as stated earlier, in this novel it is a mistake to read the merely political project of nation building as an end in itself. Rather the particular démarche gains validity only as part and parcel of a larger metaphysical enterprise so that even as the latter is conflated with the former in the apotheosis that is the Mother, it nonetheless precedes and exceeds the same. This is confirmed even in the structure of the novel where, to repeat myself, central preoccupations with the national are bracketed by the metaphysical much as the trisyllabic nature of Brahman as *satyam* elaborated in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*.

As a starting premise, then, the idea of the nation that I find overwhelmingly articulated in *Anandamath* is that of the national as a modality of the spiritual. The remainder of this study probes the constitutive scope and implications of this national/notional entity as a gendered polity.

If the nation is Mother, then it follows that the most authentic subjects of this nation are, and a tautology becomes unavoidable here, those that see it as Mother, i.e., the Mother’s children. In *Anandamath*, since the nation is indeed Mother, it does not take a genius to work out who its foremost subjects are. Helpfully, if a trifle unimaginatively, called the Santans, the Order of the Children, in fact, represents not only the premier citizenry of the nation-to-be but also its constitutional framework. As a result, it presents itself as just the site in which to ground this inquiry.

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... *te devah satyam evopasate, tad etat try-aksaram: sa-ti-yam iti. Sa ity ekam aksaram; ti ity ekam aksaram, yam ity ekam aksaram: prathama uttame aksare satyam, madhyato ‘nrtam; tad etad anrtam ubhayatah satyena parighitam satyabhuyam eva bhavati. Naivam vidvamsam amrtam hinasti*

...Those gods meditated on the real. That consists of three syllables, *sa, ti, yam*: *sa* is one syllable, *ti* is one syllable, and *yam* is one syllable. The first and the last syllables are the truth; in the middle is untruth. This untruth is enclosed on both sides by truth; it partakes of the nature of truth itself. Him who knows this, untruth does not injure.

(Radhakrishnan 292-93; BU V.5.1)
Structurally speaking, and pace Andersen’s flat egalitarianism, what is witnessed amongst the Santans is an assumptive consanguinity derived from an individualised vertical affiliation to a consecrated Motherland that is mediated through a stratified chain of command under the direction of a Big Brother kind of figure, here personified in Mahatma Satyananda. Far from taking a modern, democratic and secular model as its inspiration, thus, the national ideal in Anandamath is premised on a selective combination of the feudal, military and religio-tutelary guru-shishya paramparas of traditional sociality. For present purposes I think it best to vet this reticulate field through a set of three related concerns: a) the specific imagining of the Mother, b) the implied and actual composition of the Santans, and c) the significance of the programme of national resurgence in the overall moral-ethical universe of the novel.

318 According to Benedict Andersen, “regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail...the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.” It is also “imagined as sovereign because the concept was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm” (7).

319 According to Satyananda, explaining the Santan organisation to Mohendra, “There are two kinds of santan ... those who have been initiated and those who have not. The latter are either householders or beggars. They appear when it is time to do battle, and after they’ve received the share of the loot or some other reward, they go away. But those who are initiates have renounced everything. They [the latter group] are the leaders of our Order” (Lipner 178-79).

320 Dipesh Chakrabarty, in his chapter, “Family, Fraternity, Salaried Labor,” offers a useful account of the difference between the national fraternity as it obtained in India, and the West. According to him, Fraternity in the Lockean schema was predicated on the emergence of private property and the political death of parental/paternal authority. The conceptual history of modern patriarchy in Bengali nationalism differs on these critical points. Although private property was a condition that enabled the new fraternity imagined in Bengali nationalism, it was never stipulated as a requirement in Bengali nationalist thought that the political authority of the father be destroyed before the brothers’ compact could come into being. Fraternity in Locke’s treatise was founded in the same principle/myth that underlies civil society, the myth of contract. Fraternity in Bengali nationalism was thought of as representing a natural rather than contractual solidarity of brotherhood. European bourgeois assumptions regarding autonomous personhood based in self-interest, contract, and private property were subordinated in Bengal to this idea of “natural” brotherhood. The Bengali (male) desire for a modern patriarchy was thus predicated on a rejection of the model of the “possessive” individual of Lockean thought. The history of this nationalism thus allows us to analyze a colonial modernity that was intimately tied to European modernity but that did not reproduce the autonomous “individual” of European political thought as a figure of its own desire. (Provincializing Europe 217-18)
The "Mother" in *Anandamath* is unequivocally part of a Hindu imaginary, a latecomer to its preponderant league of sectarian divinities. Her communal identity, however, is not just a matter of ascriptive and idolatrous institution. It is also implicitly reinforced through her iconographic and oneiric manifestations in the novel. That is to say, folded into the details of her *shringara*, speech and mien are the genres of experience, the protocols of being, that have "Hindu Woman," more specifically "upper-caste Hindu Woman" written all over them. Seeing how national community is forged through uterine links, this imagining of the Mother as Hindu obviously comes with the unwritten corollary that her "legitimate" children, i.e., the national community, would also be upper-caste Hindu. While this sets in place a communal and caste dynamics of no small significance, what interests me here are the filters operative along another axis, i.e., the gender line. For, the normatively upper-caste Hindu community of the Santans, as we discover, is also normatively male. *Prima facie*, there seems little cause to link such screenings with the persona of the Mother. Upper-caste Hindu mothers, after all, do have sons as well as daughters! A peep beneath the surface however yields a hidden connection, an *upanishad*, if you like, which for me is key to the grammar of gender relations in *Anandamath*, in general, and it's imagined national community, in particular.

What I find, in brief, is that the dominant coding of the woman, even as Mother, in *Anandamath*, takes place within and under the sign of the *pativrata*. Furthermore, that, it is the cultural logic mobilised in and around this semiotic which supplies the e/motive force of national organisation in the novel. For instance, the Santans, i.e., the only recognised national community in the novel,

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321 The injunction prescribing *anuloma* marriages would secure this. It'll be only fair to clarify here that the vow which the Santans are supposed to take during their Initiation into the Order requires them to renounce caste, if only temporarily. As Satyananda says, "All the Children are of equal standing. Under the terms of this great vow there is no difference between a Brahmin and a Shudra" (Lipner 181). The casteist bias, asserted above, would lie in the terms of inclusion into the Order. For, the practices, signifiers, symbolic ideals, taken to be the norm amongst the Santans, are identifiably upper caste.

322 The way Manabendra Bandopadhyay sees it is that "Bankim visualizes the woman of the new era not as a mother but as the beloved or the wife" ("My Husband, Good or Bad" 130).
are a fraternity not because of whimsical misogyny or pragmatics. Rather, theirs is a compulsory homosociality that represents only the public/political/outer/visible/material/exercised/male-masculine domain of the national community, the flip side of which and always implied in which is its private/domestic/inner/hidden/spiritual/untouched/female-feminine realm. That is to say, the “sacred brotherhood” of the Santans, far from signifying the expropriation of women from the national body, invokes a traditional demarcation of space, time, affect and action to represent a segregated focus on one dimension of reality, a focus that nonetheless recognises the other dimension as a continuous and necessary presence. Indeed, contrary to superficial impressions, the two spheres are not simply complementary either. For the public domain is clearly subordinated to the private in the novel both as evident and accredited knowledge: its ideal function being to protect the private domain that at once constitutes its dharmic essence, its inspiration as well as

323 To say, for instance, that since the Santans are a militia group engaged in guerilla warfare, women are excluded from its membership only because of their assumed unfitness for the job at hand. Without going into the larger debate on the rights and wrongs of such presumptions, this reasoning fails on its own grounds. For Shanti, even after having unequivocally “proved” her prowess, is allowed admittance to the group only in disguise as a man.

324 Of course, none of these categories are neatly reducible to each other. In the novel, the gendered division of spaces is buttressed by the frequent allusions that various Santans make to the homes and family ties they have left behind to fulfil the vow of duty to the Mother, which, paradoxically, is also seen in familial terms. It is, moreover, implied in Satyananda’s admonition of Shanti’s transgression of her proper sphere as the sahadharmini of her husband.

325 I am referring, for instance, to the gendered schematic of virya and shringara.

326 As against the complete breakdown of public and government morality or rajdharma, the conjugal ties between Kalyani and Mohendra, Shanti and Jibananda, even Nimi and her anonymous husband represent the incorruptibility of the private sphere. Kalyani’s rejection of Bhavananda’s solicitations under conditions of extreme duress, once again, underscores its superiority.

327 The ending of the novel explicitly evaluates both and finds that the public is only useful insofar as it serves to strengthen the private for the private in the absence of public dharma does tend to become vitiated—precisely the predicament of the Mother. Refer, for instantiation, to the revelatory speeches of the sage to Satyananda at the very end of the novel. I have also quoted some of this above.

328 Obviously, this accords with the second of the two formulations that Anupama Roy identifies vis-à-vis the domestic space, and by extension, the “Indian woman,” in nationalist writings of the nineteenth century. According to Roy, one view was
counterpart. No prizes for guessing, of course, which symbol best captures this private domain! As I see it, the latter appears in *Anandamath* to be principally organised under the rubric of a sacred conjugality that is anchored in the aforementioned ideal of the *pativrata*.\(^{329}\)

But what exactly is this ideal and why am I so convinced that the dominant coding of woman in *Anandamath*, even as Mother, occurs under its auspices? To answer the first question, the *pativrata* is simply every Hindu woman who lives by her *stridharma*, a *dharma* that dictates that her husband is her God, literally and that, for her own salvation, she owes him devoted and unquestioning service. Since she is spiritually strong but physically frail,\(^{330}\) her *shastric* inscription is also that of an *abla nari* (helpless woman) in need of male “protection”—her husband’s while he is alive and her sons’ thereafter. Needless to say, in light of the fact that marriage is the only major sacrament traditionally prescribed for women, the sign of the *pativrata* functions willy-nilly as the defining female identity-ideal in the Hindu imaginary.\(^{331}\) Coming to its salience in *Anandamath*, it is true that the novel acknowledges a multiplicity of kinship ties. Nonetheless, it is based on the imagination of the *griha* or the home/domestic as lacking in the discipline and beauty that marked the “English home.” The domestic in this relationship bore the burden of being an “embarrassment,” needing reform and improvement. It bore also the burden of “guilt” for being the cause of embarrassment and emasculation of Indian men in the public sphere of male activities. Implicit in such a formulation was the acceptance of the “universalist” (colonial/Western) paradigm involving the acceptance of a hierarchical imagination of the world... In the second formulation... the domestic became a site where continuity with “mytho-religious” (Indian) society was asserted. Unlike the previous association in which the domestic was an “embarrassment” requiring corrections in order to be “modern,” in the second form of association, the civil society becomes a problem, a constraint whose coercive nature was to be tolerated but never enjoyed. The domestic, in this formulation, was the site of self-recovery and self-respect... (Gendered Citizenship 96-97)

\(^{329}\) As it happens, in its idealised form, this symbol combines *bhakti* plus *nishkama karma*.

\(^{330}\) I am, of course, putting this nicely.

\(^{331}\) In Tanika Sarkar’s words, in the nineteenth-century Hindu imaginary of which Bankim is a part, “Hindu woman” was by definition one whose “body was moulded from infancy by a *shastric* regimen of non-consensual, indissoluble, infant marriage, and by iron laws of absolute chastity, austere widowhood and a supposedly proven capacity for self-immolation” (*Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation* 143), in other words, a *pativrata*.
the conjugal tie that finds most concrete substantiation (in the relations between Mohendra and Kalyani, between Jibananda and Shanti, even between Nimi and her absent husband). Kalyani, Shanti, Nimi, married women all, recognise the claims of *pativrata dharma* on themselves. To this extent, thus, they are all variously *pativrata*. The only other flesh and blood woman in the novel, i.e., Gouridevi, also underscores the importance of marital status in a woman’s life, albeit as a lack/loss: she is a widow, unprotected and therefore the butt of Bhavananda’s ribaldry. Whilst the above emphasises the significance of the ideal in the lives of the women characters in the novel, it still begs the question as to how this trope circumscribes that other towering feminine presence in *Anandamath*, i.e., the Mother? I would say it does so simply by the fact that in the *dharmic* order of the novel no mother can be Mother unless she is “legitimately” so, unless she is the mother, that is, of her lawfully wedded husband’s children. For, as mentioned before, marriage is the only authorised sacrament that can transform the profane body of a woman into the sacrosanct, i.e., *pativrata* one of the Mother. The Mother’s *pativrata* identity, of course, is not solely the effect of implication and deduction. In the novel, she is quite clearly wedded to the Almighty in the form of Vishnu and displays a relational existence vis-à-vis Him that is the hallmark of a *pativrata*: if she is not introduced through Him (as in the temple at Anandamath), then she is definitely legitimised with reference to Him (as in Kalyani’s dream).332 Even in her manifestation as Kali, the Mother reinforces this ideal through antithesis. For, Kali, “blackened and shrouded in darkness,” as the text glosses, “has been robbed of everything; that is why she is naked. And because the whole land is a burning-ground, she is garlanded with skulls. And she’s crushing her own gracious Lord underfoot. Alas, dear Mother”

332 Sumit Sarkar, while fleetingly commenting on *Anandamath*, says at one point that “the novel contains a dream sequence where Kalyani sees Vishnu cradled and enveloped by an indistinct all-embracing mother-figure” (*Writing Social History* 301). In a footnote on the same page, he cites for his reference the novel in “Bankim Rachanabali 1 (Calcutta, 1360/1953).” I have not been able to confirm the accuracy or otherwise of this assertion. If true, of course, it undercuts my argument. However, none of the English translations of the novel that I have consulted support such a reading. All of them speak of a distraught female form discernible in front of Vishnu’s throne, and appealing to him, against Kalyani.
In fact, the project of the Santans is precisely to restore to Mother India-as-Kali her *pativrata* status of yore and so transform her from the stygian icon (*kali*) of the present to the radiant ten-armed Goddess of Righteousness (*dharma*) in the future.

And if further proof is required of the ubiquity of this ideal as a shaping influence in the text, then this is available in the facility with which it explains the mediated character of the relationship that exists between the female protagonists of the novel and Mother India. For if a woman is a *pativrata*, then it follows that the dominant tie in her life is the one that binds her to her husband. All other bonds must, by definition, be subservient to and channelled through this. If they are not, then such relations are *adharmic*, plain and simple. Then again, written into the concept of the *pativrata* is the notion of a physically helpless woman, unable to wrought changes in the material sphere and at the same time keep her *pativrata* identity intact. She can thus become both the incitement and focus of action, but never its heroic agent, for that would render her grotesque like Kali. Bringing this interpretive grid to bear on the novel not only explains Mother India's helplessness in her own behalf (she needs the service/protection of her sons), but also the absence of a mother-daughter relationship (every legitimate daughter is a *pativrata* in her own right or one in the making and so bound to her husband or potential husband). Similarly, it explains Kalyani's attempted self-annihilation in the interest of the national cause (since she becomes an impediment to her husband in the discharge of his primary duty, she does the only thing in the realm of action a *pativrata* is allowed to do, i.e., self-destruct) as well as Shanti's

333 Confirming the link between Kali and the topsy-turvy moral order is the fact that the bandits chasing Kalyani resolve to eat their slain leader in this Goddess' name (Lipner 135). Of course, this shows *Anandamath*’s subscription to the popular patriarchal reading of this iconographic image. As Saxena reminds us, however, the image has quite another interpretation in Shakta Tantric traditions. There, instead of shame at having stepped on her husband, "her white teeth biting her red tongue symbolizes *sattva* exercising control over *rajas*" (*In the Beginning Is Desire* 92).

334 Needless to say, such a focus addresses the matter of national organisation dealt with earlier from the opposite direction—if the earlier focus on the Santans was a public resolution of the matter, then, equally, a focus on the women characters essays a private one.
disguised inclusion in the Santan Order and her mediated participation in the national cause (the disqualification of Jibananda, her husband, from national service automatically debar her as well since as a *pativrata* she cannot have any stake in the cause that is ultimately independent of him).

Thus, it is no exaggeration to say that the symbol of the *pativrata* serves as the most integrated locus of *dharma*, the engine that powers the action of *Anandamath*. It is also, as I have tried to argue here, the implicit ordering principle in the gendered world of *Anandamath*. So much so that it actually doubles up as the inspiration and ideal of Bankim's textual universe.\footnote{Since, as mentioned before, *pativratadharma* replicates the structures of *bhakti* as well as *nishkama karma*.} No credible evaluation of this world, however, is possible without accounting for the serious anomalies introduced into its structural logic by the character Sangeeta Ray pithily calls, the "woman in drag" (*En-Gendering India* 40), namely, Shanti.

In a nutshell, Shanti, the wife of Jibananda, is a *pativrata*, but a *pativrata* with a difference. In thought, word and deed she constitutes a challenge to many of its cherished verities. For instance, Shanti is neither lacking in initiative, (her capacity for independent decision-making is revealed, for e.g., in her decision to don a disguise and join her husband as one of the Santans) nor invention (her con act as a mendicant woman to elicit information from the British is a case in point); she is neither physically frail (she passes the test of strength that Mahatma Satyananda puts her to with ease,\footnote{The only others to have passed the test of strength are Satyananda himself, and the commanders Jibananda, Bhavananda and Jnanananda; in other words, Truth, Life, Feelings, and Knowledge, respectively.} and at the end of the novel bodily carries her wounded husband to the river bank as the Sage requests) nor timorous (she is perfectly capable of travelling at night through dangerous forested areas). She is more than able to hold her own in the verbal contests with her husband (as in the ashram of "Anandamath") and does not shy away from pointing out the error of his ways when so convinced (as at the end of the novel, as well as when he is...}
tempted to give up his vow in the beginning); in fact, her husband often acknowledges her wisdom, seeks her counsel and accepts her direction. She even contradicts Mahatma Satyananda, the central authority figure in the novel as well as her husband’s guru and leader, when he questions the rectitude of her actions. When confronted with the fact that she might tempt her husband away from his bounden duties, instead of piteously succumbing, like Kalyani, to the time-honoured resolution open to pativratas in such dilemmas, i.e., self-destruction, Shanti decides to reinforce his resolve by herself embracing the austerities he must undergo as a result of his vow (she does this by joining the Order of the Santans in disguise). Of course, her cross-dressing completely flies in the face of all conventional diktats: the ease with which she goes back and forth across strictly gendered spaces, willy-nilly, questioning the validity of such absolute bifurcations. Thus, instead of a spiritually strong but dependent and abla nari, Shanti represents a spiritually and physically strong, self-sufficient or sabal nari.

If, at this stage, one is wont to wonder in the manner of an Eliot, after such knowledge what forgiveness, after such transgressions what acceptance, then it is meet to recall that Shanti is, all said and done, comfortable in her identity as a pativrata, that most of her infractions unfurl under the banner of pativratadharma, that she accepts the rationale of this dharma (if only in this life), that she differs mainly in the manner of its performance.

Not surprisingly, discussing the dynamics of gender relations in the novel, Sangeeta Ray sounds a pessimistic note. According to her, Bankim’s Anandamath is a text in which “woman herself avers the truth of male privilege” (48). By way of example, she quotes Shanti’s speech to Satyananda, which reads, “my husband is great to me, but my duty is greater than he, and greater even than that for me is my husband’s duty” (Lipner 202). Whilst neither the fact of this speech nor the

337 As Jasbir Jain observes, “Shanti in Anand Math displays courage not by following the ideals of female behaviour like modesty and obedience but by adopting an attitude of independence.... [Yet] it is significant that Shanti does not depart from cultural values or violate them in any respect” (Feminizing Political Discourse 171).

338 Responding to Satyananda, she says, “In this life, to a woman, her husband is a god, but in the life to come to us all, our religion is our God” (Ghosh and Ghosh 139).
presence of male privilege in the novel can be disputed, I would still desist from such “rays” of certainty. To my mind, the traditional, patriarchal determinations of the novel appear shot through with an ambivalence that culminates in its notoriously inconclusive ending. For instance, even as it is true that the Order of the Santans represents an all-male nation, a stag/nation (physically and temporally) if you like, it is also true that the gendered division of space on which it is based suggests the subordination of this space to its Other; even as it is true that Mahatma Satyananda is the supreme visionary-leader through most of the novel, it is also true that towards the end of the novel his vision stands overruled; even as it is true that Satyananda is the chief locus of patriarchal authority in the novel, it is also true that in their final direct encounter he bows before Shanti’s superior wisdom, etc. Then again, there is a constant mixing of spaces/bodies and idioms of being that undermine the achieved status of “purity” even as they valorise its ideal attraction. Thus, among other things, the forest merges psychic and objective reality, the Mother-Goddess merges political (public), familial (private) and devotional (private-public) domains, Shanti merges “masculine” and “feminine” spaces/traits, the project of nationalism is expressed in the language of bhakti but bhakti itself is underwritten by a kshatriya code of valour, the work of a renascent Indian identity takes the public domain as its karmabhoomi but its inspirations and beginnings lie in the private domain (the “mother” of Mother India belongs to the private sphere, the epilogue and its mystical communication

339 In an essay that claims to “provide a close analysis” (24), I am stumped to see Ray assert that in the conversation mentioned between Satyananda and Shanti, “The leader acknowledges defeat and asserts that he is like her son, yet he does not refer to her as his mother but as his daughter, thereby keeping the hierarchy intact” (48). A note to the chapter informs that all page references are to Roy’s translation of the novel (162; n3). Here she cites p. 139 for her reference. I have referred to the same adaptation and cannot find any corroboration in the text mentioned. In Roy’s text, the conversation in question occurs on p. 102 and it has Satyananda saying, “I have never met with defeat. Today I acknowledge my defeat at your hands. Mother, I am your child. Please have mercy on this child of yours” (emphasis mine). Checking out the Ghosh and Ghosh translation, the other text she states to have referred to, was more productive. The page number matched, p. 139. Here, Satyananda also says, “I have never been defeated. Today I acknowledge defeat by you. My daughter, I am like your son. Have compassion on your child...” thus seemingly bearing out Ray’s interpretation. But on the same page and skipping just a paragraph, the same text has Satyananda saying, “I acknowledge no other mother because except this well-watered fruitful Motherland we have no other mother. I call upon you as my mother. Be a mother and do the work of your child. Do that which will accomplish our work. Save Jibananda, save your own life” (139). Lipner’s translation also has Satyananda addressing Shanti as Mother (202).
which sets the ball rolling in this novel belongs to the private sphere, and last but
not least, the conventicle of the Santans from where they launch their military
campaigns in the cause of the nation is located in the jungle—once again,
definitely not a public space). Similarly, the way in which primary relationships
seem to be negotiated in the novel through a series of tiered affiliations—such as,
Santans→Guru→Mother India→God, devoted wife→husband→God, Mahatma
Satyananda→Preceptor→Truth/Dharma—that cross-cut less salient lateral ties
generates its own aporias. Since the same people can be heterogeneously
interpellated in different pyramids of power according to context and conjuncture
(in a way this is what accounts for the conflicts of interest witnessed in Jibananda
and Mohendra as also in Bhavananda vis-à-vis Kalyani). What’s more, the last or
highest of these tiers seems always to be a matter of deferred realisation, never
quite achieved in the novel and so never quite contained by it. 340 And so on and so
forth.

But to what avail such ambivalence? As I hope to argue, to some avail—it is a
locus of hope. 341 Anandamath is ultimately not an open and shut text. Quite
literally, it is open-ended: its conclusion does not quite deliver a ready-made India
for our critique, consumption and/or domicile. 342 Of course, there are definite
attempts through its pages to map the contours of this nation-to-be in a traditional,
militant, ascetic, upper-caste Hindu and male idiom. But since Satyananda is the
chief cartographer and since the novel concludes suggesting his fallibility, I think

340 Which, as it happens, is ideological opportunity both for the hierarchically higher to justify
their oppression of the lower, but more importantly for the hierarchically lower to legitimately
bypass those immediately above them by invoking the next higher or ultimate authority.

341 According to Tanika Sarkar, moments of ambivalence “represent the inclusion of alternative,
even transgressive, possibilities within the narrated world” (“Bankimchandra,” Hindu Wife 149).

342 In such a conclusion I go against generalisations such as Manabendra Bandyopadhyay’s, which
hold that:

The submerged silenced subtexts of Bankim’s narratives direct our attention towards
other possibilities but if we look at the design of the main links in the chain, then it
becomes obvious that all the ends are preordained—a mediated value system geared
towards closure has caged the new woman and shot the bolt on the narrative as well.
(“My Husband, Good or Bad” 130)
there is scope to look askance at the shape and scale of his imagining. In fact, Satyananda’s life discovers another ambivalence in the novel—one that is of a piece with the general dynamics of the novel and one that interests me here vis-à-vis its potential for readdressing gender relations in the context of the national.

As mentioned before, Satyananda is in the forefront of the world and work (Mother India) of “Anandamath.” As mentioned before, also, dharma is what inspires the world and work of “Anandamath.” Indeed such is the convergence between them that Satyananda seems not only to be the champion, but also the very embodiment of dharma for the most part in the novel. Yet when this apostle of dharma stands humbled at the end, the significance of dharma does not undergo a concomitant diminution. How does the novel manage this dual manoeuvre? As I see it, by making a certain degree of ambivalence integral to the identity of dharma. For, while Anandamath throughout proclaims the salience of

343 What is his imagining? Elaborating upon the Santan creed for Mohendra’s benefit, after exhorting him to join them, Satyananda says, “The Children are Vaishnavas.” When Mohendra wonders, “How can the Children be Vaishnavas? For Vaishnavas nonviolence is the highest code of practice,” Satyananda responds, “Yes, for the Vaishnavas who follow Lord Caitanya. Nonviolence is the mark of the false Vaishnavism that arose in imitation of the atheist Buddhist code of practice. The mark of authentic Vaishnava practice is subduing the evildoer and rescuing the world! For is not Vishnu himself the protector of our world! On no fewer than ten occasions did He take on a body to rescue the earth…. That Vishnu wins the victory and bestows it. It is He who rescues the world and is the Children’s chosen deity! Lord Caitanya’s Vaishnava code is not the true Vaishnava code; it’s just the half of it. Lord Caitanya’s Vishnu consists only of love. But the Lord is not only love, he [sic] is also infinitely powerful. Lord Caitanya’s Vishnu consists only of love, while the Children’s Vishnu consists of power alone. Both of us are Vaishnava, yet each is only half a Vaishnava.” When Mohendra still expresses doubts and makes so bold as to say Satyananda sounds like Christian priests proclaiming “God is love… You must love Jesus,” the leader quickly dispels such misconceptions, claiming a hoary lineage for his views: “I’m saying exactly the sort of thing our ancestors have believed for generations.” He then goes on to explain his point in terms of the guna theory elaborated in the Upanishads as well as the Gita. “Each attribute,” he says “has its own corresponding spiritual practice. God’s mercy and benevolence arise from his attribute of goodness, and that is appropriately worshipped by loving devotion. This is what Caitanya’s followers do. God’s power, however, arises from his attribute of energy, and that must be worshipped by warfare, by the destruction of those who hate God. This is what we do. Finally God uses his attribute of quiescence to become embodied, so that in accordance with his wishes he has assumed his four-armed form and so on. This attribute must be worshipped with ritual offerings of flowers, sandalpaste, and so on. This is what ordinary folks do.…” Mohendra getting the drift now, says, “So the Children are simply an order of religious devotees.” To which Satyananda assents and adds, “We don’t aspire to temporal power. All we wish to do is uproot the Muslims completely because they are enemies of our Lord” (Lipner 179-80; refer also to the gloss provided on what it means to “uproot the Muslims” in Lipner’s critical apparatus, viz., “to extirpate their authority to rule… rather than annihilate or banish them” 256).
dharma, it never quite fixes the identity of dharma—the revelation in the Prologue only says that dharma exists in the “soul’s worship.” Who, what, when or how this worship is to be performed is left unclear. Knowing one’s dharma thus becomes a matter of intuitive discrimination, of interpretation. Satyananda, of course, does perform as the chief (there are others, most noticeably, Shanti) interpreter of dharma for most of the novel; to this extent he is even identified with it. His final failure, however, reveals that dharma, at least in the human world, is not something to be interpreted once and for all, to be codified once and for all. To know this dharma is to know it timely. By adamantly claiming to the Santans, “know this much for certain that I shall acknowledge no other life than that of a Brahmachari” (Ghosh and Ghosh 159), by rigidly maintaining at the end, “I don’t crave after knowledge, I have no use for it. I shall fulfil the vow that I have taken. Bless me so that my devotion to my Mother remains unshakeable” (Ghosh and Ghosh 193) Satyananda loses track of the fact that the noumenal identity of dharma is only to be realised in its phenomenal fluidity.

Shanti, on the other hand, emerges as the novel’s most compelling articulation of such awareness—the supple strength, moral clarity and unselfish initiative she displays in negotiating the vicissitudes of life attest as much. To attempt an analogy between Anandamath and the Mahabharata, if Satyananda is like Bhishma the representative of an old order, then Shanti is most like Krishna, the representative of a new order. In fact, in the novel not only is she called Navinananda; she is also implicitly linked to the mysterious Sage whose dharmic revelations conclusively” supersede Satyananda’s vision. Then again, the miraculous resuscitation of Jibananda on the battlefield, albeit fleetingly, draws an

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344 Shanti’s role vis-à-vis her husband in the penultimate chapter of the novel parallels and prefigures that of the Sage vis-à-vis Satyananda in the last chapter. Like the Sage with Satyananda, Shanti, too, guides and explains the subtleties of dharma to Jibananda; like the Sage, Shanti, too, is finally convincing; and again like the Sage, Shanti, too, advices renunciation. This, of course, flies in the face of the explicit link made at the end between the Sage and Kalyani, between Shanti and Satyananda. I will come to this anomaly later.
analogy between Shanti and Savitri—a longstanding cultural ideal for wifely conduct. But how radical can such valorisation of Shanti really be, given her exceptional history, given her unexceptional belief in *pativrata dharma*? I attempt to answer this question by placing its clausal reservations in some perspective. First off, Shanti, it is true, has an unconventional upbringing. The circumstances of her nurture remove her sufficiently from the pale of the ordinary to render her somewhat anomalous. Of course, inasmuch as this is the case, her experience, her initiative, her action resist easy generalisation. That is, she cannot be seen to stand in for the average Hindu woman. But to see this is to see only half the story. For, it is also true that Shanti has the text’s unswerving approval. After all, it is Shanti, not Kalyani—generally thought to “enshrine the domestic ideal” in the novel—who is called the Mother. The fact that, against narrative convention, she is neither punished nor proven wrong, reformed, recouped and/or killed off as part of the final resolution of *Anandamath*, further attests her

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345 According to the myth, Savitri by her irreproachable virtue got Yama to let Satyavan live again. In *Anandamath*, Shanti in the company of a mysterious sage (who has already been compared to Yama earlier) is looking on the battlefield strewn with corpses for Jibananda. On coming upon his wounded, blood-smeared body Shanti breaks into a wail. At which the sage advises, “Don’t weep, mother! Is Jibananda really dead? Be calm and examine his body. First feel his pulse.” Santi felt the pulse. There was not the slightest movement there. The saint said, ‘Feel his chest with your hand.’ Santi put her hand where the heart was, there was not a sign of life. It was quite cold. The Saint again said, ‘Put your hand near his nose—is there any breath moving?’ Santi examined the body as directed, but could not find sign of any breath. He said, ‘Try again, feel inside his mouth with your finger, whether there is any warmth there.’ Santi felt with her finger and said, ‘I can’t feel anything.’ Hope was acting like a wine in her. The great Saint touched the body of Jibananda with his left hand. He said, ‘Fear has robbed you of all hope, so you cannot feel anything. There is a little warmth left still in the body. Feel again.’ Santi then felt the pulse again, there was some throbbing there. Surprised, Santi put her hand on his heart—it was beating slightly. She held her fingers before the nostrils, there was indeed some breath going. She felt a little warmth too in his mouth” (Ghosh and Ghosh 186-87). Although the Sage counters Shanti’s amazed question, “Was there life in him indeed, or it has returned?” with a non-committal “How can that be possible, mother? (187), it’s quite obvious that Shanti could not have missed all the cues of life in Jibananda. I believe there is no need to spell out what the alternative would be, here.

346 Critics have sometimes seen both of these as grounds for dismissing Shanti’s significance as a role-model.

347 The name means, the well-wed one! It is also one of the names of the Goddess in the *Devi Mahatmya*.

348 Indeed, Satyananda actually wants her to save herself and her husband, as quoted above.
value. So much so that Shanti actually comes across as a model, if not, the model, for women in the text, someone distinctly worthy of emulation.\(^{349}\) Or put differently, while she may not be a representative figure, she is definitely an exemplary one. And the alienation supplied by her history is evened out by the invitation inscribed in her portrayal.

Of course, it can still be pointed out that this invitation is only to become a glorified cog in what is eventually a patriarchal set-up.\(^{350}\) Which, conveniently enough, brings into focus the second clause mentioned above. Once again, it is undeniable that Shanti extols the virtues of pativrata dharma. But in her praxis, it is equally clear that she is ultimately as self-determining a social subject as possible. Pativrata dharma is not some well-formed bolus she swallows whole. If received wisdom does not square with lived reality, then Shanti time and again displays the courage of conviction to go against the former. In this regard, it is especially important to remember that Shanti actually consents to her marriage, at a time when non-consensual arrangements are the norm. Similarly, when chastised by her in-laws for unfeminine, un-wifely, vitality, she ups and leaves her matrimonial home to join a band of nomadic ascetics and when she returns she is neither apologetic nor defensive about her actions. She tells Jibananda the truth and leaves it to him to believe her or not. Her pativrata dharma, that is to say, exists on the basis of mutual love, trust and devotion; it exists in the context of a husband who is both good and, very atypically, patnivrata.\(^{351}\) Even in the

\(^{349}\) At the end of the penultimate chapter after Shanti and Jibananda have made their final exits, the text in elegiac mode, wonders, “O Mother! Will you come again? Will you bear in your womb sons like Jibananda and daughters like Santi” (Ghosh and Ghosh 189).

\(^{350}\) Refer, for instance, to Sangeeta Ray, En-Gendering India; Jasodhara Bagchi, “Anandamath and The Home and the World” and “Positivism and Nationalism”; Uma Chakravarti, “Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi?” Tanika Sarkar, Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation; Sudipta Kaviraj, The Unhappy Consciousness; Indira Chowdhury, The Frail Hero and Virtile History, etc.

\(^{351}\) As far as I know, the word is Makarand Paranjape’s coinage. It was used in a private correspondence with me to refer to the “dharmic” obligations of the husband towards his wife. These, of course, bear no comparison to the duties enjoined by pativrata dharma. Indeed, the very fact that no such word existed shows the non-reciprocity in the husband-wife relations as it was traditionally envisaged. Hopelessly deluded, if not downright mischievous, when referring to the

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lines quoted above as clinching evidence of her compromised position, when Shanti says, “my husband is great to me, but my duty is greater than he, and greater even than that for me is my husband’s duty” all she really avers is not, as has been suggested, “the truth of male privilege” but the suzerainty of dharma. Strictly speaking, she transgresses convention by putting her dharma, i.e., pativrata dharma, above her pati. Besides, seen in perspective, it becomes clear that her husband’s religion at this time is simply national service 352; that it is not some abstract principle that holds sway at all times and in all circumstances. In fact, Shanti’s calibrated description of the relation, namely, that her husband is great > but her own dharma is greater > and her husband’s dharma is greater still, is rather typical of the graduated sets of linkages cited earlier as mediating identities in Anandamath. As such, it shares in the contingent and contextual nature of the relations and identities posited in the novel as a whole. Then again, Shanti’s statement is better understood when read as part of the dialogue between Satyananda and herself. Viewed in context, it becomes possible to see how, instead of dogmatically averring the “truth of male privilege,” her statement is more of a considered response to Satyananda’s request: Shanti, who has previously been shown to contravene, upbraid and counsel Jibananda on matters of his dharma and who will do so again, professes her “inability” to advise her husband here simply because she is convinced he is doing right in this instance by being dedicated to the cause of the Mother above all else. Shanti’s dharma, thus, is neither passive nor doctrinaire—it is part and parcel of her evolving consciousness. Her speech and actions reveal an awareness not only of the universal salience of the dharmic principle but also of the contextual valence of sexist arrangements of traditional upper-caste Hindu conjugality, it does very nicely, however, to describe the unconventional reciprocal devotion of Jibananda to Shanti.

352 And if national service is the male privilege averred, then she has already protested against this in an earlier exchange with Satyananda where she asks, “Is it sinful, Master? The wife follows her husband. Is that sinful behaviour? If the code of the santans calls this sinful, then the code itself is sinful! I’m his partner in life. He’s following a particular code, and I’m here to share in it. That’s it”’ (Lipner 184).
its social/human determinations. That is to say, she lives not so much by the tenets of *pativrata dharma* per se as by the claims of *dharma*. Alternatively, she follows *pativrata dharma* only insofar as it is coincident with *dharma*—a *dharma*, which, as mentioned before, demands continuous discrimination, continuous realisation. Needless to say, if the former were to ever fall afoul of the latter, there is little doubt as to which one Shanti would pledge allegiance to. As a matter of fact, as mentioned above, in the last but one chapter, Shanti actually renounces her "householder" identity to embrace asceticism, thereby, at least conceptually nullifying her *pativrata* status and, by extension, her *pativrata dharma*.

Clearly, therefore, Shanti impresses as a woman with agency. Not only does she engage with her lived reality, her world, through personally validated modes of negotiation, contestation and consent, even her relations with men, though conducted within certain parameters of propriety, are unconstrained by a priori feelings of subservience, timidity and/or antagonism. She interacts with them as an equal and this is as natural to her finally as are her "feminine" blushes. That she exercises this agency through the discriminations of a "mentality" is not in itself sufficient disqualification. After all, most of us do the same. But what about the fact that ultimately Shanti cedes narrative space to Kalyani; that contradicting my earlier comparison between Shanti and the Sage, the text actually ends with an explicit identity asserted between Kalyani and the Sage and Shanti and Satyananda? Does this not diminish her finally so as to play up Kalyani?

353 So, for instance, the same Shanti who throughout proclaimed the Santan cause, at the end tells Jibananda, "The santans have no further claim on this newfound body" (Lipner 227). For them, their *dharma* now is not active service, but after wandering "as pilgrims from region to region" to "build a hut in the Himalayas, and worship God there, praying for the boon of the Mother’s well-being" (Lipner 228).

354 It can be argued that it is for Jibananda’s sake she makes such a decision, but whatever the cause, once such a decision has been taken, it means that she renounces all ties, even those that bind her to her husband. Moreover, it is a decision that goes against *shastric* injunction. *Sannyasa*, in orthodox script, is only for men (Clementin-Ojha, “Outside the Norms” 149). Here, Shanti not only becomes a renouncer—thus going against the traditionalists; she is the one who makes the decision for both herself and her husband—thus going against nationalist reconstruction that accommodated women only as subjects of male refashioning.

355 For a better understanding of this term, read Rajat Kanta Ray, *Exploring Emotional History*. 

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The novel in its initial parts has Kalyani at centre-stage. Shanti is nowhere in the picture. Then Kalyani dies, it is believed literally, but really she is saved and lives secretly, out of sight and out of mind for the most part of the text and its action. Why? Because by the time she regains her senses, Mohendra, believing her to be dead, has taken the vow of the Santans, a vow that requires him to renounce wife and child, among other things. His renunciation and her passive acquiescence in that renunciation then, orchestrates her textual marginalisation. At the same time that Kalyani is relegated to the story's sidelines, Shanti emerges into narrative focus. This state of affairs endures more or less to the end of the novel, when the Santans having won their battle, Shanti seems to recede to the background and Kalyani once more comes to the fore.

There is a neat little interchange of places between the female characters here that is hard to miss. Taken at face-value and transcribed into ideological terms that are, at once, also, demarcations of space, the Kalyani→Shanti→Kalyani sequence-cycle would read old shrīngara- and bhāva-identified pativrata→new virya- and karma-oriented pativrata→old shrīngara- and bhāva-identified pativrata embedded within the larger revolutionary movement of order→disorder→order that it both mirrors and signifies. This, in turn, would suggest that Shanti is but a temporary interlude in the parampara of pativrata dharma, justified only in times of anomie and only for the restoration of the old dispensation. Considered thus, Shanti does seem to undergo a textual sidetracking if not diminishment by the end of the novel. My problem with this interpretation is that it depends on a distortion of Shanti’s representation. By its logic, Shanti’s transgressions are only occasioned by and legitimised with reference to the cause of the Mother. Yet this is a clear misreading of Shanti’s characterisation. Of all the people in the text, and pace S. Maitra (see Lipner 106-07), Shanti is the only one whose history, however sketchily, is given. Undoubtedly, this is to explain the better her exceptionality. What is equally true is that this is a record of transgressions—transgressions that pre-date Shanti’s
intervention in the Santan cause and significantly transgressions which are not
delegitimised on that count. As a result, Shanti's doings in the cause of the
Mother, rather than being seen as an extraordinary spawn of a special crisis-
situation, is better read as one more instance of autonomous self-determination in
the running track of her personal history. In other words, the tidy embedded
sequence-cycle charted above doesn't quite apply. Of course, since Kalyani and
Shanti are no longer characters condemned to be serial substitutes of each other,
Kalyani's re-emergence at the end of the novel does not necessarily require, is not
etiologically linked, with Shanti's marginalisation.

As for the identity posited between the Sage and Kalyani, between Satyananda
and Shanti—it occurs in the bardic coda to the novel. After promising to reveal to
Satyananda the "true form" of the Mother, when the Sage grasps his hand, the
narrative kicks in with its panegyrical,

How sublime! In that magnificent Vishnu temple before the huge four-handed image
in dim light stood the two great personalities—talent and genius incarnate—one
holding the hand of the other. Who has gripped whom? Knowledge stands wedded to
devotion—religion has embraced Karma or action—renunciation is coupled with
success—Kalyani has grasped the hand of Santi. This Satyananda is Santi; this Sage
is Kalyani. Satyananda is success, and this Saint stands for renunciation.
Renunciation came and took success away. (Ghosh and Ghosh 193-194)

Read literally, this does appear to exalt Kalyani at the expense of Shanti rather
obviously. Once again, though, things are not as straightforward as they seem.
Most noticeably, the assertion founders when juxtaposed with the events that
actually lead to it and which it presumably explicates. Analysing the way the
association is forged, it can be said that "renunciation" operates as the slide on
and through which the transfer and transposition of meaning occurs. But while the
noun is a fair description for the Sage—after all he has just finished urging
Satyananda to give up arms—it seems inapt where Kalyani is concerned. Sure,
Kalyani by her willingness to self-destruct as well as live away from Mohendra
for the duration of his vow has given ample evidence of her capacity for sacrifice.
As matters stand at the end of the novel, however, Kalyani is re-united with her
daughter and husband; she is back in the fold of happy domesticity that she
desires. In fact, in the chapter that immediately preceded the part in question, it
was Shanti not Kalyani who was shown taking the unusual decision to become a renunciant. Moreover, unlike Shanti, Kalyani has not been portrayed in any consistently tutelary role or light\(^{356}\) that would justify her comparison to the Sage. Similarly, Satyananda has been depicted dedicating himself to lifelong celibacy or brahmacharya, his recalcitrance at the end, notwithstanding. A literal reading of the conclusion then may not be the best line of engagement, for it makes the narrative seem illogical, arbitrary, contradictory and forced in its summation.

If the structural grid delineated at the beginning is recalled, the last stage of the novel returns us to the realm of the Metaphysical. The conclusion should therefore accord with this emphasis in its attempted encompassment, not dogmatically, as it seems through the realist lens, but more integrally. A broad analogy with the Mahabharata, I believe, both applies here and will serve to clarify the sense and sensibility of the novel’s culminating pronouncements. My reference is to the lessons inscribed in the Mahaprathanamparvan and Svargarohanaparvan, more particularly, to the vision of heaven and its residents.\(^{357}\)

Briefly, svarga in the epic is shown to be home to the Pandavas, Draupadi, and others allied on the side of dharma in the Great War as expected. But equally, it is the abode of Duryodhana, Shishupala, and others who were ranged on the side of adharma. Through the device of the tests that Yudhishthir is put to, the epic clarifies the subtle and paradoxical nature of dharma. On the one hand, at a human, moral and material plane, dharma demands constant discrimination, avowal and adherence to what is right—so Yudhishthir must determine to stay with the stray dog that was his companion on the journey; he must resolve to stay with his brothers and Draupadi in hell. On the other, at the supra-human,

\(^{356}\) The only exception would be her interactions with Bhavananda, but even here the role is indirect.

\(^{357}\) France Bhattacharya is supposed to have worked out the analogy between their (Shanti and Jibananda’s final departure as renunciant pilgrims and the epic prasthanam in her introduction to a French translation of the text. My source for this information is an endnote in Jasodhara Bagchi’s “Positivism and Nationalism” (191; n31).
metaphysical plane, it is inexorable, all-encompassing and non-dual—so as Yudhishtir is repeatedly told by the gods, “This is heaven. There are no enmities here” (as ctd. in Hiltebeitel, Rethinking the Mahabharata 273). Both are dharma and one dimension cannot be bypassed for the other, as that would be error or evil.

The concluding gloss of Anandamath, I submit, is an annunciation of this wise. By deliberately making comparisons that confound empirical evidence and mundane reasoning, it points in the direction of the non-dual metaphysical underpinnings of a fissured temporal reality: that ultimately, Kalyani (the well-wed one and hence bhoga) and Shanti (calmness of mind and hence renunciation), the Sage and Satyananda are not categorically antithetical; that dharma or rta is not the repressive privileging of the one over the other but their dynamic balance. In the process, it also reinforces the Gita’s doctrine of bhakti and nishkama karma as the way of dharmic living. Such a vision has important implications, of course, for interpreting the Santan cause, the war they engage in, the enemy they fight, etc. Most significantly, it means the enemy is not an absolute other, only a temporary, context-dependent adversary. Similarly, the Santan cause is not an eternal given, only a time-bound and circumstance-sensitive case. Thus, what is dharma in one place, at one time, for one person, it signifies, can very well become adharma in another place, at another time, for another person.358 Unwillingness to admit this is what leads Satyananda to fanaticism. Ability to see this is what distinguishes Shanti. To return to whom, since Kalyani is not pitted against Shanti at the end in a competitive or antithetical way, she is not diminished by the novel’s extolment of the former.

Finally, then, given the overall orientation of the text, it would be a mistake, in my opinion, to read Shanti simply as a tool of patriarchal manipulation in the nationalist cause. For, while there is no gainsaying that her valorisation appears

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358 This is not the same as moral relativism. Dharma is not being questioned here. What is being questioned is complacency and moral sloth.
ideologically and patently cut out for patriarchal purposes, in the processes of its practical elaboration and effect, Shanti’s valorisation is only patchily assimilated to a sexist rationale. As has been shown here, Shanti often functions as a site of textual aporia—by exceeding her brief, by resisting complete re/territorialisation, she variously scrabbles the codes of gendered containment that underwrite her aggrandisement. So much so that extrapolating from the logic that runs through her character in the text,\textsuperscript{359} it is possible to argue that while Shanti’s consent to patriarchal determinations is contingent, her initiative and capacity for moral action is not. Indeed, at the end of the novel Shanti disengages herself from circumscription in the identity not only of wifehood but also of Navinanada, both patriarchal determinations it can be said. By valorising such a character to the end, by making her its chief moral agent, no less, Anandamath, all its patriarchal fantasies of a nationalist and personal sort notwithstanding, sanctions a heroine who, both in her acquiescence as well as her transgressions, both in her participation as well renunciation, both in her love as well as sacrifice, is her own mistress and what’s more, legitimately so. Ultimately, in the trail she blazes across the novel, Shanti is both Shiva and Shakti, consciousness and energy. From a feminist perspective, it is this personationality of desire coupled with the novel’s understanding and endorsement of dharma that is the locus of hope. For, even as it does not bind women to Shanti’s choices, it constitutes a recognition of them, against orthodox devaluations,\textsuperscript{360} as svatantra and moral agents in the political as well as personal domains, or more specifically, as full and free citizens of the national community.

\textsuperscript{359} That dharma—the ultimate arbiter of value in the text—is context-sensitive, and that Shanti is brimful of dharmic initiative.

\textsuperscript{360} In the orthodox scheme of things, like Archibald MacLeish’s “God,” if woman was good, she was not able; and if she was able, then she was not good. Shanti is both good and able and that is where Anandamath scores in its gender-coding of the national community.
Chapter 4: Family, Marriage and Desire

If the institution of the family is the preeminent site of legitimate desire for Indian women, at least at an injunctive level, then the performance of marriage is without doubt its most consecrated modality of being. In fact, in the latter day imaginary of mainstream India, marriage actually signifies as a necessary synecdoche for the family. But this displaced semiosis is neither natural nor inevitable. A peep behind “the decorative display of what-goes-without-saying” (Barthes 11) reveals it to be an execution of ideological facilitation and politico-historical exigencies. More specifically, reveals it to be occurring in the service of different governmentalities—in the erstwhile colonial rule and the reactive nationalistic consolidation it called forth, as well as the in the still on-going projects of communal, caste and cultural identity formation and reformation, modernisation, nation-building and capitalist development. As might be anticipated, the congealment of an earlier more fluid relation between the two institutions has a couple of significant fallouts. One, marriage gets accorded an exclusive legitimacy for facilitating, indeed, ensuring the generational transmission of multiple assets, genes and values not the least among them. And two, the “modern Indian family” gets constituted in a more or less standardised form—as it stands today, this institution is typically patriarchal, patrilineal and virilocal; it is also ideally monogamous. To reprise my initial premise in light of the above, then, marriage and family do not simply exist in some a priori way as the self-evident goal, limit and substance of self-realisation for women. Rather, in binding tandem, they school women in the different curricula of approved domesticity, and so, self-authenticate.

This chapter focusses on the nexus of interests that work the affective, libidinal and material economies of the household as it finds expression in the novel form.

361 Even a cursory historical acquaintance with the complex of kinship systems in India is enough to show that while some form of marriage might well have been germane to the constitution of some forms of families (I use the plural form here deliberately), a reduction of the latter to monogamy in an etiological bind held nowhere near its current hegemonic sway either conceptually or practically.
Given the overwhelming consensus, for one reason or another, on the centrality of women to this domain, it explores the dense latticework of domestic desires by taking the trope of the grihini as its principal navigational tool. That is, it structures its analysis in, around and through the figure of the “domestic woman” as she is imagined in the novel genre. Needless to say, in trying to gauge the nature of subjectivity and scope of agency available to this personage, I willy-nilly engage with what Malashri Lal has called the “law of the threshold”—that panoptic, punitive and persuasive jurisdiction of sedimented public opinion, which eases the way for the introjection and return of concerted sociological compulsions as so many ontological impulsions.

Rama Mehta’s Sahitya Akademi Award-winning work, Inside the Haveli has been critically acclaimed as a “truly woman’s novel” for its detailed evocation of the topoi of domestic life. Produced in a post-Independence India riven by the tugs of “tradition” and “modernity,” its sensitivity to gender as a determining factor in household affairs appears especially felicitous for the kind of study envisaged here. Admitted, at first glance, its narrow focus on the insulated lifestyles of women inside the haveli who observe strict purdah renders it unavailable for simplistic tom-tomming as a “condition-of-Indian-women-narrative.” Yet its

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362 Conservative as well as heterodox opinion converges on this point. According to the former, this is the natural space and role of women. According to the latter, women have been per force limited to this sphere and function.

363 Historically, a new type of woman emerged in the late nineteenth century in India and to a large extent her subjectivity was imagined into being in the novel form. This was the domestic woman. I am deliberately not using the term “housewife,” for she is more a feature of an urban sensibility concomitant with the nuclearisation of the family; in other words, a later and more specialised occurrence.

364 This, of course, is an interpretation of Lal’s gynocritical rendering. For the most part, Lal is interested in the space of the threshold rather than the “law” that constitutes the threshold. According to Lal, “The threshold is a real as well as symbolic bar marking a critical transition.... The Law ... allows multiple existences for men, a single for women” (12). Altogether, the Law of the Threshold offers analytical purchase through its “three essential components of interior space, doorway poise, and exterior adjuncts” (22).

365 According to Kirpal, she couldn’t “think of another Indian novel in English whose central character as well as minor character are women, and which is told entirely from the women’s point of view” (“How Traditional Can a Modern Indian Be” 176).
almost ethnographic detailing should not blind us to its allegorical and metonymic valence. For, as critics have noted, life inside the haveli works equally as an allegory for life inside a broader “traditional Indian” paradigm. Similarly, the figure of the “veiled woman” is a striking symbol for the many restrictions women experience as a routine in androcentric cultures. So that through lifting the veil on the lives of women under extreme conditions of seclusion, Inside the Haveli, throws into relief, by association, the many large and small discriminatory interdictions that constrain the lives of women in general—interdictions, which because of their diffuse existence are not as readily identifiable in the quotidian scheme of things. Consequently, it is with this text I try to unravel some way the intricate weave of home-spun desires.

**Inside the Haveli: The Ties that Bind**

Even a perfunctory reading of the novel cannot fail to show up the two interlaced yet oppositely propelled narrative movements that make up its storyline—one headed towards a progressive but patchy traditionalisation, and the other, towards a progressive but patchy modernisation. The first movement inscribes the experience of a young, college-educated, Bombay-bred girl’s slow, uncertain and far from painless acculturation to the customary ways of an upper-caste aristocratic Rajput household after her marriage to the scion of the family. The second registers the reluctant adjustment of orthodox haveli lifestyles to the incursions of modernity, most immediately materialised in the person of the selfsame daughter-in-law. Of course, whether such a perception is right or wrong or to what extent it is justifiable is another matter altogether, one to which I will return later and in some detail. For now, the point I wish to make is simply what the title lets on, that both narratives unfold “inside the haveli”—more specifically, the ancient haveli belonging to Sangram Singhji situated in the Old City of the-

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366 In the words of Kirpal, “The haveli becomes a particularized example of the vast, incomprehensible concept that we simplistically call traditional Indian culture” (“How Traditional Can a Modern Indian Be” 178).

367 Whether this is intentional or not on the part of the text is not what is being debated here. That it does so, inevitably, is the point being made.
one-time-state-capital-of-Mewar-but-now-mofussil Udaipur. Why this is pertinent to the present engagement is that in their elaboration, these two narratives movements perform variously as the site, occasion, conduit and manifest form of different macro- and micro-level investments. So much so that there is hardly any space inside the haveli that is not a crosshatch of overt and/or covert desires. My attempt here is to get a better understanding of these desires, of what they are and how they map the domestic space, and vice-versa. Towards this end, as stated above, I use the figure of the grihini as my analytical filter. In this case, that is to say I chart my study not only through and in relation to Geeta, the young daughter-in-law of Jeevan Niwas, but also Kanwarani Sa, her mother-in-law, Bhabha Sa, the irascible grandmother-in-law and the retinue of single, married or widowed servant-women who make up the female contingent of the haveli’s extended family. As for the possible charge that this is too loose and flaccid an application of the term, my only defense is that going by the haveli ethos which pervades the novel, women are by definition domestic—either that or else!

In order to get a handle on the welter of desires that crisscross inside the haveli, I opt to proceed by way of a simple taxonomy. To my mind, desire in Rama Mehta’s novel can be bunched together under two broad heads—heads that are congruent with the dual narrative maneuver identified previously as making up its plot. These are a) Traditional desires and b) Non-traditional desires. Needless to say these categories are far from mutually exclusive. Rather it is more useful to think of the novel as offering a spectrum of desires with the blur in the centre resolving into more clearly isolatable flanks of the traditional and its other, in the present instance named the “non-traditional.” I begin here with the first set of desires.

Traditional Desires
According to the OED, tradition means “a custom, opinion or belief handed down to posterity, especially orally or by practice.” In Rama Mehta’s novel, tradition appears quite specifically in the form of the ages-old haveli culture. Generally
speaking, what I call traditional desires come in two guises. One variant has the full backing of established custom; it is freely, even insistently expressed and feted all round. The other is indirectly countenanced by tradition but manifestly censured. Its expression therefore often evinces a commensurate obliquity. Both these types of traditional desires find a home inside the haveli. In what follows, I inventory them under three loosely descriptive orientations, viz., a) desire for continuity, b) desire for acceptance and c) feminine desires.

a). desire for continuity: this, in brief, is the pith of tradition. Commonly manifest as a zeal for preservation, not surprisingly, it comes with the stamp of conservative approval. In the novel under the scanner here, it is this desire for continuity that expressly informs the many orthodoxies of the women “inside the haveli”—from their strict adherence to the gendered form and etiquette of haveli-life to their zealous guardianship and tutelary induction of others into its hoary regimen. Thus, Bhabha Sa is acting under the guidance of this impulse when she dishes out liberal doses of verbal mortification to her daughter-in-law as well as the other servant-women of the haveli—her reprimands functioning as an effective propaedeutic to right conduct. That she lived by the discipline she demanded of others is further evidenced in her dying moments, where “to the very last she was aware of feminine decorum. As long as she was conscious, she insisted the maids cover her face before the doctor” (56). So that to quote the retrospective gloss that the novel offers on her draconian stewardship of haveli affairs,

for seventy years Sangram Singhji’s wife had walked in the corridors of Jeewan Niwas as the trustee of the family traditions. She had lived always in the shadow of her husband’s ancestors. While she carried on her duties, she had at the same time carefully instructed her daughter-in-law in the rituals and customs of the haveli. That was the only way to ensure the continuity of family traditions. Therefore, even though Sangram Singhji’s wife was not there to light the wick of the little earthen saucer, its tiny flame flickered as always in front of the family deity. (60)

Similarly, Kanwarani Sa, her daughter-in-law and mistress of Jeewan Niwas after her death, though nowhere near such a termagant, is moved by pretty much the same motivations. As the novel informs us,

[Kanwarani Sa’s] personality was such that it was difficult to contradict her or even express a different point of view. She had her own way of prevailing over others, a
blend of craft and tenacity. She never lost her temper, she was always seemingly considerate and gentle. She never raised her voice; she was patient and prepared to listen.... But on essentials she did not compromise. (31)

Interestingly, vis-à-vis Geeta she employs more or less the same strategies of instruction, i.e., censure mixed with unambiguous expressions of what is expected in a daughter-in-law who is to be the future mistress and custodian of Jeewan Niwas and its traditions.368 This is why even as “she never missed an occasion to bring home to Geeta that her first and in fact only duty was to serve her husband’s family,” (117), even as she directs Geeta to “keep [her] face covered” or to “not talk too much with [her] young cousins-in-law [because] it’s not becoming” (30), etc., she also tells her, “I am getting old now and soon you will have to take over” (30). Then again, the influence of this desire is in nowise restricted to the mistresses of the haveli. It equally extends to the servants of the household—Pari’s taking to task of Geeta for her infractions against the haveli code being as much an expression of it369 as the severe monitoring to which the motherless Sita is subjected to by the different servant-women of the household.370 In other words, the desire for continuity, at least at an ideological level,371 cuts across the feudal divide which separates the mistresses from their maids. It enjoys an almost

368 For instance, Kanwarani Sa’s finding fault with Geeta’s neglect in distributing Vijay’s old clothes equally among the many children of the haveli servants (144) faintly echoes Bhabha Sa’s castigation of Kanwarani Sa for the unnecessary expenses incurred in celebrating Vijay’s birth (46).

369 On one occasion, finding Geeta alone in the men’s section of the haveli, Pari frankly remonstrates with her on the impropriety of her ways, saying, “what are you doing here all alone Binniji? I know you are an outsider but it is time you learned our ways. In this section of the haveli women come only when properly escorted.... What would your father-in-law think if he saw you with your face uncovered? Binniji daughters-in-law of this haveli do not behave like this” (20).

370 Opposing Geeta’s proposal to send Sita to school, for instance, Pari says: [Sita] must be protected from the world outside.... Sita has to marry. Leave her to us, the servants. We know what is best for her.... [A] girl who has to live in the village must be sturdy. She cannot be pampered. Her limbs must be strong to pull water from the well, to plough the fields, collect the cow dung. As it is, Sita is lazy. You send her to school and she will begin to think she is a little lady. (98-99)

371 At a practical level, of course, this ideological solidarity is fractured by the specific forms which their desire take—forms that are more often than not peculiar to their perceived station and function in the feudal hierarchy that sustains the haveli culture.
ubiquitous presence and a near universal appeal, especially among the women of the haveli.

Seeing as how this is so, the one word that sets up a bit of a rat-a-tat in the mind is “why?” Why do the women of the haveli, mistress or servant, rich or poor, generally speaking, swear by this desire? What is it about this desire that stokes their passion so, claims their allegiance so? Especially when these are enlisted in the service of a tradition that is as unequivocally sexist.

According to one of the brief psychological sketches that the novel provides on haveli women,

[..]

They had confidence born out of hundreds of years of unbroken tradition. They never faltered or hesitated. If ever in doubt, they consulted the astrologer. Life, with all its suffering, was never unbearable. They shared each other’s joys and wept together in sorrow. They were strong and even ruthless when it came to upholding family customs and ties. Tradition was like a fortress protecting them from the outside world, giving them security and a sense of superiority. (114)

In view of the above, it is clearly ingenuous to take what I have called a desire for continuity at its face value, as some kind of elemental, autotelic urge. For spinning its Gordian knot are the tangled skeins of at least two other broadly identifiable desires, namely, a desire for security and a desire for honour.

Regarding the first of these, everything in the novel from household economising by the haveli mistresses to the placating of in-laws, from the marriage of girls to the education of servants is done with an eye on future and/or long-term...

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372 That this is an acquired desire, for one reason or another, is clearly established by the fact of its evidence only in older haveli women. Young girls like Vijay and Sita are shown to care two hoots for tradition. It is also attested by the fact that with changing times, i.e., changes in the macro sphere, there are changes in the micro sphere. In the novel, the traditional lifestyle no longer seems as relevant to the younger generation. To Geeta, the young haveli women are only formal in their observance of traditional norms. “They followed the traditions of their families at the bidding of their elders, but they lacked the same faith or commitment to it. It seemed to Geeta that they were waiting for the day when they would be freed from their confinement. But on the surface they showed no dissatisfaction...” (87).

373 When Kanta complains against the treatment she receives at the hands of her mother-in-law, Kanwarani Sa cautions her against “talk[ing] like this. You know she has gold and that’s money. Bai Sa, you can’t afford to displease her. Remember sweet words cost nothing” (130).

374 The matter that is of uppermost concern regarding the education of servant women, for instance, is how it will affect their availability for haveli work. As long as it does not interfere in
security. Indeed the very custom of purdah is clinching evidence of it. As for the second, its impress in a chivalrous culture can hardly be missed—honour being the most precious, the most cherished possession of Rajput aristocrats. Of course, in keeping with the structural logic of their sociality, the concept of honour is also gendered. So that even as its hegemonic hold over men and women is more or less the same, the particulars of male and female honour are vastly different. In Rama Mehta’s novel, the desire for honour among haveli women is principally expressed in the scrupulous observance of customary form. And both social as well as personal relations are conducted with a view to maintain, if not maximise it. Thus Kanwarani Sa submits to the taunts and jibes of Bhabha Sa; because it is not honourable for a daughter-in-law to retaliate. Thus Jeewan Niwas is exemplary in its upholding of haveli traditions; because “nothing mattered more to Bhagwat Singhji’s wife than the dignity of Jeewan Niwas. She would do her utmost to maintain the untarnished reputation of the haveli” (170). Thus Geeta is advised to cultivate the quality of “reticence”; because a too-ready speech in women is equivalent to a lack of modesty. Thus in the celebrations held to mark Vijay’s birth, nobody known to the family, however big or small, is left out and some servants are also given gold; because the occasion demanded such magnanimity. After all, as Pari says, “if Kanwar Sa had not fed the community on this occasion, what would people have said?” (46). Thus the proposal for Vijay is especially attractive; because it comes from another haveli of equal if not higher standing; and so on and so forth.

While there’s little to cavil about in all of the above, what still begs the question is why these component desires transmogrify into a desire for continuity? Why do

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the routine too much, it is acceptable but the moment it upsets the haveli regimen, then there are protests voiced by the mistresses of the havelis. This is how Kanwarani Sa voices her opposition to the idea of sending Sita to school:

“Just imagine sending Sita to school now, just when she is getting to be useful in the house. But Binniji thinks that I am old and foolish. Well, I may be that, but I do know that once a girl has gone to school she will never take a broom in her hand. I have my maids, Binniji. They will never leave me. But I was thinking of your comfort. You have a long life ahead of you. Sita would be a perfect maid for you. I would marry her to one of the servants’ boys and both of them could serve you. But not if she goes to school.” (118)
they not take some other form? As I see it, this tilt towards the traditional issues from the gendered architectonics of haveli culture. It issues, furthermore, from the perceived lack of any viable, read that acceptable, alternative to the dominant. Take, for instance, the desire for security. In a general sense, it will be granted that security lies in the familiar. For women in the novel, however, it lies in the familiar only insofar as the familiar is also the familial. Why? Because, as mentioned before, in the gendered division of the home and the world that defines haveli lifestyles, women have been strictly deemed creatures of the home. Consequently, security for them is also thought to exist in the traditionally prescribed syntax of women’s lives, a syntax that interpellates them within a growing web of kinship ties as they evolve from daughters to become wives and mothers, preferably of sons, etc. The rationale being that such enfoldment within the familial shields women from the need for direct interaction with a treacherous world. Not surprisingly, any step off the beaten track is viewed with suspicion, either as prodigal recklessness or as a potential threat. What wonder then the need for security, time and again, manifests itself in the novel as an enactment of convention. Matters are not much different in the second case either. Here, the transformation is wrought by the predicament of women systemically denied any access to a sense of self apart from the familial. For, as Sudhir Kakar observes “where and when tradition governs, an Indian woman does not stand alone; her identity is wholly defined by her relationship to others” (The Inner World 56). In such a scenario, the only way in which women can achieve a measure of social standing is by embracing the identity of the households into which they happen to marry. Women like Bhabha Sa and Kanwarani Sa in Inside the Haveli are exemplifications of just such a phenomenon. By internalising the

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375 This is why Sita’s education is sacrificed for a marriage. For, as Kanwarani Sa says, “marriage is the only security for women.” This is also why Lakshmi is pitied. For, despite her independence, it is assumed she must be derelict outside the protection of her home and family.

376 As in the case of Lakshmi.

377 Khyali, the cook, believes Geeta’s decision to send Sita to school endangers her security. Angrily he wonders, “Does Binniji think just because we are servants she can do as pleases with our children? Let her try and send a daughter of mine to school and see. Yes, you can do what you like with the boys but to expose a girl to the world! Never!” (126).
haveli code and becoming zealous custodians of family honour they are successful in winning for themselves a mediated form of self-validation.\textsuperscript{378} So that to tie up loose ends, since the family honour they guard, cherish and maintain is coined in the mint of tradition, any desire on behalf of the former willy-nilly translates as an expression of desire for the latter.\textsuperscript{379}

b) desire for acceptance: insofar as it induces conformity to social circumstances, this desire is not in conflict with tradition. Rather, if carefully manipulated it can serve as a key ally in any tradition’s campaign for self-perpetuation. Broadly speaking, therefore, the desire for acceptance not only has conservative approval, it is also assiduously inculcated in individuals.\textsuperscript{380} In Rama Mehta’s novel, Geeta’s tenacious attempt to come to terms with haveli traditions is an extended, though sometimes implicit and conflicted, expression of this desire. Elsewhere, it is also suggested in the little compromises, indulgences and allowances that her husband as well as her in-laws make in order that Geeta feels more at home in Jeewan Niwas. But since the nature of this desire is nowhere near as compelling, sustained or singularly critical to their lives as Geeta’s yearning is to hers, my focus here will be on the latter. More particularly, it will be on the causes that intensify this desire in Geeta.

As a newly wed bride, of course, Geeta is expected to adjust. Everyone and everything from her parents and in-laws, servants and relatives to social custom and precept, her husband and even Geeta herself, expect this of her. To begin with, then, the desire for acceptance is a regulation feature of Geeta’s

\textsuperscript{378} As Leela Dube notes, in the context of food preparations and domestic rituals, “the nurture of self-esteem and self-assertion on the part of individual women is inextricably tied to the maintenance of family prestige. Responsibility for the preservation of traditions, maintenance of the sanctity of bounded space, control over rituals, the distribution of food and the task of socialization give women a sense of power over people and situations” (“Caste and Women” 230).

\textsuperscript{379} In the novel, the self-effacing careers of both Bhabha Sa and Kanwarani Sa, their intense devotion to haveli customs, can be attributed to the working out of precisely such forms of mediated self-validation.

\textsuperscript{380} For a brief account of the psychological manipulation which conditions women to acquiescence, refer to Sudhir Kakar, The Inner World (61-63).
condition/ing as a recently-married woman—as standard to her psychic coding of 
sativva as shringara is to her physical coding as a married woman. What gives this 
desire its unusual force and character in her case is a combination of several other 
factors, including her affectionate nature and upbringing as well as the specific 
circumstances that attend her integration into haveli life at Jeevan Niwas, her 
affinal home. By way of example, take the facts of her nature and nurture. 
According to the novel, 

when at nineteen Geeta had come as a bride to Jeewan Niwas she was lively and 
spontaneous. She had not been taught to stint in giving affection; nor was she taught 
to keep her feelings concealed. Her parents had encouraged her to speak her mind. 
There was a child-like enthusiasm in everything she did or said. She knew marriage 
meant going into unfamiliar surroundings but she was not afraid. In her youthful 
confidence she believed that with love she could win over anyone, anywhere. (32) 

In other words, Geeta comes across as a sensitive, vivacious, innocent girl 
nourished on, what Kakar has called, “the ‘narcissistic supplies’ necessary for 
firm self-esteem,” i.e., “her family’s love and approval” (The Inner World 62). 
She comes across, furthermore, as a girl who is used to this, who responds to this, 
and one whose confidence as well as happiness are inextricably tied up with it. 
My point here is that such a psychological profile makes Geeta “naturally” 
predisposed towards feeling a desire for acceptance from whomever she might 
interact with on a regular basis. So that when freighted with the social 
expectations that go with being a bride, it is no surprise that Geeta should feel the 
effects of this desire in all its keenness. Then again, while every bride in a 
patriarchal, virilocal context has to go through a period of adjustment and 
“familialisation,” matters are considerably exacerbated in Geeta’s case by the 
kind of disjuncture she encounters. Not only is she a stranger in the home of her 
in-laws, 381 she is also a stranger to their culture 382—a culture as she quickly 

381 As is normal in arranged marriages. 
382 The novel describes Sangram Singhji’s haveli as a place where, 

no one really expressed their feelings, [where] they covered their emotions in an 
elaborate exchange of formal gestures, [where] even her husband talked to his 
parents as if they were dignitaries with whom he could take no liberties, [where] the 
form and courtesy which the young maintained before the old lacked spontaneity.... 
[where] everyone moved cautiously, [where] every word was weighed before it was 
spoken, [where] even with the servants no one lost their tempers; they were 
reprimanded with polite but cutting words which was almost worse than if they had 
been openly abused. (33)
realises, she is ill-prepared to handle.\textsuperscript{383} What’s worse, her difference is more often than not read as a sign of her inferiority—the haveli women constantly making her aware of her “outsider” status, taunting her for her clumsy ways and predicting she would never “adjust.” Adding piquancy to her desire for acceptance, therefore, are concurrent feelings of anger, rebellion, apprehension, frustration, uncertainty, all wanting to prove them wrong and in the process prove herself good enough to be a daughter-in-law of the haveli.\textsuperscript{384} And if this is not leverage enough, Geeta’s desire for acceptance is also whetted by the loving support and dignified consideration coming her way from her husband and parents-in-law. Sensitive person that she is, Geeta both recognises this and responds to it. Consequently her desire is equally about not disappointing them and their decision in choosing her as a “suitable girl” for their home (grihalakshmi) as much as anything else.

To conclude then, Geeta’s desire for acceptance is a complex amalgamation of various pulls and pressures. Its importance to the present engagement lies in the many ways in which it impels much of her actions, informs much of her decisions. It lies, moreover, in the many ways in which this desire solicits her troubled submission to haveli norms and so confirms its pact with the traditional in the novel.\textsuperscript{385}

c) feminine desires: by feminine desires, my reference is to those impulses that are supposed to be the peculiar monopoly of women in the novel. Patriarchal

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\textsuperscript{383} As the novel says, “The women of the haveli, rich and poor, young and old, knew exactly what to do; they were never awkward. No matter what they were doing they carried themselves with effortless grace. Geeta got no confidence from her college education. Nor did the admiration and constant reassurance from her husband make her feel more at ease...” (29).
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\textsuperscript{384} One of the fears that constantly plagues Geeta in the early years of marriage is that “No one thought her worthy of the family. Everyone was afraid that she would embarrass them by an indiscreet word or a faulty move” (31).
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\textsuperscript{385} Of course, in the case of Ajay and his parent, their desire for acceptance from her is an allowance to what they see as modernity. But given the pallid and sporadic nature of this expression, the desire for acceptance seems principally hitched to the wagon of tradition in Rama Mehta’s novel.
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traditions generally are known to adopt an ambivalent stance vis-à-vis desires they deem to be the métier of women. On the one hand, since these desires share in the general stigma that attaches to the female in a culture that values the male, they are looked down upon traditionally. On the other, insofar as they are at least “natural” to the tamasic constitution of women, despite being traditionally decried they are socially tolerated. Of course, I need hardly point to the dubious a posteriori reasoning that informs these postures and postulates. To come back to the text, this traditional ambivalence finds more or less ready replication in Inside the Haveli with regard to the desires it considers the preserve of the female. My aim therefore is not only to identify some of these tendencies, it is also to explore the politics that en/genders them.

Given that Inside the Haveli describes life in a zenana, feminine desires are woven into the warp and weft of the novel. In fact, inasmuch as they supply the affective backdrop against which the more unusual desires in the novel find heightened relief, they actually substantiate its routine. Here, I gather their diffuse presence around four broad traits. These are a) a propensity to talk, b) a hunger for gossip and scandal mongering, c) a desire for gold ornaments and clothes, and d) a tendency to hoard.

To begin with, the novel is replete with images of “chattering women” (33). Whether it is informally congregating in the haveli courtyard during the afternoon interlude from household chores or more formally gathering on the occasions of births, deaths, marriages, illnesses, or what-have-you, women in this novel seem to have an indefatigable capacity to keep on talking (33). What’s more, about nothing in particular! This image is further reinforced by contrast. The noisy gaggle of women is set off against the splendour and “quiet dignity” (39) of male assemblies, indeed, the masculine mien, in general (39, 40). The abiding impression got from reading the novel, therefore, is of women with a decided taste for chitchat. Then again, their confabulations are not all innocent. Regularly spicing it up are juicy tidbits of other people’s secrets. From Dhapu, to Champa,
to Ganga, to Manju Bua Sa, Kanta and Nandu Bua Sa, Bhabha Sa and Kanwarani Sa, each one is shown not a little susceptible to the pleasures of gossip. And if it’s eavesdropping, snooping around, a little embellishment or inventive mathematics that is required to keep the grapevine busy, then the women in this novel prove themselves more than up to such challenges. As for gold ornaments and clothes, the “fairer sex” are shown to frankly covet these. Not only do they openly cadge for gifts, they are also not averse to a little bit of scheming to help matters along.\footnote{For instance, consider the contrivances of Dhapu and Sarju, the mid-wife, on the celebrations to mark Vijay’s birth.} If anything, the excitement that grips them on getting these gifts serves as a handy index to the intensity of the desires they experience. Once again, men are shown neither to scheme for these things nor to go into raptures over them; in fact, in general, they are barely shown concerned with these at all. Therefore, by implication if not by assertion these desires appear to be the special talent of women. Last but not least, women in the novel reveal a decided tilt towards hoarding. This is evidenced not only in their attachment to gold ornaments as Geeta observes,\footnote{According to Geeta, “the women of the haveli always looked at their gold with greedy eyes. For them their jewels were something to hoard, to think about. They were never satisfied because there was always someone in another haveli who had more than they” (109).} but is implicit in Kanwarani Sa’s careful preservation of old saris or in Bhabha Sa’s advocacy of and Kanwarani Sa’s hawk-eyed practice of rationing household provisions. And that’s not all either. For the desire to hold on to things, to accumulate things, to be tight-fisted in their disbursement is equally manifest in the psychological make-up of women. As Dhapu’s says, the women “are all mean. The men are generous and understanding” (104)—a sentiment that is echoed throughout the novel and one that closely aligns with Geeta’s reading of haveli life.

What follows is a brief analytical look at the haveli ethos that pegs the above tendencies, either overtly or via insinuation, as feminine desires. The benefits of doing so from the establishment point of view, of course, are obvious. It retroactively justifies the secondary status accorded to women by seemingly
bearing out in practice the prejudices that *ab initio* underwrite the traditional culture of the havelis. Yet the point I wish to stress here is that there is enough in the novel to suggest that these venial desires are more the effect of socialisation and circumstances than any ever-present psychosomatic female quiddity. Take, for instance, the alleged inclination to gossip. Different sarcastic and/or deprecatory comments in the novel acknowledge, albeit by default, the possibility that women chatter, women tattletale, not because they are hardwired to do so, but because that is all that they can do.388 Because being unlettered, orality is their only means of entertainment, information, communication.389 Similarly, the attachment of women to clothes and gold ornaments can be explained, among other things, by reference to two factors. One, both these objects are crucial to the traditional coding of women, to her *shringara*. They are the most immediate and visible markers of her social status, of her identity.390 Then again, these are the two things of material value that she can retain some control over, inherit and bequeath as she wishes. In other words, they are a significant part of what constitutes traditional *stridhan*. So that apart from vanity, they are practically crucial to whatever influence a woman individually wields in household affairs.391

As for the propensity to hoard, women inside the haveli are from childhood nurtured to hold back, retain, store, preserve, conserve, concern themselves with

388 For instance, Kanwarani Sa on being asked to respond to a rumour replies, “Women in the havelis have so much time on their hands that when there is nothing to talk about they fabricate gossip” (152).

389 While waiting for midnight to ritually propitiate the goddess of wealth on a full moon night, Dhapu complains that if Kanwarani Sa were there, they “would all have been talking and laughing,” not “gazing at the flames.” Pari responds to this by saying, “Binniji is different. She is educated; she has other things to occupy her. Gossip is for those like us who cannot read or write” (88). Although rendered with a trace of sarcasm, this statement nonetheless is a fact—one that even though women do not intentionally admit, is implicit as a subtext to many of their comments.

390 When Geeta observes the love of haveli women for gold, she says they love it precisely as, and for, this.

391 Bhabha Sa’s crotchety remark, that the haveli servant-women no longer heed her because, “I have given every tola of gold to Binniji. I have nothing left to give and they know it” (47), Kanta’s submission to her mother-in-law (130), Dhapu’s comment, “Daughters do not get property” but are given a “share of gold” (90), as also the women’s general censure of Geeta’s bric-à-brac collection as an extravagance, all, confirm this view.
the interests of their immediate family and kin. There are scattered hints in the novel to suggest that it is this narrow compass of their prescribed interests, roles and utility in society that turns in upon itself and translates as a zeal for accumulation and general parsimoniousness. So that all things considered even as these desires serve to prop up traditional double-standards vis-à-vis women, their depiction in the novel also serves to show up traditional prejudices for what they are. Finally, it is in this meta sense also that I deem their relation to the traditional to be a bit ambivalent.

Non-traditional Desires

As the heading suggests, this category brings together desires that are not quite traditional. That is to say, these desires register as a change in the traditional routine to be found inside the haveli. The degree to which they mark this change decides their relation to the traditional—whether it is merely variational, out and out antithetical, or something radically other but not necessarily oppositional. On the whole, their occurrence in the novel is sporadic and mostly associated with specific individuals (as opposed to the traditional desires outlined above which have a more general application). Here I identify them as a) desire for privacy, b) a desire for individuation, and c) a desire for education.

a) desire for privacy: according to the novel, “there are no secrets, there could be none in the haveli. It is one household, all the courtyards are connected” (6). Despite the segregation of the sexes, despite the observance of purdah even among the women, therefore, the identity that is typically available to people inside the haveli is not a private one. For women, it is not a public one either. Rather, it is something in-between; it is a social identity—one that has meaning only in its relations to others, albeit circumscribed within the pale of the domestic. This is why, for instance, Kanwarani Sa, a bona fide product of haveli culture,
“was happiest when the verandah was full of women. She hated being alone. Noise did not bother her, but silence she could not bear” (48). Geeta, however, chafes against such complete submersion in the “social” as it is made available to her. Not only does she intermittently pine for the “the lovely luxury of being alone and to feel secure that no one will burst in to share a bit of gossip” (19), as the years pass, she also “worked out her own strategy against those who tried to find out more than she was willing to reveal” (173). So that even as she became “more and more involved in the routine of the household; [even as] she accepted the discipline of the haveli without protest” (88), “she still kept a little apart” (87). As I see it, insofar as this strikes an erratic note in the rhythm of haveli life, Geeta’s desire for privacy qualifies as a non-traditional inclination. It must not be understood as anti-traditional. For its fulfilment is conceived very much within the rubric of haveli life. A clue as to why this is so can be found in her motivation to seek privacy—a motivation that is two-fold, interfused yet contradictory. On the one hand, Geeta keeps to herself because despite her best efforts at assimilation she finds no community among the haveli women. “She had made no friends. The daughters and daughters-in-law of her age in the other havelis were no companions to her” (87). And while “the chatter of the maids, the gossip that floated into the courtyard, were amusing, [they were] not sufficient to be really satisfying” (88). On the other, Geeta safeguards her privacy as the only means of marginally distinguishing herself from the complaisant mass of haveli women, shrouded as they are by the veil of tradition. It is her way of not being “crushed by the haveli” (100), of not being swallowed up completely by its corporate culture, while still located within it.

b) desire for individuation: what I mean by this is simply an urge to stand out and apart from others; to be counted as a person in one’s own right, rather than only

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393 The novel describes her relationship with haveli women thus:
She...did not like the rigidity with which the women held on to old customs.... She could not become one with the haveli women nor did she want to. The tension between her and them, though muted, remained. But it no longer preoccupied her thoughts nor did it trouble her. Her in-laws had given her enough freedom within the haveli to keep her occupied in the manner that satisfied her.... (178)
through relation. Needless to say, the accent in this desire is on separation, on difference.

While Geeta’s desire for privacy looks for and finds ambivalent accommodation inside the haveli, the desire for individuation, as it manifests in Lakshmi, the servant-woman, is more fundamentally opposed to traditional ideals—its antagonistic orientation having a direct bearing, in my opinion, on how her life eventually pans out in the novel. But to not jump the gun, Lakshmi, right from the beginning, is introduced as someone who is one of her kind. Unlike other haveli servant-women she “did not care what anyone said” (11). Despite being married, “nothing could convince her that cleaning and sweeping was wonderful or that she was fortunate in having Gangaram as a husband” (12). What’s more, “she even blamed the mistress for marrying her to a poor man, and that too with a crooked nose” (11-12). Most of the time, “she went her own way, doing work when told to, otherwise sitting around day-dreaming” (12). She is not overly chummy with the other servant-women—things that excite them only leaving her disgruntled. Generally, she keeps her own company.\(^{394}\) When her husband falsely accuses her of wantonness, she is cut to the quick. Not only does she refuse to forgive him as is customarily expected, in what is considered an extreme reaction, she also leaves the haveli, her husband and her newborn child. And when nobody in her natal family is willing to support her or her decision, she still desists from going back either to her husband or even to the haveli, preferring to make do as best she can in the town of Udaipur. If anything, this unconventional step seems even more remarkable when considered in light of the fact that at the time she took it “she was only a little over fifteen” (12) years old. As I see it, her general intractability, her outspokenness, her laziness, her “difficult ... to satisfy” (47) comportment, her obduracy, as also her sundry choices and determinations, are all inchoate expressions of a desire for individuation. They stem from her desire to be distinct from the regular run of haveli servant-women, to be noticed,

\(^{394}\) Describing her habits, the novel tells us, “Lakshmi never came up to the verandah in the afternoon unless she had to. She preferred being in her own little room” (48).
acknowledged and respected in her own right, as her own person. So that to return to the point about the effect this has on her fate in the novel, Lakshmi’s embryonic individualism, with its impetus towards fragmentation, is clearly incommensurable with the organic albeit stratified cohesiveness of traditional haveli life. Ultimately, I believe, it is this fundamental lack of fit, this incompatibility, coupled with her refusal to tailor her desire to traditional needs that underlie Lakshmi’s decision to opt for the very real tribulations of making her home in the world over and against the conventionally vaunted security of finding the world in her home.

c) desire for education: this is the one desire among the set of non-traditional desires identified here that is not wrapped up around a single individual. Rather it finds diverse expression in the novel. To begin with, it is materialised in the most formal and accomplished way in the person of Ajay, Geeta’s husband, the scion of Jeewan Niwas and a University Professor. Then again, it is present in a more mediated manner in his parents’ choice of an educated girl as a bride for their son; in Bhagwat Singhji’s verbal and monetary support to Geeta’s effort to send Sita to school as well as to begin informal classes at home for the haveli women and children. Geeta, of course, is by far the most passionate and steadfast advocate of education in the novel. She is not only adamant that Vijay, her daughter, should complete her education, she is also desirous that other women, girls and children in the haveli have access to it—her efforts in the aforesaid instances being to the latter end. Finally, there are the incipient desires of the children and women that regularly attend Geeta’s classes. This, in brief, is an approximate breakdown of the range of impulses that cluster into a desire for education in Rama Mehta’s novel.

395 Where tradition emphasises a respect for what has gone before, Lakshmi has scant regard for precedence; where tradition invests authority in one’s superiors, identified on the basis of age, birth and gender, Lakshmi tends to believe in herself; where tradition prescribes flexibility as a virtue par-excellence for women, Lakshmi evinces determination bordering on stubbornness; where tradition is structured around hierarchies of birth and sex, Lakshmi stakes a claim for equality, however inarticulate.
Broaching the question of women's education in orthodox patriarchal settings usually means an occasion to ventilate all those tired arguments about the licentiousness of educated women, about their inauspiciousness, about their less than total devotion to their husband and families, about the ultimate uselessness of formal education for women to be good wives and mothers, the raison d'être, after all, of female existence, etc. Inside the Haveli in its treatment of the subject typically rehearses most of these partisan positions. From the many barbs that come Geeta's way for being educated to the storm of protest against the proposal to send Sita to school as well as against Geeta's informal classes for haveli servant-women, it provides a sense of the vehemence and variety of traditional opposition to women's education. Yet, despite all this conventional frothing at the mouth, the desire for education receives moral and material encouragement from the most respected quarters of traditional life in the novel. As I see it, this rapprochement occurs through a careful weaning of an admittedly non-traditional desire from the taint of its allegedly anti-traditional agenda. It is secured by hitching the horse of women's education to the wagon of an enlightened traditionalism. So that the unmistakable message gleaned is "that even an educated girl can be moulded. That [Kanwarani Sa] was not wrong in selecting [Geeta] as the wife of my only son" (30); that, in fact, educated girls are able companions to their husbands; that far from being a threat to the traditional way of life, they are actually the sahadharminis of their husbands in a fast changing social order, someone who can be counted on, not just to manage a household or for support, but also for counsel. To conclude therefore, the desire for education is shown finding some accommodation within a traditional paradigm in the novel. What is left in no doubt is that such accommodation is conditional—it

396 For a synoptic overview of some of the nineteenth-century debates on women's education in northern India, refer to Charu Gupta, Sexuality, Obscenity, Community (161-76).

397 The novel registers the frustration felt by Ajay at the haveli conventions that police his time with his wife. "Geeta was a companion to him, with whom he could talk and discuss things that were not related to Udaipur. But he had to wait till the evening to talk to her..." (21).

398 Both Geeta, and later, Sita, can be cited as examples, here.
is strictly in lieu of confirming the salience of marriage and family in a woman’s life.

As the notational exercise undertaken above perhaps indicates, I read Rama Mehta’s novel as a textured interplay of traditional and non-traditional desires. More correctly, I read the novel as an interstitial location of non-traditional cadences in a web of traditional pulsations. This structural and substantive asymmetry, in fact, is mirrored in the disproportion marking my categorical summary. Broadly speaking, of course, such a bi-focal lens on the novel is neither unique nor remarkable—most analytical essays I have come across use dichotomous distinctions of one sort or another to vet the text. Where I depart from critical custom is in the details of my binary. The dominant trend is to view Inside the Haveli as a dialectical working out of the discourses of tradition and modernity—the dialectic finding a more or less convincing synthesis, depending on the particular suasion of the critic concerned, in the character of Geeta. The argument, without exception, turns upon considering Geeta the representative and harbinger of modernity in the novel. I, of course, replace modernity or the odd variation on it with the non-traditional. This substitution is neither random nor incidental. It stems from the inability, despite trying, to find a coherent locus of modernity in the novel. Since it is crucial to the politics of desire I locate inside the haveli, I would like to set about here by expatiating on the reasons for my switch in terminology.

A good way to begin this venture might be by asking just what it is that is considered a sign of modernity across the large swath of critical opinion regarding Rama Mehta’s novel? By way of answer, to repeat myself, modernity seems most palpably inscribed for them in the person and personality of Geeta. More specifically, they point to the fact that she has had a metropolitan upbringing in

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Bombay, has gone to school and graduated from a co-educational college, is frank and spontaneous, and hails from a family where a simple mixing of men and women is not quite cause for scandal. At best, this line of reasoning is critical strategy, at worst, critical sloth. Mostly however, it is somewhere in between and a mammoth misreading of the ideological co-ordinates of modernity.

Geeta, to put it bluntly, is not modern. As I see it, her condition, as well as that of the other signs of change in the novel can be explained with recourse to two very different diagnoses of the Indian state of development. Both agree that what is found in India is not modernity. They disagree on pretty much everything else. My reference is to Dipankar Gupta’s and Makarand Paranjape’s almost diametrically opposite readings of modernity or the lack of it in post-independence India. According to the former, the Indian situation is symptomatic of a “mistaken modernity” perhaps sufficient in the trappings of the phenomenon, but sorely lacking in its substance. According to the latter, India’s is not an ersatz, variant or deviant modernity, but a kind of non-modernity—one that is by virtue of its civilisational genius for the spiritual, in his words, “gnosis” or the “wisdom traditions” (“The Third Eye” 269). In either case, what is argued is

400 In Gupta’s view:

modernity has to do with attitudes, especially those that come into play in social relations. A modern society is one at least the following characteristics must be present:

—Dignity of the individual
—Adherence to universalistic norms
—Elevation of individual achievement over privileges or disprivileges of birth
—Accountability in public life. (Mistaken Modernity 2)

Elsewhere, he writes, “modernity demands a baseline similarity so that people can live with dignity and can realistically avail of opportunities to better their conditions of existence. It is on this bedrock of equality that other differences and inequalities can be added on. But the foundational equality cannot be compromised for it is on this that claims of citizenship are made in modern societies” (5). His main thesis is that “modernity has been misrecognised in India because of the tendency to equate it with technology and with other contemporary artifacts” (2).

401 In Paranjape’s words, “India is not necessarily traditional as opposed to the modern West... we are simply [a] non-modern people” (“Saundarya, Modernity and the Aesthetics of Duality” 313). He believes that such non-modernity is sourced in “wisdom or gnosis or prajna or jnana—all these connote neither instrumental rationality [the sign of modernity] nor anti-rationality, but something that is at once less than irrationality and more than rationality” (“Saundarya, Modernity and the Aesthetics of Duality” 313).
that contemporary India belies the ideological requisites of a credible modernity, anchored, as that is in a secular, materialist Enlightenment ethic. To cut to the chase, my point is that “difference” in the novel, more often than not hypostasizes precisely this state of “mistaken” and/or “non” modernity.  

Mind you, to say this is not to deny the presence of the modern in Rama Mehta’s text. It is only to bring that presence into some sort of perspective. And replacing the word modern in my taxonomy with “non-traditional” allows me to do just that—provide perspective, that is. For while the word modern assumes a persistently combative position vis-à-vis tradition and is positively exclusive in its significance, the phrase “non-traditional” is more elastic. It can not only include the modern, but also extend to other instances that are untraditional yet not by that token necessarily anti-traditional as is the modern. So that to round off this excursus, I attempt my schematic substitution because a) Inside the Haveli has more evidence of the untraditional understood as a difference from established

The non-modern demonstrates a fluency in the vocabulary of the modern, while never acceding to the modern condition totally. The gap between reality and language, between the socio-cultural and the intellectual, between base and superstructure, between them and us is therefore never bridged totally. This gap produces ... a critical distance, an alternative viewpoint that maybe termed neither traditional, nor anti-modern, nor non-modern.... Spatially, this is the dialogue between the metropolis on the one hand and the Indian heartland ... mediated through what might be termed the modern sector that all of us occupy. ("Saundarya, Modernity and the Aesthetics of Duality" 314)

In “The Third Eye” he further says, “The debate between the West and India is not between modernity and tradition or modernity and pre- or anti-modernity, but between modernity and non-modernity. Indeed, in the ultimate analysis, this is a debate between two kinds of rationality, two ways of seeing, two visions and versions of the world” (269). At the end of this essay he also says how he deems this non-modernity to be especially Indian: “Of course, we might argue that what goes by the name of ancient wisdom was not especially Indian or Eastern, but prevailed in several parts of the world before the advent of modernity. What makes India special is the persistence of these traditions in a powerful and coherent form to this day” (269).

Needless to say, the implications for reading her actions are vastly different, dependent on the frame applied. Straightforwardly read, in Gupta’s case, she is a failure, in Paranjape’s, a distinctive accomplishment.

In this I might be seen as taking a leaf out of Paranjape’s book. The “non” in non-traditional here suggests as he puts it, a “difference that refuses to be subsumed under affirmation or negation” something that avoids “the deathly duel of the binaries” as a rule (“Saundarya, Modernity and the Aesthetics of Duality” 313).
custom than the out and out modern. And b) it helps understand the changes and
interchanges detailed in the text as a whole and with reference to Geeta in
particular in a more comprehensive and plausible manner.

The proof of the pudding, of course, is in the eating! What ensues, therefore, is an
attempt to track the ideological contours of domesticity as it emerges through the
fretwork of traditional and non-traditional desires delineated above. The accent is
on gauging its implications as a gendered phenomenon. To repeat myself, in
trying to grasp the levers of power that work the domestic scene, I will be zeroing
in on the role of the grihini as the focus and locus of multiple desires. Her identity
and agency as crystallising in and through the negotiation of their crosscurrents,
in fact, forms the crux of my evaluation.

Taking a broad view of things, the domestic realm in Rama Mehta’s novel is
founded on the twin principles of sexual segregation and social co-operation
realised through a complex network of hierarchical relations. The hierarchy,
however, is never quite absolute or a priori—at any given point, in any given
relation, the power differential is determined by the multiple coefficients of sex,
age, and status. That is to say, the inequality in any interaction is finally an
intricate working out of the relative claims to prominence of at least three basic
tenets, namely, the superiority of the male vis-à-vis the female, the dominion of
age over youth, and the authority of the master/mistress vis-à-vis the
maid/servant. Identity, as mentioned before, is not individualistic, sovereign
and/or self-contained. Rather, it is social, contingent, and embedded—
coterminous, in other words, with role and relation. The pyramidal cast of
affiliations not only entails that weaker identities are subsumed by more powerful
identities, it also ensures that identity per se is more well-defined in the upper
reaches of the pile-up—since they routinely undergo a simultaneous expansion

404 As a precaution against too-ready idealisations of the feudal model of socialisation and labour
management, refer to Kumkum Sangari’s Politics of the Possible (279-349; esp. 305-39).
and concentration in their serial climb to the top. In practical terms what this means is that the apical identity in the domestic conglomerate, prescriptively that of the patriarch of the household, is also the best individuated of the mass of identities that make it up. By virtue of his position at the top of the domestic heap, this personage has greater relative autonomy. He also has a wider field of choice to realise his inclinations. Nonetheless, his identity remains a social one. Since, normatively, there is no distinction really between his identity and that of the household he heads. Since, the identity of the haveli and its master as purveyors of a lineage are ideally interchangeable. Not surprisingly, alongside the power and privilege that accrues to him is an equivalent share of responsibility. For, the command–submission model of hierarchical relations delineated in the novel is as much a patronage–service or a protection–obedience mode of human interaction. One where it is morally incumbent upon people in authority to take care of those they command. Thus, the flip side to the tenets mentioned above is that men are honour-bound to protect women, older people must proactively guide and shelter the young, and master/mistress must look to the welfare of the maid/servant. This, in brief, is the ideological matrix of domesticity in Rama Mehta’s novel. And it is upheld by the brace of traditional desires. Consequently, the issue that needs some unpacking here is the cause for the manifest forms of the latter.

The key to understanding the brand of traditional, as indeed the brand of non-traditional desires that crisscross the domestic domain of the novel is the socio-political conjuncture that embeds its haveli culture. There can be little doubt that the domestic constellate in Rama Mehta’s text is an issue of feudal provenance. Yet, as the beginning of the novel, as well as statements scattered throughout its narrative point out, Udaipur is no longer a feudal fiefdom. Its aristocracy has been dismantled; the privy purses rescinded and the state itself incorporated into the national polity of a democratic India. As I see it, the traditional desires in question

405 One of the things that had irked Geeta the most was, in fact, “the ill-defined nature of her role in the family” (178).

406 In the novel, their perfect congruence is repeatedly affirmed with reference to Bhagwat Singhji.
are a carry-over from Udaipur's bygone era. They are a carry-over from times when despite the seclusion of domestic life, the private realm was not really discontinuous with the public sphere of sociality; when the domestic realm was, rather, a reproduction in miniature of the feudal state and symbiotically linked with it. Why? Because in such conditions of organic continuity and structural congruity, the traditional desires mentioned above would be most "natural." In fact, they would be well nigh inevitable. Since, within the household or without, there is hardly any viable space or scope for alternative inclinations. And more to the point, since they so patently constitute the mantra for winning social esteem. Similarly, the type of non-traditional desires that find expression in the novel can be explained through the asynchrony that exists between the haveli culture and the changing ethos of a post-independence India in which it finds situation. In other words, the longing for greater privacy, for self-individuation, for formal education, etc., are all collateral and nascent signs inside the domestic arena, of ideas gaining currency in the political and economic spheres outside. So that to offer a concluding gloss on their respective positions in the text, while traditional desires articulate a dominant-sliding-towards-residual presence, non-traditional desires hint at an emergent-moving-towards-dominance impetus.

This, of course, is a rather apposite point of take-off for the remainder of my study. For the relative trajectories of traditional and non-traditional desires is precisely the thematic concern of the novel. My allusion is to the clear attempt traceable in it to stagger the will-to-change that is apprehended as imminently threatening traditional modes of social bonding and kinship ties. Alternatively, therefore, Inside the Haveli can be said to inscribe an attempt to give direction to changes that it sees as inevitable and up to a degree necessary but not, for all that, entirely wholesome. The modus operandi it employs towards this end is double-pronged. On the one hand, through a broad invocation of the "throwing out the baby with the bathwater" syndrome, the novel seeks to sensitise to the many advantages of a traditional sociality. On the other, through an imputation of dereliction and deprivation, the novel seeks to warn against a precipitate and
solitary repudiation of custom and community. Not surprisingly, given its focus on the domestic, both these stratagems unfold around different women characters—Geeta’s gradual assimilation inside the haveli is the principal device for the first awareness, whilst Lakshmi’s alleged destitution outside it is the main recourse for the second. In what follows, I assess their various interpellation in the text and in its narratives of desire from a pragmatic, and finally, feminist point of view.

Geeta’s character graph in the novel records a slow metamorphosis from a young uncertain bride who took “comfort in the hope that her stay in Udaipur was temporary” (28), “who felt better as she dwelt on the prospect of leaving the haveli,” to a more mature mistress who “no longer felt trapped in the haveli” (178), who had “seen the value of kinship ties and wanted to preserve the ancestral dignity of the haveli” (178). In her own words,

the desire to change the life in the haveli seemed to have subsided in her.... I don’t want to leave Udaipur now. The haveli has made me a willing prisoner within its walls. How stupid I was not to see all that it holds. Where else in the world would I get this kind of love and concern? The children must grow up here. They must learn to love and respect this ancient house. (170)

By and large, this change-of-heart sequence gets played out within the discursive rubric of the insider–outsider encounter: not only is Geeta’s character pitched in terms of this particular interface, even the eventual resolution she achieves is registered as a modular negotiation of its ideological divide. My point here is that the perception of Geeta as the personification of all that is extraneous to the haveli traditions is the site of a major narrative slippage in the novel. It fudges the distinctions between things “modern,” things “different,” things “outside.” More importantly, in so doing, it implicitly miscasts her character and role in the aforesaid exchange. This “fuzzy logic” of the novel, as mentioned before, has found many takers among literary critics. What I attempt here is to read against the grain of the text as well as this trend in criticism and offer an alternative

407 Expressly or otherwise, Geeta stands for all that lies outside the haveli way of life while the haveli, itself, with all its conventions, through allegorical extension, also represents traditional India
understanding of Geeta inside the haveli. I do this because it is indispensable to any assessment of her agency in the novel.

To address the question of her status first, Geeta as a newly wed bride of an arranged marital alliance is clearly a stranger in Jeewan Niwas, her husband’s home. Having been brought up in the metropolis of Bombay, she is furthermore a stranger to Udaipur where the haveli is located. To this extent, then, at a most obvious familial and geographical level, Geeta is an outsider. What the novel does is use this physical and social estrangement to assume a like cultural alienation such that Geeta also becomes a representative of the modern: the numerous occasions on which Geeta as well others dwell on her difference in upbringing, behaviour, mindset, if anything, serve as a convenient springboard for this conceptual leap. It is my submission, however, that the same is unwarranted. That, in fact, Geeta’s “difference” is, as mentioned before, an intricate patina of “mistaken” and/or “non” modernity covering sub- and/or unconscious depths of traditionalism. That, moreover, her reaction to haveli ways issues directly from this shared but sparsely realised axiological continuum. By way of reasons for my contention, consider, for instance, the issue of Geeta’s “different” upbringing. According to the text, Geeta has grown up in a family that does not explicitly censor female speech; neither are its women expected to observe purdah. Not surprisingly, she is both frank and spontaneous in her expressions. Yet the structures of thought that underlie her natal family’s actions seem hardly very distinct from the conventional. After all, don’t her parents arrange the marriage of their only daughter when she is fresh out of college and just nineteen years of age—thus acceding to the overriding importance traditionally attached to marriage in a woman’s life? Don’t they also reveal an all too familiar anxiety, worrying if their daughter will be “approved,” while contracting a hypergamous

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408 All instances of “mistaken” modernity, of course, cannot simplistically be read as instances of a non modernity—as Paranjape uses this latter term, it is an affirmative state. Sometimes what you have is simply an ersatz modernity unclear about its own convictions and satisfied with cosmetic re/solutions.

409 As the novel informs us: Geeta’s “mother had been on the lookout for good boys for her and her sisters as soon as they had entered their teens” (220).

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match for her with the heir of an aristocratic family? In fact, if Geeta is to be believed, her parents' only doubt seemed to concern Ajay's family. The women of the upper class in Udaipur, among them his mother, remained in purdah. Geeta had been differently brought up. She had gone to college and studied with the boys. How would such a girl learn to live in the constricted atmosphere of a world of women, to give her elders the traditional deference? But they reassured themselves, since Ajay was one of the new generation, he couldn't possibly believe in the old customs. Her parents' anxiety was not really so much about Geeta's adjustment, but about whether a girl like her would be approved by Ajay's parents. The more orthodox relatives might be afraid of an educated girl and caution them against her, particularly one who was not from Udaipur. Geeta knew that her mother had worried that she would spoil everything by talking too much on the day when Ajay came to see her. (16)

What's more, in a startling display of traditional presumption, after finalising her marriage with Ajay, Geeta's parents also "didn't think it necessary to tell her about purdah" (16). And if that's not enough, discrediting all pretensions to any substantial alterity is the advice given to Geeta by her mother in the lead-up to her marriage. This litany of strictures, ranging from "Keep your head covered" to "never argue with your elders"; from "respect your mother-in-law and do as she tells you" to "Don't talk too much" (16), really, would do even a Kanwarani Sap proud! The point to note in all of this, of course, is the complete absence of any rancour or resentment in Geeta's recollections. Since it attests her acquiescence to the fundamental logic underwriting these actions. So may be the cast of her nurture is not all that different but what about Geeta's education? Is that not a justifiable sign of her modernity? If modernity exists simply in the fact of a formal education in a contemporary socio-temporal frame, then, yes, Geeta is modern. If, however, it manifests, as I believe it does, in the adherence to a set of rational principles for sociality, then no, Geeta is not modern. In my reckoning, the importance attached to her education in the novel is wildly disproportionate to its quantum of influence. There is nothing in the text to suggest that Geeta is any other than the type of regular graduate churned out by the thousands each year in India—a graduate equipped with no very special skills, no very special

410 True, Geeta wonders if her mother knew about it, but the preceding record of their anxieties (quoted above) clearly dismisses such possibility of ignorance.

411 Similar views have been expressed, among others, by Sunanda P. Chavan in her reading of the novel. For greater details, refer to her essay, "Inside the Haveli: Inadequate as a Work of Art."
convictions, no very special knowledge, just a bland mishmash of indifferently comprehended liberal humanist views and a very slight veneer of “modern” sophistication. This is one of the reasons why, when her paltry fifteen years of formal education come up against the algorithms of custom worked out over hundreds of years inside the haveli, time and time again, Geeta flounders, Geeta cringes, Geeta capitulates. In fact, her skirmishes with the traditional come across more as expressions of personal grievance than as ethical opposition. And even when she is shown taking up a principled stand, for instance, in her advocacy of education for women, it fails to measure up on two related but distinct counts. On the one hand, Geeta vacillates too much: her every resolve to defend and propagate the cause of education is invariably followed by an opposite urge to abandon course because of uncertainty regards her own stance, because of uncertainty, especially, regards its universal applicability. On the other, her understanding of education itself is none too radical: for the most part Geeta seems to espouse a conventional reformist view of education as a finite enterprise “demarcated strictly within the purview of domestic serviceability” (Sangari, *Politics of the Possible* 147). That is to say, despite her passionate championing of the cause she never seriously entertains the possibility of education having a utility for women beyond the demands of domesticity; neither does she consider the possibility of education radically restructuring the gendered power equations that constitute conventional domesticity. To readdress the issue of her status therefore, Geeta is an outsider to Sangram Singhji’s haveli, but she is an outsider like any other bride who is dislocated upon her arranged marriage to the groom’s place of domicile. Her cultural alienation, though made much of in the novel, is, in the ultimate analysis, simply skin-deep. It is an expression of the

412 Just as one instance, when Pari catches her in the male section of the haveli and upbraids her for her transgressive behaviour, all that Geeta wants to retaliate with is a childish, petulant, “I am here because you left me alone to go down to the servants’ quarter for a little gossip” (20).

413 In making this judgement, of course, I am following Gupta, contra Paranjape, without necessarily buying into the former’s faith in the absolute superiority of modernity. To apply the latter, in this instance, would mean making a virtue out of necessity, as indeed those reading a straightforward feminist intent in the novel tend to do. Geeta is not someone proficient in the language of modernity yet refusing it, as Paranjape’s model would need, but rather, a wannabe grounded in neither the traditional nor the modern and unsure of her convictions.
schizophrenia customarily induced in women by the socio-sexual contract of patriarchal marriages, a split consciousness which they are brought up to expect, and accept, as quintessential to the female condition.

The moot question here is just how such a perspective impacts the reading of her textual agency; since, without doubt, Geeta carves a niche for herself inside the haveli. If Malashri Lal is to be believed, Geeta’s “agenda to introduce subtle change is nothing short of revolutionary” (95).

The school in the haveli is the outcome of Geeta’s complex emotions about traditions, modernity, poverty and affluence. Education will pull down the barricade between the haveli and the outer world. The poor children will find employment beyond the haveli because the old system can no longer offer patronage. For the servant-maids too, Geeta has her own proposal for vocational instruction in sewing and needlework if they find book learning difficult. As for the high-born women, they are welcome to the classes should they wish to use their time more profitably than in gossip.

Regarding her acquiescence to haveli customs, Lal further contends that Geeta dons the purdah in deference to custom. Through the masking cover of the diaphanous fabric, she comprehends haveli events, participates in conversations and contemplates her proposal for reform without arousing too much opposition. The veil is her subterfuge, the necessary cunning of women who are denied power over others or even control over their own destiny. (93)

Attractive this explanation definitely is, from a perspective looking to recoup Rama Mehta’s novel for an affirmative account of women’s agency. Yet I find it and such like positions both textually unsubstantiated and insidiously counterproductive. For the sine qua non of their argument, namely, the delineation of conscious design in Geeta’s every action inside the haveli, is an issue of critical inflation and invention, something that is achieved only through whitewashing the considerable part played by caprice, convenience and confusion in Geeta’s character as it develops in the novel. Moreover, such wholesale and tendentious valorisation, where almost any act of commission and/or omission on the part of the heroine qualifies to be read, after the fact, as a sign of emancipatory intent, runs the risk of making a virtue not only of necessity but also of chance.

414 Not only does she tinker with its hoary regimen through the interpolation of her personal likes and dislikes, she is also the principal trigger for change in the collective consciousness of haveli life. Then again, since agency is not just about conscious and conscientious dissent, but equally about informed consent, even her acculturation to haveli ways is not automatically void of agentic subjectivity.
lack of clarity and plain self-interestedness. In the process, it generalises, travesties and defuses the radical acuity and ethical energies of feminist interventions thereby rendering the term itself a semantic void. Ultimately, therefore, its advantages in the short term and specific instance, notwithstanding, the long-term consequences of such critical obfuscation I deem to be deleterious in the extreme for feminist agencies. Contra this, I find it more textually grounded to appraise Geeta’s character through the heuristic supplied by Kumkum Sangari’s theorisation of female consent and agency in patriarchal cultures. According to Sangari, the evidence of “socially structured and often sanctioned forms” of initiative among women is best understood with recourse to the polythetic concept of “indirect agency”—something that “comprises of agency as it is ascribed to, conferred upon, and delegated to women within patriarchal structures, [and] characteristically functions through “feminized” agential modes such as convolution, disguise, displacement, deflection, surrogacy, or manipulation, and signals some degree of consent to patriarchies” (Politics of the Possible 364). In my reckoning, apart from fitting to a T the kinds of female subjectivities on offer in Rama Mehta’s novel, the notion of “indirect agency” also articulates well the developing consciousness of Geeta as a haveli woman. After all, what is Geeta’s acculturation to haveli ways but the slow renunciation of any direct will to power for the indirections of a mediated agency? I am aware, of course, that by denying Geeta the aura of dedicated activism, this reading, right at the outset, disallows the kind of feminist recovery attempted by the former thesis. Nonetheless, I prefer it because of its greater fidelity to the overall spirit of Geeta’s characterisation. Besides, it clears the way for an alternative feminist interpretation of the novel—but more on that later. For now I wish to focus upon Lakshmi, the other unfolding object lesson in the novel.

Lakshmi’s character in the novel transitions from a position of social rootedness as a married haveli servant-woman to a condition of aggravating vagrancy as a

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415 To be fair to Lal, her focus is somewhat different. Hers is a Showalteresque agenda that melds biography with fiction to recuperate a female aesthetic in the Indian English novel in The Law of the Threshold.
single woman without husband, child or home. This shift is consequent upon her resolve to sever all ties with her husband, a newly born Sita and the haveli when Gangaram (her husband) unjustly accuses her of infidelity. Needless to say this change in state is registered in the world of the novel as a change in status, more precisely as a *loss* in status. By the end of the novel, therefore, the dominant impression to be gathered about Lakshmi from the composite of scattered reports, hearsay and innuendo is of a demirep looked upon variously with suspicion, ridicule, derision, pity and incomprehension. In addition, her heart-wrenching attempts to re-establish contact with Sita as well as the gift she makes her on the eve of her marriage, mark Lakshmi out as a woman confounded by a "return of the repressed," viz., the feelings of maternal love and affection she had summarily repudiated at the time of abandoning her daughter. Critical literature, by and large, has built upon this representation of Lakshmi's character to read her as a foil to Geeta. Thus, if according to some, Lakshmi's intemperate anger, importunate decisions and stubborn egotism, all serve to highlight the relative maturity of Geeta's compromises, then according to others, Lakshmi's spirit of independence and refusal to take patriarchal and feudal oppression lying down as well as her determination to stick to her decision in the face of ferocious and blanket disapproval compares favourably against Geeta's wishy-washy protests and chronic indecision. Likewise, while to some, Lakshmi's extreme step of leaving her husband denudes her of any effective initiative within the world of the novel and Geeta's more conciliatory approach actually wins her greater traction to bring about changes in the haveli code of manners, to others, Lakshmi's capacity for making difficult choices is both heroic and positive proof of initiative. What follows is a slightly different take on Lakshmi's character, function and agency in the novel; it reveals both points of overlap as well as divergence with the critical trends outlined above.

To my mind, Lakshmi is best described as the site and sign of invert specularity in the text. Everything from her pugnacity and acid tongue, to her malingering ways and general disaffection mark her out as the obverse of the domestic ideal.
conventionally upheld for women. As for her act of leaving Gangaram, it is the very highpoint of role and affect reversal in the novel. In an event that allusively rehearses the trial and banishment of Sita, Lakshmi’s anger prevents the script from going the way of its *itihasic*/*aitihasic* model. For, when Sita, that *pativrata* par excellence and paragon of feminine submissiveness, is accused of infidelity on flimsy grounds, at/tested by fire, proved innocent and still exiled by Ram, she accepts her lord and master’s unjust verdict without demur. When Lakshmi is accused of infidelity and berated by her husband, however, she neither submits to any test nor offers any proof of innocence to plead her case. Instead, incensed by the unfairness of it all, she disowns her husband, child and the haveli—here representative of the entire edifice of patriarchal feudalism that countenances and perpetuates this gross inequity. What’s more, she resolutely thwarts all attempts to bring about a reconciliation and/or her return to the haveli. My point is that confronted by a situation tailor-made for the re-enactment of an *ur* moment of feminine complaisance, Lakshmi stands on its head a narrative that has operated as a “regulative psychobiography” for Indian women, viz., the life-story, the *charitrachitra* of Sita. To return to what I was saying earlier, therefore, Lakshmi seems to be the ideal of the *grihalakshmi* invoked in her name turned upside down and inside out; an anti-Sita, in other words. And in this capacity she serves as a foil not just to Geeta but the entire cast of “domestic women” inside the haveli.

If Lakshmi is “other” to the type of domestic women in the novel, does that mean her agency is also “other” than theirs? If domestic women exhibit forms of “indirect agency” as I have argued above, does Lakshmi, then, evince a type of “direct agency?” Logically speaking, there are no grounds for making such corollary assumptions: being “other” does not necessarily entail exercising “direct agency.” But to answer the questions more specifically, as I see it, Lakshmi, while subverting the traditional ideal of the *grihini*, fits rather well the traditional mould of the *kulakshini* or the Alakshmi. In the novel, she is variously represented as

416 Spivak intends by the term, “model narratives that give ‘meaning’ to our readings of ourselves and others” (“The Political Economy of Women” 227).
selfish, headstrong, sharp-tongued, lazy, hard to please, immodest and not respectable—all epithets customarily signifying a flawed moral character in women. She also comes to grief, thus exemplifying the conventional adage that bad women reap a bitter harvest. Insofar as her “difference” takes the shape reserved for it in the traditional scheme of things, I believe, that Lakshmi reinforces and vindicates the traditional even as she challenges and undermines it. And this is not just true at the level of appearances and externals, either. Lakshmi’s perverse conformity to the traditional is not simply an effect of prejudiced ascription and unhelpful circumstances; it is also, to some extent, a result of her mindset. For, while she chafes against its constraints and rebels against its inequity, her protests are not in the service of any alternative worldview. They are, rather, inspired by feelings of personal wrongs done her and remain, for the most part, at that level of articulation. Indeed, her last act in the novel suggests that she actually shares in the traditional weltanschauung. The gift she gives Sita for her marriage conveys not only her love and blessings to her daughter but also, by implication, her subscription to the traditional delineation of “the good life” for women, viz., marriage, family and domesticity. Then again, the fact that she chooses to make her gift but neither reveals her identity nor attempts to participate directly in the wedding celebrations hints at feelings of both guilt and shame, feelings that establish her concurrence with the soi-disant custodians of tradition in the novel who are unanimous in averring that her presence at the wedding is out of the question.\textsuperscript{417} All things considered, therefore, Lakshmi is definitely “other” to the domestic women inside the haveli. She is also, however, like them, ultimately, a product of the haveli culture. As for how this disquisition might be relevant to the present engagement, in my view, seeing the ambivalence in Lakshmi’s character and position/ing is crucial to any evaluation of the kind of agency she exhibits in the novel.

\textsuperscript{417} I prefer such a reading to one that sees this as her stubborn adherence to her rash action of years ago, since she has already backtracked on that in admitting feelings for her daughter. Lakshmi, to use Lal’s heuristic, steps over the threshold but fails...in society’s eyes, as also in her own.
To address which issue now, Lakshmi undoubtedly has agency. Her decision to leave her husband and the haveli as well as her capacity to make a shift for herself in unsympathetic circumstances confirm this many times over.\(^{418}\) What's more, her agency is not the type of surreptitious manipulation of power popular among the domestic women of the haveli. Lakshmi acts in her own name, thus, dispensing with the "veil [of] subterfuge" (Lal 93) that normally feminises and domesticates agency for traditional accommodation and protection. But for all that, in the final analysis, her agency remains limited to her own self and its bare survival. In the world of the novel she exercises no influence, brings about no change, whatsoever. In fact, the converse is true. Her reported state of dereliction, towards its conclusion, sets her up rather well as an object lesson in loss for women—loss of family, honour, community, perhaps even sanity—thus warning them against any rash move out of orthodox domesticity. As I see it, Lakshmi’s eventual fate in the novel is a concoction of two principal factors. Firstly, Lakshmi is socio-economically deprived. Hailing from the lower classes, she lacks the financial and educational wherewithal to be able to pursue any other but the "oldest profession for women" to eke out a living. Once this happens, of course, she is immediately slotted a "fallen" woman and denied even a pretense to social respectability. So that while she is able to survive, even prosper, economically, she becomes marginal to the life of respectable women (as a prostitute, of course, she is available to a variety respectable men). And secondly, Lakshmi lacks the awareness that can transform her sense of personal angst into an expression of political anger.\(^{419}\) That is to say, unable to see her deprivation as part of a generalised system of gender discrimination, Lakshmi cannot make common cause with other haveli women, whether servant or mistress.\(^{420}\)

\(^{418}\) An idea of the enormity of her courage and resolve can be got from the fact that she was an unlettered teenager with no hope of emotional and/or economic support when she made that decision.

\(^{419}\) Here I would like to offer a slight modification on the feminist slogan "the personal is political." As I see it, the personal is only potentially political.

\(^{420}\) She sees class discrimination but not gender discrimination in her reading of the mistresses of the haveli.
Consequently, her protests remain locked within the idiom of individual grievance. Eventually it is this isolation as much as any social prejudice, that empties her action of all social valence and limits it to a statement of personal defiance. Though she never returns to the haveli, in the absence of any ethical conviction, she is unable to sustain her defiant attitude for long. And her gesture at the end of the novel is a sign, among other things, of this flagging spirit. To conclude therefore, while Lakshmi exhibits a capacity for direct action, she is handicapped by the privations of her class position, by a lack of perspective as well as by a too-narrow absorption with herself.

If I believe that neither the protagonist nor the minor antagonist-of sorts, viz., Geeta and Lakshmi, have what it takes to merit a feminist tag, if moreover, I believe that the dominant drift of this novel is conservative, then where do I locate a feminist inflection within it? What, in other words, is the basis of the alternative feminist reading of the novel that I alluded to earlier? As I see it, the source of radical potential in Rama Mehta’s novel is its meticulous realism. And I wrap up this engagement with an attempt to accentuate what is readily available in the text but not necessarily as its “first-order meaning” (Sarkar, “Bankimchandra” Hindu Wife 149) to arrive at a feminist modulation.

Towards this end, take the matter of Geeta’s turnaround on the value of haveli traditions—in some senses, the crux of the novel. For the most part, Inside the Haveli foregrounds this as a transformation wrought by a growing familiarity with and appreciation of traditional domesticity. Yet the wealth of detail that anchors as well as fleshes out this change is equally amenable to another reading—as a wearing down of Geeta by the traditional, as a slow seduction of her senses, her feelings and her perspective by the traditional. A couple of reasons, especially, incline me to the possibility of such an inference. Firstly, there is plenty of discrepancy between the totality that the novel portrays and the fragment that Geeta perceives and/or emphasises. Thus, where the novel shows the systemic oppression as well as bonds of patronage-loyalty that characterise the master-
servant relationship in havelis, Geeta stresses only the ties of benevolence and reciprocal affection between them; where the novel candidly describes an exclusive male gathering entertained by the “famous singer of Jodhpur… [who] takes five hundred rupees an evening and sings only for men” (40-41), thereby hinting at the modes of exploitative sexual gratification entrenched in the chivalrous culture of havelis, Geeta sees only the dignity and grandeur of the male gathering; where the novel does not shy away from showing haveli women as legatees of pervasive structural discriminations (at the level of ideology and emotions as well as, practically, in terms of inheritances) in addition to male courtesy and protection, Geeta foregrounds mostly the latter aspect, affirming that she wants her children to grow up imbibing its ancient values (qtd. above and 170). Secondly, after her marriage as a nineteen year-old girl, Geeta lives in the haveli, surrounded only by other haveli women, conversing only with other haveli people.421 That is to say, secluded from the world outside by a thick veil of custom, Geeta has no other point of reference really against which to compare haveli life, no other perspective than the traditional from which to attempt an objective assessment of it.422 When combined with the fact that as a daughter-in-law there is social pressure on her to generally conciliate her affinal relations,423 that she finds affectionate and amiable in-laws and a decent husband whose approval and happiness she would want to secure, that, moreover, she stands to inherit the privileges of haveli life as the mistress-in-waiting of Jeewan Niwas, then, to my mind, the circumstances appear extremely ripe for Geeta to succumb to the charms of tradition and form a favourable opinion of haveli lifestyles.

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421 According to the novel, “she was hardly ever alone; she had not read a book in six months...” and they only visited relatives and only relatives visited them (22).

422 As for the riposte that she is no partisan; that she is, in fact, an outsider brought up in an urban culture and therefore having that as a point of comparison, I would only like to remind that Geeta’s difference is a surface phenomenon. Since the circumstances of her nurture present, as argued above, a watered down version of the traditional as it is to be found in Jeewan Niwas.

423 As Pari tells Geeta on one occasion, “It is in these families that you will have to make your reputation as a good devoted daughter-in-law...” (18).
In an analogous fashion, Lakshmi's fate also serves as a fertile site to unearth an alternative perspective on the novel. Viney Kirpal articulates the more usual judgement passed on Lakshmi in the novel pretty neatly. She also gives expression to the principal lesson to be derived from Lakshmi's life as it unfolds in the text. To quote her,

Lakshmi's success in upholding the value of honour and purity is only partial. In choosing not to return, she gets punished the most. Deprived of her daughter, she continues to pine for her and miss her. She can come to see her in school only clandestinely and without disclosing her identity. Moreover in leaving her husband who is bad-tempered but not bad, she ends up as mistress to a series of other men—the paanwala, the tailor etc. The option to break away from the family exists but the question is whether it works to the advantage of the woman in all societies. In India, the woman "walking out" with her "door open" and returning when things have been sorted out is more usual than the woman who severs ties with her husband forever." (187)

According to the above position, Lakshmi's fate is made out to be a reflection on her character and actions; a natural consequence of her character and actions. But Lakshmi's fate as it is described in the novel can just as well lead to a reflection on the character and actions of the society of which she is part. Instead of a simplistic affirmation of cause and effect that is limited to the personality of Lakshmi, such a perspective would ask, what kind of a society it was that exacted this kind of a price from a woman who, in the final analysis, only expressed a desire to live with dignity and respect? It would ask what kind of a society it was that condemned women to disreputability for refusing the only respectable social role given her in life, i.e., domesticity? It would ask what kind of a society it was that quietly countenanced the dereliction of a woman who had done no wrong but stand up for herself? It would ask what kind of society it was that made a mother's invisibility a condition for the possibility of a respectable future for her daughter? The answer to all these questions is obviously an unjust society, one that is fundamentally built around a covey of patriarchal desires. What is significant is that such a conclusion need not be an effect of logical assumption. It is a conclusion vividly and repeatedly realised in the manifold processes of haveli life as this has been depicted in the text.

My point is that both these perspectives either singly or in conjunction embed the facility to dislodge the dominant meanings derived from and ascribed to the
novel. In the process, they discover a narrative with decided feminist undertones. In fact, reading in this vein, I find *Inside the Haveli*, to be a text that lifts the veil on alliance and kinship ties that bind women’s desire to traditional expressions. For, while Geeta’s story reveals the array and attraction of the devices and modes of persuasion that are a traditional staple for manipulating female desire in the service of patriarchal sociality, Lakshmi’s fate lays bare the coercive and punitive power that traditional institutions unleash upon rogue wills. But is this all? Does the novel only discover manqué feminism in its female characters? How does this record of failure, then, account for the very real change that Geeta facilitates in the consciousness of haveli life? As I see it, the novel marks how confused and self-centred resistance at best renders attenuated reform (as in the case of Geeta424) or gets completely sidelined (as in the case of Lakshmi). To say this, however, is not the same as to say that the novel is dismissive about confused interventionism. On the contrary, Geeta is its heroine. And in her character what the novel registers, apart from the dilution of change, is precisely the possibility of change; even the more usual modality of change, especially among the privileged classes.425 That is to say, by becoming a part of the haveli, yet by resisting complete acculturation to its ways, Geeta, however inadvertently, gets the haveli to engage with and make the difference that she retains a part of it. Consequently, even as she undergoes a progressive traditionalisation, the haveli tradition itself stands modified by her assimilation. After all, the lack of radicalism notwithstanding, a haveli tradition with Geeta at the helm of domestic affairs is clearly a different proposition from a haveli tradition with Kanwarani Sa

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424 In this case, I believe it would be instructive to keep in mind the distinction drawn between “modernizing” and “democratizing” social changes by Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid. According to them, “Whereas democratizing movements seek to alter class relations at the same time as undertaking some levelling of gender relations, the modernizing movements in colonial India seek to partially level gender relations either without attacking class inequality or by positively reaffirming it” (*Recasting Women* 19). That’s in theory. In practice, however, they admit the two are not as cleanly demarcated (*Recasting Women* 19-20).

425 Or as Lindsey Harlan, puts it in the specific context of Rajput domestic arrangements, “What remains consistent is the basic disposition of women in the household toward creative, if subtle, change. This change is not set over against tradition. It is part of tradition, the viability of which hinges on conveyance and on interpretive appropriation throughout the generations” (*Religion and Rajput Women* 226).
or, before her, Bhabha Sa, as the mistress.\textsuperscript{426} I believe that in depicting such a situation, the novel bears witness to the gradual processes of change that are not simply reducible to the determinations of individual and/or ideological intent. So that while Geeta’s consciousness is not feminist or even particularly “modern,” the novel at the end delivers a haveli ethos that is definitely more woman-friendly through having had to interact with the “difference” that Geeta presents, confused and wavering as this is. Finally, it is in this sense that I think, \textit{Inside the Haveli’s} dual take on the subject of desire in the context of marriage and family, a take that at once inscribes a conservative appeal as well as a clinical critique, recognises and repeats the complex interpellation of women in the institutional discourse of patriarchal domesticity.

\textsuperscript{426} Under her stewardship, not only will Vijay, her daughter, be educated but even her sons will grow up having an educated mother. Also the relationship with servants, it can be said, will be different: the right to their labour, time and loyalty will not be as confidently feudal; neither, of course, will it be as personal.
Chapter 5: Institutions, Interdictions and Desire

This chapter is informed by certain assumptions that are more or less commonplace to contemporary thought. These can be broadly enumerated as 1) that institutions are technologies of order which not only amass identities through a weeding out of difference but also establish what they distinguish explicitly or otherwise in a hierarchical relation with each other; 2) that interdictions are regularly coeval with, if not, progenitive of institutions; they are, moreover, crucial as rationalisations for the consolidation and perpetuation of institutional practices; 3) that subjectivity is not simply an autonomous a priori essence; rather it develops through interpellation within various institutional grids. In other words, it takes shape and finds articulation in or against the institutional identities which invest its being with social meaning; and 4) that “man” and “woman” are two of the longest standing institutions of human sociality which when deployed in the service of patriarchal ideologies, whether traditional or modern, inevitably ramify to the overall detriment of subjects comprehended under the latter sign. My attempt is to explore the form and nature of desire as it runs through institutionalised imaginaries in the light of these postulates. It is especially to attend to the intercalation of desire and taboo in the make-up of institutional bodies and the function of all three in the constitution of individual subjectivities. Of course, social reality in India is a complex phenomenon; mapped by differing cartographies, it yields a plethora of institutional types and relations. Since a comprehensive treatment of the topic is all but ruled out, if not by the nature of the pursuit itself, then definitely by the scope of the present enterprise, what I propose is only an indicative study. An indicative study, I might add, that is garnered round the caste system of sociality.

This last specification is not exactly random happenstance either. Off the cuff, I can list at least three allied reasons that support such anchorage. To begin with, caste is a structure of long standing in the history of Indian social organisation. Not only that, it is an extensive phenomenon. As the reams of socio- and anthropological literatures go to show, it cuts across different regional, linguistic,
ethnic, ideological and temporal disjunctures in Indian sociality. It, moreover, has a ritual, socio-political, economic, as well as cultural valence. First off, therefore, since caste has a widespread resonance in the Indian social context, disclaimers to the contrary notwithstanding, an orientation such as the present wins for this study at least a modicum of general relevance (or at any rate, such is the hope). Then again, despite its considerable reach and proportions, the caste system in India is not a monolithic behemoth. Neither is it a simple aggregation of disparate sets of relations. Rather what S. Radhakrishnan, calls its "comprehensive synthesis" is achieved through a web-like pattern of development that both envelops and intersects with numerous other institutions of social engineering. To engage with it thus is at once to encounter a variety of institutional types and practices. Needless to say, within the analytical constraints acknowledged above, this allows for a deeper, more layered investigation of the thematic espoused than what might have been possible with some other institution of choice, say, widowhood or prostitution. Finally, caste is a mechanism of social management that turns on the principle of discriminatory inclusion. That is to say, it not only circumscribes without erasing the public/private, man/woman, good/bad, pure/impure, sacral/secular divide that is variously a limit for other institutions, it also relates and maintains the divisions that it produces through proscription. Consequently it pushes centre-stage what is often marginalised, excised and/or rendered invisible in other institutional set-ups, i.e., the solidus that cleaves and classifies and the interactions that occur, indeed are set-up, along its

427 Marriage and family as institutions, for instance, apply to both men and women and also rival the reach of caste across the length and breadth of the country, but it is a space as, argued above, of legitimate desire. That is, it is seen as a positive institution. Then again institutions such as widowhood and prostitution are unilaterally unsavoury conditions, apply only or mostly to women and are generally a lot more localised in their meanings and validity.

428 If at all one must speak of a caste system and not merely of individual castes, then perforce, I believe, one must pay heed to synthesis of some sort or the other, it being comprehensive or not being open to debate. Dipankar Gupta, for one, offers an interesting account of it as "discrete categories which ... allow for the formation of multiple hierarchies" (Interrogating Caste 9). Specifically, he talks of brahmin, kshatriya and baniya hierarchies, among others. For more details, refer to the book.

429 This paradoxical issue is achieved, among other things, through the superposition of strict prohibitions against intermarriage. Refer, for instance, to B. R. Ambedkar's Speech at Mahad (112-26).
faultline. Given the thrust of the chapter, of course, this makes caste rather suitably accoutered for the study on hand. What’s more, this fitness is only enhanced by the fact that despite recurrent theorisation, caste has continued to escape tidy disambiguation; that its macro character, its “metaphysics” has not always squared with its micro workings out, its materiality, to bear out any consistently predictable narrative of cause and effect. Since the door is not quite slammed shut on fresh attempts to read the caste equation. Here, as mentioned before, I attempt to delve into the gender implications of social organisation by posing the question of institutions in terms of interdictions and desires and using caste as my paradigm marker. The novel through which I set myself to address this problematic is U. R. Anantha Murthy’s Samskara.

Published in 1965, Anantha Murthy’s Kannada novel has achieved translated recognition nationally and internationally as a modern classic. Significantly, whether as custom or as conundrum, caste consciousness permeates its narrative universe and relations both with others as well as with the self are informed by its structural logic. As such there is ample scope to observe the interplay of institutions, interdictions and desires in the make-up of gendered subjectivities. Incidentally, the novel also offers an interesting counterpoint to the text considered previously. If Inside the Haveli can, with some justice, be described as a “truly woman’s novel” that renders the drama of women’s minds and manners in intimate detail, then Samskara comes across as an uber-male composition in which women characters are perceived objectively, and with little or no depth. Mind you, I offer this contrast not as some self-evident value judgement on the respective narratives but as a tangential observation on their literary styles.

430 Notions such as Uma Chakravarti’s “brahminical patriarchy” are convenient rallying points for both feminists and dalits. But in real terms they seem unable to explain or even confront the many fractured interests that caste serves in modern India. Against Chakravarti’s Gendering Caste, there is Nicholas Dirks’ Castes of Mind, which broadly understands the form in which caste obtains in modern India to be a colonial legacy. Then again, on a different tangent, Bimal Krishna Matilal through an attention to karma or “merit-based” world-view, talks of the “internal criticism” within the tradition about the prevalence of the heredity-based caste hierarchy” (142). In his essay, “Caste, Karma and the Gita,” Matilal shows how the Mahabharata seems to argue both for, and against, a “heredity-based caste hierarchy” (124). To repeat myself, then, there are many views, but the last word seems far from said on the issue.
Samskara: The Rites and Wrongs of Discrimination

In the words of A. K. Ramanujan, the translator of the work into English, *Samskara* "is a religious novella" that "takes its title seriously" (Translator’s Note). Helpfully, his translation comes supplied with an epigraph that reproduces an entry for the title-word from *A Kannada-English Dictionary*. It reads thus:

Sam-s-kara. 1. Forming well or thoroughly, making perfect, perfecting; finishing, refining, refinement, accomplishment. 2. Forming in the mind, conception, idea, notion; the power of memory, faculty of recollection, the realizing of past perception... 3. Preparation, making ready, preparation of food, etc., cooking, dressing...4. ...5. Making sacred, hallowing, consecration, dedication; consecration of a king etc. 6. Making pure, purification, purity. 7. A sanctifying or purificatory rite or essential ceremony (enjoined on all the first three classes or castes). 8. Any rite or ceremony. 9. Funeral obsequies. (Epigraph; by the Reverend F. Kittel, Mangalore, 1894; p. 1479)

Ramanujan’s Afterword to the novel reinforces his preliminary insight by suggesting some of the many ways in which the text resonates with the different senses of the word (139-47). My own reading of the novel takes shape very much within the metaphysical, ritual, psychological, discursive, material, practical and affective vistas of meaning opened up by this word. On the one hand, this is because of the many and substantive ways in which the polysemous significance of the concept gains from its embeddedness within the context of *varnashramadharma*. On the other, it is because of the way in which the concept contains within itself the potential to defeat this very embedment and become a site of systemic undoing, as auto-critique or as travesty. To elaborate on this anymore here would be precipitate. For the present, I am content to focus upon the novel and develop my argument.

Set in a nondescript little village called Durvasapura, Anantha Murthy’s text is about the compounded crisis that variously overtakes its brahmin and outcaste inhabitants. More specifically, it is about a ritual crisis metaphorically and practically linked to a deadly sociological crisis that eventually precipitates an ontological crisis in the foremost savant of the predominantly Madhva *agrahara* of Durvasapura, namely Praneshacharya. As it happens, the elaboration of these interbedded crises—both the lead-up to them as well as how they play themselves
out—is simultaneously the scene of multiple desires in the text, desires that in some way or the other are linked to the said crises either as cause, effect or embodiment. My first aim, at this juncture, is to get a proximate measure of these desires. To this end, I take recourse, as has been my wont, to a schematic formulation, one that even as it derives its categories from the substance of the text, remains, admittedly, an act of hermeneutic superposition.

In my reckoning, desire in *Samskara*, can best be distinguished under four broad categories, viz., a) desire for the good, b) desire for the pleasing, c) natural desire, and d) unnatural desire. Of course, and as the classification perhaps suggests, the types of desire identified do not belong to the same order of being. Whilst the first two categories are about a hunger, quest, appetite or tendency for something—in this case, “the good” and “the pleasing”—that may by logical deduction be deemed lacking in the seeker, at least in the instance of its experience, the latter two divisions are about desire as an assimilated part of one’s existence, an embodied fact of living, if you like. Not surprisingly, they also serve a different function in the novel, one that works in tandem to invest the tripartite structure of narration with meaning such that it is kept from being just a mechanical or adventitious parceling out of textual content. The exact manner of that accomplishment, I will come to by and by. What follows immediately is a brief elucidation of the said schema of desire.

**Desire for the Good**

In the novel, this desire is most compellingly articulated in Praneshacharya, the Crest-Jewel of Vedic-Learning, and the pride of Durvasapura. The certitude possible in identifying its locus, its chief bearer-representative in the text, however, is not as easily mustered when it comes to determining what “desire for the good” means in *Samskara*. This is primarily because of the rift that opens up in Praneshacharya’s own thinking as a result of the challenge it faces in the form of Naranappa, dead or alive, a rift, which ensures that he ends up apprehending the nature and significance of what is already a subtle concept in two very
different ways. Here, I will try to flesh out the dual sense in which “desire for the good” circulates in the novel. Needless to say, I attempt such a collocation only because I am convinced that, the differences mentioned above notwithstanding, there is enough continuity in the tenor of Praneshacharya’s motivations to justify their configuration under the same rubric.

To begin with, Praneshacharya is shown to be a man of high standing and authority in the novel. Not only is he comfortable in his position as the spiritual head and leader of the agrahara (without being either complacent or arrogant about it), he also discharges his responsibilities and receives the encomiums, flattery and respect coming his way in that capacity with calm assurance. The narrative makes it clear that he derives this assurance principally from a consciousness of life meritoriously lived (2). That this is not merely a variety of artful casuistry or flabby self-deception on his part can be further inferred from the way in which his influence exceeds narrow sectarian, caste and/or gender constituencies. In the text, whether Madhva or Smarta, devotee or reprobate, old or young, sophisticate or yokel, high-caste wife or low-caste prostitute, Durvaspura locals or more distant denizens, a mixed bag of people attest to Praneshacharya’s towering stature. Without doubt, he enjoys such prestige because of his stupendous learning, his thorough grasp of the shastras that has won him both his fame as well as his moniker. But in no small measure, he commands general esteem also because of the compassionate and ascetic piety of the life he leads. So that to make my point, by all accounts, i.e., both his own as well as of others, in the early part of the narrative, Praneshacharya is what is generally considered a “good” man.

Instead of clarifying things, however, such a statement only seems to bemuse the more. For, if Praneshacharya is a “good” man, if, moreover, he leads a life of “goodness” as is being claimed here, then surely this goes against the assumption posited earlier, that the seeker lacks what he/she desires. Most certainly it does.
But as I hope to show, this is only an apparent contradiction, one that a little closer scrutiny soon resolves.

The way I see it, the appearance of contradiction is caused in the main by an all-too-common tendency to confuse expressions of goodness with the concept of the good. Or put differently, by the tendency to consider them as mutually adequate and interchangeable categories. In ordinary circumstances, of course, there are enough grounds for explaining and excusing such mix-ups. As the latter term is being employed here, however, such indiscriminate applications only give rise to factitious contradictions. For, what Praneshacharya desires in *Samskara*, viz., that which is identified as “the good” in this essay, is substantially other than the “good nature” and conduct that he displays. Whereas the latter belongs to the realm of mundane reality, the former is essentially a supra-mundane principle that anchors a metaphysical-moral soteriology. Then again, whereas the latter is caught up in the inexorable gyres of *samsara* and so subject to the vicissitudes of *kala, sthana, janma, karma*, the former is an absolute state of self-realisation impervious to the determinations of time and place. In fact, described in this way it becomes clear that what Pranschacharya yearns for in *Samskara* is nothing other than the Upanishadic concept of *shreyas* wormed out of Yama by a persistent Nachiketas as the key to ultimate transcendence. Logically, therefore, it is a *non-sequiter* to argue for a one-to-one correspondence between “the good” that he desires and the goodness he exhibits.

Of course, to say that there is no straightforward equation between the two is not the same as to deny all connection between them. Far from it. As T. N Madan points out in another context, “A heightened moral awareness is the *ideal*, but the road to it is seen by ordinary people to lie in the consistent effort of self-
improvement through attention to the proper (culturally defined) conduct of life" (Non-Renunciation 13). In other words, good conduct is simply so many steps on the journey to liberation; it is part of a process of self-purification that is inspired and oriented towards the latter, but for all that not identical with the same.

Pertinent to the focus here is the fact that at the start of the novel, Praneshacharya evinces precisely such an understanding of "the good." For instance, even a quick reading of Samskara is enough to show that Praneshacharya sees himself as undergoing a progressive "maturation" of the soul. 432 This is reflected not only in his unfortunately smug sounding, "By marrying an invalid I get ripe and ready" (2); it is also implied in the premium he attaches to his brahmin birth, 433 his conviction about his innate good nature 434 and the extreme care he expends on monitoring his conduct. 435 Similarly, there can be little doubt from all that the text lets on about him that Praneshacharya apprehends the absolute he desires at this juncture only as it comes refracted through the prism of convention. In fact, it would be no exaggeration to say that Praneshacharya's consciousness in the early part of the novel is largely a composite of different traditional notions of human being in the world filtered through the sieve of a Manichean Madhva world-view. Since his sensibility reveals a scrappy synthesis of variously incommensurate,

432 The word is used by T. N. Madan to describe the changes that the embodied soul undergoes through life. Given the allusion to ripening that is there in Samskara, I believe it is an apt application here.

433 Praneshacharya rationalises his brahmin birth and specific social situation thus, "The Lord definitely means to test him on his way to salvation; that's why He has given him a brahmin birth this time and set him up in this kind of family" (2). Elsewhere, he gives the traditional explanation of and valorisation of brahmin birth when he notes that "The Books say, one gets to be a brahmin only by merit earned in many past lives" (48).

434 According to Praneshacharya, No one can say, "I'll become a 'Man of Goodness'"; one can only say truly "I am a 'Man of Goodness.'" Only such natures crave and hunger for the Lord's grace. I am born with one such "Good" nature. (76)

435 The text actually compares the zealous manner in which he regards his good conduct to a skinflint's love for wealth. 
[He] hoarded his penances like a miser his money. A hundred thousand mantras chanted and counted this month, another hundred thousand the next, a couple of hundred thousand for the eleventh day of the moon. Million by million he counted his earnings, penances reckoned on the beads of his basil-bead rosary. (75-76)
even opposed notions derived from the discourse of *varnashramadharma*, the Upanishadic *guna* theory and the axiology of *karma*, all tendentiously assimilated, of course, to uphold a dualist metaphysics. If anything, the specific form that his desire for the good initially takes in the novel emphatically reconfirms Praneshacharya’s complete dependence and confidence in the conventional. For, cherishing the good as a salvific principle, he deliberately embraces a path of penance, non-attachment and self-sacrifice. But he does so in a way that does not violate any of the *samskaras* ritually prescribed for a brahmin. Rather, he eagerly and punctiliously fulfils his *dharmic* obligations as the best, if not, only, means of achieving a progressive self-purification. The narrative at one point charts the trajectory of his decision and mindset as follows,

> When he married her he was sixteen, she twelve. He had thought he should renounce the world, become a *sanyasi*, live a life of self-sacrifice. That was the ideal, the challenge of his boyhood days. So he had married a born invalid deliberately. He’d left her in the grateful house of her father, gone to Benaras, studied to become the “the Crest Jewel of Vedanta Philosophy,” and had come back. Here was the Lord’s ordeal for him, waiting to test him whether he had the strength to live and act by non-attachment—that was why He had given an ailing invalid wife into his hands. He would serve her delighting in that knowledge. He had cooked for her, fed her the wheat-gruel he had himself made, done meticulously every act of daily worship for the gods, read and explicated the holy texts for the brahmins... (75)

In other words, Praneshacharya at the beginning is a man attuned to, and desiring of “the good” understood as ultimate Truth, but his perceptions as well as actions towards its realisation are governed utterly by the determinations of convention rather than genuine experience or insight.⁴³⁶ Indeed, insofar as his desire finds expression at this stage as a kind of self-denial in the present in the hope of an ultimate reward in the future, it represents more a project of delayed gratification than a pursuit of *satchitananda*, which is its own reward at every instance.

But this is the early Praneshacharya. Naranappa’s death and the chain of events it triggers, loosens his ideological moorings such that he is cast adrift in a sea of

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⁴³⁶ Later in the novel, vis-à-vis Mahabala, he explicitly acknowledges this, when he says, “As for me, God never became such an immediate urgency... I was busy establishing the Madhva view” (99).
uncertainties. Or as the text describes it, “Like a baby monkey losing hold of his grip on the mother’s body as she leaps from branch to branch, he felt he had lost hold and fallen from the rites and actions he had clutched till now” (75). The other sense in which desire for the good circulates in the novel is conceived in the belly of this turmoil. However, even as it gestates and grows, the idea is never quite brought to term and delivered in Samskara in any definite form. Rather, the end of the novel sees “Praneshacharya [still] wait[ing], anxious, expectant” (138). Thus, asseverations on its shape and substance are necessarily an issue of part hypothesis, part extrication. Here, I try to flesh out the concept by paying attention a) to the circumstances that are its fertile ground, and b) to the signs that suggest its slow germination.

To address the issues in order, the stress-ridden aftermath of Naranappa’s death sees two events that force Praneshacharya to abandon his doctrinaire existence. The first is the failure of Praneshacharya to elicit a response from Maruti even after much propitiation. In the thaumaturgical world he inhabits, such lack of success is a direct aspersion on his faith, and, as the Acharya worries, a potential blot on his reputation. The other event that follows close upon the heels of this “divine apathia” is Praneshacharya’s coupling with Chandri, the lower caste mistress of Naranappa. If the first event severely dents his ritual faith and self-belief, then the second one virtually destroys it. Mulling over the incident later on, he thinks,

Undesired, as if it were God’s will, the moment had arrived…. It was a sacred moment. Nothing before it, nothing after it. That moment brought into being what never was and then itself went out of being. Formless before, formless after. In between, the embodiment, the moment. Which means I’m absolutely not responsible for making love to her. Not responsible for that moment. But the moment altered me—why? I’m responsible now for someone who’s changed—that’s the present

437 In fact, even when alive, Naranappa had managed to disconcert Praneshacharya. However, all his provocation had not been enough to decisively undermine Praneshacharya’s abiding faith in the validity of the dharmic view of life, more specifically, the Madhya view of dharmic life.

438 Looking back on the event, trying to understand the reasons why it happened, he admits as much in saying, “I was roused by the unexpected touch of her breasts, I ate the plantains she took out of the end of her sari. Hunger, weariness and the disappointment that the Lord Maruti gave no answer. That was the reason why” (97).
distress. Has that memory become a mere memory? And as memory is roused, I begin to desire it again... (97)
Immediately afterwards, however, on returning to the agrahara and going face-to-face with the other brahmins, “the Acharya felt not only remorse, but also a lightness in the thought he was now a free man, relieved of his responsibility to lead the way, relieved of all authority. “What manner of man am I? I am just like you—a soul driven by lust and hate” (77). Slowly digesting “his first lesson of humility” (77), he admits defeat, saying, “I’m lost. I couldn’t get Maruti to say anything. I know nothing. You do whatever your heart’s say” (78). This sloughing off of responsibility, this sloughing off of authority marks the dawn of a new consciousness in Praneshacharya. From hereon, he undertakes a journey of self-discovery that has him careering torturously from one position to the next in an attempt to arrive at some kind of equilibrium. It is my submission that an incipient but identifiable impulse runs as a thread through his experiences; indeed, giving its vertiginous kaleidoscope, impetus as well as some manner of meaning. And this is the recurring tendency I now track as the second of the two senses in which desire for the good occurs in the novel.

Broadly speaking, in the course of coming to terms with what one critic has called his “felix culpa” (Sharma, “Renegotiating Identity in Samskara” 132), Praneshacharya turns many summersaults. Most notably, in an extreme reaction against his erstwhile self and its routine ways, he starts out by rejecting all convention, all learnt modes of behaviour, all received wisdom, as a lie. In his own words, “… Must forget all words learned by heart, the heart must flow free like a child’s. [After all w]hen he caressed Chandri’s breast, it didn’t occur to him to say, ‘I am sin’” (78). Convinced that, “Experience is risk, assault. A thing not done before, a joining in the dark of the jungle” (82), “[h]is hand itched to go caress Belli’s breasts, thirsting for new experience. So far he didn’t even live; doing only what was done, chanting the same old mantra, he had remained inexperienced…. He’d thought experience was fulfillment of what one wanted, but now it seemed it was the unseen, the unpredicted, thrust into our life like breasts, entering it” (82). The death of his wife, fortuitously enough, leaves him
free to explore this new avenue in right earnest. A variety of sensory assault later, however, he is not so sure if he has what it takes to live out such a “life of [p]assion” (78). In fact,

Praneshacharya was in a panic. He had abruptly dropped into a demoniac world. He sat down in utter fear: if in that nether-world where he decided to live with Chandri, if in that depth of darkness, in that cave, if the cruel engagement glinting in the eyes of these entranced creatures is just a part of that world, a brahmin like him will wilt…. It became clear that he didn’t have the skills to live in this world of sharp and cruel feelings. One part of lust is tenderness, the other part a demoniac will. (117)

Most of Praneshacharya’s introspections play out a variation on one or the other of these two positions. Significantly, despite giving the appearance of circular logic, because of the manner of their narrative conjugation, it is possible to trace a line of development in his thoughts. From an understanding of authentic life as a mere sensory phenomena “Immersed[, t]he oneness, the monism, of desire and fulfillment[,] That art Thou” (121), to one that, howsoever inarticulately, senses a moral dimension to it. 439 I attribute this movement as well as the direction it takes to the one sentiment that keeps cropping up as a sort of refrain in his troubled musings. My reference, of course, is to his reiterated wish to be “mere awareness”—the other sense in which desire for the good moves Praneshacharya.

As it seems to me, this desire both recurs and matures in the novel. That is to say, the moment of its iteration also marks the moment of its slow development. Here, I will try to illustrate the point by highlighting three main instances of its articulation. But really, the desire is a diffuse consciousness in Praneshacharya, which even as it never quite finds clear realisation within the bounds of the text, achieves a manner of gathering strength in the course of its narration.

The first major instance of its occurrence I identify is towards the end of Part Two. Expressed as a longing, “[t]o be, just to be. To be; keen, in the heat, the cool, to the grass, the green, the flower, the pang, the heat, the shade. Putting aside both desire and value. Not leaping, when the invisible says ‘Here!’ To receive it gratefully. Not climbing, not reaching out, not scrambling…” (83), this passage could very well be read as a call for submergence in the sensuous, in

439 Needless to say, in Praneshacharya’s world, the moral is, inevitably also, the metaphysical.
nature. Since, except for the single reference to the invisible and to the ambivalent
descriptions of human effort to gain it that follow, there is very little to suggest
another meaning. Indeed, the subsequent description of Praneshacharya tugging at
the sarsaparilla root, drinking in its fragrance, cavorting in the pond as in his
younger days and basking in the sunshine afterwards, only strengthens this
impression.

By the time the idea recurs, however, right at the beginning of Part Three, it has
already undergone a subtle change in emphasis. The ardent hope now is for

the mind [to] be like the patterns of light and shade, the forms the branching trees
give naturally to sunshine. Light in the sky, shadow under the trees, patterns on the
ground. If, luckily, there’s a spray of water—rainbows. May one’s life be like that
sunshine. A mere awareness, a sheer astonishment, still, floating still and self-
content, like the sacred Brahmani-kite in the sky. Legs walk, eyes see, ears hear. O to
be without any desire. Then one’s life becomes receptive. Or else, in desire it dries to
a shell, it withers, becomes a set of multiplication tables learned by rote. That
Kanaka, illiterate saint—his mind was just one awareness, one wonder. That’s why
he came to his master and asked: “You want me to eat the plantains where there’s no
one. Where can I go, where can I do that? God is everywhere, what shall I do?” God
has become to me a set of tables, learned by rote. Not an awareness, a wonder as he
was to Kanaka—so no more God for me. (92)

As the quotation shows, the references to nature, the delight in the senses is all
there. What has changed is the concluding reference. From a nondescript little
allusion to the invisible it has developed into an unmistakable expression of
longing for God (or Good, as the case might be). For, although the passage ends
with a seeming rejection of God, “...so no more God for me,” read in context, it
emphasises precisely the opposite. That is, the implicit desire to rediscover God
not as “a set of tables, learned by rote. [But as] an awareness, a wonder as he was
to Kanaka.”

The third instance I marshal to the aid of my argument likewise marks another
stage in the slow fruition of the idea. Once again occurring in Part Three but
towards the end of the novel, it reflects Praneshacharya’s thoughts right after he
has made the decision to return to Durvasapura.

440 In the paragraph immediately following the quoted passage, Praneshacharya admits, “He was
entering another cave of self-deception” (92). But I believe the reference is not to the desire for
rediscovering God as educed here, but to the way his subconscious actions still clung to old habits:
“Whatever his decision, his feet still walked him close to the habitations of men...” (92).
"If I begin walking now, I'll reach the agrahara by midnight, far away from this world. In full view of the frightened brahmins, I'll stand exposed like the naked quick of life; and I, elder in their midst, will turn into a new man at midnight. Maybe when the fire leaps and dances around Naranappa's dead body, there'll be a certain consolation. When I tell them about myself, there should be no taint of repentance in me, no trace of any sorrow that I am a sinner. If not, I cannot go beyond conflict and dualities. I must see Mahabala. Must tell him: only the form we forge for ourselves in our inmost will is ours without question. If that's true, don't you really have any craving for good anymore?—I must ask him." That melodious Sanskrit line came into his mind again: Southern breezes from sandalwood mountains caress delicate vines of cloves. Praneshacharya was quite moved. Affection moved him. He put a hand over Putta's shoulder, and drew him closer. (135)

This passage, apart from the persistent desire to transcend "conflict and dualities" that is very much a part of the earlier two instances, goes on to express an insight that marks both a remarkable return as well as an advance in Praneshacharya's position. Admittedly, read in itself, his "Only the form we forge for ourselves in our inmost will is ours without question" suggests a move towards a modern existentialist sensibility. But the thought that flows from it, viz., "if that's true, don't you really have any craving for good anymore?—I must ask him," immediately puts it in its proper perspective. That is, it returns the whole engagement to its scene of origin by reformulating the issue in terms of guna and samskara, svabhava and svadharma, only this time, with a crucial difference. When Praneshacharya had set off on his uncertain journey of self-discovery, the legitimacy of these terms was precisely what was under question—the mess in his own life as if testifying to their inadequacy in explaining character and action (75-76). In their present invocation, however, that is no longer the case. Since in the interim, albeit inarticulately, Praneshacharya has had the opportunity to come to the realisation that not only does he not have the wherewithal to survive in the "demon world of pressing need, revenge, greed" (120), he also does not have the appetite for it: "I dread it. It's the dread of being transformed from ghost to demon" (121). That is to say, in the insight and question he has for Mahabala, howsoever tentatively, Praneshacharya registers a reaffirmation of the traditional, a reaffirmation of the traditional not as convention, but as lived reality. I am encouraged some way in this inference by the manner in which Praneshacharya responds to the spontaneous recollection of a Sanskrit line immediately after the
sentences quoted above. Earlier when Sanskrit lines or ideas from memory had intruded into his consciousness, he had vehemently rejected their communications as excrescences of his convention-ridden past (78, 91). Now, in sharp contrast, he accepts its influence. According to the passage, he is “quite moved” and evidently buoyed by it. This, I believe, gestures towards his new equation with the traditional—one that is neither blindly subservient nor equally blindly antagonistic to it. As for how this entire passage is relevant to the question of desire for the Good, what Praneshacharya wishes to communicate to Mahabala implicitly suggests that he still sways to the urgings of this impulse, or rather that he re-cognises it and is, in a manner of speaking, reconciled with his recognition of it. His question for Mahabala, based upon this insight, thus, is in the nature of a genuine wonderment at the abrupt change in the latter’s life-goals: if he for whom God had never been “such an immediate urgency” (99) still felt the promptings of desire for the good, could Mahabala for whom “God was a hunger” (99) really not feel any craving for the good any more? Needless to say, this time around, the needle of doubt is pointed away from Praneshacharya’s own fledgling conviction to the authenticity of Mahabala’s experience.

To sum up, then, desire for the Good as it finds expression in Praneshacharya remains a salvific concept throughout the novel. But whereas in the beginning it is grasped only as dogma, by the end of the novel, there is a move towards apprehending it as an experiential phenomenon. This move, however, as mentioned before, is never quite brought to completion in Samskara. Consequently, its validity or otherwise, as also its nature and form, remain a matter of anticipation, of speculation, both within and without the text, i.e., for Praneshacharya and the reader alike.

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441 He had remembered this same line earlier in the novel and it had choked him then with emotion as it reminded him of his friend Mahabala and his rendering of Jayadeva’s Gitagovinda (99); a friend against whom he had hardened his heart (100).
Desire for the Pleasing

Yamadeva in elucidating the mysteries of life and death, the soul and the hereafter, had in addition and opposition to shreyas touched upon another principle in the Katha Upanishad, viz., preyas. Desire for the pleasing in Samskara is akin to this concept. That is, it swears by the axiom of instant gratification. In the novel, Naranappa, the antagonist to Praneshacharya’s protagonist, is the chief actor and spokesperson in its behalf; or rather, he is its principal embodiment. Apart from him, the desire is also to be seen in his motley crew of friends, but theirs is distinctly an espousal in minor key. Here, I will briefly sketch the specific form that desire for the pleasing takes in the novel.

Well, most obviously, it takes the form of Naranappa. And he is a plague-ridden rotting corpse when the novel opens. But the significance of that little detail, I will keep for later. For now, I focus upon the shape of this desire a) as it incarnates in Naranappa—a Naranappa resurrected from the memory that people have of him, that is, and b) as it materialises in the antics and ambitions of Naranappa’s cronies.

By all accounts, Naranappa comes across as a sybarite, one with a prodigious appetite for the three m’s of conservative brahmin horror—madira, mamsa and maithuna. I believe a couple of features in his Epicureanism merit especial attention, since they give it its particular character and charisma in the novel. Firstly, Naranappa comes across as no ordinary sensualist. He is a connoisseur of the spread at life’s table as much as he is a gourmand. What’s more, he has the daring and the means to suit his tastes, or rather, to indulge his tastes. It is this initiative and capacity, in fact, which gives him a certain aura of heroism in Samskara. It also draws to him an admiring group of young men from the agrahara as well as its neighbouring areas, who look upon him as their leader in libertinage. Secondly, Naranappa takes a savage delight in confounding Madhva pieties. Of course, given the extremely strictured lives of the Durvasapura brahmans, sensual adventurism of almost any kind would qualify as a breach of
some vidhi nishedha or the other, at least in theory. My reference, however, is not to such inevitable but incidental violations. What I wish to highlight is how Naranappa’s hedonism constitutes a deliberate and systematic assault upon brahmin orthodoxy. Even to the extent of this being its one-point agenda, its raison d’être. Or, to put it differently, how Naranappa’s preferred maxim of living, “borrow, if you must, but drink your ghee” (21) finds articulation in an idiom that is consonant with his professed aim in life, i.e., to “destroy brahminism” (23). 442 This is why Garudacharya, among others, remembers him as, “[t]he rascal [who] undermined all good Brahmin influence on the others, he saw to it. And then, he wasn’t content with ruining our agrahara, he had to go and spoil the boys of Parijatapura too, make them run after dramas and shows” (11). To my mind, while the first feature establishes Naranappa’s excesses as an identifiable and, at least to some, attractive modus vivendi in the novel, the second anchors it firmly within a context, as an extreme reaction to a specific socio-cultural set-up. Of course, since Naranappa’s is the principal representation of desire for the pleasing in Samskara, the latter manifests predominantly as a pursuit of pleasure obtained from upending entrenched institutional sanctimonies. In this capacity, for a large part of the narrative, it also functions as the seemingly more authentic alternative to the decadent conventionalism of the Durvasapura brahmins.

But this is its dominant avatar. As mentioned before, desire for the pleasing has another, more subsidiary presence in the text as well, one that animates Naranappa’s band of companions. These young men are neither as spirited nor as wealthy as their mentor-friend. And their feckless debauchery443 scarcely adds up

442 Everything about his pleasure-seeking ways, from abandoning his brahmin wife, cohabiting with a lower caste woman and eating food cooked by her, to his neglecting “to observe the death anniversaries of his own father and mother” (7), from his desecrating the temple-pond and killing the sacred fish in it, to his throwing the salagrama into the river and spitting after it, from his eating and drinking taboo food with the Muslims, to his encouraging Shyama to join the army and Shripati to neglect his wife, clearly establishes this.

443 In the novel, these range from Shripati’s hilarious ventures into womanising and dramatics to Shyama’s defiantly running away and joining the army and then miserably writing home for
to any kind of coherent philosophy of life at all. As a result, they end up offering a rather wan facsimile of the latter’s passion. For the most part this desire can be described as a mindless, goalless, disoriented, whimsical and lazy dalliance with pleasure. It is also notably limited to the sphere of the sensual. That is, no other ideological, epistemological or metaphysical motive plays a part in its being. What’s more, but for the active encouragement provided by Naranappa, there is good reason to believe that it would peter out for want of both imagination and commitment. In itself, therefore, the sum total of this desire works out to a pretty paltry quantity in the overall narrative scheme of Samskara. To judge its utility purely on this basis, however, would be an error for its real significance lies elsewhere. As I see it, this imitation in mock-heroic mode serves the better to underscore the high seriousness of its original inspiration. Through comparison, it not only distinguishes Naranappa’s desire from a variety of juvenile delinquency and/or adolescent thrill-seeking, but also buttresses its projection as a rationally adopted and true-to-form way of life, as a jeevan siddhanta. Finally, it is in this sense as much that desire for the pleasing as it is found among Naranappa’s friends is an auxiliary presence in the novel.

Natural Desires

By natural desires, my reference is to needs and drives that are experienced, accepted and acted upon as part of the business of living. In other words, I focus upon the representations of instinctive life in Samskara. Typically, the novel conceives two facets to the said phenomenon one, benevolent, and the other, minatory. And it uses different characters to symbolise and flesh out this Janus-faced reality. Here, I will first provide a thumbnail sketch of each of these two expressions of life lived au naturale and then follow it up with a concluding gloss.
1) Benevolent aspect of instinctive life: Chandri is the character most consistently presented as the apotheosis of a bounteous and fecund Nature. This hyperbole is legitimated mostly through modes of association, implication and direct figuration. For instance, at one point, Chandri compares herself to a "running river," impervious to the defilements of sinfulness. "It’s good for a drink when a man’s thirsty, it’s good for a wash when a man’s filthy, and it’s good for bathing the god’s images with; it says Yes to everything, never a No. Like her. Doesn’t dry up, doesn’t tire. Tunga, river that doesn’t dry, doesn’t tire" (44). This would undoubtedly be dismissed as an instance of hubris or self-aggrandisement on her part if it were a one-off occurrence. Instead, it gains credibility by the repeated allusions that the text makes to her generosity of spirit, her passionate and giving nature. In this connection, not only is Chandri shown giving up all her gold jewellery to defray the expenses for Naranappa’s dasahasamskara at a time when the Durvasapura brahmins are mean-spiritedly splitting hairs about who should perform the deed, she is also described by Shripati as a paragon of loving devotion.444 There is, moreover, the reference to Chandri’s willingness and capacity to satiate Naranappa’s sexual hunger and yet not be exhausted by it. As she herself puts it, “Naranappa had guzzled at her body like a ten-year old, tearing and devouring like a gluttonous bear at a honeycomb” but did her “cheeks become hollow, breasts sag and fall—not hers. Perennial Tunga, river that doesn’t dry up, doesn’t tire” (45). Finally, if all this is not enough, the abundant vitality of instinctive life is literally bodied forth in Chandri. By way of example, consider the narrative fixation on her breasts. Many critics have noted how this establishes Chandri as a nurturant and life-sustaining Earth Mother or Annapurna-like figure in the novel. But even apart from this, everything about her voluptuous beauty, from the thickness of her braid to the length of her toe and the cast of her eyes, signifies as a physical expression of the life of passion.

444 As he puts it,

"...is there any woman as lovely, as bright, as good, as Chandri? Take a count. If you find one, I’ll give up my caste. What does it matter if she’s a whore? You tell me, didn’t she behave better than any wife with Naranappa? If he drank too much and vomited, she wiped up the mess. She even wiped up ours didn’t she? Anytime, even at midnight, when he woke her up she cooked and served him, all smiles. Which Brahmin woman would do so much? Stupid shaven widows!" (72)
Then again, while Chandri’s is the main role in this symbolic capacity, Belli, the outcaste sylph who fires Shripati’s lascivious tendencies, puts in a supportive act as well. Shripati’s lust-inflamed description of his secret squeeze *enroute* to a hoped-for tryst with her, establishes Belli as a similar figuration of earthy vitality. To quote him, “which brahmin girl was equal to Belli? Her thighs are full. When she’s with him she twists like a snake coupling with another, writhing in the sands.... she’d be warm and ready—like a tuned-up drum. Not utterly black-skinned, nor pale white, her body is the colour of the earth, fertile, ready for seed, warmed by an early sun” (37). As can be seen, this repeats some way the over-determination of physical and behavioural attributes as signs of libidinal plenty that inscribes Chandri as the very incarnation of a benign and prolific life-force in the novel.

Threatening aspect of instinctive life: Putta, the half-caste, hard-to-shake-off wayfarer-mate of Praneshacharya’s peregrinations, and Padmavati, the mysterious *femme fatale* Praneshacharya encounters courtesy Putta, are two of the most identifiable faces of the “demonic world” in *Samskara*. Right from the moment he is brought onto the scene as a “pair of eyes” that induces a panic attack in Praneshacharya (101), Putta is associated with a sense of lurking danger. On the one hand, this is managed through potentially sinister insinuations, such as when his “close-set eyes” are said to make “one squirm under” its gaze (102), or his clinging nature is compared to the formidable adhesiveness of past sins (106)—the former hinting at vaguely menacing shades to Putta’s character, while the latter effectively clubbing it with the ungodly and the inauspicious. On the other, it is written into his fluid being. To illustrate the point, consider the many identities Putta packs into a brief narrative appearance. At first, he introduces himself simply as “Putta, of the Maleras” (101). Soon, however, after posing a couple of riddles for Praneshacharya’s solving and subjecting him to incessant chatter, Putta admits, “I’m exactly what people call me. One of my names is Riddleman Putta, another is Prattling Putta” (112). These, of course, are his
acknowledged sobriquets. As the novel progresses, it becomes increasingly clear that Putta can with equal facility and no real contradiction also merit the tags of Wife-beater Putta, Uxorious Putta, Good Samaritan Putta, Whoremonger Putta, and Gambler Putta, among others.¹ Iv This is possible only because of his complete absorption in the moment. For Putta, with no attempt at witticism, is as putty to the force of stimuli: he slides from one persona to the next, true only to the call of his instincts. Needless to say, this establishes him as a bona fide creature of the “nether-world...of cruel engagement” (117) that Praneshacharya finds simultaneously fascinating, frightening and repulsive.

Padmavati, the other face of danger in the novel, puts in a cameo role that identifies her as a kindred to Putta, and not just as a half-caste Malera woman who is a “distant relative” (121) of his, either. For, Praneshacharya experiences a frisson of fear when he encounters her, which is not unlike the terror he felt at the first approach of Putta. But I am running ahead of my plot. The way Putta describes her, Padmavati is a “beautiful woman” who stays all by herself in a “grove.... running it as a tenant” (121). From his perspective, this clearly presents an alluring picture, an opportunity that is irresistible. Praneshacharya, however, takes a slightly different view of things. To him, Padmavati’s imagined attractions, her “elongated dark eyes” and “black snake braid,” appear in a distinctly predatory light at first. So much so that he compares his condition at the moment of their introduction to “The bird [being] paralysed by the stare of the black serpent. Dread” (123). Of relevance to the focus here is the fact that despite the characteristic flip-flops on the issue that follow from Praneshacharya, Padmavati carries the aura of danger built around her at this juncture for the remainder of her brief appearance in the novel. This not only suffices to characterise her as another embodiment of instinctive life after the manner of

¹ In fact, after all but arranging a one-night stand for Praneshacharya with Padmavati, he gushes, “This Putta will do anything for a friend. Putta, the Altruist, that’s my title” (125).
Putta, but also more particularly, sets her up as a counter to the inscription of a nurturant Eros achieved in Chandri.\textsuperscript{446}

To note as much and no more about the representation of natural desires in \textit{Samskara}, would be to work with a partial view of things. I conclude this section with a set of general observations that will hopefully put the foregoing disquisition into some sort of perspective. First off, though Chandri and Belli, Putta and Padmavati are the most visible articulations of instinctive life, they are by no means its only manifestation. The outcaste people of Durvaspura as well as the drifting populace encountered in the temple town of Melige during the festival celebrations vivify the same impulse, albeit as anonymous collectivities. What's more, it's a way of life they are shown sharing with the vegetal and animal world in the novel—something, I believe, that explains its evidence in different settings, i.e., the forest, the grove, in the outcaste settlement of Durvasapura as well as the market place in the town of Melige. Then again, while there is a definite difference to be observed between the benign and dangerous aspects of instinctive life, it would be a mistake to assume any kind of absolute distinction between them on this basis. Since, in the ultimate analysis, the two facets of natural desires actually exist as part of a continuum in the novel—a continuum where the differences are more relative and conjunctural than essential and fixed. Such a view is especially well supported by the likeness suggested between Chandri, Belli, Putta and Padmavati.\textsuperscript{447} Finally, and this is a related point that is a logical

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\textsuperscript{446} Praneshacharya’s description of Padmavati, “Long hair, not yet oiled after a bath; plump fleshy thighs, buttocks, breasts. Tall, long-limbed. A gleam in the eyes, an expectation” along with other images of her, establishes Padmavati in a seductive, courtesan mould.

\textsuperscript{447} Thus, for instance, Putta’s “That’s why I say Yes to everything” (122) is strikingly reminiscent of Chandri’s self-characterisation as a “running river,” which “says Yes to everything, never a No” (44). Similarly, the focus on the hair, the breasts, the thighs, etc., is common to the representation of Chandri, Belli and Padmavati in \textit{Samskara}; the only difference being in emphasis. In fact, the connection between Chandri and Padmavati is even more visible in the images that flit across Praneshacharya’s mind when he contemplates the latter in a carnal light. According to the novel, Praneshacharya recalls, “the scent of grass and country sarsaparilla” and “floating chariots of lightning bugs” (125) on seeing Padmavati. I need hardly remind that the grass, the sarsaparilla root as well as the lightning bugs are precisely the things that were associated with his coupling with Chandri. As for Belli, as Shripati reveals, though she is good to sleep with, the moment she opens her mouth she talks only of ghosts and demons thus aligning her with the dark world.
no-brainer but still must needs be made, the representation of instinctive life in the novel is distinctly amoral. In other words, neither is compassionate Chandri exactly “good,”\textsuperscript{448} for example, nor raffish Putta particularly “evil.”\textsuperscript{449} This is because the acts and actions of Putta, Chandri, Padmavati, Belli et al are not portrayed as conscious decisions made in adherence to some absolute principle of right or wrong. Rather, they are shown as being influenced by the exigencies of the situation and the call of their senses. Consequently even though their actions appear “good” or “bad,” as the case might be, they are devoid in themselves of any moral discrimination, any moral determination.

**Unnatural Desires**

Whereas natural desires are delineated as essentially amoral expressions of instinctive life, the representation of unnatural desires tends more towards the immoral. In the novel, these find articulation primarily as a handful of monstrous personality traits and dysfunctionalities rife among the Durvasapura brahmins, both men as well as women. As it happens, this focalisation of the abnormal is far from accidental. For, in one way or another, all unnatural desires in Samskara are an excrescence of severe repression. More specifically, they are an excrescence of the severe repression that the model brahmin code of conduct requires when it is bigotedly understood and hypocritically practised. Needless to say, since the Durvasapura inhabitants are the one set of brahmins whose lifestyles get any sort of sustained treatment in the novel, they quite naturally appear as the principal repositories and signifiers of the text’s collection of unnatural desires.\textsuperscript{450} In what follows, I attempt a brief notational gloss on the same.

\textsuperscript{448} After all, as the novel lets on, Chandri is “a natural at pleasure, unaccustomed to self-reproach” (68). And if she gives up all her jewellery to conduct her lover’s funeral, then she also, as Praneshacharya remembers, “took what she wanted—walked away” (125). So that, to quote him, “Chandri’s too is the same world” (115) of “demonic” involvement.

\textsuperscript{449} Putta can just as easily beat his wife, bet and pimp as genuinely help and look out for Praneshacharya’s interests.

\textsuperscript{450} In the social set up of south Indian villages especially, this is not to be wondered at, since the population was often made up of brahmins and varieties of shudras and outcastes, i.e., the intermediate castes were missing. It was not a chaturvarnya society.
Broadly speaking, there are two varieties of unnatural desires on offer in *Samskara*. One type is of the conscious, dishonest, variety, and the other, of the unconscious, naturalised variety. Neither of these is strictly exclusive of the other. Rather they operate in a kind of symbiotic bind and often co-exist in the same character. I will begin here with the first set of aberrant desires.

According to orthodox lore, a brahmin is supposed to be one with an inherent tendency for *satya* (truth), *jnana* (knowledge), *ahimsa* (non-violence), *bhakti* (devotion to god) *dana* (generosity), *daya* (compassion), *kshama* (forgiveness), *anasuya* (absence of jealousy), *aparigraha* (non-possessiveness), *asteya* (non-stealing), *tyaga* (sacrifice), *brahmacharya* (chastity), *saucha* (purity), among others. As a matter of fact, it is this putative concentration of *sattva guna* that rationalises his ensconcement at the top of the *varnashrama* hierarchy and secures for him the homage of all the other castes. Since, through what is effectively a piece of circular reasoning, his virtue is deemed to be variously proof, cause and result of his high birth. What’s more, the *samskaras* that he is enjoined to perform are meant to cultivate and perfect these *atmaguna*. The Durvasapura brahmins (Praneshacharya and Naranappa excepted), however, represent a study in antithesis to this traditional valorisation. Ranging from meanness, deception, greed and cupidity to envy, covetousness, gluttony and *schadenfreude*, their psychological profile offers a catalogue of vices that are, in fact, a comprehensive reversal of the conservative ideal. Here, I would like to highlight a couple of points about this particular constellation of “unnatural desires.” First off, the collective proclivities of the Durvasapura brahmins show up the neat equation assumed between brahmin birth, brahmin nature and brahmin *dharma* in dominant strains of conventional thinking for what it is—a contrivance that while

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451 My use of “him” and “his” to refer to brahmins is deliberate since traditional thought-systems regularly took the man to be the subject of their discourse.

452 As against frugality, for instance, can be cited Dasacharya’s hunger, as against *daya*, there is evidence of collective meanness and Lakshmana’s stinginess, as against *asteya* is to be found Garuda’s thieving, as against chastity, there is the prurience of the men, as against *bhakti* and *tyaga* can be cited their collective selfishness, as against purity, their moral turpitude, and so on.
not unnatural or impossible is neither necessary nor even the norm. And secondly, they reveal how instincts when blindly and mechanically suppressed find continued expression in transmuted, more grotesque forms that are not only unhealthy but also downright immoral. For, as mentioned before, the unsavoury propensities of the Durvasapura brahmins signify as an unintended by-product of high-cultural institutions and interdictions in the novel. What I would like to underscore here are the two related ways in which they answer to this description. As it seems to me, on the one hand, the practice of conforming to austere standards of living without any genuine understanding or inclination for the same is shown to cause the proscribed tendencies to fester within the subject and take on an obsessive, surreptitious and debased character that then holds all in its thrall. On the other, the germ of these secret twisted desires are shown to grow and develop by encouraging brahmins into two-faced and ritualistic observances of conventional dharma such that their entire social corpus is gradually rendered corrupted and effete. Needless to say, unlike amoral actions, both these trajectories of unnatural desires, chartered as they are through acts of dissimulation, inscribe a distortion and degeneration of the moral imperative, which for better or worse, they acknowledge and exalt.

While the above expression of unnatural desires is predominantly psychological, the other articulation it finds in Samskara is largely corporeal. That is to say, unnatural desires are quite literally embodied in the Durvasapura brahmins. Not surprisingly, and once again with the aforesaid exceptions, these latter constitute a singularly ugly set of people. Since their moral crookedness and impoverishment finds an eloquent referent in their physical deformity and decrepitude. In fact, because of this incorporation, sundry unnatural desires, as noted earlier, are more or less naturalised among the brahmins; that is, they occur as an indistinguishable part of their identities. I have no intention to dilate here on all the specificities of this somatic coding: suffice it to say that even a desultory reading of the novel is enough to confirm the validity of this observation. Purely for purposes of
demonstration, however, I do propose to focus upon the way warped inclinations find substantiation, for instance, among the Durvasapura brahmin women.

Briefly, this contingent of characters, like their male counterparts, presents a consistently unprepossessing picture. If Bhagirathi, Praneshacharya's wife, is a congenital invalid drained of all but the breath of life, and Lakshmideviamma, the star-crossed widow of the agrahara is a "sour belch" in more ways than one, then the other brahmin wives are not exactly fetching specimens of healthy womanhood either. In fact, their thin dwarfish braids, stinking breath, sunken cheeks and withered breasts, all flesh out the anatomy of a deep distemper—a deep distemper that is both generic to them as well as pervasive in them. I am referring, of course, to the crippling aridity that imbues their lives and finds definitive form in it. For everything from their sexual frigidity and mean-heartedness to their sickly constitution and dyspeptic temperament is symptomatic of it. That, within the narrative frame, no brahmin woman is shown to be pregnant or giving birth to a child only grounds this malaise further in a biological perversity. But so what? In other words, even if all of the above is granted, how does that transform a graph of corrosive sterility into a configuration of unnatural desires? The answer lies in the strong association that exists between a woman and her womb in traditional world-views, even to the extent of this becoming a reductive identification—"the woman is a womb." Owing to such linkages, the one desire related to her body that a woman can express with some freedom and hope to meet with, at least, social understanding, if not approval, is the desire to be a mother. Since her regenerative capacity is considered to be both the most creative aspect of her nature as well as the very (high) point of her life. Ultimately, I believe, it is against such ruling dogmas on femininity that the barrenness of the Durvasapura brahmin women and their aversion to sex acquires the cast of deviant desires; or more correctly, acquires the cast of tendencies contrary to the "eternal feminine" ontology traditionally denoted for women.
If the above classification gives a broad name to the different strands of desire to be found in *Samskara*, then what ensues is an account of how these strands braid the plot of the novel. Most analytical efforts I have come across so far seem to read *Samskara* as a text that stages a temporal-ideological encounter of sorts, where an older, essentially fixed, tradition is faced-off against the dynamics of a fledgling modernity. In this skirmish, Praneshacharya and the *agrahara* of brahmins he heads, supposedly stand-in for the time-honoured conventional order, while Naranappa and his cronies personify the new way of life. The resolution which critics so-minded see the novel as offering its principal flashpoint, comprehends a range of positions, from a slow birth into a new sensibility (Meenakshi Mukherjee; Suresh Raval, “Interpreting the Cultural Impasse”) to a caste- and gender-qualified access to modernity (Nalini Natarajan), from an inability to offer a truly radical alternative to a decadent Brahminism (Radhakrishnan, “*Samskara*: A Reading”) to a descent into a spiritually unsatisfying, bleak and despondent existential uncertainty (Makarand Paranjape), to name only a few. Unfortunately, none of these mappings sit exactly well with the schema I have been advancing above. More importantly, despite there being enough textual evidence to support all of these and such-like other insights individually, the broad matrix within which they get articulated, queers the pitch of the novel in significant ways. What I outline here, therefore, is an alternate paradigm to read the text—one that is not just more consonant with my taxonomy of desires but actually cast in terms of it. Admittedly, my intervention reiterates many of the inferences available in critiques employing the aforesaid framework.

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453 This is only indicative of a certain trend and not exhaustive by any means of the variety of criticism that this novel has attracted. So, for instance T. N. Madan (*Non-Renunciation*) reads it as an intra-traditional affair, while Dunkin Jalki reads it as a modern problematic (“Orientalism as a Linguistic Behaviour”). There is, of course, Naipaul’s infamous reading of the novel as a world of barbaric civilisation without a head and Jaidev in *The Culture of Pastiche*, for instance says, “The ending of Samskara...is existentialist but does not smack of pastiche. This is because the priest-hero is thoroughly rooted and contextualized” (43).

454 For one, my typology of desires in *Samskara* does not see Naranappa as a representative of the modern. For another, it draws a significant distinction between Praneshacharya and his fellow-brahmins in Durvasapura. And finally, it does not see the transformation wrought in Praneshacharya to be a sign of existentialist (though it might be existential) angst or freedom of choice and individualism.
The point, however, is that the overall function and import of these conclusions vis-à-vis the text registers a change in light of the different rubric under which they occur. Also, I am persuaded to the feasibility of such a proposition by the way in which it renders the structural layout of the novel meaningful, i.e., by the way in which it makes the physical format of the novel integral to its narrative design.

The central dialectic in *Samskara*, as I see it then, is not between tradition and modernity but between two varieties of traditional thinking, viz., desire for the good and desire for the pleasing.\(^{455}\) And the unnatural and natural desires differentiated above serve as so many scenes, props and conditions of possibility against, through and in which this dialectic plays itself out. The seed of conflict, as indeed its impetus, can be traced to the antithetical truth-claims advanced by the two ideologies on behalf of human nature, truth-claims that both fire their pretensions to supremacy as well as inflame their rivalry.\(^{456}\) For, while the former apprehends man as an essentially spirituo-moral complex and deems a virtuous lifestyle to be the ideal, the latter perceives him almost wholly as a sensory being and considers a life of sensual satiety to be the very high-water mark of authenticity. In fact, ultimately, it is the burden of *Samskara* to see this fight to a finish; to arrive at some sort of articulation of the truth of human nature and being in the world by arbitrating between these two adversarial positions. As for modernity, it or the habiliments of it make an appearance in the novel, only peripherally or as a contingent modality of the traditional. This latter asseveration, I hope, will become clearer by and by. In the meanwhile I attempt to explicate just how such a lens aligns novel form with content.

\(^{455}\) In fact, Naranappa’s “borrow if you must…” dictum, quoted above, is a variation on Charvaka philosophy. And Praneshacharya’s admonishment of his glib contentions likewise recalls the charge of sophistry brought against the Lokayatas, thus further reinforcing the intra-traditional nature of the novel’s central dialectic.

\(^{456}\) Praneshacharya admits that his efforts at reforming Naranappa were not just motivated by compassion. “It covered a terrible wilfulness…. The wilfulness had taken a shape all its own—the shape of a resolution to use love, compassion, austerity, to make Naranappa walk the narrow path” (47).
At the risk of belabouring the point to death, *Samskara* comes structured in three parts. Part One is located primarily in Durvasapura. It begins, more or less, with the death of Naranappa and ends with the adultery of Praneshacharya. Part Two is also mostly situated in the same place, but it is a changed Durvasapura—a Durvasapura reeling under the shadow of death, Black Death, if you will. It starts with Praneshacharya waking up in Chandri’s arms and ends with him cremating his wife and setting off “wherever his legs took him” (87). Part Three offers a veritable slideshow of locations and well it might. For, from start to finish, really, it is a journey that Praneshacharya undertakes. In the beginning the direction of his movement is away from the familiar and oriented towards the unknown. At the end, he is on *enroute* to making a return to Durvasapura. The way I see it, these segments concatenate in a manner that both facilitates as well as reflects, at the structural level, the dialectical working out which is the crux of the novel at the thematic level. Let me explain.

On the one hand, the pairs of events/acts that flank each section at either end perform a broadly diacritical function. That is, they help distinguish each segment from what goes before and after, thus justifying and naturalising the structural division. They are able to do this by constituting the different sections of the novel as meaningful units in themselves, by bringing to some logical conclusion, within each section itself, the issues introduced therein. On the other, they perform a specifically conjunctive function. That is, they integrate the different components of the novel such that it communicates an overall meaning not simply reducible to the sum of its various parts. They manage this by signifying as so many rites of passage for the storyline, rites of passage that organically embed each segment within a larger narrative sequence. My point is that both these

457 Strictly speaking, the Plague that decimated European populations in the Middle Ages is different from the rat-related bubonic plague of *Samskara*. But in terms of the effects on the moral and social universe of the Durvasapura inhabitants, I believe, Black Death is not an entirely inaccurate description.
aspects combine in a way that makes Ramanujan precisely correct when he says, "samskara is not only the subject of the work but the form as well" (142).

But what exactly is this reading of Samskara that melds structure and substance? I would like to preface my attempt at a gloss here with a couple of comments. Firstly, I tend to agree with Krishna Rayan that Samskara is a "gunibhutavyangya text; it practices a mode characterized by metaphor, omission, obliqueness and resonance, but it also admits a great deal of statement" ("The Other Samskara" 158). Or more pointedly, with Ramanujan who says Samskara is "an allegory rich in realistic detail" (Translator’s Note). Its "characters are frankly allegorical but the setting is realistic. [That is, an abstract human theme is reincarnated in just enough particulars of a space, a time, a society" (144). As is perhaps clear, I believe this abstract human theme to be a struggle between two principles, viz., desire for the good and desire for the pleasing, over what constitutes the "truth" of human nature. Secondly, I see the narrative of Samskara unfolding as a series of stages that register an incremental growth worked by a supersessive logic of development. In fact, in what follows, I intend to reprise the plot of the novel precisely in terms of these stages—stages that total four in number.

The first stage—this refers to the period before Naranappa’s death, which is not merely a temporal categorisation but also expresses a different consciousness. Strictly speaking, the page and a half that begins Part One before Chandri announces Naranappa’s death to Praneshacharya is the only direct representation of this stage in the novel.458 Thereafter, it is always distilled through memory, since it is anterior to the narrated present of Samskara. In this stage, Durvasapura is the site and prize of a fierce struggle between Praneshacharya, representing desire for the good and Naranappa, incarnating desire for the pleasing. The

458 And what sort of life does it represent? Meenakshi Mukherjee has this to say on it: “The novel begins with an emphasis on the static quality of life as lived in the Brahmin colony of Durvasapura village. The word ‘routine’ is repeated three times on the first page, highlighting the lack of spontaneity in Praneshacharya’s acts...” ("Samskara," Realism and Reality 167).
principles themselves manifest as an extreme adherence to *tyaga-marga* and *bhoga-marga* on the part of the two combatants and the battle for supremacy is conducted under their respective banners. Ideologically, it is a time when right and wrong, truth and untruth are seen in black and white terms by both parties to the dispute. That is, it is a time when dualism is the reigning order of the mind. For his part, Praneshacharya sees the hypocrisies that characterise the observance of Madhva *dharma* by the older set of Durvasapura brahmin men and women. But at this juncture he is fully convinced that even a superficial profession of the sacerdotal creed is better than its flagrant disregard as it was the only recourse for their salvation.

The second stage—this refers to the period after Naranappa’s death and extending up to Praneshacharya’s unpremeditated coupling with Chandri in the forest. Structurally, it coincides more or less exactly with Part One. The battle between Naranappa and Praneshacharya, between desire for the good and desire for the pleasing, needless to say, shifts gears. But it is a subtle shift. Most obviously, if earlier the threat to orthodox piety was from the apostasy and strategic profligacy of a living, breathing Naranappa, then now it is the rapidly rotting corpse of the said man that poses the challenge. And while prior to his death, the “faithful” of the community could shun his company and so keep their “brahmin purity” intact, none in the Durvasapura *agrahara* (with the possible exception of the Smarta Durgabhattacha) can quite escape the dire implications for their caste identity if they go wrong with the matter of his *antimsamskara*. Praneshacharya is acutely alive to this turn of events. As he admits, “If there’s no answer in the ancient code-books, it’s truly victory for Naranappa, and defeat for him, the Acharya” (47).

In this phase, though assailed with gathering doubts, a sharply binary thinking continues to dominate the faithscape of Durvasapura. Thus Praneshacharya,

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459 Of course, it would be meet to mention that the crisis is precipitated, in the first place, because of the greed and competitive jealousy of Naranappa’s relatives, who each want to do the honours so as to get their hands on his wealth and the gold that Chandri gives up to take care of the expenses of the ceremony.

460 For instances, one of the thoughts that is a recurring torture to Praneshacharya is Naranappa’s assertion that “every action results not in what is expected but in its exact opposite” (24).
believing in their omniscience, still doggedly looks to the *shastras* to resolve this *dharmasankat*. And when he can't find any clear answer in them, instead of giving up hope, he looks to Maruti, the local deity, for grace and direction. What the insistent recollection of Naranappa's antinomian jibes and taunts by Praneshachraya signify, however, is the slow internalisation of a battle that had been hitherto wholly external and objective.

The third stage—this period begins with the moment of sexual intimacy between Praneshacharya and Chandri in the forest and extends till the time Praneshacharya finally makes up his mind to return to Durvasapura. It is essentially a stage when the extrinsic conflict between *tyaga* and *bhoga*, between desire for the good and desire for the pleasing, between Praneshacharya and Naranappa has been fully psychologised to yield a tussle that now plays itself out in the secret coils of Praneshacharya's subjectivity. As it happens, this displacement and transmogrification reveals two stages in its narrative unfolding. The first stage, ending with the death and cremation of Praneshacharya's wife, Bhagirathi, describes the initial tendencies, sensations and experiences of a born-again Praneshacharya. Since, as critics have noted, his waking up in Chandri's lap is symbolic of his waking up to a new consciousness through her. Equally, it is as if through coupling with Chandri—a pleasure that for the last ten years had belonged to Naranappa alone—Praneshacharya becomes his contumacious Other. Of course, it is not entirely incidental that Naranappa happened to be the one person in Durvasapura whom Praneshacharya had "looked at ... with desire" (22). And what form of expression does this re-birth take? Well, most obviously, for the first time in the novel, Praneshacharya can be seen allowing himself to apprehend the world through his senses.⁴⁶¹ Then again, in this phase, he not only feels alienated from the community of Durvasapura brahmins, he also feels a

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⁴⁶¹ "For the first time his eyes were beginning to see the beautiful and the ugly. He had not so far desired any of the beauty he'd read about in the classics. All earthly fragrance was like the flowers that go only to adorn the god's hair. All female beauty was the beauty of Goddess Lakshmi, queen and servant of Lord Vishnu. All sexual enjoyment was Krishna's when he stole the bathing cowgirls' garments, and left them naked in the water. Now he wanted for himself a share of all that" (76)—is how the text describes it.
sense of freedom in that alienation. In fact, the splitting off from his old self and its anchorage in community and custom, religion and ritual is most tellingly captured in the changed sensibility he displays towards his wife. Where earlier he had seen only the altar to his sacrifice and the means to his salvation when he looked at the bedridden woman, tending to her now “he noticed her sunken breasts, her bulbous nose, her short narrow braid and they disgusted him.” (76). Or more correctly, intermixed with his innate sense of compassion for her now was the aesthetic distaste that Naranappa had expressed towards her and her sickness. Structurally, this stage aligns with Part Two of the novel. Substantively, it reveals a schizoid Praneshacharya wrestling with himself. Ideologically, it shows the new existentially inclined Praneshacharya steadily gaining ground over the old religious self. For, faced with the inadequacy of orthopraxy as a guarantor and guide to Truth, and through intercourse with benevolent natural desires Praneshacharya slowly embraces his erstwhile rival’s methodology as a possible means of authentic living. In fact, the death and dahasamskara of his wife serve as a climactic dissolution of his ties with the past and the traditional, thus delivering him at the threshold of a new innings.

That second innings begins with a freshly single and, in a sense, “homeless” Praneshacharya setting out on a path of determined migrancy. It culminates, as mentioned before, with him undertaking another journey, but this time round, one that is homeward bound. Structurally, this stage corresponds with Part Three of the novel. Ideologically, it reveals Praneshacharya performing a u-turn. For when he embarks on his peripatetic adventures, he is more or less hopeful about the new epistemology of the self he has adopted to show him the way to salvation. Over the course of his travels and contact with different aspects of natural desires, however, he is gradually forced to acknowledge that an unenlightened life of the senses can no more be a ticket to self-realisation than the blind asceticism eschewing all sensory experiences he had earlier espoused. In this context, his decision to return to Durvasapura, instead of succumbing to the solicitations of Putta and Padmavati to spend the night with the latter, indicates that he is poised
to make another transition, one that leaves behind the dualisms of both the earlier Praneshacharya as well as the now-dead Naranappa, in many ways his alter-ego.

The fourth stage—this is the stage, I believe, Praneshacharya is set to graduate into at the end of the novel. Insofar as it constitutes the “yet to be” of the narrated current, this stage does not have a substantive presence in the text. However, it can be glimpsed in the terminal fringes of Part Three, much as the first stage could be found in the margins of Part One. Ideologically, it suggests a state in which the sharply polarised renderings of tapas and kama, duty and pleasure are no longer valid. Rather, a rich synergy of the both is what it seems to uphold as a means of Self-realised being. Ironically enough, though this period finds only nebulous articulation in Samskara, being the “ideal” of the novel, it actually functions as the telos towards which the entire narrative is geared.

That’s as far as the storyline of Anantha Murthy’s text goes. What remains is to illuminate the axiology that works the novel. That Praneshacharya is the hero of Samskara, its chief protagonist, there is little room to debate: everything from his handsome bearing and luminous presence to his phenomenal learning, exquisite taste, impeccable diction, blameless birth and exemplary life pronounce him so. Even after his moral debacle of sorts, the sheer volume of narrative space he occupies as well as his centrality to the plot means there is never really much doubt as to the role he performs. For a large part of Samskara, however, it is very hard to muster anything close to a like confidence about the principle he is supposed to live by, viz., desire for the good. This uncertainty is not only heightened but also chiefly precipitated by the challenge that Naranappa poses. It turns on the fact that the Praneshacharya of Samskara’s end seems a radically different being from the Praneshacharya of its beginning. More importantly, it turns on the fact that Praneshacharya’s transformation through the novel seems to be principally worked out in terms of an acceptance and assimilation of his erstwhile rival-antagonist’s world-view. Since, eventually, if posthumously, this appears to validate and vindicate that personage’s position rather than the one
Praneshacharya had started off espousing. It is my submission that to follow this drift of the novel, to the exclusion of all else, is to be beguiled by its textual front; it is to ignore the *sotto voce* that subtends *Samskara*'s narration and points out its ethical trajectory. Attending to this latter, on the other hand, cannot help but impress two things upon a reader. One, within the value-system of the novel, Naranappa and the lifestyle he propounds, only flatter to deceive. And two, though Praneshacharya is a changed man at the end of the novel, his transformation is not in the nature of an abrupt break or an artificial graft. Rather, it is a type of metamorphosis—an uncovering and efflorescence of that which was inchoate and misapprehended. The second point vis-à-vis Praneshacharya has already been touched upon in sufficient detail. What ensues here, therefore, is a brief explanation for the impressions that relate to Naranappa.

As I see it, there are at least three telltale signs which suggest that Naranappa and his footloose and fanciful ways are not quite what the novel considers a healthy alternative to the blind observance of social norms that is the obvious subject of its critique. The first of these concerns his actual presence in *Samskara*. The vitality that attaches to him in reveries and recollections, notwithstanding, it is difficult to get away from the fact that within the time-world of the novel, Naranappa is a stinking, plague-ridden, rotting corpse. No doubt, this allows his challenge to mutate and function at an altogether different plane and with more potency. But the principle that he stood for itself is never quite able to shake off the spectre of grisly moribundity that haunts it in the form of Naranappa’s corpse in the novel. Secondly, it is true that there is an aura of exceptionality built up around Naranappa. Lakshmideviamma calls him a “golden man” (43), Praneshacharya looks at him with desire, the young brahmin men of Durvasapura see in him their mentor and role model, even Chandri remembers him with affection. In addition, his daredevilry and brazen disregard of convention, his intelligence, his eye for beauty and determination, all mark him out as different from the regular run of vulpine and weak-spirited brahmins in Durvasapura. Many times in the novel, this distinction seems to assume heroic proportions. Yet in the
ultimate analysis Naranappa fails that role because he lacks compassion—a quality that the novel rates highly throughout and, significantly enough, a quality that permeates Praneshacharya's being even when he adheres to the rigid dictates of orthodoxy. Indeed, it is his saving grace in Samskara. As against this, Naranappa's actions are tailored to suit the demands of a narrow self-indulgence. His selfish individualism, for one, is wholly insensitive to others, their needs, their happiness, their predicaments, their pain. What's more, if they do not exactly fit in with his scheme of things then he is also ruthless in denying their life any worth, any meaning. In fact, the disfavour with which Padmavati looks at him only confirms this unsavoury aspect to Naranappa's character. Finally, and this is the most persuasive feature in the novel against an uncritical valorisation of Naranappa, namely, his sterility. Even after ten years with him, Chandri has not conceived a child. The novel makes it clear that this is despite her being desirous of doing so. Of course, it can be argued that the incapacity is hers and not Naranappa's. But given the overall tenor of her characterisation in Samskara, it would be no exaggeration to say that she is natural fecundity itself, personified. Consequently, ascribing infertility to her is incongruous with the thrust of the novel. True, by the same token, Naranappa is also a certain type of virility incarnate. The only caveat is that his virility is destructive rather than productive; it is impotent as a life-giving or -affirming power. The way I see it, this little detail when seen in conjunction with his manifest fate in the novel goes a long way towards establishing Naranappa and what he stands for as a literal as well as metaphorical figuration of barren death. Indeed, in this context, it is no coincidence that Chandri hopes her solitary tryst with Praneshacharya will bear fruit. For, ultimately, within the matrix of the narrative, it is with Praneshacharya and the principle he represents that the hope for re/generation lies. He is, as it were, the lord of life, its spiritual guide—pranesha + acharya.

So Naranappa is not the hero of the novel. But what exactly is his role then, what is his function? I would like to conclude this segment of my analysis with an attempt at answering precisely this question. To my mind, the role and function
that Naranappa performs in *Samskara* is comparable to the one performed by the *asuras* in Puranic lore. Needless to say, such a view is in keeping with the reading of *Samskara* as a “religious novella” that “tends towards allegory” rather than simply a variety of realist inscription usually considered the stock-in-trade of the genre. It is in keeping with the reading of *Samskara* as a “contemporary reworking of ancient themes” (143). More specifically, as a contemporary rendering of a concern that has found repeated cultural articulation from the time of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* on, viz., the struggle over truth understood as a *dharmasankat* and a *dharmayudha*. For just as the *asuras* of old, by engaging the *devas* in conflict, become the inadvertent means for the exposition, clarification, re-cognition and/or restoration of *dharma* in every age, Naranappa serves as the agent provocateur in what is, to all effects, only another, more current version of the selfsame cosmic *leela*. Indeed, the analogy seems especially meet since the eternal conflict between *asuric* fallacy and *daivik* insight actually finds ideological resonance in the clash between Naranappa’s epistemology of the Body and Praneshacharya’s metaphysics of Consciousness.

Of course, it is not difficult to see how such a formulation could still be deployed to read the earlier mentioned modernity-tradition *agon* between Naranappa and Praneshacharya as the dominant dialectic of the novel. After all, the connection between modern civilisation and the demoniacal/materialist/immoral has been on preponderant offer in a variety of indigenist, orthodox, quasi-mystic as well as nationalist accounts—none more sustained perhaps than M. K. Gandhi’s critique of modernity based on precisely such an equation. I, however, am not too persuaded in this line of reasoning. The principal cause for my skepticism is that Naranappa simply fails to convince as a legitimate child of modernity, let alone its conscious representative—a prerequisite for any criticism favouring the above exegetical model to carry weight. It is true that in practicing commensality with the Muslims and the lower castes as well in cohabitating with Chandri, Naranappa

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462 For a brief introduction to some of the facets of this critique of modernity, refer to Ashish Nandy’s “From Outside the Imperium” (127-62) from his *Traditions, Tyranny, and Utopias.*
goes against central interdictions of Madhva orthodoxy. Moreover, as the local patron of “arts” and “indulgence,” as the sole carrier of Congressism and oracle of the future, Naranappa veers enough away from the beaten track of Durvasapura brahmin existence to simulate the appearance of modernity. Yet this is precisely what it is—a simulation of modernity, one that is limited to the apparent and the superficial. In the first instance, there is nothing to suggest his dining habits and living arrangements radically dissipate communal, caste and gender disequilibria. The “friendship” between Naranappa and the unnamed Muslims seems restricted to outraging brahmin custom rather than a genuine meeting of the minds and discovery of common humanity. Similarly, his sleeping with Chandri only rehearses the practices of concubinage institutionally available to men of higher castes. As is shown, it scarcely reorders the systems of caste and gender privileges underwriting traditional society. Then again, against the vapid prudery of his fellow-brahmins, Naranappa’s support of drama and music, his appreciation of beauty, etc., his embrace of the new age machine and technology, no doubt, shows up as a flamboyant distinction. But, it is hardly tantamount to supporting a vital alternate form of cultural and/or artistic creativity, a new consciousness, a radical ethic. For, the young men he cultivates only dabble in the “arts;” they only view it as another opportunity for risqué entertainment, tawdry gratification. Which leaves Naranappa’s espousal of the Congress Party—definitely a symbol of political modernity in the novel. Granted, in saying “your texts and rites don’t work anymore. The Congress Party is coming to power, you’ll have to open up the temples to all outcastes” (21), Naranappa seems to pitch his lot with the forces of change poised to overtake traditional sociality. Still, a look at his actual practice in disseminating that Congress culture reveals the poverty of his understanding, the flippancy of his engagement. According to the text, “[w]hen he heard about the Congress Party here and there, he came to the village and taught the boys the new fashion of Congress uniform, of handspun knee-length shirts, loose pajamas and white caps” (71). In other words, guiding principles of

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463 The sceneries and backdrops he imports from Shivamogge for his drama group as well as the gramophone he owns.
swadeshi and swaraj, liberty, equality and fraternity (always fraternity) are by Naranappa reduced to mere sartorial predilection! Undoubtedly, all of these could yet be rationalised as typical of modernity through recourse to the above-mentioned conservative determinations if only Naranappa had been convincing as an atheistic secularist. But as his dying moments reported by Chandri show, for all his bravado and profanities, Naranappa, at heart, remains very much a believer in the traditional gods and their dispensations. Ultimately, therefore, Naranappa makes an unseemly mascot for democracy, an unsatisfactory emblem for modernity, any which way you look at it—modernity understood as a valid, alternate sensibility and schematic or modernity understood as a crisis of faith and "moral sclerosis." As for the overall presence of modernity in the novel, to repeat myself, it or the habiliments of it appear in Samskara only peripherally or as a contingent modality of the traditional.

What he represents rather better, it seems to me, is an illegitimate spawn of tradition. One who at the level of psychology is a reaction against the spiritual bankruptcy of hidebound traditionalism, and, at the level of ontology, a virulent recrudescence of all the vitality that an over-strict orthodoxy inevitably represses in the name of conformity. Indeed, the little history to be culled about him from the narrative of Samskara sufficiently bears out this reading. According to the text, Naranappa is the son of a simpleton swindled out of the control of his property by Garudacharya's father under the pretense of protecting him. It moreover appears that Naranappa was non-consensually betrothed, when young, to Garudacharya's sister-in-law. The way I see it, this early experience of

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464 According to Chandri, "Naranappa, who wouldn't fold his hand before a god any time, had started talking as his fever rose to his brain. As coma set in, he mumbled, 'O mother! O God Ramachandra Narayana!' Cried out, 'Rama, Rama.' Holy names. Not words that come out of a sinner's or an outcaste's mouth" (45).

465 The phrase occurs in Nadine Gordimer's The Late Bourgeois World.

466 As in the case of Shivamogge, khadi, the laws, the Congress party, Gramophone, sceneries, etc.

467 The example being Naranappa.
Naranappa goes a long way towards feeding the implacable animosity he feels for brahmin pieties. It also explains his transformation from “golden man” to dissipated troublemaker. After all, it is not impossible to see how an impressionable young man, at the receiving end of the skullduggery and meanness of Brahminism practised Durvasapura-style from childhood on, should conceive an antipathy for it. It is also not impossible to understand why he, being a spirited person, should make a determined attempt to cultivate all those habits and sensibilities that seem antithetical to this Brahminism. The point is, insofar as Naranappa’s actions are entirely a reaction to Brahminic falsity, its extreme and mostly two-faced asceticism, he is a product of precisely that which he abhors, albeit in an indirect and inverted fashion. I mean his rebellion is completely determined by and dependent upon that which he rebels against.468 This is what gives it its ferocity. But at the same time, it is also its chief limitation—since Naranappa has nothing to offer beyond or apart from his all-consuming hatred for Brahminism. The other reason why it seems more plausible to read Naranappa as an excrescence of the traditional is that underneath his bluster, he is never really able to wrench free of the worldview he ostensibly rebels against. Or as the text puts it, “he may have rejected brahminhood, but brahminhood never left him” (9). This not only explains his deathbed utterances, it also clarifies his attitude towards Praneshacharya, indeed, his attitude in general. To quote Chandri,

> It’s true Naranappa had thrown out barhmin ways, but they had still clung to him. Angry, mad, strong-willed man—he had capered and somersaulted, said he would turn Muslim if they excommunicated him. But who knows what was going on inside him? She certainly didn’t. Whatever his capers, he never used obscenities against Praneshacharya. Though he did talk out of turn, say rash things, he was quite afraid inside... (45)

Eventually, it is in this sense also, as much as anything else, that Naranappa justifies the asura analogy invoked earlier. For among other things, one understanding of the asura-deva dyad that is very much a part of traditional thinking is as polar expressions of human potential. The asuric debases the human by a cognitive error that identifies the truth of its self with its materiality. Or, in the mythic telling, after the toil of the samudra manthan, the asuras get distracted

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468 This is why his examples for rebellion are all from the cultural loop of brahmin value-systems—apsaras, myths etc.
by the appearance of Vishnu as Mohini (a woman, of course!) and give up on the nectar of immortality while the devas persevere with single-minded concentration in their desire for amrita. So their paths diverge, as do their destinies, but for all that they belong to the same world-system; they are consubstantial in their origins. Naranappa, like the asuras, is just someone caught up in the swirls of Maya. Ontologically then, as his name, he is simply Narayana in a corrupt form, Narayana unrealised—not other but not the same either. Functionally, he is the equivalent at a cosmic macro-level, of the homely spring-cleaning at the micro-level. That is, he represents both the means and mechanism for internal correction and/or auto-critique that is crucial, if the traditional is to survive and flourish.

To sum up, then, the novel Samskara recreates a traditional paradigm of conflict between two principles of desire, two principles of being. To start with, the conflict unfolds in a landscape, socioscape, faithscape and mindscape riven by dualisms. These dualisms are not independent strands of traditional thinking, however. In the world of the novel, materialism is the bastard child of a wisdom that is wisdom no longer. It is the bastard child of a wisdom that has degenerated into unenlightened repression and blind, ritual obedience. One of the meanings of the word samskara as the epigraph quoted before tells us, is the “realizing of past

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469 Indeed, the ultimate Truth consists in going beyond the apparent dualities of body and spirit. As the Gītā says, “The Light of consciousness comes to him through infinite powers of perception, and yet he is above all these powers. He is beyond all, and yet he supports all. He is beyond the world of matter, and yet he has joy in this world” (13.14).

470 Ultimately, this ambivalence of Naranappa is evident in his manner of death as well. In traditional Hindu belief the manner of one’s death is a crucial insight to the worth of the person. On the one hand, it can be said Naranappa died painfully, in fever and incoherence. But, on the other hand, he died in a twinkling with the name of god on his lips. Asura, perhaps, but one who is crucial to the revelation of dharma, I would say.

471 One of the things that Naranappa's death brings home to the Durvasapura brahmans subliminally, and Praneshacharya emphatically, is that there is something seriously wrong in their practice, their dharma—as the novel says, “It felt as if there was a dead body in every house, in every dark room” (51).

472 Tyaga juxtaposed with bhoga; Praneshacharya juxtaposed with Naranappa, Chandri juxtaposed with brahmin women, fertility juxtaposed with aridity, outcastes propitiating the demonic juxtaposed with the brahmans propitiating their gods, etc.

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perception." This, I submit, is the burden of Anantha Murthy's text—the "realizing of past perception," realising them not as perceived in some golden age of the past or in some equally abstract utopia of the future but in the here and now of life and living. For, towards the end, the novel is poised at the threshold of a consciousness confident in the non-dual Truth beyond phenomenal distinctions. And this is the new consciousness, howsoever dimly seen and tenuously grasped, which is upheld as the sole hope for regeneration in its mostly sterile, nescient world, a consciousness that is neither the rigid negationism, the allegorical fallacy which characterises Praneshacharya’s life at the beginning nor, the equally fixated, materialism, the literalist fallacy that Naranappa is prey to as a reaction.\textsuperscript{473} In what follows, I subject the narrative of \textit{Samskara} to a kind of feminist litmus test to see where its interplay of institutions, interdictions and desire stands on the pH scale of gender sensitivity.

It might be profitable to begin this exercise with an inventory of the many women characters that form a part of Anantha Murthy’s text. Roughly speaking, these women can be seen as falling into two groups, brahmin women and various types of lower-caste and outcaste women. In the former category belong Bhagirathi, Anusuya, Sitadevi, Lakshmideviamma and Lilavati, among others. In the latter, Chandri, Padmavati, Belli, Putta’s wife, etc. According to the novel’s delineation, the brahmin women, as mentioned before, constitute a remarkably unappealing set of characters—dried up, unhealthy, envious, mean-spirited and/or choking on their own spleen. As against this, the lower caste and outcaste women are varieties of healthy womanhood.\textsuperscript{474} In the case of Chandri, Padmavati and even

\textsuperscript{473} In one of the exchanges between Naranappa and Praneshacharya remembered by the latter, Naranappa professes his literalism thus: accusing Praneshacharya and the brahmin contingent in general, he says, ""You read those lush sexy Puranas, but you preach a life of barrenness. But my words, they say what they mean: if I say sleep with a woman, it means sleep with a woman; if I say eat fish, it means eat fish..."" (25).

\textsuperscript{474} For instance, brahmin women show scant sympathy for each other in the novel. They are even more vicious in their thoughts about outcaste/lower caste women. In sharp contrast, when Belli is grief-stricken at her parents’ illness, Chinni not only shares the tobacco she got from Sitadevi with her but also tries to cheer her up.
Belli, the repeated comparison with classical heroines, mythological and celestial temptresses establishes them as so many cultural symbols of feminine beauty. At a glance, this might seem like a fair balancing act. After all, the degradation executed in the first representation is more than adequately compensated for by the superlatives attending the second. In terms of simple arithmetic, perhaps so. In terms of social dynamics, however, even Meenakshi Mukherjee, who can hardly be accused of any “narrow” feminist agenda, is uneasy on the score. According to her, it is a common practice in Indian novels that “outcaste or lower-caste women are often endowed with a greater sexual vitality than their high-born counterparts.” Paraphrasing Rajat Kanta Ray’s invocation of socio-economic factors to explain this recurring difference as a sort of purvapaksha to her position, she writes,

Notions of purity and pollution are more strongly embedded as one goes higher up the social scale. The taboos of touch practised over a long period of time tend to curb spontaneity. Chastity, satitva, and penance for widows cannot be the values of a class that does not have the economic means to enforce them, and apparently this freedom adds to the uninhibited naturalness of the lower-caste women. But the formation of a stereotype is not a simple process. The easy availability of lower-caste women may also have imbued them with a greater erotic aura in the male imagination. ("Samskara," realism and Reality 172; emphasis added)

The last two lines of the passage quoted above, I believe, perform an important qualifying function. By bringing the question of “male imagination” to bear on a content seen as only a type of symptomatic description, Mukherjee directs our attention to the fact that what passes for their objective realism could equally possibly be instances of subjective projection.

She, of course, leaves it at that. She does not, for instance, go on to develop what is implicit in her insight, that “easy availability” oftentimes is a euphemism for systems of institutionalised sexual exploitation of outcaste and lower-caste women by upper-caste men,\textsuperscript{475} that male sexual desires are often mapped onto categories of socially muted female bodies and then recovered in popular and high

\textsuperscript{475} In fact, in Samskara both historical and cultural precedent is cited to approve the coupling of brahmin men and lower-caste women. Durgabhatta, the only Smarta brahmin in Durvasapura reminds the Madhva brahmins, “our ancestors after all came from the North... history says they cohabited with Dravidian women” (5-6) and the text is not short of references to Puranic legends that sanction such coupling, nay, make it seem more fulfilling even.
culture as expressions of feminine sexuality—whether to commend it or to condemn it. In *Samskara*, this process of sexualising women can actually be seen at work in the first remembered tryst between Shripati and Belli. The incident itself is recounted twice, once in dialogue between Naranappa and Praneshacharya and once as part of Shripati’s self-reflection. Both times, it is presented exclusively from the latter’s perspective. Naranappa, revealing the contrary effect that Praneshacharya’s sexually fraught “recitations of holy legends” (24) had on Shripati, describes it so:

> He couldn’t bear to hear any more, he ran straight to plunge his heat in the cold water of the river. Luckily, an outcaste woman was bathing there, in the moonlight. Luckily, too, she wasn’t wearing too much, all the limbs and parts he craved to see were right before his eyes. She certainly was the fish-scented fisherwoman type, the type your great sage fell for. He fantasied she was the Shakuntala of the Achari’s description and this pure Brahmin youth made love to her right there—with the moon for witness. (25)

Shripati, puzzling out the libidinal make-up of a man (Praneshacharya) “who speaks so beautifully about Kalidasa’s women” and yet is married to a “chronic invalid,” records his own first sexual encounter in the following terms:

> Actually [he] had taken Belli at the river when she had come to get water, only after he had heard the Acharya speak of Shakuntala’s beauty. He couldn’t stand it any more. Belli was carrying a pitcher of water on her head, the rag on her body had slipped, and as she stood in the moonlight bouncing her breasts, the colour of earth—she’d looked like Shakuntala herself. He had then personally, carnally, enjoyed the Acharya’s description. (39)

In both the recollections of Shripati’s lust-driven fantasies and actions, what is conspicuous by its absence, is any mention of Belli’s reaction; more specifically, Belli’s consent. This last is neither sought nor given any expression. It is as if her caste and body are her consent, her desire. Apart from this always-already implied consent, the utter inconsequentiality of Belli’s volition in what transpired on the riverbank, to Shripati, to Naranappa, and indeed, to Praneshacharya, only underlines her complete invisibility as an autonomous subject within the worldview of the novel. On the face of it, at least, therefore, “rape” might be a more appropriate term to describe what takes place between Shripati and Belli that first time than the ridiculously misleading “made love.” Indeed, Belli’s identity only as a sexual object for Shripati’s “carnal enjoyment” is further evidenced in a later

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476 Also seen in Durgabhatta’s covert and febrile musings about Chandri when she stands in front of the male assembly, all dewy-eyed and heavy-breasted. Or later on, in Pranesacharya’s encounter with Padmavati.
episode between them. By now they are supposedly in a secret relationship. Shripati goes to meet his paramour hoping for some sex. Belli comes to him naked from the waist up and with her hair all open, etc., but saying “Ayya, please, not today” when he “embraced her.” He “was amazed, but disregarded her words and undid her waist-cloth.... He was impatient. She was saying something, was somewhere else. He had come to her with such urgent desire, here she was prating about someone croaking. She had never talked like that at such times. She had always been like ripe ears of corn bending before the falling rain.” And so on. When “Belli, wrapping the cloth round herself,” however, persists in having her say, then Shripati exits the scene in a hurry with the parting thought that “Belli was alright for sleeping with, she was no good for talk. If she opens her mouth, she only talks ghosts and demons” (40-41). Obviously the comparison with Shakuntala sustains only so long as the subaltern doesn’t make a shift to speak, doesn’t desire to be heard, that is! At the end of the day, therefore, merely the ascription of sexual vitality and beauty to women need not automatically signal a step forward. It need not signal any real or empathetic perception of them at all.

Actually, even the contrary. A valorisation of female sexuality as the sole barometer of woman’s value especially when articulated in exclusively heterosexist terms and from limited androcentric perspectives, can simply be a repackaging of old wine in new bottles; the more respectable “woman is a womb” cliché resurfacing as the “woman is her body,” more specifically, “her sexual appeal...to man” dictum. This displaced reduction and reification, in fact, is precisely what is witnessed in Naranappa’s ethic of sexual liberation. On the one hand, his vociferous espousal of the libidinal supplies a necessary corrective to the encrusted forms of brahmin praxis; its vitrified kamini kancan hating ideals.

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477 This, in itself, need not signify any sexual desire on her part. The privilege to cover the breasts has been a caste specific one and indeed has been a site of violent historical contestations.

478 In fact such an association has been the traditional staple with the aesthetically-minded celebrating it; the ascetic-minded reviling it. Refer to Daud Ali, “From Nayika to Bhakta,” for a brief account of the association of women with shringara in traditional prescript.

479 The irony is how the ideal is belied by the actual greed and carnality of the brahmins.
By attacking the ruling varnashrama binary of chaste (because available only to one man through marriage), “good,” upper caste women and promiscuous (because available to many men through organised systems of commerce and enforced “service” as well as pleasure), “bad,” lower caste women as a lie, Naranappa definitely clears the space for an alternate perception of women to emerge in the novel—one that redeems their sexuality from the demonised margins to which it was pledged by its persistent associations with death, deceit, and shame in orthodox accounts. He also provides a positive identity-value for whole classes of hitherto sexually defined and in the process demeaned women, such as prostitutes, devadasis lower caste women/outcaste women, in general. But on the flip side, his exclusive identification of a woman with her (hetero)sexuality opens up a new\(^{480}\) channel of oppression by turning a blind eye to other aspects of her personality. By his standards, the only women worth caring for and living with are the ones that are sexually alive, attractive and serviceable to men. In other words, he swears by a ruthless put-up or shut-up, use-and-throw credo that is not only gendered but also misogynistic. Since it recognises no other tie of duty, loyalty, friendship, caring or compassion between man and woman. Taken to its logical extreme, such an ideology would entail either the killing off or abandonment of all old, unattractive, sickly, unresponsive, otherwise-inclined women. Indeed, Naranappa himself is guilty of the one\(^{481}\) and speaks enthusiastically of the other.\(^{482}\) What renders his sexual contract especially objectionable is its singularly one-sided focus.\(^{483}\) Women are understood

\(^{480}\) It’s new only in the context of Durvasapura, otherwise there is a long tradition for Naranappa’s thinking as well. His allusions to myths and literature confirms this.

\(^{481}\) He abandons his wife to take up with the more delectable Chandri. He also encourages Shripati to do the same when his wife is not exactly enthusiastic about his sexual overtures.

\(^{482}\) He advices Praneshacharya to ““Push those sickly wives of yours into the river. Be like the sages of your holy legends—get hold of a fish-scented woman who can cook you fish-soup, and go to sleep in her arms. And if you don’t experience god when you wake up, my name isn’t Naranappa”” (26).

\(^{483}\) It is true, as Gandhi says an eye for an eye motto will only lead to a universally blind world. But the burden to keep the world from becoming universally blind cannot be only one side’s responsibility when all parties stand to gain or lose in the project. How long can one side keep perpetually blinding with impunity and the other side keep getting blinded without justice?
instrumentally to suit male sexual needs but Naranappa never entertains the possibility of a reverse utilitarianism. Thus, while the novel itself makes no secret about the unattractiveness of the Durvasapura brahmin men, nowhere does Naranappa even consider the thought that perhaps the brahmin wives should dump their husbands into the river and find more satisfying mates, perhaps pair off with more virile, able-bodied, lower-caste/outcaste men. Then again, when Shripati like a spoilt brat denied its whim is peeved at his wife’s unresponsiveness to him, Naranappa, presumably a master in the *ars amoris*, never suggests that he might refine his lovemaking technique some, refine it so as to give as much as take pleasure. Instead, he encourages Shripati to persist in a wholly exploitative relationship with Belli—no doubt on the principle of the endless substitutability of women and their singular destiny as the sexual playthings of men. The way I see it, while Naranappa offers a reevaluation of the “sexual woman,” one that with the complicity of the narrative succeeds in overturning dominant traditional standards and instating her as the symbol of natural beauty, desires and vitality, he provides hardly any succour to either the conventionally sexualised woman or the conventionally desexualised woman. In other words, he offers a cosmetic change, which does little to acknowledge and alter systemic gender imbalances that deleteriously impact women’s lives and consciousness. Thus, for instance, how the liaison with Shripati is even remotely advantageous to Belli is not something Naranappa is bothered about. He is satisfied by her apparent consent. My point is that such literalism refuses to admit that social *varnashrama* conditioning has as much, if not more, to do with her consent as perhaps personal inclination.

Likewise, by simplistically vilifying the sexual frigidity of brahmin women as the root cause of social anomie in Durvasapura, Naranappa seems to represent brahmin men as somehow the injured party, missing out on life and vitality by being tied to their dysfunctional wives. Yet the novel itself reveals, albeit in passing, the very real stake that brahmin men have in controlling the sexuality of their women. Durvasapura Madhva brahmans are high-up in the caste hierarchy

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484 After all, “pinching” and generally manhandling a sexually inexperienced young girl, or any woman, for that matter, is not always the best way to arouse her ardour!
because, "sour belch" or no, Lakshmideviamma is chaste. Parijatapura has slipped down the scale of brahmin respectability because "their lines [had gotten] a little mixed. Once upon a time some lecher got one of their widows pregnant and their agrahara tried to hush it up. The rumour was that the guru at Shringeri heard of it and excommunicated the whole colony" (12). Ultimately, therefore, by conducting a superficial male-identified critique of brahmin practices and ideology, Naranappa's enterprise of sexual liberation fails to provide a genuinely emancipatory alternative to women in Samskara.

Indeed, it is not just Naranappa who is guilty of sidelining women in the novel. This is quite the normal state of affairs in Samskara where both men as well as women habitually evince a sexist attitude. Thus, referring to Naranappa's desertion of his wife, Chandri believes, "his hysterical wife didn't have the guts to stand up to his strong will; she'd gone back to her mother's place, cursed and died there" (45). Anusuya, on the other hand, is convinced that Chandri had bewitched him. "If she had not given him potions, why should he, Anusuya's own maternal uncle's son, why should he push aside his own kinswoman, call her an invalid, squander all his property, and throw all the ancestral gold and jewels on the neck of this evil witch!" (7). Both opinions while differing on whom they held to be blameworthy are entirely in sync when it comes to absolving Naranappa of any culpability. Needless to say, both are also entirely in agreement that it is a woman who is to blame and the direct beneficiary of their cerebrations is a man, the husband who abandoned his wife and took up with another woman!485 Similarly, Lakshmideviamma whose "life was a Purana by itself" (42), evokes taunts and jeers aplenty (from Half-Wit, to Sour Belch to Ill-Omen, Lakshmideviamma has heard it all), but she scarcely finds anyone willing to take up cudgels on her behalf and win her restitution for the wrongs she has suffered. Praneshacharya, on being appealed to, only counsels Garudacharya as a result of which she is

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485 This act in itself is not shocking—its commonplace nature takes away any edge it might have—what is cruel about Naranappa's act is the utter helplessness and lack of options for a woman whose husband has abandoned her, in orthodox brahmin situations.
parsimoniously pensioned off in a manner of speaking by the latter. Praneshacharya also gets her some food from the other brahmins every now and then. But neither man nor woman, neither rebel nor guru find the unjust immiserisation of this lonely widow, incidentally, the oldest person in the agrahara, important enough to make a committed attempt to put an end to it. Their apathy is especially glaring since the narrative makes it clear that Guradacharya’s father’s as well as his own sharp practices are an open secret in Durvasapura. Obviously brahmin men cheating emasculated brahmin widows of what little patrilineal laws allow them by way of subsistence is not high on the list of execrable crimes in the shastras. And this after promulgating their original destitution by deeming women unfit for independence! Ultimately, for the agrahara, as I see it, the Lakshmideviammapurana only has one moral—that no one can (and must) do much to mitigate the terrible karma and talavidhi (destiny) of a woman who is unfortunate enough to have outlived her husband. Another incident, perhaps, worth mention in this regard is Putta’s admission of wife-beating. From the way Putta talks about his wife, it is clear that he loves her. His confidences to Praneshacharya about his marital situation are interspersed with enthusiastic assertions of how “neat,” how “good [his wife is] in everything else—but for this one trouble” (108). That “trouble” being

She just loves her parents. She throws tantrums every month, or every other, insisting on a visit to her mother’s place. In these times, who can spend two rupees for the bus so often? You tell me. She just doesn’t listen. A mother of two children, she’s still childish. But then, she’s really very young. My mother-in-law is a fuss-pot, but my father-in-law he’s large-hearted, I tell you. After all, he knows the world. My mother-in-law says at times, “What right has my son-in-law to beat my daughter?” But my father-in-law hasn’t mentioned it, not once. But then my wife hasn’t learned the lesson, despite the beating. She threatens to jump into the well if I don’t send her home to her mother. What can I do? She’s so neat, so good in everything else—but for this one trouble. Whether she cooks a dish, or washes a pot, she’s neat. Just this one trouble. What do you say to this? (108)

Praneshacharya’s immediate response to this is laughter. He “laughed, not knowing what to say.” Putta, too, in turn, laughs, saying, “Understanding the way of a woman is just like tracing the track of a fish darting in water—that’s what the elders say. They know.” Praneshacharya then assents to that statement with a, “That’s true, quite true” (108), after which both of them become preoccupied with their personal thoughts in companionable silence. As may be gauged, the entire
exchange is framed in a lighter vein. In view of the rest of the narrative, its sole purpose seems to be to reinforce Putta’s characterisation as a denizen of the “natural” world—someone whose problems as well solutions in life wear the stamp of spontaneity. Such a slant taken at face value, however, elides some of the disturbing aspects and implications of this episode and its narration. For one, the fact that Putta should consider wife-beating a valid means of settling or solving a domestic issue, although realistic is nonetheless troubling in the unchallenged run it is allowed to have in the novel. Then again, it is true Putta’s decisions could be explained away as the expressions of artless impulse, of amoral passion, but Praneshacharya’s amused or politely disinterested reaction to the incident only reflects the tacit (through indifference), if not vocal and considered approval that society accords to such disciplinary actions. More ominous is the manner in which the narrated episode pooh poohs female desires (wife’s wishes to visit her parents) as well as female protest (mother’s distress at son-in-law’s ways) as signs of childishness on the one hand and ignorant nitpickiness on the other. The opinion that counts is the father-in-law’s, and he, does not say a word. Similarly Praneshacharya, whose views on the matter are solicited, does not say a word, either. To me what this displays is the silent male consensus that effectively delegitimises women’s voices counter to patriarchal precepts and unauthorised by male approval. It moreover displays the manner in which women’s pain often finds transmuted expression in social discourse as man’s vexation. For, while it is the woman’s voice that is systematically disregarded, it is the man’s perspective that gets socially regarded. As a result, most breakdowns in gender relations persistently circulate in the popular imaginary as the essential inscrutability of the mercurial female confounding the well-meaning but hapless male. Of course, given Putta’s own wanderlust as well as his propensity to help utter strangers monetarily and with company (as is

486 Towards the end, Putta reveals he is on his way to fetch his wife from her parents’ place, where she has been with the children for the past one month. Putta has not had any communication from her either. He asks Praneshacharya to go along with him and advice his wife. All this suggests domestic discord and unhappiness on his wife’s part but still Putta cannot acknowledge his role in it: the problem is with the wife (133-34).
witnessed with Praneshacharya), his begrudging the wife her wish to visit her parents on account of pecuniary considerations seems suspect reasoning in the first place. That a young woman (her youth is something that Putta himself acknowledges) whose husband is a bit of a vagabond should want to visit her parents home frequently is in itself, after all, neither as shocking nor as incomprehensible a matter as Putta makes it out to be and Praneshacharya affirms. Insofar as the text glosses over these issues by narrating the incident in a jocose, casual way, I believe, it winks at its characters’ prejudices. The point here is that this is no simple one-off occurrence. Rather, the narrative of Samskara is consistently androcentric in its orientation. As Nalini Natarajan argues, it marginalises women at several levels—ideological, spatial, sexual, economic, among others. All in all, therefore, to my mind, sexism appears to be both the default mode of narration as well as the ordinary and extraordinary modality of being in Samskara.

But hang on a moment. Does such a categorical reading at all factor in the dynamics of Chandri’s characterisation? Is not Chandri beautiful, generous, loyal, sexually active, full of life and energy! Is she not free from the fetters of casteist interdictions! Is she not able to fend for herself! Is she not reasonably happy! Is she not shown to be capable of independent action and practical thinking! Most importantly, is it not Chandri that disposes off Naranappa’s putrefying body while the witless brahmins are busy giving cause to Sir Vidia to pronounce darkly on Indian civilisation! Indeed, T. R. S. Sharma, at least, is convinced that Chandri is someone who “stands outside the social fold and in total freedom.... a free

487 To quote her, “If the realist sections of Samskara erase upper-caste women’s labour and sexuality, the existential sections could be read as erasing the prostitute’s claim to subjectivity through Art—in other words, through the erasure of women’s cultural labour” (159). I don’t agree with all of Natarajan’s claims here, but more on that later.

488 According to Naipaul, “Anantamurti [sic] has portrayed a barbaric civilization, where the books, the laws, are buttressed by magic, and where a too elaborate social organization is unquickened by intellect or creativity or ideas of moral responsibility (except to the self in its climb to salvation). These people are all helpless, disadvantaged, easily unbalanced; the civilization they have inherited has long gone sour; living instinctive lives, crippled by rules.... they make up a society without a head” (97).
agent without the shackles of the purity/pollution binary.” According to him, she “comes out as a better human than the so-called cultured brahmins” (130). Likewise, in another context, Makarand Paranjape, praising her rare commonsense, believes that “If anyone has her bearings, it is Chandri.... I think we should follow Chandri’s example” in recognising the dead for what it is, in giving it its due burial (or cremation, as the case may be) and in embracing the flux of life and living (“Na Hanyate” 214-15). Given her representation in the novel, I can well see why critics might wax so enthusiastic about Chandri’s personality. Nonetheless, I believe, they overestimate her emancipative role and potential. Their inflation, it seems to me, stems from a fundamental analytical oversight. They miss the fact that though Chandri stands outside the caste-fold, she stands outside it very much in terms set down by that selfsame caste society. Or conversely, that Chandri is free not in spite of but because she has internalised completely her traditional inscription as a casteless nityasumangali. And what textual sources exactly do I have in mind when putting forth these claims? Well, primarily Chandri’s self-representation and secondarily her thoughts and actions.

According to Chandri,

no sin will ever rub off on her. Born to a family of prostitutes, she was an exception to all rules. She was ever-auspicious, daily wedded, the one without widowhood. How can sin defile a running river? It’s good for a drink when a man’s thirsty, it’s good for a wash when a man’s filthy, and it’s good for bathing the god’s images with; it says Yes to everything, never a No. Like her. Doesn’t dry up, doesn’t tire. Tunga, river that doesn’t dry, doesn’t tire. (44)

My point is that such notions are perfectly congruent with some of the values and virtues ascribed to both the figure of the nityasumangali and the ganika/veshya in the socio-cultural systems of pre-colonial India. Saskia C. Kersenboom, explaining the phenomenon of the nityasumangali in South India, writes,

...all nityasumangalis and even the devadasi-­nityasumangali are “married” first to the goddess or to those objects that can be regarded as her synonyms: the royal staff, the talaikkol, jara­jara, trident, pot, spear, kattari and ant-hill. All these objects can be interpreted as synonyms of the goddess or as the shakti of the god. The actual “marriage” ceremony becomes, due to this symbolism, rather a “merger” with the goddess. In the case of the matanki or the dasis of Ellamma this is an obvious identification, whereas in the case of the courtesan Matavi and the devadasi­nityasumangali the process evolves in two steps: 1) only after the human shakti has been merged with the universal Shakti (i.e., the great goddess) by a proper ritual, the girl is “fit” to be dedicated (step 2) to her natural husband: the god residing in the
temple.... The rites of passage themselves, and the traditional explanation given to them, all point in the direction of interpreting the *nityasumangali* not only as a woman whose auspiciousness is like that of the great goddess, but as a woman whose auspiciousness is lasting because she is the goddess.... The status which the *devadasi-nityasumangali* did derive, originally, from this highly sophisticated symbolism was very high and dignified. (*Nityasumangali* 197)

Similarly, both Sumanta Banerjee as well as Sukumari Bhattacharji cite various ancient, classical and medieval texts, myths and tellings where courtesans/prostitutes are shown enjoying a fair measure of social esteem. Referring to her “auspicious” presence required at different cultural and religious ceremonies, Bhattacharji believes that “her very profession involved repeated sexual relations with many men and so potentially symbolized fertility and the power of reproduction... she symbolized the fertility principle. Hence her place in ritual” (“Prostitution in Ancient India” 219). Chandri’s self-image, I submit, is a hybrid of precisely such forms of thinking. At least in her own mind, she is someone who merges the archetypal figures of the *nityasumangali* and court dancer and so inherits the sacral and secular symbologies that crystallise around their sexuality. A fact that accounts not only for her unapologetic dedication to, and expertise in matters of *shringara*, but also her striking mobility, initiative as well as reasonable sense of happiness and self-worth in the novel.

Besides this, the extent to which the traditional functions as the very substance and limit of her subjectivity can be glimpsed in the tenor of her thought and action. For instance, in the early days of their cohabitation, she had tried to dissuade Naranappa from eating food cooked by her. “She had begged of him ‘Don’t eat my cooking, don’t eat meat and stuff. I’ll give it up myself; if I crave for it, I’ll go to the Shetti’s and I’ll eat my fish there, not in the agrahara.’ But he hadn’t listened, he wasn’t the kind who would. Sheer pigheadedness” (45). Hardly impervious, that, to the “pollution/purity binary,” I would say. Indeed, pace Sharma’s assertion, Chandri shows a consistent deference for brahmins and their pieties, which in the absence of any rational basis in lived reality—given the utter unworthiness of the bulk of the Durvasapura brahmins—can only be described as
customary form. Then again, the practical wisdom that Paranjape so admires in Chandri and deems exemplary is simply a variety of that pragmatism which is supposed to be the sole purushartha of public women according to traditional prescription. To cite the Kamasutra on the subject:

Vatsyayana [elaborating on the reasons for a courtesan’s relationships] says: Gain, warding off losses and love are the reasons. Gain, however, should not be thwarted by love, since gain is the chief concern. But the relative worth of fear and so forth should be tested. That is how to decide on a friend, an eligible lover, an ineligible lover, and the reasons for taking a lover. (Doniger and Kakar 135)

Chandri’s decisions in the novel, I propose, are an obvious amalgam of such considerations. For example, take Chandri’s cogitations in the aftermath of Naranappa’s death. At one point looking back on her erstwhile patron’s scandalous ways, she thinks, “Who wants complications? Once the rites get done, she could offer her salutes and go home” (45). A little later recalling his dying moments, she reveals her personal interest in seeing that he gets a proper funeral. The way she puts it, “She hadn’t quite understood what was going on deep inside him. If they don’t give him a death-rite according to the Books, he’ll surely become an evil spirit. She’d eaten his salt, she, Chandri... Everything now depended on Praneshacharya” (45-46). In these thoughts, I believe, it is the urge for “warding off losses” that is the dominant concern. Similarly, consider her act of cremating Naranappa. According to the text, Chandri after her little sexual peccadillo in the forest returns to Naranappa’s house because she is embarrassed by the episode for Praneshacharya’s sake and does not wish to mortify him any further with her presence in his house. On reaching Naranappa’s place,

Her groping hand felt the open door. “Ayyo O God, hope no fox or dog has entered the house and done things to the body....” She felt distressed, forgot her fears, went in swiftly, found by habit the box of matches in the wall-niche and lit the lantern. A

\[489\] Not only does this conventional deference explain the above mentioned food issue, but also her self-effacing conduct in the male assembly gathered to discuss Naranappa’s funeral. Afterwards, though lonely, she still she avoids brahmin company, fearful of giving offence. In a broader sense, it also explains her easy acceptance of concubinage with Naranappa as well as the respect bordering on devotion and secret desire for Praneshacharya. Such anuloma relationships, after all, have full traditional sanction and glorious precedents, as the text makes clear in its repeated invocation of different itihasa and kavya offerings. Putta trying to establish Padmavati as a class apart from the regular run of prostitutes, saying, “Don’t think that the woman’s a common prostitute. No, sir. No lowcaste man has been near her” (125), also attests the prevalence of such couplings. As Krishna Rayan commenting on this, says, “Such duplications of a situation is a way of investing it with historical and legendary reverberations and a permanent cultural significance and thus raising it to the status of a myth” (The Lamp and the Jar 161).
horrid stench. Dead rotting rats. She was grief-stricken that she’d left the body orphaned, unprotected, the body of the man who’d antagonized the whole agrahara for her sake. She went upstairs, thinking, “We should have burned some incense and filled the place with sweet smoke.” The dead body was reeking. The belly was swollen, the face of the dead man was grisly, disfigured. She let out a scream and ran out. Her spirit cried out: what’s up there, that thing, that’s not the man who loved her, no no there’s no connection. Like one possessed, she gripped the lantern and ran a mile all the way to the farmer’s section.… Only one thought burned clear: it’s rotting there, that thing, it’s stinking there, its belly swollen. That’s not her lover, Naranappa. It’s neither brahmin nor shudra. A carcass. A stinking rotting carcass.

In my reckoning, “love” is the prime mover in this act. That is to say, it is the impact of the physical body become grotesque and the shocking contrast that provides rather than the effect of any metaphysical Truth become apparent, as Paranjape would have it, which is the spur for her action. As for her one-night stand with Praneshacharya, clearly “gain” intermixed with dollops of compassion is what explains Chandri’s actions in that instance. Why do I say this? Because on the one hand, her musings about “How [Praneshacharya] glows,” “how patient he was,” “what a halo around him,” etc., are interspersed with genuine commiseration for his sexually deprived life: “Poor man, he probably knew nothing of the body’s pleasures, his wife lay there like a dry log, the good woman” (46). On the other, thinking of him, she throbs with a yearning urged by the recollection of her mother’s words that, “prostitutes should get pregnant by … holy men.” Since according to Chandri, “Such a man was the Acharya, he had such looks, virtues; he glowed. But one had to be lucky to be blessed by such people” (46). Thus, in coupling with Praneshacharya, while she definitely sought to give comfort, “there was also a hope in her that his touch might bear fruit in her body. And a gratefulness that she too might have earned merit” (67). Finally, both the freedom with which she grieves for Naranappa yet simultaneously affirming the validity of her continuing life in sleeping with Praneshacharya as well as the unfussy manner in which she leaves Durvasapura and Praneshacharya to return to Kundapura emphatically underscore her traditional socialisation as a nityasumangali/prostitute. For firstly, unlike “chaste,” family women and according with traditional thinking on the matter, she does not believe her
fortunes are tied up with one man (Naranappa). And secondly, again unlike "chaste," family women and according to traditional diktat, she does not expect any lasting emotional or social commitments from a man she has been physically intimate with (Praneshacharya). All things considered, therefore, from start to finish of her brief appearance, in quotidian matters as well as out of the ordinary circumstances, Chandri deports herself in a manner that reveals a distinct fidelity to the cast of an ideal prostitute as that figure exists in conventional rulings.

Not surprisingly, I find her role in the novel to be in keeping with such a characterisation. Chandri is above all a symbol of natural desires—the benevolent face, as mentioned before, of natural fecundity. Compared to the Durvasapura brahmmins she definitely offers a healthier alternative. But it would be a clear inflation to conclude from this that Chandri represents some kind of salvific principle. Samskara never promotes any such ascription. It is true Praneshacharya for a while believes that moksha is to be found in Chandri’s arms. However, this is only a passing phase. For its part, the narrative is consistent in showing Chandri as a “natural in pleasure, unaccustomed to self-reproach” (68), someone who at the same time that she is generous is also given to jealousy by self-admission and who perceives no fundamental contradiction in her easy reconciliation of the two tendencies. Or put differently, the narrative repeatedly underlines Chandri’s lack of a moral faculty. In the process, it puts paid to her chances for signifying any real hope for human deliverance. What she does end up offering, according to its determinations, though, is an opportunity, an opportunity for a moral agent to gain an inkling of the consciousness that would be deliverance. Ultimately, therefore, Chandri in the novel is best understood as an aspect of the Samkhyan principle prakriti. Like the latter, she represents the material conditions of possibility for the realisation of the Self. Indeed, such a reading finds some endorsement in the potential semantics of her name: “Chandri” as the feminine of chandra or moon.

490 That sort of fidelity would be against a prostitute’s professional ethic and is never traditionally prescribed, is discouraged even, as seen in the Vatsayana passage quoted above.

491 An equally unrealistic expectation given social prescripts.
In the *Prashna Upanisad*, Rishi Pippalada answering a question concerning the origin of life forms says, “Prajapati...was desirous of offspring. He performed austerity. Having performed austerity, he produced the pair, matter and life, thinking that they would produce creatures for him variously” (Radhakrishnan 652; PU 1.4). And then comes the interesting part:

\[
\text{adityo ha vai pranah, rayir eva candramah, rayir va etat sarvam yan murtam camurtam ca, tasmat murtir eva rayih}
\]

Or

The sun, indeed, is life. Matter itself is the moon. Matter, is verily, all this, whatever is formed and formless. Therefore, whatever is formed is itself matter. (Radhakrishnan 652; 1.5)\(^{492}\)

Chandri, I believe, is a character of such derivation and is set a comparable role to play in the novel.

Expressing her dissatisfaction with the text’s delineation of women characters, in general, as well as Chandri, in particular, Nalini Natarajan writes,

[i]f the realist sections of *Samskara* erase upper-caste women’s labour and sexuality, the existential sections could be read as erasing the prostitute’s claim to subjectivity through Art—in other words, through the erasure of women’s cultural labour.... Chandri is pre-modern in her notion of genealogy and family. Her self-image is matrilineal. She desires a child by Praneshacharya for reasons usually ascribed to *devadasis’* desire for children (Srinivasan 1870). But Chandri is portrayed without any sense of cultural talent (in singing and dancing) usually associated with her class. The existential text fails to provide any viable subject positions for woman. The attempt at portraying interiority in a male subject does not suggest the possibility of any interiority for woman. (159-160)

For reasons mentioned earlier, I am not convinced by Natarajan’s identification of the latter section of the text as existential, an identification that follows from reading *Samskara* through the prism of a tradition-modernity dialectic. I also do not go all the way with Natarajan when she contends that “Chandri is portrayed without any sense of cultural talent (in singing and dancing) usually associated with her class.”\(^{493}\)

What I find useful in Natarajan’s analysis is her conclusion that

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\(^{492}\) *Rayi*, as Radhakrishnan tells us, “is the material medium in which all forms are expressed” (652).

\(^{493}\) Firstly, because according to Chandri’s wistful ruminations on motherhood “if she had borne a son, he could have become a great musician; if a daughter, she could have taught her to dance,
the text “fails to provide any viable subject positions to woman.” Though with her strictly materialist focus I feel she is unable to quite locate the root of the problem. To modify Natarajan’s insight somewhat, therefore, Samskara fails “to provide any viable subject positions to woman” not because it discriminates against them culturally or sexually but because it nullifies them spiritually. Given its persistently moral-ethical concern, I believe, it is the presence or absence and quality of Consciousness ultimately that decides value in Samskara. As it happens, the brahmin women of Durvasapura are shown to be morally enervated or sick while the lower caste women are portrayed as morally innocent. In other words, both are projected as lacking that transcendent consciousness which the novel suggests is essential to the work of any real transformation. Indeed, there are only two developed points of conscious agency in the novel, one, Naranappa classical style. She had got everything, yet had nothing” (54). To me this very clearly suggests Chandri’s own accomplishments and interest in the arts. Secondly, because in the early part of the novel, Chandri is repeatedly shown to be not only the very personification of cultured beauty but also a connoisseur of it. This identification with and expertise in the aesthetic is, I believe, the narrative’s implicit way of acknowledging her artistic talents. The way I see it, therefore, Chandri’s contribution to cultural labour is recognised but subsumed within Chandri’s significance as sexual body. Needless to say, as against the nature-culture divide of western philosophical discourse, the Samkhya principle of prakriti contains sanskriti as a subset of itself.

494 Indeed, Praneshacharya himself contributes to the naturalised perception of below par spiritual quotient in women by persistently (though implicitly) identifying them with their bodies. Despite his “That art Thou” (123), role-swapping interlude with Padmavati, his habitual thinking reconfirms insidious notions about the spiritual deficiency of women. Thus, for instance, he admits to waning enthusiasm for his evening recitations when the only audience he is left with is “women bent on earning merit, uttering the names of gods over yawns in the middle of the stories, and old, old men,” when “the young listeners [read that young men really, given the context as well as the content of his recitations—descriptions of luscious heroines and temptresses of the Puranas] who used to look at him with lively eyes and bring joy to his heart, stopped coming” (26). Obviously “women bent on earning merit” is not a serious or exciting enough proposition—and this from a man who self-admittedly “hoarded his penances like a miser his money!” (79). If this pejorative aspersion can be attributed to the conventional prejudices of Praneshacharya’s earlier self, then no such arguments can be advanced to excuse his later exhibition of sexism. Well after he has seen through the meaninglessness of Madhva orthodoxies, when agonising over his friend Mahabala’s apostasy, he wonders, “‘Did woman and pleasure bring you every satisfaction? Could that aristocratic spirit of yours be satisfied by mere woman?’” (100). That such a statement is made with no irony and that a similar thought is not even entertained vis-à-vis what women find in “mere” men, indeed, are constrained to find in mere men, reveals the extent to which the identification of women with materiality, with kamini kancan, is a normatised part of Praneshacharya’s mindset. And when the only women worth their while according to the novel are shown falling all over themselves to bed Praneshacharya and desiring no more than physical intimacy or additionally a sperm or two, in Chandri’s case, then the narrative seems to collude in such prejudice.
signifying a kind of false consciousness and the other, Praneshacharya, the moral centre of the novel. Of course, both are male and also brahmin. Chandri’s role in the novel is, in my view, subject to the calibrations of such yardsticks. So while she is definitely celebrated as an ideal of natural fecundity, to the extent that her life is deemed instinctive, Chandri remains a representation of “unconscious” vitality. It’s simple logic really. As prakriti, no matter how well or benevolently she performs her role, Chandri cannot represent salvation in a narrative that privileges purusha and kaivalyam. Willy-nilly she is destined to serve as means to that end. 

Needless to say, such a characterisation is scarcely equipped to warm the cockles of a feminist heart. Though Chandri is reasonably happy and fairly well able to take care of herself, neither her good cheer nor her initiative translates into an enabling proposition for women, in general. There are two reasons mainly for such discontinuities. Firstly, Chandri is not woman-identified. Her empathetic energies are anchored in and oriented towards androcentric concerns. Consequently she is neither exercised on behalf of any woman (say Naranappa’s wife) nor does she exert herself for the benefit of any woman (say Belli, or Lilavati or Lakshmideviamma or even herself) in the novel. Secondly, the identity-ideal that Chandri so cherishes, the one that sanctions her self-esteem, mobility and measure of agency, is, likewise, male-centred. Linguistically, nityasumangali simply means an eternally or innately auspicious woman.

495 In a way, I believe, it is this disqualification that gets reflected in Chandri’s social reception (as opposed to her self-projection) in the novel. Far from being respected for her “auspiciousness,” the Durvasapura brahmin men, with few exceptions, only look at her as an exquisite lay. Similarly, the brahmin women (if Anusuya’s opinion is considered representative) just vilify her as a shameless hussy (of course, the Durvasapura reaction to Chandri also represents the puritan streak of orthodox Hinduism that so often lapses into rank corruption by becoming dogma in its praxis). Even in the instance of cremating Naranappa’s body, I think critics read far more significance into that act than the narrative apportions. The fact of the matter is that by the time Chandri gets round to lighting his funeral pyre, Naranappa’s dead body has already been drained of much of its narrative significance: the challenge he represented having already found displaced life in Praneshacharya’s psyche.
Culturally, however, this compound has acquired quite another, distinctly patriarchal, flavour. The way it circulates in social discourse, the native and/or innate aspects of a woman’s auspiciousness have been elided and, instead, this has been derivationally hitched to her matrimonial status. That is to say, an auspicious woman, a sumangali, in the popular imaginary is a married woman whose auspiciousness is completely identified with and contingent upon her marital status and, by extension, the life of her husband. A nityasumangali, by the same logic, is a woman who is married to someone immortal. It is in this sexist sense that the concept occurs in Samskara. According to Chandri, she is “ever-auspicious, daily-wedded, the one without widowhood” (44)—the adjectival phrases not discrete and accretive in their significance but mutually substitutable. Even apart from the ideological legerdemain perpetuated through the term, what is troubling is that in social practice a (nitya)sumangali can be exalted only by the concomitant degradation of the non-sumangali, more specifically, the widow; indeed, the term would be meaningless without this corollary. Chandri’s easy acceptance of her position as well as the limited agency and mobility it wins her, I believe, bespeaks a blithe ignorance of this ugly dynamics which pits woman against woman in a see-saw balance centred in male-normative needs. Ultimately, since Chandri never tries to exceed the cultural brief of her inscription and, for instance, recoup the more empowering linguistic senses of the term, a valorisation of the ideal as it occurs here does nothing for such as Lakshmideviamma, the “Ill-Omen”; moreover, it only secures for other wives a provisional, borrowed public regard. Overall, Chandri’s apparent and socially scripted dynamism thus fronts a deep-seated passivity to patriarchal systems that prevents her from offering any ideologically or practically liberating alternative to women. In other words, she is unconvincing as a symbol or champion of a revolutionary gender ethic.

\[\textit{Nitya + sumangali}:\] According to Monier-Williams one meaning of nitya is innate, native; the other is continual, perpetual, eternal (547). Sumangali means bringing good fortune, very auspicious (1230).
Tying up loose ends, then, *Samskara* inscribes a move towards realised being and away from hand-me-down institutionalised subjectivities. As mentioned before, both the problem it articulates as well as the resolution it favours is of a traditional provenance. The problem is faith reduced to empty ritualism and dogma. Durvasapura brahmins mistake the outer form of *varnashrama* regulations for the sum total of *dharma*ic existence. This is *samskara* as travesty, a dogmatic privileging of *smriti* over *shruti*—as fatal to the spiritual and social body as plague to the biological body. The solution is an invigoration of being through a reconnection with life in its immediacy, through an attention to the moment. Or a reawakening of what Paranjape would call a faith that “is reposed not in something or the other, but begins to manifest itself as the very medium of our existence, the essence of our being, the stuff of life...” (“Na Hanyate” 215). Praneshacharya’s coupling with Chandri and his later adventures are very much an attempt in this direction. This is *samskara* as auto-critique, for the term is equally resonant as practices of self-perfection. The trouble with this thematic is not in its aims so much as in its actualisation. Ultimately, *Samskara* views the world from a gender and caste specific locus. That is to say, it questions the institutional excesses and occlusions of a traditional *varnashrama* society from a brahmin, male perspective. More importantly, it discredits notions of caste-identity hinged in birth as a value for a brahmin man. As a result, the relevance of *varnashrama* interdictions remain for both the lower castes as well as women.

497 Further explaining the contours of this faith, Paranjape writes, “This kind of faith is not necessarily unwavering or unreasoning. Nor is it blind or absolute. It is not unquestioning belief, nor is it a system of beliefs or dogmas. It is closer to a confidence, a trust, a reliance, not in something, but as a sort of commitment to truth, if you will – to that which is, which is not an idea or a thought, but the very stuff of existence” (“Na Hanyate” 215).

498 I am not even going to go into the terrain of religious exclusivism, though with the mention of Muslims, if not their presence, that is definitely a valid point of inquiry into the text.

499 Thus, for instance, Praneshacharya after offering a quick run down of his many transgressions against Madhva orthodoxy—from sleeping with Chandri and lusting after Padmavati to feeling disgust for his wife, from drinking coffee in a common shop at the fair to going to see a cock-fight, from eating a holy feast sitting at a temple-line with brahmins even at a time of mourning and pollution to inviting a Malera man to come into the temple and join me—reveals the obsolescence of caste interdictions for him, when he says, “This is my truth. Not a confession of wrongs done. Not a repentance for sins committed. Just plain truth. My truth. The truth of my inner life” (131-32).
Indeed, they remain unperceived, unquestioned, unformulated, for the most part. The risk that *Samskara* runs throughout is generalising the limited perspective it focusses upon. Such an extended representation while definitely legitimising the slackening institutional stranglehold of caste prescriptions on male brahmin subjectivities, would inadvertently tighten their grip around other necks abjected from that self by either naturalising the condition/ing of caste society for them or by whitewashing their specific apprehensions and experiences of it. Unfortunately, in the absence of any genuine dialogism and to the extent that it validates Praneshacharya’s enterprise of self-realisation, this is precisely the dual maneouvre that *Samskara* seems to end up performing. Obviously this dents its credentials as well as capacity for advancing a wider gender and lower-caste critique of institutionalised caste-marked subjectivities within a traditional framework. Paradoxically, though, it retains utility as a text which shows up the danger of solipsism that attends emancipative projects (whether of a traditional or modern mintage) when these are envisioned solely from sites of a various socio-cultural privilege.

This, of course, is one alternative reading of *Samskara* where the narrative as well as the hero stand indicted for a kind of unhelpful gender-blindness, among other things. There is, however, another interpretation that is possible, one that without calling into question the overall anagogical premise posited above, nonetheless finds occasional points of disconnect between narrative and protagonist viewpoints; indeed, finds Praneshacharya to be the at the receiving end of some narrative irony. It is sourced in the enervated figure of Bhagirathi. And insofar

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500 In the case of caste identity, for instance, despite dismantling almost piece by piece the truth and value of caste ideology, ultimately the fact that lower-caste people recurrently appear in the novel only as instances of instinctive life implicitly reinforces cultural stereotypes of their moral innocence. That is to say, it repeats some way the demoralisation that has been central to their dispossession and de-gradation in hegemonic caste-system apologias based putatively on religio-moral grounds.

501 Since I believe it is within a traditional frame that both the question and its critique are posed.

502 Critics have, no doubt, discerned a lack of fit between the importance Praneshacharya accords his tortured introspections and the relevance it has in the social world he inhabits. But their
as it provides a textual anchor for feminist intervention, serves as a useful supplement if not necessary corrective to the rather bleak view of *Samksara*’s gender politics elaborated earlier.

Across the spectrum of critical opinion on the novel, Bhagirathi, if at all she merits mention, is described as a symbol of the traditional; more specifically, as the epitome of “the diseased sterility of the entire agrahara” (Mukherjee “Samskara,” *Realism and Reality* 172), as the “crippled wife [of Praneshacharya] who can satisfy him neither physically nor intellectually” (Paranjape “Clip Joint”). Turning this drift on its head, I propose that far from being the deadwood of tradition that needs to be cleared before regeneration can be possible, Bhagirathi is precisely that attenuated sap, that component, in the traditional that needs to be nourished and nurtured for life to flourish again in Durvasapura. A couple of things in particular about Anantha Murthy’s narrative point me to such a reading.

First off, her name: as I have tried to show throughout, character names are significant in *Samskara*. They are suggestive codes that texture narrative meaning. Bhagirathi is another name of the Ganges—the most sacred river of India. One legend has it that king Bhagiratha performed severe austerities to propitiate Goddess Ganga so that the heavenly river would agree to flow on earth. Since it was only in the event of the holy waters washing over the ashes of his accursed ancestors that their souls could find final liberation. *Gangavatara*na or the descent of the Ganges, of course, is an eventful episode and there are many versions as discoveries have been mostly oriented towards deriding Praneshacharya’s viability as a hero. Such a direction would be counter to all I have argued here.

503 According to Monier-Williams, Bhagirathi is the “name of the Ganges or one of the three main streams or branches of it, namely the great western branch” (751). In the words of Diana L. Eck, “The Ganga is both goddess and river. She is claimed as the consort of Siva and Visnu [as Visnupadi] alike. Her waters are said to be the liquid embodiment of sakti as well as the sustaining immortal fluid (*amrta*) of mother’s milk. And her *avatara*, her ‘descent’ to earth, brings both her power and her nurturance to incarnation on the plains of India” ("Ganga" *Devi* 137).
indeed twists and turns to that tale before it is quite done told.\textsuperscript{504} Of import to the present undertaking are two features of the river that are a staple of the composite myth. One, that Ganga is a stream of life and salvation; her waters as manna from heaven to the parched earth are life-giving, liberating.\textsuperscript{505} And two, that she is abundant, a plenteous flow and force of vitality not to be easily exhausted or stemmed. Vis-à-vis \textit{Samskara}, this sets up an obvious polarity of meanings that adds some substance to Bhagirathı’s bareboned characterisation.

Secondly, her nature: much is made out in the novel about Praneshacharya’s compassionate temperament. In contrast, Bhagirathı’s generous disposition finds almost no affirmative mention in the text, except perhaps Chandrī’s lay reference to her as “the good woman” while extolling Praneshacharya’s virtues (46). Yet even the few scenes she plays out in \textit{Samskara} are enough to suggest that she is indeed a “good woman.” Take, for instance, the subject of Praneshacharya’s remarriage that is supposed to be frequently broached by Bhagirathı and which Praneshacharya good-humouredly rejects. While Praneshacharya grows all turgid with pride at the thought of his self-sacrifice and conviction of special destiny, what is completely sidetracked in all the attention on him is the magnanimous spirit of the bedridden woman. Not only does she make the suggestion without rancour, her generosity unlike Praneshacharya’s is unmixed with the alloy of egoism and self-interest. That is to say, she acts out of a genuine empathy for Praneshacharya, an empathy strong enough to make her consider another’s happiness above her own. Apart from this, Bhagirathı can also be distinguished from the other brahmin women in the novel by the complete absence of any ill-

\textsuperscript{504} The anxiety revealed in the myth to confirm patriarchal control of Ganga’s force is interesting and undeniable but as Ruth Vanita has recently pointed out there are medieval texts in which Bhagirathı from whom Ganga derives her name is himself said to be “born of two vulvas (bhage bhage janam hetu bhagirath nam)” (Vanita, Gandhi’s Tiger and Sita’s Smile 242).

\textsuperscript{505} To quote H. Zimmer, “Physical contact with the body of the goddess Ganga has the magic effect of transforming...the nature of the devotee. As if by an alchemical process of purification and transmutation, the base metal of his earthly nature becomes sublimated, he becomes an embodiment of the divine essence of the highest eternal realm” (\textit{Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization} 111; as qtd. in G. S Amur, “The River, the Lotus Pond and the Ruined Temple” 95).
will or animus in her nature. Compared with the bitter ventilations of Lakshmideviamma, the greedy malice of Anusuya, the self-serving meanness of Sitadevi, she displays a consistently benevolent attitude towards others. So much so that it becomes even feasible to posit a sort of parallelism between her and Praneshacharya: just as the latter is the best specimen of traditional brahmin manhood in Durvasapura, Bhagirathi represents the best of traditional brahmin womanhood.

Taken together, these factors allow Bhagirathi to be meaningful at two levels, both of which qualify Praneshacharya’s narrative of self-realisation in crucial ways. On the one hand, she is significant at a symbolic plane of expression, and, on the other, within a realist frame of reference. In what follows, I try to first clarify and then harness this dual pitch to trace a feminist inflection in Samskara’s narration.

The way I see it, as a symbol, Bhagirathi represents precisely that “ontic sap” (Panikkar, “Faith” 45) around which, to preserve which, traditions materialise, but which the ossified parampara of Durvasapura, and by extension, the angry, ascetic shastraic culture it is liege to, has rendered not only invalid but invalidated.506 In the Durvasapura inhabitants, men and women alike, the fluid life-principle has dried up, hardened and split off into an antithetical dualism of spirit and matter.507 And the various pathologies of constitution—physical, biological, psychological, social, spiritual—they display can be read as a fallout of this divisive petrifaction. Praneshacharya himself is guilty of feeding such artificial distinctions when he opts to marry an invalid and live as a “celibate

506 Just as an aside, according to one myth, Durvasa, the sage after whom the agrahara is named is an incarnation of Shiva, born as Durvasa from a curse by Atri’s wife Anusuya when the three gods, Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva raped her.

507 In fact, a striking affirmation of the reading of Bhagirathi > Ganga > “ontic sap” is available in the passage which describes Praneshacharya thoughts when he is confronted by the drunken profanities of Naranappa. To quote the relevant portions, “He [Praneshacharya] knew that words were useless. He knew, unless his goodness flowed like the Ganges silently into Naranappa, he would not become open...” (22).
within a sex-less marriage, but ... carrying out his other duties as a householder.”\textsuperscript{508} For, even as his decision recognises and valorises the ritual imperatives of grihasthashrama, it “sacrifices” and devalues the material and affective synergies essential to healthy domesticity.\textsuperscript{509} Indeed, his subsequent quest for authentic being, through such a prismatic, is simply the attempt to realise that integral and integrating stream of consciousness he has dammed up and dissected in his misguided conception of salvation. Curiously enough, the symbolic interpretation advanced here works to strengthen Praneshacharya’s claim to the mantle of heroism in the novel vis-à-vis Naranappa. How does it do this? As the husband of Bhagirathi, quite literally, Praneshacharya is bhagirathinatha or the possessor/protector of the same. In contrast, Naranappa is master of Chandri, Chandri who is compared with the river Tunga. Chandri, of course, is shown to be more robust than Bhagirathi and generous enough. To all appearances this should signal affirmation for Naranappa and his position. For large parts of the novel this even seems to be the case. But as has been argued above, Chandri lacks moral discrimination. That is to say, while the Tunga is able to nourish the body, Bhagirathi is necessary to liberate the soul.\textsuperscript{510} When Naranappa chooses Chandri over his wife, he chooses kama over dharma, prakritilaya (in its limited sense) over kaivalyam (also in its limited sense). This no doubt inverts the value-system prevalent in Durvasapura, yet in its materialist

\textsuperscript{508} Paranjape in a private correspondence.

\textsuperscript{509} In this regard, Bhagirathi’s urging Praneshacharya to marry again is significant.

\textsuperscript{510} Mind you, this is not to posit an absolute otherness between Chandri and Bhagirathi. Using the river analogy Bhagirathi as Ganga subsumes Chandri as Tunga; Tunga shares in Ganga’s sacredness as a subsidiary, a tributary and not the other way round. For, as Eck says, “The Ganga as goddess is more than a single river. She functions in India as the archetype of sacred waters. Other rivers are said to be like the Ganga, others are said even to be the Ganga (such as the river Kaveri, the Ganga of the South). But the Ganga remains the paradigmatic sacred river to which they are likened.... Not only is the Ganga said to be present in other rivers, but others are also present in her ” ("Ganga" Devi 138). If anything, this hierarchy in the relationship of the Ganga and the Tunga is confirmed by the fact that the source of the three rivers, the Tunga, the Bhadra and the Netravati in the Western Ghats is called Ganga Mula. In the novel, as mentioned before, Chandri as Tunga is auspicious but unaware (like prakriti) and Naranappa’s intercourse with her remains limited to one of sensuous consumption. Even though he tells Praneshacharya, “to get hold of a fish-scented fisherwoman...and go to sleep in her arms. And if you don’t experience god when you wake up, my name isn’t Naranappa” (26), the fact is, his dying moments give the lie to his vaunts.
conceit continues to operate within the parameters of a dualist ontology. Praneshacharya, on the other hand, escapes the worst excesses of Manichean thinking because of his compassionate nature. Ultimately, it is this spring of compassion in him, coupled with a genuine hunger to know the truth of the self, that supplies the emblematic valence of Praneshacharya’s literal situation as bhagirathinatha in the novel. 511 And, his quest in Samskara, as asserted earlier, is nothing but the attempt to get his enfeebled “bhagirathi,” his encrusted consciousness, to flow strong and free again in order to fertilise a neerasa jeevan, in order to achieve realised being.

If as an abstraction, Bhagirathi connotes the fluid essence of rta run almost dry in Durvasapura, then as a human being she denotes the systematic privation of women within the varnashrama axiology. Her invalidity-from-birth, I submit, is the caste proper of a “good” brahmin woman. 512 Or more specifically, it is the shastraic illogicality on brahmin stridharma taken to its logical extreme. 513 Why do I say this? Consider the specificities of Bhagirathi’s illness. According to the novel, Bhagirathi is a congenitally sick woman who is bed-ridden and incapable of sexual intercourse. In other words, physically she does not enjoy the use of her limbs and sexually it is impossible for her to act on her desires even if she has any. 514 Practically speaking, this renders her both totally dependent on

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511 Incidentally, Ganga is known to be the second wife of Shiva which draws a parallel between the latter and Praneshacharya. Needless to say, Shiva apart from auspiciousness in the Tantric traditions is supposed to be both consciousness as well as the end of all dualisms as Shiva-shakti/Ardhanariswara, the erotic-ascetic, Anuttara, etc.

512 Chandri’s vitality, her sexuality, by definition, would make her a “bad” woman within the varnashrama schematic.

513 Stridharma, of course, in traditional prescript is precisely without logic.

514 In this regard the fact that Bhagirathi is shown menstruating is significant: it suggests that despite her bedridden status her capacity for creation, for motherhood is still operative. This is not, of course, how Praneshacharya sees it. Bhagirathi’s menstruation for him is only ritual pollution which rules out his accompanying the other brahmins to Kaimara to consult with the Pundit there. Apart from providing Praneshacharya with an honourable reason (within the purity/impurity obsessed world of Durvasapura) to not go along with the other brahmins, however, Bhagirathi’s menstruation is striking because it mirrors in its associations the legendary transference of guilt which Indra is supposed to have performed. According to different tellings, Indra wanting to free himself of the guilt of brahminicide, shifts the burden of his sin, among others, onto women in
Praneshacharya and chaste beyond possibility of lapse. Need I remind, this is precisely the means and ends that at least one hoary lawgiver deems mandatory to keep the *amantravat, nirindriya* female from realising her *svabhavik* propensities and jeopardising the central edict of *varnashramadharma*, namely, caste purity and the patriarchal proprietorship that secures. To repeat myself, therefore, as a chronic invalid, Bhagirathi embodies the physical incapacitation that is the cultural inheritance of a "good" brahmin woman courtesy the *manavadharmashastras*. Her sickness represents a symptom of the deeper malaise at the core of *varnashramadharma*, namely, the nullification of women as autonomous spiritual subjects. This nullification not only condemns women to primary materiality in a paradigm where the transcendent consciousness is all-in-all but also sanctions the instrumental use of women to serve various male purposes. In the novel, such one-sided utilitarianism finds ample reflection in Praneshacharya’s choice of Bhagirathi as his wife as well as his persistent blindness to her subsequently in any capacity other than the field of his spiritual labour, the altar of his sacrifice. For, if the former reveals how the material (especially sexual) debility of women is perceived to be ideally-suited for the spiritual advancement of the man, then the latter shows how women are structurally relegated to playing out the role of, in Spivak’s words, the “self-consolidating other” where the “self” is by definition male.

exchange for the boon for progeny. It is this ritual guilt that supposedly appears every month in the form of a woman’s menses, thus rendering her “impure” for the period (Madhu Khanna, “The Goddess-Woman Equation in Sakta Tantras” 48, 58; Doniger, *Splitting the Difference* 106). Frederick M. Smith quotes the *Taittiriyasamhita* (2.5.1) on the matter advising: “Therefore, one should not converse with [a woman] with stained garments, nor should one sit with her or eat her food when she has emitted the colour of *brahmahatiya*.” To quote Smith, “according to the official mythic context, menstrual blood is regarded as impure and dangerous because it was the result of Indra’s curse.... Women—the bearers of the discharge, the curse, the danger and the impurity—were in turn subjected to severe restrictions” (“Indra’s Curse, Varuna’s Noose” 23). The economy of Durvasapura and Praneshacharya, I believe, is guilty of repeating this transfer of sin for male crimes in the present and Bhagirathi is both witness against and bears the burden of this convenient patriarchal habit in her emasculated, “polluted” condition.

515 This is not to posit any necessary and ubiquitous link between caste and patriarchy in the abstract; it’s just to draw attention to the specific imbrication and co-ordinated development between the two in the Indian context.
But where in all of this do I locate a split between narrative and protagonist consciousness? The symbolic meaning educed above simply facilitates a positive reading of Bhagirathi. Indeed, insofar as the novel shows "bhagirathi" tenuously surviving only in Praneshacharya's consciousness, it hardly serves to prove a cleft in hero and text perceptions. Since in cremating her dead body, Praneshacharya at an emblematic level just frees his "bhagirathi" from the suffocating shackles of tradition to be born into a new life. Likewise, the denotation of gender-oppression read in the figure of Bhagirathi can at best detail a saga of victimisation. But in the absence of any expressed discontent with the status-quo on the part of the oppressed as well in view of the general tenor of the text, such an interpretation is more likely to attract charges of motivated criticism than illuminate a convincing ironical narrative subtext to Praneshacharya's quest for realised being. Bhagirathi's scream is what ensures that this does not happen

Occurring a little beyond the mid-point of the novel in an agrahara deserted but for Praneshacharya, the plague-ridden rats and the birds of carrion, the scream in question issues from Bhagirathi's fever-flushed body as if wrung out of her by the tightening grip of death. According to the text, describing her dying moments as well as its immediate aftermath, Praneshacharya is distraught that he had left his sick wife alone all this while. In fear, he lit the lamp and called to her. "Look here, look here!" No answer. The silence seemed to howl. But suddenly his wife let out a shriek that left him speechless. The long, raucous, pitiful cry touched him in the rawest flesh, and he shivered. When the howling stopped it was like darkness after a flash of lightning. He could not bear to be alone there. Before he knew what he was doing, he was running to Naranappa's house calling out to Chandri.... No one. Just as he was about to climb the stairs, he remembered there was a corpse in there; a fear returned, as in childhood when he had been afraid to enter a dark room, fearing a goblin there; he came home running. When he touched his wife's forehead, it was cold.... [At the cremation ghat he looked on] at the burning body of his wife—at the best of times no more than a small fistful, the field of his life's penance—now burning down to ash. He did not try to hold back his tears; he wept till all his weariness flowed away from him. (85-86)

Clearly, Praneshacharya's standpoint dominates the above representation. To him Bhagirathi's cry is discombobulating only temporarily. As an utterance communicating a sense of some unnamable horror it soon dissolves and is washed away in the cathartic gush of his tears, never to be recalled. Indeed, Praneshacharya even retroactively co-opts the pain-filled pathos of Bhagirathi's
scream into the biography of his self by reading her “burning body” as his “life’s penance” going up in smoke. Be that as it may, it is possible to trace the contours of another perspective embedded in the textual description of the episode, another perspective that Praneshacharya remains oblivious to at considerable loss to himself and his goal of Self-realisation.

The best way to perceive this alterity, it seems to me, is to place the incident in context. After all, why does a woman who has all along appeared to be the very personification of passivity and complaisance suddenly wail like a banshee in her final moments? This is especially odd given that at least on one occasion earlier, Bhagirathi had expressed an explicit wish to die. Then again, why does a woman who has convinced throughout as a pativrata display complete unresponsiveness to her husband’s urgings at the end? Praneshacharya, of course, chooses to explain away these anomalies in his wife’s behaviour as sourced in some private, fever-induced nightmare, which, except a sense of the surreal, shares very little with the crises variously overrunning Durvasapura and its inhabitants. This line of reasoning, however, is unsatisfactory on at least two counts. Firstly, in reducing Bhagirathi’s scream to an individual psychosomatic disorder, it goes against the general practice in the narrative, where out of the ordinary occurrences invariably function as multi-accented, morally loaded events. Secondly, it goes against the textual as well as prevailing cultural tendency to look upon final utterances in the face of Death as a record of a subject’s truth unmediated by any artifice. Another reason is that it fails to account quite for the panic-stricken reaction the scream produces in Praneshacharya initially, before he regains some measure of control over the situation and himself, that is. Keeping all these considerations in mind, and without rejecting out of hand the role played by delirium, therefore, I contend that it is more than plausible to also read Bhagirathi’s scream as an anguished cry of betrayal, if not a howl of rage, against the specific set-up of brahmin varnashramadharma of which Praneshacharya, unwittingly or otherwise, is very much a part and of which Bhagirathi, as she comes to realise, is ultimately the gull. A scrutiny of the lead-up to her scream clearly backs such a supposition.
The scene where Bhagirathi appears plague-afflicted and ready to give up the ghost follows another episode where Praneshacharya is shown tending her. True, words and phrases such as “usual” and “as he did every day,” affirm his ministrations here are of a piece with his daily routine. Yet, there is a crucial difference witnessed in the quality of attention he pays her. Whereas earlier Praneshacharya had nursed his wife “delighting in [the] knowledge” that “[h]ere was the Lord’s ordeal for him, waiting, to test him whether he had the strength to live and act by non-attachment” (75), now when “he poured the bath water over her,” her naked form “disgusted him” (76). Whereas earlier he had tended her with calm assurance and kindness, now when “he gave his wife her usual medicine … his hands trembled and spilled the medicine…. He shivered in an attack of nausea. He imagined all the stinks assailing his nostrils, all issuing from that source” (75). What accounts for this difference in his attitude is that in the interim Praneshacharya has had his unplanned tryst with Chandri in the forest. As a result,

[...]or the first time his eyes were beginning to see the beautiful and the ugly. He had not so far desired any of the beauty he’d read about in the classics. All earthly fragrance was like the flowers that go only to adorn the god’s hair. All female beauty was beauty of Goddess Lakshmi, queen and servant of Lord Vishnu. All sexual enjoyment was Krishna’s when he stole the bathing cowgirls’ garments and left them naked in the water. Now he wanted for himself a share of all that. (76-77)

Characteristically, when reviewing a “quarter century of doctor-patient relations, of affection and compassion” from this new vantage point, “he...see[s] an abyss” (75), but only from his perspective: “his broken wife’s pitted eyes” remain “helpless visionless symbols of his self-sacrifice and duty as a householder” (75). Yet, it seems highly unlikely that Bhagirathi would not pick up on his changed demeanour. Indeed, it is my contention that she does pick up on it. And her scream, as also the attendant distemper, is a direct expression of this altered perception. What follows is a broad-brushed genealogy of Bhagirathi’s scream. Needless to say, it is speculative. But insofar as the speculation is grounded in the narrative and remains within the bounds of reasonable possibility, I am persuaded in offering it as an implicit unsaid of the text.
The way I see it, Bhagirathi, prior to her final appearance in the novel is not just a passive presence but also a placid presence. Though an invalid, as mentioned before, she is neither bitter nor vindictive. Moreover, she wishes well for others and wants no diminution in their happiness just because her own share of the same seems so meagre. No doubt, this is because of her good nature. In equal measure, however, it is also because of the strength, security, solace and satisfaction she derives from the knowledge that she is cherished by her husband, himself a good man and a pillar of traditional society. That is to say, Bhagirathi accepts the loss of agency, which is ideally the lot and mark of good women within varnasrama society, because close contact with the empowered best of that tradition, i.e., Praneshacharya, beguiles her into thinking that her emasculated or rather “immasculated” condition, and by extension, she, are systemically valued and cared for. When Praneshacharya turns coat and views his wife with disgust, then Bhagirathi, is left with no comforting illusions to allay the cruelty of her systematic deprivation and somehow make it all seem worthwhile. Her scream originates in the maw of this shattering realisation. It is, in a manner of speaking, the gathering of all her dissipated energies to utter a final gasp of anger and hurt against the powers-that-be of traditional sociality who first demand her debilitation and then, when the system they swear by becomes unpalatable to them for various reasons, view her incapacity as the very source and symbol of all its ills. Likewise, the indifference she displays towards Praneshacharya at the end suggests her refusal to participate in the sham conventions of their marriage anymore. As for the sudden symptoms of plague-infection that she displays at the last, this is simply the externalisation of a disease that has so far been latent in her. With the bluff of traditional grihastha relations being called, it is the plague of patriarchal varnashramadharma covertly feeding away at her insides that ultimately stands exposed in all its deadliness as it readies to claim its victim of long.

Praneshacharya, I believe, intuitively senses some of this truth. That is why he describes Bhagirathi’s scream as a “flash of lightning.” But he is unable to grasp
its full meaning, unable to face up to its full implications. As a result, he is only
unnerved by it, and slips right back into darkness, the darkness of ignorance,
deception, half-truths and hopelessness he so wants to be free of. Indeed, all of
Praneshacharya’s actions thereafter—from the frantic search for Chandri to his
irrational fear of Naranappa’s dead body and the goblins in the dark, from the
solipsistic spin he gives to Bhagirathi’s death to the journey of self-realisation he
sets out on—at the same time that they are attempts at keeping this darkness at
bay also have at their centre the *avidya* that he inadvertently clings to when he
misrecognises Bhagirathi’s scream. Needless to say, till such time as
Praneshacharya continues unaware in his self-deceiving blindness, all his moves
towards realised being, no matter how seemingly advanced, will remain short-
circuited from within, they will remain self-defeating.

The question that needs some answering here is what the narrative achieves by
showing up its hero in such a manner. First things first, *Samskara*, as mentioned
before, does not discredit its protagonist’s overall aim; it only qualifies his
chances of success in achieving the same. Praneshacharya wants to go beyond the
pull of dualities. He is a seeker after the truth of the self and wants to accomplish
an aware existence that is at one with itself and all around it. What the narrative
qualification of Praneshacharya’s consciousness shows is how, while good
intentions are necessary, they are not quite enough for attaining his purpose.
Praneshacharya is irreproachable in his sincerity. Yet he falls short in his praxis.
His failure lies in

a) the continuing sway that institutionalised modes of “Self” identification, of
“Self” perception have over his subjectivity—this accounts for his inability to
recognise, for instance, autonomous subjectivity in categories of women and
shudras/outcastes traditionally “othered” by *varnashrama* struc/tures, and

b) the lingering anxiety he exhibits for the security, the integrity of his individual
sense of self, his ego-self, if you like—this explains why he thinks that

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516 “If I shed it [brahminhood], I’ll fall into the tigerish world of cock-fights, I’ll burn like a worm”
(131) is his fear.
“experience is risk, assault.” It also explains his fear of engaging, really engaging with anything, be it a moment in time, Padmavati, Putta, Bhagirathi or Naranappa.517

Obviously, to be successful in his goal, then, Praneshacharya needs to free himself from his tradition’s ruling notions of the Self, notions that have become so deep-seated over time as to appear natural. He needs to recognise and steer clear of the narcissism that repeatedly reduces the polymorph infinitude and variety of cosmic being to the form and hierarchy of Purusha, the Primeval Man (O’Flaherty, The Rig Veda 29-31; “Purusha Sukta” 10.90.1-16), howsoever humungous this latter may be. Such liberation would automatically dissolve the lurking attachment to his brahmin, male, ego-self as the real, or more correctly, the best integer of being. Since it would entail his perceiving his self in, and as part of the fluid connections of cosmic being, rather than something special in and of himself. Naturally, a Praneshacharya so-aware would not see “experience [as] risk, assault.” He would not refrain from the giving and taking, the defining and being defined, the coming-together and drawing apart, the inter-subjectivity, the contact, in other words, that is key to any experience. Rather, he would embrace it as an opportunity for greater self-realisation, self-expression, self-manifestation.518 Ultimately, this is the comment/ary that I see Samskara offering on itself by the fork in narrative and protagonist consciousness it introduces in the figure of Bhagirathi. It is significant because the dual perspective renders Samskara a text that suggests a) how individual “success” and social empathy are inextricable, b) how empathy is possible among institutionally valorised selves only when they recognise in their goodness, their desire, their integrity, their power not just the evidence of their innate gunas, as these may be, but the work, the sacrifice, the disintegration, the emasculation, the essence of institutionally

517 His coupling with Chandri is an exception but there he is more overwhelmed by the moment than acquiescing to the experience.

518 In this regard, it is true that towards the end with Padmavati, Praneshacharya comes closest to perceiving the truth of tat tvamasi.
othered selves,\textsuperscript{519} and c) how social well-being can only come about in any real sense when institutionally buttressed selves (in addition to apprehending the Self in the other) begin to, as Spivak would say, "unlearn their privilege as their loss" in order to accept the other in the Self.\textsuperscript{520} Needless to say, there are valuable lessons to be gleaned here for any project of social justice, whether of a traditional or modern inspiration. Not the least of these is the insight into the time-bound relevance of institutions as instruments of practical society which when they become always-already validated ends-in-themselves operate as sites of systematic occlusion and oppression. In other words, \textit{Samskara} subjects the rites of discrimination to the "rights" of discrimination. It subordinates institutional practice to ethical fitness, failing which, it shows, oppression results. From a feminist perspective, it gives me almost wicked pleasure, in conclusion, to point to the thumbs-up traceable in the novel's dual-pitch for that at one time staple yet now looked down upon aspect of their politics, viz., "consciousness raising," as an individual and collective enterprise for personal and social evolution, or is that revolution?! 

\textsuperscript{519} True, insofar as this counter-narrative crystallises around Bhagirathi, the novel seems to be more sensitive to systems of gender-discrimination than conditions of caste oppression. But really by the logic of its own argument, then, it cannot withhold support to mobilisations along different axes of institutional disenfranchisement. And this is not just applicable \textit{vis-à-vis} the human world.

\textsuperscript{520} The flip side of this, of course, is that institutionally othered selves begin to re-cognise themselves in addition to their others as legitimate franchisees of the expressions and epiphanies of cosmic being instead of seeing, as institutionally required, only their other as the Self, but that is an issue not explicitly dealt with by \textit{Samskara}. 

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Chapter 6: Self, Other and Desire

Getting down to brass tacks, this could be called. For, pared to their fundaments, theorisations of desire have all too frequently revealed the self–other equation that preoccupies them in one form or another—whether as the alpha and omega, the source and end, the who and what of desire; whether as an opportunity, promise, threat, trap or illusion for and of desire, and articulated in a political, socio-cultural, psychological, sexual, ethical, economic, mechanistic, religious or philosophical idiom. What I attempt here is a re-engagement of this conceptual troika as it circulates in the novel-imaginary with a view to understanding at least some of the implications for gender roles, identities and relations. As is intended, this will also substantiate a necessary complement to the focus espoused in the previous chapter. There, change had been interrogated and formulated from the perspective of the institutionally dominant, broadly speaking. Here, on the other hand, change is encountered and conceived from the standpoint of the socially muted in the sexual balance. The novel that constitutes my field of labour is Vaasanthi’s Birthright.

Birthright was originally published in 1996 by the name of Kadaisee Varai (meaning “till the end”). Vasantha Surya then translated this Tamil novel into English in 2004 with the name Birthright. Apart from a consideration of the semantic possibilities opened up by the two very obviously different titles, my work will not concern itself with the practice or politics of translation that attends the novel’s linguistic reproduction. For my analysis, as mentioned before, it is Birthright that serves as the object of scrutiny. I am drawn towards this novel for the way in which its simple—simple almost to the point of being simplistic—narrative, nonetheless offers an alternative entry-point into a range of issues that address, imbue, frame and clarify the self–other dynamic constitutively marking sexed subjectivities, sexed desires. The common critical practice in this regard has been to treat the entire question through the heuristic of the heterosexual couple, say in the manner of a Sudhir Kakar in his Intimate Relations. Vaasanthi’s novel confounds this analytical fixation by focussing upon other cross-generational
relations in addition to the lateral and erotic interactive. More specifically, it focusses upon the impact of the father–daughter tie in the workings out of social identities, affiliations, roles and agencies, and vice versa. To a thesis entitled “De/Siring Women,” of course, I need hardly point out in what felicitous light such narrative concerns appear as an object of perusal.

**Birthright: Conceiving a New Swaraj**

Tilak’s “swaraj is my birth right and I shall have it,” giving pithy expression to the gathering fervour for “Home Rule,” of course, is the assertion that immediately comes to mind, given the title-frame. But it is to Gandhi’s later use of the term I would like to call attention here. When Gandhi picked up on the concept and used it in his *Hind Swaraj* and other writings, he significantly altered the thrust of its meaning by twining the “national” question of home rule with the personal question of self-rule. In other words, he transformed what was most popularly then a modern political catchphrase into a moral valence centred on the individual and drawing upon a traditional civilisational ethos and axiology. More recently, Makarand Paranjape in an audacious little dialogue that is part homage, part addendum to Gandhian thinking tried to rearticulate the salience of the idea of “svaraj” for an unevenly modern India negotiating a rapidly globalising world scenario at the threshold of the twenty-first century (ref. to *Decolonization and Development*). Vaasanthi’s novel, I submit, is a move in this direction, albeit executed in a creative rather than critical idiom. On the one

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521 As Fred Dallmayr says, “Several political leaders, including Dadabhai Naoroji and Bal Gangadhar Tilak, had specifically employed the term *swaraj* to designate the goal of their political aspirations. However, as used by these leaders, the term had a narrowly ideological or strategic cast, suggesting basically nothing more than the expulsion of the British from India. It was the momentous merit of Gandhi’s booklet to raise the issue of *swaraj* from purely strategic concerns to the level of political ethics and a vision of the ‘good life’: the vision of democratic self-government transcending self-centredness or selfish interests” (“What is Swaraj?” 105). For a useful account of how Gandhian *swaraj* was ranged against “the competing claims of Hindu revivalists, cultural nationalists, and violent revolutionaries in defining and directing the future course of the Indian nation” (Kapur 125), refer to Sudarshan Kapur’s “Gandhi and Hindutva.” For an idea of the traditional, philosophical usage and significance of the concept, Shashiprabha Kumar’s “Svara[j]ya: The Vedic Vision” is a helpful resource.

522 Personally, it is fitting to mention Paranjape here, as I began to consider *swaraj* as an idea, in any wise at all, because of him.

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hand, I see it constituting a question mark against the adequacy of the moral and political conceptualisations of swaraj that have thus far been on offer in mainstream thought. On the other, delineating an effort at productively redeploying the term to further contemporary agendas of social justice. And especially distinguishing its intervention on either count is the centrality accorded to the category of gender. Or, put differently, Vaasanthi’s novel can be read as trying to envision swaraj from the point of view of subjects rendered off-centre by definition in androcentric discourses, namely women. Its overriding concern, at an ethical as well as epistemological level, may be identified as the urge to track the contours of a gender-just swarajya that recognises the “birthrights” of men and women, at “home” and in the “world.” What’s more, as both an individual praxis, and collective state, this swarajya, I believe, it holds to be a necessary condition for generating any humane personal and/or social politics worth the name in the present as well as in the foreseeable future. I will advert to these claims again later. For now, though, I look to study the text itself in greater detail.

The story of Birthright revolves around Manohari (Marro, for short), a young, unmarried, well-to-do gynaecologist, who performs sex selective foeticide and abortion in her maternity clinic located somewhere in the hinterland of Tamil Nadu but close to the city of Salem. The reasons for her actions provide the grist for the novel’s narrative mill. Unpacking these is an occasion in the text not just for showing up the rank inequity of traditional notions of gender complementarity, at least as these manifest in common practice and prejudice, but also for opening a window on another dispensation, another socio-sexual contract, a new co-operative made possible by a transformed understanding of, and relation with, the self and the other. My immediate aim is to read this two-pronged script for the different interlocking desires that it encodes; desires which, in a way,

523 For instance, Paranjape’s re-visioning, mentioned above, despite its convoluted expression of solidarity with women’s causes (202-213), persists in treating them for the most part as a special interest thing—as if the implications of institutionalised gender discrimination can be set aside while discussing general issues of decolonisation and development, only to be remembered when considering “the woman question.”
constitute its substance, shape and grammar. To this end and true to form, I proceed by way of a functional schematic.

As it seems to me, the plot of Birthright can be described as a blend of two broad categories of desire, viz., socialised desire and unsocialised desire. What exactly I mean by these terms will become clearer in the actual course of my inventory. At present, I only wish to offer a couple of preliminary qualifications. Firstly, though the classification itself might have some durability across social formations as an analytical convenience, the same cannot be said for the specific desires that it ends up differentiating at any given time. Simply put, the particular composition of the groupings depends on the socio-historical conjuncture to which the taxonomy is applied. And secondly, even within a chosen “moment” in time and space, what I call “socialised” and “unsocialised” desires do not exist as some kind of stable, unchanging, self-evident and absolutely discrete categories. Rather, the terms only serve to provisionally discriminate an untidy farrago of desires marked by varying degrees of social recognition, neglect or disarticulation and often liable to change their positions on the scale of public sanction according to the discursive grid within which they happen to be broached.

Keeping this in mind, if one was to stake out the conjuncture that Birthright represents, then most obviously there is the suburban socio-cultural milieu of Tamil Nadu during the early years of the 1990s in which the novel is set. But this is only its literal location. While not quite an allegory of the nation, Birthright also has a national dimension. Its anonymous backcountry situation showing all the signs of haphazard “development” evocatively shadows traditional India’s truck with modernity, in a manner of speaking. I stress this point here for two interlinked reasons. One, it has some bearing on our grasp of the cultural matrix of the novel. For, over and above an identifiable repertoire of Tamil beliefs, practices and traits, the plot of Manohari’s predicaments, draws upon and reflects
a wider "national" heritage and habitus, as also, a pathology. And two, it clarifies how the resolution which the novel attempts can be meaningful within a dual frame of reference. For, not only is the ideal that Birthright envisions, and therefore the intervention that Birthright attempts, viable at a personal, interpersonal, micro-level, it is equally pertinent at the macro-level as a sort of directive principle of state policy, if you like. In what follows, I offer a summary account of the desires that animate the narrative of Birthright according to the schema proposed earlier. As mentioned before, I do this with a view to assessing their part in the self–other exchange that informs gender relations in the novel. One last caution before I proceed. My classification does not in, and of, itself constitute a secret index of value. Evaluation, I reserve for later.

Socialised Desires

By these I mean a variety of overtly or covertly, ideologically or practically "taught" and "learnt" desires. Socialisation is commonly understood to be an effect of nurture rather than nature. More often than not, its discursive deployment ends up inflating the nature–nurture, nature–culture distinction implied, into a full-blown antithetical divide. Nothing could be further from my intention here. The way I see it, both the "natural" and the "social" are mutually implicated and multiply interdependent time-, region- and culture-specific conceptions. That is to say, what is deemed "natural" is as much a production of the "social" as is the "social" and what is deemed "social" is not necessarily any the less "natural" for being "social." Moreover, the relation between the "social" and the "natural" finds enunciation in various combinations and permutations ranging from the antagonistic and symbiotic to the overlapping and disjointed, from the superordinal and embedded to the crustal and subterranean, among others. My aim at present is only to take a quick stock of the different kinds of desire that evince social articulation of one type or another in Birthright. I believe that such

524 The periodic intrusions of the Delhi-based friend, the repeated mention of nationally broadcast teleserials such as the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, the references to in/famous yet recognisably Indian epic tales and cultural practices such as the Draupadiavastuhran and sati, in fact, all perform a metonymic encoding that writes Birthright into a larger pan-India history and experience, without nullifying in any wise its Tamilian specificity.
articulation, by giving desires a vocabulary, substance, shape and form to express themselves in, and inhabit, makes them especially amenable to the educational enterprise, to be "taught" or "learnt," that is.

A "first read" of Vaasanthi’s novel is enough to know that it is veritably teeming with instances of socialised desires as I have used that term here. Simply enumerating them, however, seems of little purpose. Apart from being extremely laborious, such a task would do little to provide any analytical handle on the text. What I propose to do, therefore, is organise the various desires under four broad heads, each delineating a predominant trend or tendency in the novel. Ultimately, I feel this is just more helpful in yielding an intelligible roadmap of the different tracks of power and longing that crisscross Birthright’s narrative terrain.

a). desire for sons: The yearning for male-progeny is the single, most potent, phenomenon against which the narrative of Birthright takes shape. Apart from being etiologically important and willy-nilly informing the overall direction of the novel, when occurring as a pervasive, extreme orientation, this desire is also crucial for the sociology it bespeaks and the semiotics that “speaks” it. In Birthright, since the desire is not simply a matter of personal predilection but a subject of pandemic obsession, my analysis will pay attention to all the four facets mentioned above. For greater clarity, I address them one at a time.

1). causal function—to repeat myself, Birthright inscribes the story of Manohari, the heroine of the novel, and a gynaecologist who actively participates in the culling of female foetuses at her private clinic. And a substantial part of the novel unfolds as an engagement with her reasons for doing so. According to Manohari, she helps in this cruel practice because she lives in a culture that is fixated upon sons—a culture, where even if women get to live, they are not exactly valued and can only expect a life of untold misery and humiliation. To obviate the coming to pass of what she considers is a certainty, and casting herself in the role of an Angel of Mercy (10), therefore, Manohari performs both sex-selective abortions
as well as female foeticide at her medical facility. Of course, such an answer only partially explains the situation. For, it is not at all clear why an educated young woman, a professional who by her own admission “can earn not just [her] own living, but enough to sustain a family for the next two generations” (29), and one who is an only child hailing from an affluent family to boot, should espouse so bleak a view of women’s place in society. That lacuna can be supplied only by closer attention to the grounds on which Manohari forms her opinions, attention which reveals both the extent and intensity of the aforesaid desire.

Briefly speaking, Manohari’s reasons are both emotional and empirical. On the one hand, as an only daughter she is acutely aware of the pity her parents attract for being sonless and of her own inadequacy to ever measure up on that count. This is especially branded into her memory when at nineteen years of age she discovers a father whom she had looked up to as an ally against social prejudice contemplating a second marriage in order to beget a son. On the other, Manohari’s professional situation as an obstetrician puts her repeatedly in the way of married women desperate to bear a son, desperate to miscarry the life in their womb if it happens to be of their own kind, desperate to try for the former and ready to kill when the latter, try and kill, again and again, even if it destroys them mentally, physically, spiritually, psychologically and materially in the process. What’s more, quite apart from this, the motley set of women patients, relatives, retainers, dependents and acquaintances that people the novel provide a virtual tableau vivant of victimage, fleshing out various gestures of female helplessness, fear, exploitation, wretchedness and compromise. Thus, personal experience finds objective confirmation in public mores to strengthen Manohari’s perception that the desire for male progeny is rife in her part of the world and that women figure low, very low, on the scale of social value. Eventually, it is so convinced, hurt, angered and humiliated, that she colludes in what is both at one and the same time an act of kindness to the life she blots out in the womb, and an act of vengeance against a society inadvertently bent upon its own destruction.
2). telos—it would be illogical in the extreme to argue that the culminating insights of Birthright, its narrative ends, are a direct outcome of a desire for sons. Having said that, it is equally true that the desire in question has some bearing on the trajectory charted by the novel. Specifically, my point is that if the desire for sons does not exist in a virulent, pronounced and prolific form, then more likely as not the anger against it will also be commensurately muted and/or incoherent. Why? Because, one, the more diffuse the desire, the less the facility to isolate and identify it. And two, the disease generated by such attenuated desire as well as the spur to eradicate it is milder since there appears no substantial cause for concern or cure. Alternatively, it can be said that extreme and pervasive expressions of a desire for sons creates the conditions of possibility within which an agency for change could materialise, though this is neither mandatory nor need it follow any single, predictable course of development. In the text, Manohari’s dissatisfaction with patriarchal ways frequently operates at the crescendo-pitch of desperation owing to the acute bias she encounters around her against the girl-child vis-à-vis a son. And as it happens, almost all her actions, from the mistakes and successes to the suspicion-ridden and friction-fraught love-hate relationship with her father, among others, can be traced back, in one way or another, to that heightened affect. Ultimately, it is inasmuch as this is the case that I believe the desire for sons influences the course of the novel without in any wise determining it.

3). sociology—as mentioned before, the desire for sons when occurring as a widespread phenomenon embeds vital clues about the living practices of people. The question to ask, of course, is what type of social arrangements make “sons” central to the task of maintaining human relations? In Birthright, the answers are to be had most emphatically around the protocols administering inheritance, death and matrimony. Briefly, Vaasanthi’s novel reveals a social set-up in which a) ritually only men cremate the dead, b) marriage mostly follows the convention of virilocality, and c) daughters are heirs under erasure. In what ensues, I offer a

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525 A bit like arguing that national independence is a direct outcome of colonialism, actually.
condensed note of how these factors, in isolation and in tandem, work to set a premium on sons.

The first feature mentioned above might well seem quaint as a contributing factor, if not downright opaque, till such time as closer attention is paid to the social milieu that *Birthright* represents. Without going into too many details, the novel fleshes out a largely faithful and “Hindu” world where a belief in afterlife and reincarnation, gods, spirits and ghouls as also a reverence for and propitiation of the manes enjoys wide currency despite the non-coincidence often marking individual expressions of the same. Needless to say, such convictions are very conducive to death and the proper conduct of funeral proceedings acquiring prime importance. Since the smooth transition of every *jiva*, from one life to the next, so rides on it. Traditional caste Hindu *antimsanskāras*, however, are rather elaborate affairs, involving much expense, ritual pollution and sundry difficult taboos and observances spread out over extended periods of time. Consequently, it is safe to assume that people will not want to take on the onerous responsibility of cremating someone if they can help it. 526 This, in turn, also makes it extremely risky, not to mention foolhardy, for any individual to wholly entrust the future well being of their soul to the far from certain flows of the milk of human kindness. My point is that when combined with the customary bar against women performing the deed, 527 there obtains a situation that is tailor-made to promote sons as the ideal insurance against possible metaphysical distress in the future. For given the claims of affection, filiation as well as obligation, sons would

526 In the novel, Appa “had lit the funeral pyre for his luckless friend, who did not have a male heir, and whose male relations shrank from the ritual implications of lighting a sonless person’s pyre. There was pollution involved, there were taboos” (39).

527 According to the novel, this is because “The daughter is married and has gone to another house. She does not have the right to light the funeral pyre...” (39). Veena Das, albeit in the context of north Indian funeral rituals, says there was a gendered division of labour at work in the traditional treatment of the dead body and death. “While the corpse is in the house, all preparations, including the bathing and dressing of the dead body, are performed by women. Women cling to the corpse imploring the dead person not to leave them. It is the men who have to disengage the dead body from the weeping and wailing women, to carry it on their shoulders to the cremation ghats, and to give the sacred fire to the dead person... Thus, if women perform the task of bearing witness to the grief and the loss that death has inflicted... it is men who must ritually create all the conditions so that the dead can find a home” (“Language and Body” 81).
simply be much harder-pressed than others to justify any dereliction of duty in the matter. End result—a production and intensification of the desire for sons anchored in concerns of personal salvation.

If cremation rites provide a *dharmic adhaar* for desiring sons in the novel, then both marriage and inheritance norms offer more *aarthic* motivations for the same. To address these issues in sequence, Tamil marriages are traditionally supposed to be isogamous with practices of mutual gift-giving between the families of the bride and the groom. In the modern era, however, with the monetisation of the economy and the withdrawal of women from productive labour, this has slowly given way to hypergamy as in the North Indian context. While isogamy theoretically suggests a more secure footing for the wife in the matrimonial alliance, in practice this is often undercut by the prejudices of an overarching patriarchy and virilocality. In the circumstances, all in all, marriage practices can be said to promote the inclination for sons on two counts. Firstly, the groom’s family is often “compensated” by the bride’s family for the favour done in accepting an extra mouth to feed in the person of the bride “who will not be an economic asset” (Harriss-White, “Gender-cleansing” 142), and taking on pollution.528 This compensation usually takes the form of a transfer of wealth called dowry—a particularly misogynistic latter-day mutation of the erstwhile *stridhan*—which even though a criminal offence under the law in contemporary India, continues to flourish because of the lingering hegemony of caste endogamy and outmoded considerations of social prestige. Of course, the practice, as it thrives, has long given up any pretensions to being a voluntary act of gift-giving. Instead, it now exists as a coercive but popularly approved form of mercenary extraction, allowing a groom’s family to parasitically feed off the bride’s family, even to the rack and ruin of the latter. Vis-à-vis how it affects attitudes towards sons and daughters, the birth of a girl child, in such a scenario, more often than not presages economic hardship for her family in times to come, while the birth of

528 For an interesting account of the ritual politics of gift-giving, admittedly, again in a north Indian context, read Gloria Goodwin Raheja and Ann Grodzins Gold, *Listen to the Heron’s Words.*
a son promises windfall collections in the marriage market. In consequence, the former event is generally envisaged with trepidation and greeted with gloom even as the latter is anticipated with eagerness and celebrated with joy.\textsuperscript{529} Secondly, the tilt towards sons engineered by the economics of matrimony stands reinforced in the residential pattern of conjugal couples. Mostly, the convention as it can be gathered from the novel, is for the girl/woman to move body and soul, bag and baggage, upon her marriage, to her affinal home. In practical and material terms, this effects a slackening or fraying of the reciprocal bonds and \textit{ipso facto} claims between parents and daughters. For with marriage, social \textit{diktat} holds that it’s the husband’s family and not her natal kin that has the primary title to a woman’s time, labour, loyalty and sacrifice. In contrast, no comparable rupture, displacement or weakening of the ties structurally threatens the relationship between parents and sons. If only for reasons of self-preservation, therefore, people are socialised into desiring the latter as the economic and emotional anchor, the physical crutch and security of their old age.\textsuperscript{530}

Finally, meshing with the above practices and further strengthening the drift towards son-preference is the dominant propensity depicted in the novel to

\textsuperscript{529} A related point perhaps is the perception of the greater trouble and expense in bringing up a daughter vis-à-vis a son in a sexist culture, quite apart from the dowry question.

\textsuperscript{530} The account above applies to more contemporary times when traditional marriage and kinship patterns have altered with the shift to a capitalist mode of production, a monetised economy. For a brief introduction to traditional inheritance rights of women as also the claims they had on natal family even after marriage, read Kanakalatha Mukund’s “Turmeric Land.” According to her, in addition to inheritance rights such as reflected in the concept of \textit{mancal kani} or “turmeric land,” women also had some customary rights in Tamil society. Among all castes and classes in Tamilnadu the bride receives a gift from her mother’s family, usually from the maternal uncle, known as \textit{amman cir}, which includes the bride’s \textit{sari}, a gold ring and silver toe rings. Married daughters similarly continue to receive \textit{ponkal cir} from their brothers each year, besides having several other claims to ritual gifts from the natal home. These may be small in value, but are important in that they establish a continued claim on the family property. (136-37)

The novel, on the one hand, shows how these traditional allowances enjoyed by women have undergone an erosion with modernisation: Akila, for instance, is denied any rights to her natal home by her brother and his wife. On the other, it shows how women perceive these customary practices, insofar as they exist, as protective. Thus, for instance, Rasamma sees widowhood with conditional kinship support as a safer bet than a second shot at love without the said family backing. Similarly Shanbagam, another widow would rather go in for a secret abortion than risk any breach in family ties by making her sexual life as a widow public.

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recognise descent only through the male line. When articulated within a patriarchal paradigm, such “patrilineage” usually extends to matters of property-distribution and ownership as well. Consequently, what is witnessed in *Birthright* is the rationale for wanting sons coalescing around two broad concerns. On the one hand, there is the individual and familial ambition for survival through self-perpetuation and on the other, there is the issue of conserving and maximising the material health of the family through the generations. In the first case, since daughters are considered only secondary members in the families of their birth, sons become imperative to the task of securing lineage. In the second instance, once again since daughters are supposed to belong to the lineage they marry into, and since any wealth they inherit would automatically register a like shift in “belonging,” sons as heirs become a must for accumulating and keeping a family’s wealth with and within itself down the ages.

4) semiotics—the desire for sons does not simply emerge from practical considerations; it is equally urged by the offices of signification, since practices over time often rigidify into values and prejudices that take on a symbolic life of their own quite independent of the functionalism which first, perhaps, called them forth. What I hope to track here are some of the connotations that accrue to the words “son” and “daughter” through their various interpellation in the processes of sociality. I do so because far from being supervenient, in *Birthright*, these semantic add-ons cumulatively texture the said designations enough to make a desire for the male child seem axiomatic.

Take the case of “sons” first. The denotation stands for male issue—nothing more. In the novel however, “son” is not merely its literal referent. In fact, it is overcoded by a battery of social scripts such that the reference itself appears as a physical representation of the signifier. Thus, through insertion within the gendered economy of Hindu cremation rites, a son is not simply male progeny but
a “saviour” in potentia. Similarly, discriminatory orders of descent and inheritance practices mean a son willy-nilly carries the badge of rightful heir and future master. Indeed, as a male, he shares in the aura of power and authority that attaches to men generally because of their primary engagement in economic activity and control of material resources. My point is that all these associations dovetail to invest the sign “son” to such an extent that the referent becomes identified in the popular imaginary with the positive charge of its signification. Conversely, sons come to be perceived as the source of “value” rather than that valuation being seen as an effect of social practices and structures mediated through language.

This linguistic valorisation of sons is helped, if anything, by the parallel but contrary inscription which mar(k)s the sign “daughter.” Customarily kept from a role in funeral rituals and cut out of family trees and legacies alike, the full humanity of daughters is invariably rendered dubious by their exclusive identification with a sexual and/or domestic (read that reproductive) function, as against any “productive” role. Then again, virilocality as the preferred residential mode, post-matrimony, plus the ceremonial gestures that perform marriages, supports the cultural coding of daughters as guests or amanat in their natal home. Like with sons, these connotations combine and consolidate in social perception as inherent lakshanas of daughters rather than ascribed meanings. But whereas sons ended up as a type of status symbol in that bargain, the result here is only an overall diminishment in the worth of daughters who are variously deemed

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531 As Manohari say, “... a putiran—is essential for an escape from the hell they call Put. Among our people that is the law” (43).

532 In the text, this can be seen in how, both Raasamma and Maanikkam, when admiring Manohari for her achievements or her capacity, compare her to a man, a male scion. In their mindset, somewhere along the line, value has shifted from the actions and practice of males/sons to be located in maleness itself. Paati’s repeated taunts, that no matter what Manohari does, she could never become a man, also reflect the same phenomenon.

533 This is a minor cause for the agitation that Manohari’s decision to marry and stay on in her father’s house creates. It also accounts for her insecurity vis-à-vis her position in her own house, etc.
substantiations of lack or loss. Indeed, a family’s honour is tied up with maintaining fidelity to this graph of incapacity and dependency in their daughters. It does not require too much cerebration, I believe, to figure out how such associations collectively “naturalise” a desire for sons (39, 43).

b) desire for security: This desire is usually keenest where the exercise of control is most fragile or elusive. In the novel, both men and women are shown susceptible to its promptings, but there is a marked difference to be observed in the circumstances that excite the impulse in them as well as the responses it draws forth from them. What ensues is a brief sketch of this gender distinction with a view to afford some insights into the psychological make-up of men and women in Birthright.

Starting with the stimuli first, men seem to experience a desire for security in the novel principally with regard to matters of mortality and posterity. Thus, there is Manohari’s father who after suffering a stroke, repeatedly confesses how it was only after she showed up that he felt reassured. Then again, there are the anonymous throng of men, who, though not always appearing in the flesh, are, nonetheless, an implied presence, indeed, the hidden agent of the wretched drama that plays out at Manohari’s clinic. If in the first case, it is a near-death experience and the helplessness attending, which accounts for the desire finding fairly straightforward expression, then in the second instance, it is the prospect of eventual death and an attempt to circumvent that end through the reproduction of sons, a sort of immortality by other means, which more indirectly embeds the desire. As against, and in addition to, such motivations and expressions, the desire

534 Arguments of pampering and love that a daughter finds in her home don’t cut ice here. Neither can the recourse to citing the traditional regard for guests. Athithi might well devo bhava but there are certain lines that are not to be crossed, certain liberties not to be taken, certain concessions not available, when the guest happens to be your daughter, and not a dignitary or a deity.

535 Paati, for instance, is virulent when Manohari tries to break the mould by pursuing higher education. For Paati, an economically independent daughter is an aspersion on, and insult to, the honour of a family. Consequently, “Look here, stop this useless talk,” Paati told me. “No need for you to get educated! Nobody here is depending on you to earn or anything. You cannot become a man! So shut up and stay quiet!” (21).
for security displays a much broader range of articulation among the women in *Birthright*. It manifests not only with regard to their person but also their actions and professions. Thus, for instance, the widowed Akila turns up at Manohari’s establishment, asking for a job, any job, so that she could leave her affinal home where she is forced to sexually service her brothers-in-law. In the absence of support from her natal kin, as she tells Manohari, getting a job is her only real chance of escape. On the flip side, despite wanting to, Akila’s mother, herself a widow, is unable to give her daughter shelter because despite being the “elder” of her family, she has no authority in her own home. She is dependent upon her son, the “head” of the family and must bide by his decisions. As it happens, in this case he and his wife are very clear on the scant claim of a married daughter on her natal kin and their resources. Similarly, Raasamma another young widow, reconciles herself to lifelong loneliness because her family decrees that a second marriage would not be respectable. Or, Shanbagam goes in for a secret abortion (which when botched actually proves fatal) because economic independence notwithstanding, as a widow for her to have a child is to sully her, and her family’s reputation, and jeopardise her means of livelihood as “master mason” (43). Also, there is Periamma, Manohari’s mother, who, though shocked and angered by her husband’s temporary resolve to marry a second time in order to beget an heir, after winning her “reprieve,” redoubles her efforts to bind him to her through unstinting service. And so on and so forth. I believe this difference in the sites and situations that trigger a desire for security among men and women deserves attention because it is a handy indication of the power-imbalance informing gender identities. It shows how in the world of Vaasanthi’s text men usually experience a lack of control vis-à-vis matters of mortality and the metaphysical, whereas over and above the metaphysical, women typically also register disempowerment in the domains of the material, the social and the personal.536

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536 In the words of Manohari, “For women who have always lived and learned to be satisfied in a confined space, friendship and sharing are words which will remain stunted words whose potential will never be delineated. And when those ideas are allowed to expand and yield their full meaning,
Of course, this is only half the story. For, the power differential is confirmed and augmented many time over by the manner in which men and women react to perceived conditions of insecurity. Which brings us to the second aspect of the desire. In the novel, men when confronted with encounters of the potentially emasculating sort either resort to a pro-active strategy to counter the challenge or resign themselves to their fate in a way that nonetheless wrests for them a measure of initiative—the initiative contained in wise acceptance and self-mastery. The desire for progeny (especially sons) as a means of defeating death and Perumaal’s belligerent counter-attack when Shanbagam’s brother tries to pin her death on him illustrate the first type of response, while the way Manohari’s father comes to grips with his wife’s demise as well as how he reconciles to his own impending death exemplify the latter kind. Contra these variants, the female reaction to danger in the novel is grounded in fear—a dispiriting fear of the unknown. From Akila’s incapacity to strike out on her own to Raasamma’s embrace of the familiar rather than a second shot at kin- and custom-alienating marriage, from Paati’s pathetic plea for the elixir of life, the sanjivani, on her deathbed to Periamma’s resilient but poignant anger-laced devotion to her husband, from Shanbagam’s self-loathing at her widowhood-defying body and its persistent appetites to Manohari’s destructive inferiority complex, all bear the imprint of this crippling fear. The point I would like to offer here, as a summative gloss, is that neither of the broad patterns of response delineated above reflects any innate, isolatable truth about men and women. Rather, they are a product of longstanding socio-cultural inculcation, of the traditional investment in male agency (with aggression, adventurism, and valour as crucial components of that agency) and female debility (with dependency, guile and caution as hallmarks of that condition), reinforced through structural discrimination and they cause bewilderment and panic. There is the fear that if you emerge from within the boundaries and step into the outside world, you’ll be laughed at in the open bazaar” (56).

537 If anything this is reinforced in myth and custom through “practical wisdom” that says a girl after reaching maturity must not venture alone for she might attract the dark spirits. In the novel, this is actually the explanation that Paati gives Manohari when, as a child, she witnessed a terrifying scene of exorcism being performed on a young woman (75).
disproportionate opportunities. Ultimately, it is this combination of factors that explains the kind of gender disparity in the desire for, and approach to, security found in Birthright.

c) desire for love: Or more specifically, desire for romantic love. Admittedly, this desire does not enjoy a very marked, direct or extensive presence in the novel. Nonetheless, it merits note for revealing an important facet of gender socialisation in the narrated world. I begin with a brief gloss on the idea of romantic love as it circulates in the text.

The concept of romantic love appears in two clearly distinguishable forms in Birthright. The first type is about which Raasamma, defending her preference for watching a Bengali movie on TV over the philosophising on offer in a Tamil rendering of the serial Mahabharata, says, “It’s some kind of love story, akka. That I can understand, whatever the language” (60). It is the sort of love, in other words, immortalised by the troubadours of ages past—universal in scope, idealised in pitch, abstract in content but culturally stylised in expression. Here, that roughly translates as a love which is heavily affect-laden, and running the entire gamut of gestures signifying traditional Shringara Bhava. Films seem to be its most powerful and latest mode of propagation, while Raasamma and her ilk, its avid consumers.

In the novel, Manohari clearly considers the foregoing variety of amour as the fluff of romance, something that can only beguile the immature and the undiscerning. Drawing a distinction between what the hoi polloi feel and her relationship with Shiva, she confides,

Raasamma had never fallen in love. Love in the movies was all she knew, all costumed and made-up, the kind of love which runs around some unnatural looking tree, the kind of love that fills duets. She would not understand the ardent passion of a man who was determined to thrust aside all his self-respect, bundling it up and putting it away, just so he could come and live with his wife in her family home. (92)

The other idea of love in Birthright crystallises around this pole of “ardent passion.” Manohari’s is the main role in its textual elaboration. From her musings,
actions and reactions, it can be said that, as against the former, this one is more frankly sexual. It also projects a more realistic image, being cast in the language of the here-and-now, of drives, instincts and sensations, of individual likes, dislikes, and compatibility.

As evident from the above, the first form of romance comes supplied in the narrative with a readymade, hard-to-miss perspective through which it is presented: Manohari’s dismissive portrayal of the phenomenon as lowbrow and as the subject and object of mass delusion throws into bold relief its nature and function as ideology, as false consciousness. The second kind of attraction mentioned, however, has no comparable accompanying frame. Consequently, it tends to perform as the “rational” and “natural” actuality, what the cognoscenti in such matters might themselves affirm, if asked. This, of course, is just a chimera. Fact is that for most of the narrative, Manohari is as much in the grip of another guiding myth as the uneducated Raasamma she derides—the modern myth of true love that conquers all, of that magical soul mate who is our one-way ticket to instant personal salvation in “happily-ever-after-land.” Indeed, the very celerity and ease with she “reads” Shiva’s motives in the passage quoted earlier suggests as much.

So both versions of love as they occur in the text represent generic “models” that actively shape psychic realities. What I focus upon now is their conjunct with patriarchal hegemonies in the shaping of those realities, realities that ultimately inform, if not determine, personal choice and social behaviour.

The fact that only female characters wax enthusiastic about the phenomenon, is, I believe, not an incidental detail in Birthright. Rather, I see in it deliberate textual design to spotlight a very real site of differential gender socialisation, the differential socialisation of men and women, that is, in matters of the heart. The

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538 Shiva does make melodramatic professions of love but he is only manipulating conventions, not believing in, or living them out.
absence of men from the “scene” in question serves as a telling reflection of their relative implication as well as investment in the affair; it mirrors prevailing social prescripts wherein women are normatively defined through their performance in the very domain of romantic love from which men are meant to derive only secondary, subsidiary or instrumental value, at best. Then again, the choice of Raasamma and Manohari as vehicles of elaboration shows that this skewed pitch is not just a feature of traditional writ: while illustrating the differences between older and newer conceptualisations, it subtly points to the continuities that mark the same. So it is very clear, for instance, that the kind of comfort which the conservative, uneducated, Raasamma derives from television melodramas hold no attraction whatsoever for the educated, modern-minded Manohari. To the young and widowed Raasamma, fed on a diet of feudal devotion, hierarchy, constancy, fatalism, marriage as sacred duty and love as sacrifice and suffering, the formula flicks present a respectable and safe means of accessing the forbidden; they allow her to ride the crests and troughs of passion, that is, without risking her good name. For Manohari, influenced by the ideological complex of personal satisfaction, authenticity, rights, reciprocity and experimentation that dominates modern thinking on individual well being and interpersonal relations, on the other hand, such vicarious fare offers but meagre sustenance. What is interesting is that even as this difference is thrown into sharp relief, the juxtaposition suggests an important point of overlap—the special susceptibility of women to these ideologies of hetero-normative love. In Raasamma’s case, this needs no further clarification. That traditionally women were co-opted to their own detriment into unequal gender paradigms, relations, roles and identities, after all, is no revelation. Birthright is vital in that it hints at a similar dynamic in Manohari’s socialisation. That is to say, it resists the common tendency to simplistically equate the condition of modernity with a state of empowerment. In Manohari, it profiles the very type of modern woman who is educated and economically independent, but psychologically insecure and vulnerable to manipulation when it comes to love. For, from the way the entire episode gets presented in the novel, her readiness to fall for Shiva’s sudden volte-face on their relationship and his
subsequent sham professions of love can be ascribed to two interconnected reasons. On the one hand, Shiva deftly employs the gestures and vocabulary that signify love to the modern mind, gestures and vocabulary which by their reiterated, high-visibility nature are as much conventions as anything colouring Raasamma's world-view. More specifically, by claiming to have been overpowered by intense attraction, he mimics the "passion" that is supposed to be the cornerstone and high-water mark of true love according to current fashion. On the other, despite consciously fighting it, Manohari exhibits deep-seated beliefs that a woman qua woman finds real meaning and value in life only through heterosexual coupling. This explains both her extreme sensitivity to Shiva's churlish prediction that if she didn't change her ways, "'You will always be alone'" (53) as well as the euphoria that grips her when Shiva accepts her condition and renews his suit (55). It is also clearly reflected in the fluctuating tenor of her private confession, when triumphantly recalling Shiva's aforementioned forecast after his abrupt turnaround vis-à-vis their relationship, she says,

I had seen it for what it was: an empty threat! A bluff! As though not having a man to share my life would make me like some kind of stunted, blasted tree. And yet, when Appa closed his eyes forever would I have to spend the remainder of my days sitting with Raasamma in front of the TV? The fear of that happening often came home to me in my weaker moments. It occurs to me that even now, in the twenty-first century, when the need for the union of male and female for the sole purpose of procreation is a thing of the past, the sheer maleness of a man, and intimacy with him, might give life if not a wholeness, at least some kind of meaning. My heart tells me that conflicting views and values are just what gives life its flavour. (53)

And then again, in the histrionic, hyperbolic manner in which she registers her disappointment when Appa reacts angrily to the idea of a resident son-in-law and Manohari decides not to marry. Comparing her choice to Raasamma's decision to toe her family's line, Manohari says,

Really there was no great difference between Raasamma and myself. Just as she sacrificed her youth, when the elders in her family decided that she should not marry a second time, out of a desire to avoid conflict, I was saying, "This house is what matters to me!" That was the screen of illusion that I drew across my own vision, as I crushed in my palm the unexpected chance at life that had come within my grasp. As I flung it away. (68)

The point is that this not just symptomatic of individual caprice. Rather, Manohari's psychology here is an effect of social conditioning. Her doubts, anxieties and fears being the internalisation of messages overtly and covertly
relayed to her, and not just by the traditional milieu of which she is part, either. For, that, she has more or less rejected. More insidious and compelling in her case are the signals picked up from the modern world to which she owes her education and ideological grooming. The fact that even Kamalini, her Delhi-based friend and no-nonsense "feminist" academic to boot, makes Manohari's love life, or the lack of it, a regular topic of conversation every time she puts in an appearance in the novel, I believe, is illustrative. It depicts the enormous peer pressure that young women face to validate their worth in terms of their marital status, no matter that they be financially independent, "liberated" doctors, intellectuals, even that alleged font of misandry, a feminist! Indeed, in the course of the narrative, Kamalini actually announces her decision to marry a businessman. And both her relation of it as well as Manohari's reaction to it only reinforce my contention. To quote Kamalini on her suitor and his suitability,

"He's got a business. Hasn't studied a lot. But he's a good person. No hypocrisy in him. I am fed up of all the hypocrites around me. I am tired of all these debates about science, there's no warmth in them. He won't stand in the way of my activities, he won't be jealous of me. Seems to me he'll be my friend. I don't know what he sees in me. He asked, will you marry me? That day the question sounded absurd to me. But when I thought about it, I felt that among all the men I know he's the most straightforward and I said yes."

Manohari's unvoiced reaction to this is to admit to thinking, "That an ardent feminist like her had so easily found a way out made me envious." Her spoken response is simply, "I'm amazed, Kamalini!" To which comment Kamalini assents and says, "Yes, it is amazing.... What about you? You said you would marry only someone who would live here, did you find anybody?" (79-80). Apart from the aforementioned obsession with matrimony, what is striking here is Kamalini's perception. That an academic finds other academics hypocritical and their discourse sterile, I am sure is something most academics, at least, will readily understand. Why this might be so is a question I am not going to explore here. Though it might provide useful perspective on institutionalised intellectualism, such a focus is not directly relevant to the present pursuit. Of far greater purport is Kamalini's reason for agreeing to marry her beau. That a woman on one or the other side of thirty by a couple of years at any reasonable estimate should marry because "among all the men I know he's the most
straightforward,” frankly comes across as a copout, a compromise, or, as Manohari inadvertently puts it, a “way out.” In the process, it also demonstrates the pressure on young women to find this “way out” as a means of self-legitimation, as a means of being pronounced a “success,” or at least normal.

To sum up, therefore, by showing only women playing Trilby to love’s Svengali, Birthright suggests how the desire for love is both generated and intensified differentially in men and women. Additionally, it shows how the desire for love is implicated in the practices and politics of gender-coding, whether traditional or modern.

d) desire for recognition: This desire is inextricably tied up with questions of social affirmation on the one hand and self-perception on the other. In the novel, given the rigid demarcation of gender roles and hierarchies underwriting patriarchal hegemony, what obtains is a split in the manifestation of the desire among men and women. My immediate purpose is to shed some light on the nature of this differentiation, a differentiation I call the desire for success and acknowledgement, respectively.

1) desire for success—on the whole, this desire is characteristic of men in Birthright. Its two most prominent specimens are Manohari’s father, “Appa,” and Shiva, her romantic interest in the novel. Significantly, both represent considerably different versions of the desire in question. What follows is a synoptic note on the nature and shape of these differences. I begin with Appa.

To Appa, success is part and parcel of being a benevolent patriarch. It means not only material prosperity but also a stress on the manner in which wealth is begot and managed. It means not only a life lived well in comfort and happiness but also a life well lived in good works and harmony, in fulfilling the duties and responsibilities to family, friends, dependents and factotums. Alternatively, it can be said that rectitude, respect and reputation constitute the three r’s of Appa’s idea
of success. Whichever the form of description though, of import is the fact that what is described is not idiosyncratic. Appa’s mindset is not simply an expression of personal preference; it is more correctly representative of a social ethos. In the novel, he is described as “a person who deemed it imperative not only to be present but to take an active part in all events, happy or sad, that took place in the households of relations and close friends” (41); indeed, who would put himself to considerable discomfort, if need be, to do so. The rationalisation offered for such thinking, in his own words, is that “Only then will people come to us when we need them” (41). This, I submit, is not just a cynical statement of *quid pro quo*, a *mantra* for self-serving manipulation. Rather, it is the locution of a longstanding value-system, of a deeply ingrained world-view, in which the individual as an autonomous, essential or absolute unit of value is a cognitive nullity. Appa, that is to say, is rooted firmly within a wide network of kin and community practices and the desire for success he exemplifies is overwhelmingly, as also, identifiably, traditional.

Shiva, on the other hand, embodies a very different, and what I would call, more modern, articulation of the desire for success. For one, his understanding of accomplishment, of achievement, is preeminently materialist—calibrated in terms of competitive professional advancement and financial profit. For another, it is unabashedly individualist in its orientation—with the self as the first and last, if not, only, point of reference. This ideological cast can be educed not just from his sayings and doings in the novel but also from the thoughts ascribed to him by Manohari when every once so often she chooses to second-guess her lover. Then again, it is reflected and reinforced in the dynamics of his characterisation. Only once in the entire text is he addressed by what is presumably his full name—when Manohari’s father calls him Dr. Shivakumar. At all other times he is simply Shiva. There is also nothing given about his background, his kith and kin. Indeed,

539 That it sounds suspiciously like it and indeed runs the risk of lapsing into it, I am not disputing. That there is not, by that token, a fine line to be drawn is what I am stressing. In fact, in the novel, even his daughter suspects him of being moved in his involvement in the lives of friends and kin by baser motives at one point (41).
even when the question of his marriage with Manohari comes up, there is no mention of consultations with his family. This need not be an effect of narrative oversight, poor detailing and/or hasty execution. To my mind, it works admirably to show Shiva as a free-floating agent without any identifiable history, any blood ties or community commitments worth the name, any moral code in personal interactions except that suggested by the exigencies of the moment or private conviction—in other words, a proximate image of the urban/e, alienated subject of modernity. What surprise then, as I argue here, the desire for success he substantiates should bear the stamp of that condition?

2) desire for acknowledgement—predominantly to be found among the women characters of the novel, this desire too, reveals a more or less dual track. On the one hand, there is the type of expression represented by Periamma, Manohari’s mother, and on the other, there is the kind of impulse fleshed out in Manohari herself. As with the desire among men, the two sorts of the desire among women also prove amenable to being fitted in/to “traditional” and “modern” frames. In the event, it provides fertile scope for a comparative understanding of the pressures and politics that make up gender identities in Birthright. Periamma serves as my point of entry into this stretch of analysis.

A figure distilled from memory—primarily of Manohari’s, but also of her husband’s and of the people around—Periamma is the traditional woman par excellence in the novel.540 As the chaste wife, the pativratai, her characterisation clearly evokes the famed heroines of Tamil lore said to possess ananku and karppu—the primordial, radically transformative, sacred power sourced in female sexuality and chastity.541 Unlike those revered women of myth and legend,

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540 By the time the novel opens, Manohari’s mother is long dead, yet she has a powerful posthumous presence in the lives of those she leaves behind.

541 For a handy discussion of the concept and belief, see Vijaya Ramaswamy, Walking Naked; Sita Anantha Raman, “Old Norms in New Bottles”; and George L. Hart, “Woman and the Sacred in Ancient Tamilnadu.” As a link between early Sangam and later Hindu concepts, Sarah Caldwell citing G. Hart is also interesting. As she says, “The concept of ananku, ‘in many ways a very early forerunner of the concept of Sakti was also very important in Sangam religion” (16).
however, Periamma’s karppu proves toothless in adversity. And it is in the gap this opens up between fact and fiction in her consciousness that I see the desire for acknowledgement finding piquant cause as well as poignant expression.

Simply stated, Periamma before the catastrophe of her husband’s flirtation with the thought of contracting a second marriage, and after it, is two different people. Or, if that is too drastic a split to grant, she represents, at least, two different levels of cognition, two different constellations of affect. Prior to the episode in question, Periamma is content with her station and role in life as Appa’s wife. She both accepts the structural hierarchy traditionally written into the matrimonial relation and is wholeheartedly devoted to her husband. Moreover, she does not see the unequal arrangement, or her own acceptance and praxis in accordance with it, as in any substantial way detrimental to her sense of self-worth. Indeed, even to the contrary. In the manner of a “karppulankari,” Periamma wears her virtue as Appa’s chaste wife like a bejewelled diadem of power and dignity.542 Partly this has to do with the general currency of such thinking, the overall ideological orientation of the community in which she is rooted. But more importantly, it is owing to the security and self-affirmation she finds in the reciprocated commitment of Appa—a man she deems fully worthy of her devotion, quite apart from the traditional directive to that end. When he dallies with the idea of a second marriage, however, her trust as well as confidence takes a severe beating and this equipoise is shattered. So much so that, “She who had gone around thinking that she was his wife, now lay in a crumpled heap, overcome by shock that the god whom she had worshipped had turned into mere clay, and overcome with terror at what lay ahead. The sense of insult was crushing” (25). Though Appa does not eventually go through with the perfidious act, the point is that Periamma is unable to recover her prelapsarian state of innocence and equanimity. Indeed, despite Manohari’s confirmation of a

542 I borrow this phrase from Sita Anantha Raman’s essay, mentioned above.
reversion to type of sorts in her mother’s behaviour, what is clearly evident in different recollections of Periamma’s speech and conduct thereafter are undercurrents of insecurity and existential doubt laced with simmering anger all crying out for some kind of affirmation of her self, her being.

Moving on to Manohari, according to her own assessment:

A whole generation lies between Amma and myself. Her compulsions and inhibitions don’t exist for me. I’m an educated woman.... Yet I realize that between Amma’s yearning to justify her existence in some way, and my wanting some kind of approval, if not quite appreciation, for every step I take, there isn’t really that much difference. (30)

This asseveration holds true enough up to a point, yet tends to mislead beyond it. For, while both mother and daughter display the broad signs of a desire for acknowledgement, the specific articulations of their desire reveal at least three crucial differences. Firstly, unlike Periamma’s wants, Manohari’s desire extends to a kind of one-upmanship (well, one-upwomanship to be precise). This is especially the case in her interactions with Shiva, where the competitive edge is clearly visible and the thought of having the upper hand in their relationship is the source at different times of delicious though secret satisfaction. Second, however circumspectly vocalised, Manohari’s desire when parsed yields the far more assertive discourse of rights as opposed to the relatively nebulous language of affects and obligations used by Periamma. Thus, time and time again, Manohari’s anger is at having what she considers her legitimate claims set aside, as a person, as a daughter, as a woman by Paati and Amma, by people at large, and by Appa, in particular. Her anguish is at being a social cipher and her hunger is, as she describes it, for a “Certificate of Approval” (90) that would unequivocally recognise her individual worth, value and meaning. Then again,

543 To quote Manohari on the issue:

I expected my mother to be sensitive to the insult done to her, but she clung to him even more closely than before. As though the paradise she had lost had been restored to her. She heaved a sigh of relief. Her release from the fear of being abandoned made her feel a debt of gratitude to Appa all her life.... I hesitate these days to explain away all Amma’s actions in terms of her economic dependency. What must have had a greater impact on her was the shock of finding out that her love was being set aside. And so she seems to me to have responded by disarming him completely with that same extraordinary love of hers. Ultimately that was the way she had established her right over him, because that was the only way she knew. (25, 29)
though both Manohari and Periamma’s anxieties converge around Appa’s responses, Amma’s desires are largely limited to the domestic register and domain as also the husband-wife relation whereas Manohari’s demands range more broadly, making a play for recognition in the professional and social spheres as well as in the realm of romantic and filial ties.

How such a distinction resolves into versions of traditional and modern desires respectively, I believe, is fairly obvious. My purpose here is only to draw attention to the parallel to be had between various expressions of a desire for recognition among men and women. Since this offers a useful entry-point into the broad problematic of gender identity in the novel. At the level of generalisation, then, I submit that male desire for recognition consists in adjuncts and auxiliaries, while female desire for acknowledgement concerns their very being. Alternatively, I contend that the project of male desire in Birthright is largely about a self-consolidation, self-magnification, aggrandisement, transcendence even, whereas the female enterprise is more about a basic confirmation of their self, about negotiating an immanent and ontological crisis precipitated by the business of society.

**Unsocialised Desires**

I refer here to the tumble of desires without a social vocabulary. Accorded no legitimate expressive form, there are surges of impulse in Birthright that are rendered opaque or mutant. Obviously, searching for direct evidence of the phenomena under these conditions is unsound policy, certain to lead to a detective cul-de-sac. What I propose to do, therefore, is identify and study the possible sites, symptoms and symbols of omission and camouflage in the novel as a means to illuminate the traces they might bear of anonymous inclinations. For purposes of clarity and convenience, I organise my diffuse field of exploration into two broad demarcations of unsocialised desires. These are, a) displaced desires, and b) repressed desires. Before venturing any further on this expedition, I should, however, issue a word of caution. Despite ostensibly borrowing from the critical
lexicon of Psychoanalysis, I nowhere accept the towering monologic of Oedipus as a structuring device. In my understanding, the constituents of unsocialised desire (as indeed the constituents of socialised desire), far from bearing out the invariant psychologism of that disciplinary narrative, are time- and context-specific tendencies, subject to change and demanding circumstantial clarification.

a) displaced desires: the libidinal slide effectuated, often through metalepsis, is one dynamic by which unsocialised desires gain a measure of legitimate form and visibility in Vaasanthi’s novel. I focus here upon a couple of examples that occur as veritable archipelagos of affect in the high seas of Birthright’s subliminal impulse, viz., the miraculating phenomenon that is Goddess Mangamma Thayee and the cluster of emotional palliatives loosely comprehended here under the tag “MGR worship” (32).

Mangamma is the spirit of female longing that haunts the novel. Mangamma is also the name of a dream come true. Both these descriptions, of course, are accurate enough, literally: if Mangamma’s “birth” ascribed to the oneiric vision had by Paavaayee, bears out the latter statement, then the popular legend insinuating a tale of “unsatisfied desire” to explain her spectral visitations (6), verifies the former. But besides this and more importantly, in the course of her deification, Mangamma emerges as the opportunity and locus of a displaced cathexis that is both collective as well as cathartic (26-27, 116). “[E]verybody’s burden bearing stone” (116), in other words, she is an eidolon transformed into the kamarupa of a community. Three things, as I see it, facilitate this libidinal transference; explain this surcharged transfiguration. In no particular order, these are, 1) the paradox that is Mangamma’s desire in a social milieu which at one and the same time fears the feminine and devalues the female, 2) the felt continuity of oppression among women resulting in a kind of timeless, universal, ready sorority of suffering, and 3) the typically liminal condition of women’s desire in androcentric cultures.
What makes Mangamma’s desire significant is the manner of her death. If folklore is to be credited, Mangamma is not just the spirit of any ordinary woman. She is the spirit of a *sati*. Now, customarily, a *sati* is supposed to be socially venerated as a goddess in traditional India. Customarily, also, a *sati* is supposed to have achieved the highest heaven by her act of *sahagaman* and exemplary adherence to *pativrataharma*. In other words, all her desires are supposed to have been fulfilled. My point is that given such ideological overcoding, Mangamma’s spook-showings constellate a peculiar conjuncture of events that is potentially as confounding of ruling conventions as it is enabling of newer forms of social expression. Since, on the one hand, her afterlife as a restless apparition is capable of seriously undermining hegemonic discourses that assert the exaltation, the absolute bliss that awaits every *sati* post mortem (considerations that, no doubt, form a substantial part of the incentive to become a “burning stick,” as Manohari puts it). And on the other, Mangamma’s ghost, read and rationalised as a Goddess is capable of both neutralising her disruptive potential through recuperation into traditional religious plots that are ultimately misogynistic, as also essaying, through divine sanction, different, even subversive narratives of social being that are more woman-friendly. Altogether, this has the effect of turning Mangamma’s desire into a site of semantic ambivalence and excess,

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544 According to Paavaayee, “a hundred years ago, right here on this land, a woman climbed onto her husband’s pyre. Her soul, she says, still haunts the place” (6). Though in a personal communication with this writer, the author maintained that, “Mangamma is an imaginary Goddess. I chose the name Mangamma because it is a common name that denotes prosperity from the word ‘mangalam,’” just as an aside, there is also a historical personage whom the name, in its similarity, recalls. I am referring to Rani Mangammal, a 17th –18th century queen, whose biography provides a stark contrast to this spirit’s life. Whereas the latter commits *sati*, the other, refuses to do so, on being widowed. In fact, she goes on to rule Tamil country as regent on behalf of her infant grandson, though finally meeting a grisly end. I am grateful to Dr. G. J. V. Prasad for alerting me to the existence of this historical figure.

545 For an account of criticism against the practice in traditional sources, read Arvind Sharma, *Sati: Historical and Phenomenological Essays*.

546 In the south, Madhavacharya was a proponent of such views.

547 That these views are very much part of the cultural landscape of *Birthright*’s world is evident from Manohari’s sarcastic rejoinder to Paavaayee. “If she [Mangamma] turned herself into a burning stick for his sake, [Manohari asks] doesn’t she belong in heaven? Why should her spirit wander about here?” (6).
which is receptive of various projections, susceptible to various appropriations and pregnant with various possibilities.

Aiding and aggravating the instability of meaning that marks Mangamma’s desire are the ties of empathy supposedly bonding women in the novel into a sisterhood of the deprived extending through time and space. Every once so often *Birthright* reveals the impress of this premise in its narrative elaboration. When uneducated, destitute, job-seeking Akila answers Manohari’s demand to identify herself, with, “‘I am a woman. Apart from that, how can I identify myself, akka?’” (58); when Manohari, in turn, thinks to herself, “What a sophisticated argument she is using! Outsmarting me!” (58), when listening to the dirge sung by the village women, Manohari insists that “there was something that bound everyone in that circle together, and that [she] was also one of those ensnared” (14), when describing the fortnightly ritual of Mangamma-worship, Manohari again says, as “they cry out ‘Mangamma Thayee’ with tearful eyes, I understand that it is for the family of womankind in general” (27); when a link is established between the *satis* in Rajasthan and the women in the novel with the words “[t]hat in Rajasthan, too, many Paavaayees have existed and many Mangammas. That for all those who sacrificed their lives with their mouths shut, there were those who would mourn them, with open, wailing mouths” (27); when the violent end that Nicole Simpson suffered in distant North America is sought to be rendered locally intelligible through the assertion that “Paavaayee wouldn’t understand the problem of colour, but she was quite capable of an empathy intense enough to set up a stone to honour O. J.’s ex-wife” (27-28), for example, what gets invoked, either implicitly or explicitly, is the imagined community of besieged womanhood. The fallout of such “imagination” is that it tends to view the experiences of women separated by time, space, race, class and/or culture, *inter alia*, to be a) transparent to the female gaze and b) fungible with a little tinker here and there because essentially the same. In other words, it actually fosters the feeling of intimate, intuitive and privileged understanding, which underlies, if not drives, the act of self-projection so crucial to forging any notion of a transcendent solidarity and community
among women subject/ed to different patriarchies. Apropos the argument here, the wide currency of these preconceptions means there is considerable discursive encouragement for the women in the novel to identify with Mangamma; since, that is, there is an assumed continuum of wretched womanhood to which both Mangamma and they (the women) seem to equally, and naturally, belong to.

Of course, Mangamma could never have succeeded as a recurring object, site and agent of transferred and transformed meanings in the novel but for the third factor mentioned above, viz., the routinely amorphous, unrealised and ill-represented nature of female desire in Birthright’s narrated world. Thus, the text makes amply clear that “When Mangamma climbed up her husband’s bier and lay down upon it to make herself a burning log ‘for his sake,’ she hadn’t died happily. These women knew that” (27). What is left unfathomed in the crepuscular reaches of consciousness, however, is the source of that unhappiness. The scope, shape, subject, object, and modality of Mangamma’s desire, the unfulfilled desire so assuredly held to account for her phantom appearances, is yet never precisely identified in the text. Likewise, though there are many women characters in the novel obviously dissatisfied with their lot on a variety of fronts, the exact form of their discontent and desire is often something to be inferred from implication rather than something that is denoted through assertion. So, for example, there is the “burning stomach” from which Paavaayee talks (119), or Shanbagam’s rage-filled grief at her husband’s death, or Akila’s desperate search for a way out or Manohari’s loneliness and the “great sacrificial fire in my life, one that I was building up very carefully, which had the power to turn to ashes all other attachments, and all romance” (35)—different glancing gestures and expressions that point to strong undertows of lack and longing, without ever actually putting a name or giving any fixed form to those drifts of desire. Why this chiaroscuro representation is important is because it facilitates virtually untrammeled traffic of meaning between Mangamma and the female cast of characters in Birthright. Since neither party’s desire finds clear delineation, it is possible for either’s wants to be potentially read ever anew without endangering the sisterly solidarity that
runs as a *fait accompli* through the text. On the one hand, this is to say, the women can share in Mangamma’s ascribed sorrow and discontent because their own desire is only nebulously discernible to themselves. On the other, the girdle of empathy survives intact because the women can transfer their own keenly felt but vaguely understood impulses on to Mangamma and then re-encounter the same as the desires of the Eternal Feminine. This commerce in affect, in fact, explains both the ease with which different characters stand in for Mangamma at one time or another in the course of the narrative as well as the almost careless invention that marks the advent of Mangamma-worship in the text—“They’ve even given it a name—Mangamma. On new moon and full moon night Paavaayee and Meenatchi smear turmeric and vermilion on a rock they’ve set up in the garden, and make offerings of milk” (6), is how the novel describes the naming and consecration of the spirit that suddenly appeared in Paavaayee’s dream one night. It is also reflected in Manohari’s confession that “[e]very once in a while I have a peculiar sensation of being connected to all the women who come to my clinic, by bonds that exist beyond this birth. Embracing their concerns is like recruiting an army, all by myself, for my own cause” (10).

To sum up then, all the three factors mentioned above work in random tandem to make Mangamma the amalgam of dislodged intensities and fecund trope of female expression that she turns out to be in *Birthright*.

The other evidence of displaced desires in the text gathers under what I have, perhaps a little too freely, generalised as “MGR worship.” Briefly, my reference is to three objects on which different characters come to lavish their attention. These are a) the pictures of MGR pasted all over the walls of Raasamma’s widowed mother’s house, b) the TV screen flashing its content of popular entertainment to which Raasamma seems addicted, and c) the ultrasound scan screen with its images of somersaulting female foetuses that is Manohari’s

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548 From Manohari to Periamma, Dr Lakshmi, Akila, Nicole Simpson, the *satis* in Rajasthan, all stand identified with Mangamma, at one point or another, in the narrative.
lodge stone. In the first instance, apparently Raasamma’s “father had died at a young age” and her mother had become a “‘devotee’ of MGR.” If Raasamma is to be believed, her “amma never talked about my appa. For her, it was always only MGR…she had his photo everywhere in the house.” The narrative adds that “It surprises her, now, that nobody in the neighbourhood took it the ‘wrong way’” (31). As Manohari comments, this is because, “MGR worship acted as an outlet for the sexual frustrations of poor women in Tamil Nadu” (32); it was an acceptable means of harnessing and defusing loose, and therefore, potentially disruptive libidinal charges, in other words. The TV set airing mushy love stories of which Raasamma turns out to be so engrossed an audience, performs a comparable service. According to the novel, Raasamma, like her mother, had been widowed young. There had been an opportunity at a second alliance but her family had decreed, “‘A second marriage is not permissible!’” Thereafter, “Just as her mother had coped with her frustration with the aid of pictures of MGR, this woman smeared holy ash on her forehead, seated herself before the TV, saying, ‘This is my fate’” (42). Which leaves the ultrasound scan screen—the screen on which Manohari’s (illegal) practice thrives. A synecdoche for her professional engagements, it signifies displaced desires as a means of assuagement and compensation for personal disappointments as also an instrument of twisted vengeance on a sexist society. Since, that is, Manohari looks to her career to both shelter and soothe her injured psyche as well as provide an outlet for her pent-up rage. She even admits as much when underlining the parallels between her life and Raasamma’s, in this context. To use her words, “Our outlets for the sacrificial impulse were different, that was all. The TV screen for her, the scan screen for me” (49).

As may be evident, common to all the “objects” identified above is their lenitive function—each is a socially acceptable anodyne for some pain, some plaint or the other. This, indeed, is what allows them to be clubbed together. But how are they to be distinguished from the kinds of desires and experiences coalescing around
and into the phenomenon that is Mangamma? Why, after all, do I feel constrained to inventory them separately?

The difference, to my mind, is subtle but significant. As a “cultural prop” that is a “shock absorber for female desires and suffering,” Mangamma certainly plays a palliative role similar to the one performed by the second set of objects. It would be a mistake, however, to infer from this that that’s all there is to Mangamma in the text. One way to understand the distinction I am trying to draw is via the kind of effect that the respective objects have on those under their spell—whereas the pictures of MGR, the TV screen and the scan screen sever the people they mesmerise from the world around them, Mangamma connects hearts and minds. Another possibility is through attention to the state in which they exist and operate in the novel—whereas pictures of MGR, the TV screen, the scan screen, again, are essentially static in matter and meaning, Mangamma is dynamic. What it all adds up to is an important difference in the type of relief provided. The former soothes by dulling pain with vapid alternatives or giving scope to anger without addressing and eradicating the cause of it. As against this, Mangamma-worship manifests the capacity to be genuinely therapeutic. Ultimately, the comfort it offers is not simply of the soporific and/or reactive sort but something that can be actively cleansing, something that is healing, curative. Of course, in the process, Mangamma also stops being an effect, an illustration, of displaced desires and becomes “original”—but that’s a shift I’ll explain later.

b) repressed desires: this is the seething, churning substrate of displaced attachment. Not surprisingly, therefore, impulses alluded to above, as variously

549 “All such goddesses are, however, cultural props that serve as shock absorbers for female desires and suffering”—as stated by Vaasanthi in personal communication with this writer.

550 Raasamma, her widowed mother and Manohari, for example, all seem to be locked into some kind of private compact with their respective fetish-objects.

551 To quote Manohari on the effects of Mangamma-worship, “Whether or not Paavaayee regards this pujai as social service, what it has done is to create a feeling of togetherness among the women here...” (112).
causative, recur here at centrestage. Because all points of repression need not find morphed, masked or sublimated expression, however, the etiological link and hence the repetition I suggest is only a possible condition and not a necessary one. A further caveat regarding the nature of evidence presented is that the textual back-ups for my reading in this part are allusive rather than explicit. Given the specific subject under scrutiny, this can hardly be avoided. In any case, within these limitations and working with very broad brushstrokes, I discern two strains of repressed desires operating in Birthright, one pertaining to men and the other to women.

For the men, what seems censored from consciousness in Vaasanthi’s text is a language of needs. That this gets thrown into sharpest relief vis-à-vis Appa is not without its apparent irony. After all, is not Appa the authority figure (and hence male) par excellence in the novel? As a wealthy landowning patriarch cum business magnate, is not his mastery material as well as ideological, feudal as well as capitalist, moral as well as affective, traditional as well as modern? Moreover, does not every character, from his daughter, wife and mother to his band of underlings and employees, recognise, appeal and seek to gratify this formidable concentration of power in some form or the other? So what and how can such a personage, such positioning, lack for anything?

Describing the faithful service that Appa gets from Muniappan, Manohari comments,

When Appa was a child, this man’s father had been a gardener. He and Appa may even have been playmates at one time. But so far he has never overstepped the limits set for him in showing his respect. Underlying both Amma’s feelings towards Appa, and these people’s feudal loyalty, I sense the same principle. It is something beyond a mere indebtedness for the food one eats, it’s a barrier they have constructed for their own protection. Is it against a fear that even an edifice of gratitude can be razed to the ground? (31)

This passage is revealing of two things. The oftener perceived insight is into the apprehension, uncertainty and self-doubt that dependents, women and servants habitually experience in their relations with Appa. It brings into focus the inhibiting and ultimately damaging predicament of these characters—never
certain of Appa but subject to him through various bonds of obligation, affection, service, love, security and fealty. Willy-nilly attention is directed to the ways in which close ties with Appa stunts the capacity for confidence, growth and self-expression among people placed in hierarchical contact with him. This is one aspect, and pretty irrefragable too, in the truth it spells out. But, as mentioned before, there is another “revelation” to be had in the passage, one that is both easily missed for the obliqueness of its expression and more to the point here. Simply stated, if people are walled in and so repressed by the self-protective barrier they raise between themselves and Appa, then Appa’s also walled out by that same barricade. He is alienated and frozen into a mould of absolute power and invulnerability; he is rendered a psychological outcast and an emotional cipher. What’s more, he is forever susceptible to being (mis)taken for this petrified authority as well as pressured to repeatedly vivify it. In the novel, this explains in part, one, why Appa is more spoken for than speaking, and two, why he is almost always misread by Manohari’s narrative. Mind you, I am not suggesting that Appa’s privations are wholly an effect of “subaltern” imposition. Far from it. Appa’s linguistic and emotional divestitures, ultimately, are equally a consequence of active internalisation, of deeply socialised desires. What settles this for me is when, in a rare moment of unreserve, Appa divulges his fascination for Superman. Addressing Manohari, he says,

“When we were youngsters, my friends and I would go all the way to Salem, just to see the Superman films in English. Superman is a super hero. It was our dream to be like him. We believed that the actor who was playing Superman was Superman himself. You know on the day he killed himself, it was as though God himself had died…. Why I am saying this is because we all think of ourselves as Superman. But that’s only a role—just like in the cinema.” (102-03)

This confession is notable not just for the aspiration it discloses, but also for the poignant recognition, it registers, of that lifelong aspiration and front, as an illusion. Ultimately, Appa’s projection of the Superman persona is “only a role—just like in the cinema,” with the credits for direction and screenplay reading SOCIETY. For, it is rigidly demarcated gender roles and expectations that firstly, explains the strong pull which the idea exercises on Appa, and secondly, renders

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552 A variation on the Woolfian insight about being locked out and locked in elaborated in A Room of One’s Own (30-31).
his ambitions with regard to it entirely "natural," both within his immediate peer group, as well as wider social circle.

Vis-à-vis the cost of such upbringing and education, to repeat myself, therefore, Appa lacks a language and position in and from which to express naked need; he lacks a language and position in and from which to connect with himself and others through relations of unguarded emotional give and take. Of course, insofar as Appa's character is representative of masculine authority, his predicament also a) offers an important insight into the paradoxical nature and dynamics of power and b) stands for a common enough experience among men born and brought up in patriarchal cultures.

If men display signature repression in matters of emotional truth and dependency, of intimate encounters with and acceptance of the other as part of their psychic reality, then women in Birthright show themselves inhibited in dealing with issues of individuation, and independence; inhibited in terms of a language of the self, as it were. Time and time again, the novel has women articulating deeply troubled, guilt-fraught equations with themselves. Or, rather, time and again, women come across as painfully timorous and conflicted about making decisions and owning up to desires in their own name, for their own pleasure, their own convictions. So, for instance, the restrained Shanbagam, "very likely...less than thirty years old" (44), with "that frugal smile and those signs of widowhood on her person" because "that's why [her] brothers and sisters accept [her]" (43), is wracked with self-loathing as she comes to Manohari, pregnant, and faced with certain infamy. Her traumatised reaction to Manohari's "Why do you go? Why do you trust him?" is described thus:

Loosening her grip on me, she began to strike herself on the head with great slamming blows. With great difficulty I restrained her hands. Convulsed and shaking with sobs, she cried, "This body of mine is shameless, akka. It wants to...what can I do?" I sat there shocked. I remembered what I had asked her the last time: "Why can't you just - leave it all to...to God, or whoever—and just get married,

553 His statement, "I don't understand any of this 'love' and so on and so forth," in this regard, must not be taken lightly.
Shanbagam?“ How she had broken into tears. To tell her to get a grip on herself seemed idiotic at such a time. Her guilt was enough to kill her.... (119)

Then there is Raasamma, who forgoes the uncertainty of being cut adrift from her family for marrying again and reconciles to the security of a benumbed life snug in the swaddling bands of convention. The first line of action would have meant claiming a second chance for herself, “[b]ut she shed tears of guilt, as though it were a sin against the gods” (42) to have such ambitions. And what about Periamma, who gives her daughter no visible support against the spiteful barbs of Paati, who “[l]ike the piper who keeps the pitch for the nadaswaram player...intoned whatever Paati said” (21) so that Manohari often thinks of her mother as an antagonist rather than a friend? This gracious lady of the house is able to express solidarity with her daughter’s desire for higher education only in the privacy of her bedroom when, as Appa lets on to a totally bewildered Manohari years later, “You were not the only one who had a tantrum. Your mother had one too” (141). Quite apart from the infantile cast given to her reactions by the use of the word, tantrum, a cast especially unfortunate considering it’s used to describe a mature woman’s interest and concern for her child’s future, Periamma’s restrained behaviour is a mirror to the self-doubt, the uncertainty she feels vis-à-vis her role, position and value in the household. Indeed, her utter inability to “demand” any rights for herself or her progeny in the domestic arena that traditional ideology would have is a woman’s domain, comes through in the cryptic advice she gives her newly “in love” daughter regarding the latter’s future security. To quote Amma, “‘You shouldn’t blunder into some mess and just give up whatever right you have in this house. Don’t give up your fort! ... I’m not an educated woman. I don’t know how to explain more than this’” (35). In different guises and forms, therefore, Birthright presents female characters ill acquainted and ill at ease with their selves. Their femininity or the code of manners and mannerisms they live by is a volatile mix of repression and expression, a mix that ultimately also explains, for instance, the mass hysterical release found in Mangamma-worship.
Up until this point, what has been on offer is an inventory of the different forms of desire that jostle for space in Vaasanthi’s narrated world. It is significant insofar as the desires listed, together, mark out the libidinal economy within, and against which, the central thematic of the novel finds articulation. That thematic crux I hold to be Manohari’s quest for self-validation. And, as mentioned before, it is through a series and simultaneity of self-other encounters I see her quest developing. From hereon, my labours are directed towards tracing the course and character of this development.

A recent translation into English, Birthright has not yet found its way into too many weighted tomes of “litcrit” in the language. Still, in its short run the novel has managed to catch the eye of a fair number of reviewers. Vaasanthi’s interest in gender issues, of course, has been long, active and sufficiently documented. The subject of the novel, its title, the identity of its publisher, the accompanying Translator’s Introduction, the overall packaging further emphasise this angle. In most of the early review literature on the novel I have come across, too, the accent persists, i.e., Birthright’s fate seems decided by a) how well or badly it is perceived to serve a feminist cause and b) the utility of that feminist agenda. Thus, on the one hand there are approving reviews where Vaasanthi’s text is warmly feted for “adding to the number that illustrate gender justice” (Padmini Devarajan, “A Plea for Justice”). On the other, there are caustic write-ups that deem its “feminism” to be “manifest, one-dimensional and expressionistic.” To quote Lipipuspa Nayak, “The problem with such works is that because they are politically correct, they escape critical scrutiny, either as literary works or from the point of view of realism…. The problem of female foeticide remains unsolved primarily because it has been hijacked by the feminist movement” (205). Another, third type of review, treads the middle path between these extremes of approbation and censure. It variously faults Vaasanthi’s execution without at the

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554 I am thankful to the editor at Zubaan, Jaya Bhattacharji, as well as Vaasanthi for making many of these available to me.

555 It is only fair to Vaasanthi, I add, that this particular review is so badly done that it makes you wonder if the reviewer read the same novel.
same time discrediting her politics. Thus, Sushila Ravindranath believes, “Vaasanthi makes a strong case for gender justice and equality. But the way the issues are resolved are too pat and abrupt. Manohari’s relationship with her father remains a bit of a puzzle. How does she reconcile herself from [sic] the shock of her father wanting to marry again? Or of reminding her that he is the decision maker in the house?” (“The Right to Live”). Similarly, Uma Mahadevan-Dasgupta holds that “Manohari is a compelling character but when she reflects on her troubles, drawing tedious comparisons from the epics, the prose becomes, prescriptive, even shrill.” That granted, however, “On the whole [she maintains] Birthright is defiant, disturbing and thought-provoking.” (“Still Life”). A summative assessment of the text in the smorgasbord of short reviews carried by a First City issue reads, “A serious book with an important social message, Birthright is direct and combative, but is extremely heavy going” (148). And Rema Nagarajan writes that the novel

  takes a hard look at the practice of female foeticide.... It is a straight and simply told story, the kind Vaasanthi is best known for among Tamil writers. Yet, the sudden and simplistic resolution of the whole novel in the last few pages is jarring. Her father declares she will be the one to light the funeral pyre, and Lo and Behold, a lifetime’s complexity is sorted out and in a literally overnight transformation she becomes a champion of the girl child. And quite incredulously, her patients buy her pitch to keep the female foetus[,] abandoning centuries of prejudice within minutes, instead of finding another clinic to drop the baby. (“Craving Dad’s Acceptance”)

My purpose in assembling these opinions here is two-fold. One, of course, is to reinforce (if such reinforcements be still required!) the role of gender as a critical and constitutive category of experience in the novel. Since whether good, bad or middling, the reviews, all, stress this aspect in their assessment of the text. But principally it is to set up a useful point of departure. Since, one way or the other, the reviews, all, also demonstrate a tendency to read the aforementioned “gender interest” as a one-track narrative of oppressed womanhood based upon an unproblematic fit posited between the perceptions of the protagonist and the meanings communicated by the text.

Granted, the title of the English translation, “Birthright,” invites a straightforward link to be made between the heroine’s circumstances and her struggle by supplying a name both for her lack as well as her desire. When combined with the
fact that it is Manohari’s first person narration that tells the story, there is, no
doubt, powerful textual inducement present to further encourage the kind of
interpretive stance I have noted above. To succumb to this solicitation, however,
is to get caught in the shallow and the obvious; it is to miss the forest for the trees,
in a manner of speaking.556 For, ultimately, it is not that Birthright’s feminism is
preachy or “shrill” or didactic or “expressionistic” as the reviewers see it—when
not entirely off the mark, these describe what is, at best, tangential and contingent
in the novel. Rather, the truth is that Birthright simply does not cut it much as a
feminist text if the measure of that feminism is supposed to be Manohari’s
ideological savvy. What that lady offers by and large is a variety of pop-feminism
capable of giving the heebie-jeebies to any seasoned feminist worth her pepper at
the turn of the last century. Her actions and thinking are not just theoretically
naïve for the most part of the novel; they are also practically self-indulgent and
irresponsible.

A more fruitful way of understanding Birthright, it seems to me, follows from a
slight shift in the focus of attention. It entails reading Birthright as Manohari’s
coming-of-age tale, as formerly, yes, but with a difference. Instead of taking the
protagonist’s views at face-value and as identical with, indeed, defining the
semantic pale of the narrative every step of the way, in other words, it entails
watching out for the discontinuities that mark the same. And why should this be
so? Because it is in the interstices of statement, comment, flashback and
description, eventually, the opportunity exists for an internal yet alternative
perspective to be gained on Manohari’s narration and all it signifies. At the very
least, such a subtext and counterpoint saves Birthright from coming across as
merely propaganda by suggesting other shades to its meaning. But more
importantly, the dialectic set up is better able to reconcile Birthright’s obvious

556 While “Birthright” can be misleading when read for a straightforward description, it works
extremely well as a problematisation of itself—birthright as inheritance and entitlement versus
birthright as swaraj. The Tamil name, “till the end” is better, on the other hand, literally speaking.
It directs attention, for clarification, to that part of the novel where attention is due, for till the end,
not much is certain in Birthright. Also unlike the blunt pugnacity of “Birthright,” it does not have
an in your face politics. This means readers can discover the text without too many preconceived
expectations/antagonisms that can sometimes get in the way.
gender concerns with its achieved style and substance. As perhaps expected, the rest of my essay is aimed at pressing precisely that last claim.

If a brief biographical profile were to be drawn from Manohari's narration, one that tracked her emotional state; took into account where she was coming from, where she was at, where she looked to go; and, covered all but her final experiences, it could well read something like the following:

- Manohari's past as she remembers it—roughly coincident with her childhood and early adolescence, it is a time of innocence (or ignorance, if that's your fancy) and security. During this phase, the sexist barbs of Paati and the strictures of Amma are powerless to puncture little Mana's high spirits since she is sure of the approval of one around whom their own lives revolve and to whom they defer, i.e., her father. Despite her more contentious relationship with her mother, she is also sure of the latter's love and, what's more important, is proud of her. A crucial component of her self-contentment, indeed, is the knowledge that she is cherished by both her parents; that they, in turn, command social respect and admiration; and most importantly, that they love, cherish and care for each other. All in all, in other words, a time of happiness.

- Manohari's present as she lives it—beginning with her late adolescence, when Appa toys with the thought of a second marriage to beget a male heir, and extending up to her early adulthood in the narrated present, it signifies a time of strife and suffering. Her father's moment of madness turns Manohari's world topsy-turvy: it shatters her illusions, destroys her self-assurance and poisons her mind. Thereafter, she is in a constant struggle to come to grips with her patrimony of pain. In her "present," then, Manohari is intensely insecure, angry, hurt, bitter, vulnerable and determined, with most of her actions as well as her relationships—whether familial, romantic, social or professional—conceived and
negotiated through the haze generated by that volatile cocktail of energies.

Manohari’s future as she desires it—the “scape” of her as-yet-to-be is dominated by two powerful, interconnected urges. On the one hand, Manohari looks forward to a time when her identity and position as Appa’s heir is established and accepted beyond doubt not just by society, but more importantly, by Appa himself. Indeed, the care she lavishes on him, though undoubtedly, an expression of her filial affection, is just as much a poignant “demand” that he recognise, approve and be content with her as his sole child. On the other, not unlike the “succession” proclaimed in the chant “The King is dead! Long live the King!” Manohari wishes for a future when she will be Appa. Evidence for this can be had in the sentiments she reveals vis-à-vis her father’s property. To quote her, “Every inch...every inch of that expanse of land was familiar to me. All those who worked on it were close to me—close enough for me to call them by their names. One day they were going to install me in Appa’s place, and go on with their lives” (22-23; emphasis added).

The chief utility of this incomplete graph, to my mind, is the light cast on Manohari’s narration. It is, of course, no secret that the story gets told from Manohari’s here-and-now, from her present. What the account above serves to do is emphasise how that present for the most part is also a state of extreme emotional turmoil. A detail, which can clue us in to the possibility that perhaps Manohari’s relation is not meant to be blindly trusted; that perhaps Manohari is an unreliable narrator—unreliable, mind you, not dishonest. Overall, therefore, the gloss ends up illuminating a rather handy textual basis for my critical enterprise. Since it is so “clued in” that I set out to unspool Manohari’s telling and thread together Birthright’s tale.

557 In the novel, Manohari recalls such statements to emphasise her naïveté vis-à-vis the settled gender prejudices of her society. The thought itself, her desire and its implications, she does not question.
Luckily, once on the lookout, proof of Manohari’s iffy dependability as a narrator is not hard to come by. In fact, it can be found at several points in her actions, her interactions, her perceptions, her opinions. Dictated by convenience, I present this scattered body of evidence under the rubric of a) her different relationships, and b) her intellectual make-up. Needless to say, in so doing, I only aspire to provide a persuasive sampling of some of the red-flag moments in the novel.

Three relationships stand out from others for being of particular importance in Manohari’s life. They are her relations with Amma, with Appa and with Shiva. The first two are vertical cross-generational blood bonds, while the third is a lateral, intra-generational, sexual-romantic contact. What’s startling is that in each of these relationships, Manohari shows herself prone to considerable misjudgement. With regard to her mother, for instance, one of the sore points in Manohari’s wounded psyche is the perceived lack of maternal support during her formative years. The way she tells it, Amma often teamed up with Paati to rain on her parade. Of a particularly galling incident, she says, “‘I am going to college! I am!’ I told my mother once when I was seventeen, as I sat eating dosais in the kitchen. She laughed as though I had made some kind of joke. Even today, I find it hard to forgive her for this. I’ve had to do battle for the simplest things…” (21).

Alternatively, then, this alleged maternal apathy and neglect is a melancholy riff that runs through most of the narrative, colouring Manohari’s understanding of the past and affecting her actions in the present. It is also germane to her perception of being a self-made woman who has done all her own fighting. Yet, as Appa’s disclosure towards the end of the text shows, Manohari has read her mother very wrong. As it transpires, that lady not only supported her daughter, she even had a significant, if not decisive, role to play in facilitating the very education Manohari is so proud throughout to have won by the dint of her own striving (141).
Similarly, Manohari displays a pronounced tendency to misconstrue her father’s motives. By way of example, consider the time that Appa returns after having performed the last rites for his friend, Pandurang. Manohari asks him why he had to do so? “Doesn’t he have children?” To which her father, no doubt insensitively, replies, “Just one daughter” (37). According to Manohari, “It felt like a slap in the face” (38). Feeling “badly let down” (40) by Appa’s responses, of course, would have been entirely understandable, if that were all. But smarting under what she takes to be a withering judgement on her, Manohari lets her fears run riot. On the one hand, she “imagined him standing under the shower and thinking: it’s just to escape this kind of thing happening to me that I agreed to get married a second time” (40). On the other, she second-guesses his actions. “[W]ith Pandurang’s death” his normally helpful, co-operative “behaviour took on a new meaning—Appa had been making people aware of his own need. When his time came... I too, only have a daughter. So when I close my eyes, it is you who must bring me ashore. What I did for Pandurang you must do for me” (41). In other words, she lets a thoughtless comment crystallise in her heart into dread certainty and then forevermore is both tortured by the mortification it inflicts on her and constrained to view everything through its distorting lens. Thus, later on when Appa is furious at her for having the presumption to make a gharjamai of Shiva without so much as a by-your-leave from him, “The words [again] fell like whiplashes” (63). Once more, Manohari immediately traces his anger and objections back to the fact of her being her father’s daughter and not his son. Divining his rationale, she says, “Because I was born female, I could never become a permanent member of this household, I just didn’t have the right. A son-in-law with unknown antecedents and prospects could not be accepted, the way a daughter-in-law with unknown prospects could...” (65). Or, when he seems reluctant to discuss his business matters with her, Manohari readily gets into tizzy believing the lie that Shiva feeds her about her father’s plans to adopt a male heir before his death. Indeed, such is the canker of her suspicion that even when a hospitalised Appa agrees to her match with Shiva, Manohari is perversely satisfied only with a selfish cause to explain his decision. In her words, “I didn’t have to look very far to discover the
reason for his change of her heart. It was fear, fear because he was now conscious of his need to have me by his side. If I were to stay with him, then there was no way but to allow a stranger in the house...” (100). As in the case of her mother, however, the end of the novel demonstrates how far off the mark Manohari has been vis-à-vis her father. Not only does that gent not adopt a male heir before his death, he also “wills” it so that only Manohari lights his funeral pyre. His disinclination to talk business with her, it turns out, is not because of some nefarious design to disinherit her as assumed by Manohari, but simply because he did not want to burden Manohari over and above the demands already placed on her in her high-pressured profession: “It is not that the company affairs should not be told to you. Why should I burden you with all that, as well—that’s what I thought” (139). As for his outburst over Manohari’s matrimonial arrangement with Shiva, though never explicitly explained in the text, this can, with hindsight, be traced to the sharp downturn in his business affairs. On the one hand, as someone confronted with a potential clean-out business-wise, blustering proprietary statements such as “This is my house,” is almost to be expected (though not by that token either justified or perpetuated) given his socialisation—it’s a means of asserting a fast disintegrating authority over a “soft” target. On the other, once again given his financial situation, it is obvious that Manohari’s independent agreement with Shiva is both inopportune as well as needlessly complicating at that conjuncture. For, if Shiva is a gold digger, then associating with him could only spell unhappiness for Manohari. And if he is not, then asking someone to uproot themselves from a well-settled life elsewhere and relocate in the middle of nowhere and that too when your own finances were tight is far from sound thinking and very near bad faith. In other words, Appa’s anger on that occasion can reasonably be attributed to the confused expression of a hurt ego, insecurity, anxiety and practical concern rather than any settled gender prejudice as understood by Manohari.

Which leaves her relationship with Shiva to consider. Here, too, Manohari stands exposed in the end for having been on the wrong track about her suitor. Only this
time round she errs on the flip side. This time round, she is too trusting by far. When Shiva abruptly renews his once, rather tetchily, aborted courtship, singing an altogether different tune, Manohari is thrilled by his love-song. So thrilled that she does not pause to wonder either at the sudden transformation in her born-again Romeo or the whirlwind pace at which he tries to conduct their romance and see it through to its institutional culmination, i.e., marriage. Love, of course, has been used to excuse a zillion oddities from time immemorial. And Shiva invokes it often and loudly in his defense. What’s surprising is how easily Manohari buys his pitch. Since both in the depiction and description of their earlier interactions as well as in Manohari’s own feelings towards him, there is very little to support the storm of passion, the deep and total compatibility that supposedly spurs Shiva. Rather, their attraction seems to be of a superficial and physical nature more than anything else, a yin-yang balancing out in its most literal, sexual form; one, furthermore, which either party could walk away from with little other save a dented ego. In such circumstances, if Manohari were at all thinking straight, Shiva’s hyperbolic protestations of love should have set some red lights flashing in her mind. Instead, with almost zero misgivings and ample self-congratulation, Manohari chooses to believe him. Needless to say, it comes as no surprise when in the end Shiva is discovered to be a fraud and Manohari is exposed once again to be an unreliable judge of character. In fact, Manohari’s self-delusion in the affair stands underscored when in response to the damning revelations about Shiva contained in Kamalini’s letter at the end, she says, “The words had not particularly shocked me. Small things he said and did, some of the movements he made, even the most minute, the smallest things he did had been continuously sending me warning signals” (146).

If these relationships caution against an exclusive dependence on, or a blind acceptance of, Manohari’s perceptions, then the underlying assumptions and implications in some of her statements and actions, advice a like guardedness vis-

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558 This is actually what is witnessed when they had indeed decided to call it quits. Manohari felt relieved in the immediate aftermath of that decision (2). Later on, the vulnerability she feels is not so much to do with Shiva as with his parting shot, which had a touched a raw nerve of sorts (18).
à-vis her thinking and value-system. Take, for instance, the two conversations that Manohari has—one with Raasamma and the other with Kamalini. On the first occasion, the subject at issue is the criteria for deciding a woman’s worth. To quote Manohari,

Washed and refreshed, I went to the dining table. Along with the coffee, Raasamma brought a newspaper and placed it before me. That was what was always done for Appa, and ever since I opened my clinic and set up practice, it’s done for me too. “You are also working, no? As much as any man? For that you should get proper respect or not?” said Raasamma one day. “Is it only after seeing how I compare with a man that you’ll give me respect Raasamma?” I teased. When she laughed and said, “That is the usual custom, ‘kka!’ I had to shut up. (5)

Of the second, when Kamalini visited her for the first time, Manohari says,

Kamalini... was a bit startled by the cool dexterity with which I handle such cases. “Is it really you, Mano, doing such things? Under the law, it’s a crime, Mano.” [After watching the lusty capers of an unsuspecting female foetus that shows up on the scan screen, Kamalini asks.] “Do you still have the heart to do it, after you’ve seen this.... Smiling a little, my eyes still on the screen, I told her, “You wouldn’t understand how merciful a creature I really am.” “Merciful my foot!” Kamalini retorted, disgusted. I wasn’t prepared to get into an argument with her. Every argument is useless, utterly futile. Arguing about this thing with a person who doesn’t have the slightest idea what it is to breathe the air of these parts is especially meaningless. (11)

Both passages end with Manohari keeping her peace and her counsel. Only, in the former, her silence is tacit agreement with Raasamma’s conflation of value with custom while in the latter, it is a refusal to engage with another perspective. But it is not this likeness in conclusion or difference in detail so much as a broader underlying similarity in the rationale that guides Manohari in either of these instances which leads me to pose them here in juxtaposition. For, discernible therein is the imprimatur of victimhood, an abiding conviction, that is, of being both helpless and persecuted. My point is that if Raasamma shows herself fatalistic in this wise, it is perhaps excusable. After all, she is both gender and class oppressed. Manohari’s education, her professional training, her independent earning capacity, her family wealth, her position and standing in Birthright’s world, however, renders the adoption of any such stance on her part ultimately dishonest, irresponsible and self-indulgent. It is also contradicted by her practice. Since her entire endeavour to gain acknowledgement in her own right, indeed, her
entire life-course, belies her belief that where she lives custom is law and that law, unchangeable.\textsuperscript{559}

Then again, when Manohari confesses that “[e]very once in a while I have a peculiar sensation of being connected to all the women who come to my clinic, by bonds that exist beyond this birth. Embracing their concerns is like recruiting an army, all by myself, for my own cause” (10), the overall impression sought to be conveyed is of a Richesque “lesbian continuum” of empathy. Yet, and without calling into question her sympathy, it is very hard to ignore the utilitarian implications of the second sentence. Does Manohari make instrumental use of other women’s plight to advance and/or sustain her own agenda? Unfortunately, the answer is yes. That Manohari feeds off their pain is in itself not the issue. Some form of transference and counter-transference, projection and introjection is almost inevitable in any social interaction. The more troubling phenomenon is that which is facilitated by and manifested in her medical malpractice. For, apart from the mercy she undoubtedly feels for her foetal targets, and which she says guides her actions, Manohari here is also complicit in reinforcing and perpetuating the very misogynistic system under which “the family of womankind in general” (27) suffers. In other words, she is complicit in reinforcing and perpetuating their pain. When this pain becomes, as it does for Manohari, a source of added justification in her personal crusade, inflaming her anger, keeping her hurt and humiliation ever raw and bleeding, then it is well-nigh impossible to gainsay some form of parasitism in her thinking and her actions.

Another, related point, concerns Manohari’s attitude towards the locals, especially, those dependent on her or her family in some way or the other. It is not that Manohari is insincere when she says things like:

\textsuperscript{559} A little later, under considerable emotional strain, and as part of an on-going dialogue with herself, she says, “Don’t talk to me about the law, it has no meaning at all. Society is one thing, the law is another. But here law is just what society decides. Does your law say that a son—a putitiran—is essential for an escape from the hell they call Put? Among our people that is the law” (43).
I am Big Sister to practically everybody here, except old Muniappan, the gardener. These people have been with us for two or three generations. To the entire third generation I am ‘Akka,’ and when they call me that I feel the burden of all those generations pressing down upon me. I fantasize that my very security is bound up in that closeness. More than their need for me is my need for them... (5)

But that such sentiments issue from a kind of benevolent paternalism. This reading is consistent, for instance, with the earlier mentioned wish Manohari cherishes to be Appa’s successor, to have the very same people under the spotlight here, “install [her] in Appa’s place, and go on with their lives” (23). Since what Manohari wants, as the word “install” suggests, is to be acknowledged as a kind of presiding deity among the local populace; she sees herself more in terms of a munificent patron, that is, than a compassionate partner. It also squares with the condescension that often laces Manohari’s thoughts about the “way,” the mentality, of Muniappan, Maanikkam, Raasamma, et al., condescension that sometimes lapses into plain impatience and/or contempt for the same. Nowhere is this slide more apparent than on the occasion when Manohari loses her temper with Raasamma for the latter’s interfering ways; when fuming inwardly, that is, she wonders, “why should you be so very bothered about his welfare! For the salary you get all you have to do is boil rice and dish it out twice daily. What makes you fit to do anything more than that? ...” (18).560 To repeat myself, therefore, Manohari’s affections for the local populace is sourced in a type of benevolent paternalism. As with most forms of paternalism, here too, the problem is that Manohari’s attitude is largely self-edifying. Furthermore, her magnanimity and attachment, far from erasing hierarchical distinctions, actually thrives on them. The danger, ultimately, is of a solipsism in practice, even when not professed in theory.

Cumulatively, credible textual evidence, clearly, for not swallowing Manohari’s spiel lock, stock and barrel. Yet she is far from discredited by the text. That eventuality would have required Birthright to be ironic in its treatment and tone, which it most definitely is not. Manohari is no parody of a heroine. She is the real

560 Although this is a momentary lapse and as she goes on to tell us, “Abruptly I calmed myself. That was the way Raasamma talked. There was no point getting worked up about it” (18), the scorn she has for Raasamma’s skills as well as her understanding are hard to deny.
thing and no two ways about it. So how does the novel manage to both support and critique Manohari at one and the same time? By validating her pain but invalidating her analgesic, could be one way of putting it.

What is Manohari’s pain? It’s the wound of being born a healthy girl child in an unhealthy sexist world, where, no matter what she does, she is just not good enough in her own person. What does she believe is the balm for it? “A Certificate of Approval” from society in general, but especially, from her father, i.e., the figure practically and ideologically invested with ultimate authority in patriarchies. The novel justifies and sympathises, in my opinion, with Manohari’s angst. It questions, however, her chosen method as well as means of achieving pain-relief. This is a subtle but important distinction that allows the novel,

1. through the depiction of Manohari’s hurt, to highlight the bane of gender discrimination,
2. through the elucidation of Manohari’s fears, excesses and setbacks, to delineate the limitations of dominant forms of protest adopted against institutionalised sexism, and,
3. through the lessons inscribed in Manohari’s learning graph, to touch upon another, more non-oppressive modality of being and relating—with that last being the very point of it all. My immediate concern is with identifying the different ideological co-ordinates through which this narrative resolution of self, other and desire gets worked out in Birthright, an exercise, I believe, that is crucial to understanding the text’s idea of social transformation.

Briefly, the problem that Birthright highlights is of traditional provenance—son-preference being an institutionalised feature of feudal patriarchal set-ups. Both, the text, and its protagonist seem agreed on this point. As already mentioned, the rural-suburban milieu of the novel’s setting does duty for traditional Tamil Nadu, literally, and traditional India, figuratively. Manohari’s trauma, according to the text and in her view, is because of having been born in/ro this tradition. For, systematically it withholds approval from her person in the course of her
upbringing. This is clearly shown (in the narrative), and nebulously understood (by the protagonist), to have a dual fallout. On the one hand, it psychologically maims Manohari, robbing her of self-esteem through constant deprecation. On the other, it whets her hunger for approval—thus delivering her to the dominion of a painful double bind.

Traditionally, of course, the practice of gender mortification is quite programmatic: it being meant to cultivate in women a certain streak of masochism, to ease them into habits of clingy dependency, indirection, submission and self-abnegation so imperative to their roles as satellites of stellar males. Wounded by its regimen, Manohari, however, resists “feminisation” in the traditional mould. Instead, she dons the garb of another identity, one tailored by the discourse of modernity.

And where does she find access to this other signature. As it happens, just outside the threshold of her home—with “home” there being a neat, though hackneyed, synecdoche for the traditional. For, if Manohari is born into the bosom of conservatism, then she is equally a foster-child of modernity. Both, Periyar’s Self-Respect Movement, which radically mapped the political and public topography of present-day Tamil Nadu, as also the Indian Constitution, which charts the character and comportment of the nation, are discourses and documents of modernity. As a citizen of India and as a Tamilian, Manohari encounters, this other identity during her early years through the media of state approved or nationally certified curricula of formal education, formal education that, in confirmation of India’s new avatar as an independent nation-state, is standard practice even for girls among the well-to-do though tradition-bound families. Schooled, thus, in and within the broad parameters of modernity, Manohari actively embraces its credos, opportunities and values for self-affirmation. To heal the wound inflicted by tradition, she becomes a doctor in modern medicine.
There lies the rub of it, though. For the text does not share Manohari’s faith in modernity to quite the same degree. Its reservations about both the practices and ideologies of modernity come through in some of the ways in which the latter manifest in the narrative. Take, for instance, the cardboard cameo of Jayalalitha. Both as Party Chief of the AIADMK, in other words, one of the present day claimants of Periyar’s legacy, and as Chief Minister of the state, Jayalalitha is an immediately recognisable symbol of political modernity. Describing her appearance “[o]n the gigantic poster … that stood at the street corner,” the narrative notes, “right under her broad smile were the words: WE SHALL GIVE EQUAL RIGHTS TO WOMEN. Like the gracious blessing of the Paramacharya himself” (3). Brief and fleeting as this image is, it manages to shine quite a light on the reigning state of affairs. By comparing Jayalalitha, a secular head, to the Paramacharya, a head in the old religious dispensation, Birthright implicitly begs the question if what is embraced as new and path-breaking may not possibly be some old wine in new bottles; especially since the likeness drawn is not just in terms of tone, and style and gestures (though that would be pause for thought enough) but in terms of the underlying logic of their pronouncements, the position from which they speak, promise, grant, grace, bless or what-have-you. After all, what difference can it make, really, if it was the Paramacharya who denied women “equal rights” according to traditional diktat or Jayalalitha who promises to “give” them the same according to modern niceties. For, eventually, what Jayalalitha giveth, Jayalalitha can taketh away, and women remain as merely passive recipients, whether of religious stricture or state largesse. The novel by exposing this power dynamic, I believe, solicits a re-look at the mandarins of the new social order, their workings and their promises. It also identifies an illogic at the heart of modern societies, which pride themselves on individualism and are loud with the discourse of rights, yet systematically vest power and authority outside of individuals in organs of the state. Birthright, in my opinion, is neither very taken with this aspect of modernity nor by extension with those whose idea

561 For an account of some of the issues that were debated by women Self-Respecters, read K Srilata, *The Other Half of the Coconut*.
of reform focusses all too exclusively on impersonal, institutional bodies and statutory norms.\footnote{The novel is not very taken, for instance, with a certain kind of academic feminism. In Kamalini, it suspects the jet-set type, researching “subjects”—in this case, “women working in the fields” for their folksongs—they seem to have neither much empathy with or respect for nor any understanding of or indeed interest in, except perhaps as professional stepladders (11-14).}

Another ambivalence the novel highlights relates to techno-modernity. By this I specifically mean all the gizmos and gadgery that are par for the course in modern and modernising societies. In Birthright these are the TV, the car and motorbike, the photographs, and, of course, the pre-natal diagnostic scan screen. The first of these beams content such as the serialised epics or dopey love sagas. Well-to-do men, whether traditional or modern, own the second—an index of social and physical mobility.\footnote{On the one occasion that Manohari drives the car much is made of the fact.} The third are pictures of film stars, more particularly of MGR, before which uneducated, poor, lonely women genuflect, trying to come to grips with their prematurely desexualised, compulsorily austere existence. And the fourth helps identify female foetuses in the womb for routine weeding out to make way for sons. Each of these is a product of modern technology. In the novel, they are shown not only infiltrating the old world but also actually melding with it to sharpen traditional prejudice. This value-neutrality of techno-modernity, the ease with which it melds with the traditional for a certain price to become “high-tech sexism” (Sen, The Argumentative Indian 226), is something that Birthright repeatedly points out and critiques.

Then there is the matter of Manohari’s crusade and the manner of its conduct. It would, of course, be cruel, cruel irony that a woman who is fighting for her own birthright, indeed, is extremely sensitive about her “inheritance of loss” and fiercely passionate about her mission of reclamation, should have a hand in denying others their right even to be born. Yet, that is precisely the twisted scenario scripted by Manohari’s malpractice. No amount of angst can make venial its parasitic quality. To blame, ultimately, is an extreme individualism that makes
it difficult for Manohari to recognise absolute value in another's experience—her own must always take precedence. This is also evident, for instance, in the brusque manner in which she shoos away a desperate Akila when that wretched woman intrudes upon a private moment of triumph for Manohari. *Birthright* looks seriously askance at the worth of such thinking for achieving any social justice worth the name. Inasmuch as modernity idealises this mode of being, needless to say, the novel’s skepticism extends to it.

Ideologically, modernity stands faulted on a separate count as well. Speaking about the phenomenon of Mangamma-worship, Manohari informs, “Those tears, the melodrama that these people had created for themselves, the hysteria that they summoned up around it—in the beginning all this used to annoy me. They are the sort who cry at movies, I used to say, exasperated...” (27). Glimpsed here in muted form is the rational-scientific bias of modern thought, which systematically denigrates as “melodrama,” superstition or backwardness, all that escapes its empiricist epistemology. For most of her young adult life, it can be gathered from the text that Manohari has precisely such conscious predilections. Discredited in her eyes, that is to say, are all the world of feeling and imagination, not to mention anything occult or metaphysical. *Birthright*, however, affirms the intangibles of human experience. What it shows up, instead, is the inadequacy of instrumental rationality to explain or understand the non-quantifiable—other than pathologising, dismissing or repressing it, that is.

On all these points, then, there is a subtle fork to be discerned between Manohari’s narrative and the textual perspective. It is a division, however, which does not persist till the end. Indeed, it could not have done so without destroying Manohari’s position as the heroine-protagonist of the text. As already mentioned, *Birthright*, is not interested in undermining the importance of its central character. So how does the novel manage to sustain a split in perception through much of the narrative and synthesise it in conclusion? By making “difference” (in the form of tradition and/or modernity) occur as an intrinsic part of Manohari’s road to
maturity; as nodes of tension, frustration, dissonance and turmoil, in other words, which she must encounter and work through to best the demons of her wounded psyche. Manohari’s heroism, in fact, lies in not cheating here, in not taking the easy way out, in displaying, rather, the courage to acknowledge and engage the uncomfortable contradictions of her situation, her socialisation, her learning, her actions and her desires. Via this process, she ultimately arrives at an understanding, which, I believe, *Birthright* upholds as key to both personal as well as social well-being.

And what might that be? In one word, and bringing my argument full circle or thereabouts, that, would be *swaraj*. Manohari, of course, does not present her changed cognition in the form of a full-fledged theory or even a well-defined set of statements. Neither does she put a name to it. The conceptual contours of the transformation, thus, remain to be extrapolated from the shape and substance of her life and the narrative. *Swaraj* seems an apt description because the most important message that I find *Birthright* inscribing and Manohari realising, to be along the lines of the ancient admonition “Healer, Heal Thyself.” Healer, heal thyself ... for no one else can, to be more precise. I am persuaded in this inference by the way in which Manohari is circumstanced towards the end of the novel.

One by one, as it draws to a close, *Birthright* strips Manohari of her different kinds of safety covers. At the novel’s finish, Manohari is without her father—he is dead, without much of an inheritance—Appa’s business has gone bankrupt, and without Shiva—he turns out to love, not Manohari, but her assumed wealth. In other words, she is without those props, buffers and crutches that through traditional and/or modern socialisation people are handicapped into considering indispensable for their self validation and security.\textsuperscript{564} Being so ruthlessly divested,

\textsuperscript{564} From the traditional standpoint, Manohari’s situation is dire: as a woman without a father, a brother, a husband or a son, her life simply cannot have much legitimacy irrespective of whether she has wealth or no. By modern conventions, her case is not so hopeless in principle, but in practice, it is only marginally better. Her father’s death still means a loss of the guardian-figure. Her inheritance fizzling out means she has to earn her living. Hardly a happy prospect that, in a world where financial security is equated, not with adequate income as one might think, but with
Manohari should normally have been the very picture of misery and helplessness. The end of the novel, however, shows a heroine who is both at peace with herself and positively charged. What accounts for this anomaly?

According to Vasantha Surya, "As Mano tells her story, a persuasive argument emerges for enlightened fatherhood, which alone can set right the skewed relationship between the sexes" (Translator's Introduction x; emphasis added), thus pointing to Appa's deathbed doings as the explanation. Without in any wise diminishing the importance of Appa's unequivocal profession of love for his daughter at the end, I believe, focussing on it in isolation is an error and misreads the central thrust of the novel. 565 No doubt, enlightened fatherhood, enlightened motherhood, enlightened brotherhood, enlightened sisterhood and enlightened companionship are all important. But they are of not much use in the absence of enlightened selfhood. What Manohari exhibits in conclusion, I submit, is a self that is mistress of its own destiny, such as it can be. The lightness of spirit, the relief, the calm she experiences is the corollary of self-acceptance, warts and all. It is the release from playing by another's rules, from living up to another's standards, from wanting another's approval, from dreading another's disapproval, from being fearful about expressing one's love, from being scared about exposing one's hurt, from being apprehensive about admitting one's anger, from being terrified to let go of either that anger or that hurt, from being unwilling to forget and afraid to forgive, from being unable to be or become. 566 Underscoring this fact for me is her serene solitariness, a solitariness, which suggests that she has

surplus wealth; where the accepted view, in fact, is that the fatter your bank balance, the greater your legitimacy. As for the break-up with Shiva, this leaves her alone—a dreadful condition since it announces her failure in the mating game, since it robs her of the personal legitimacy that comes with being normatively partnered. Theoretically, to repeat myself, then, modernity does not dispute Manohari's legitimacy just because she happens to be a single woman; indeed it will assert her "human rights." Practically, however, she is leached of it even within the modern paradigm.

565 If enlightened fatherhood, only, can trigger change, then all agency is once again located outside women, indeed, it is a call for patriarchy, albeit of a modified sort. Hardly the most helpful position when it's the empowerment of women that is at issue.

566 By the end of the novel, Manohari has found the courage to own up to her love for her father, irrespective of whether her father can make peace with his demons or no.
learnt the lesson of self-reliance, not just of the “economic independence” variety but a more fundamental sort—what I have called here swaraj.

This transformation is not some sudden precipitation of grace from on-high, either. Although not exactly in the order of a foregone conclusion, it is nonetheless a culmination of Manohari’s desire for self-validation. In that quest, as mentioned before, she is both unswerving and honest. And visible in the contradictions it brings her way are the seeds of swaraj that come to fruition with the novel’s denouement. Thus, for instance, Shiva’s opinion, “if you don’t give up this obstinacy of yours, you’re just going to end up all alone” is prickly enough to “jab at [her] like thorns” (4) and keep coming back to haunt her. Yet, it also forces her to confront the spectre of loneliness that spooks out many a wayfarer on the road to self-affirmation. To quote her, “I resolved to myself: if that is the only way I can win, then loneliness is no big thing. You have your goal, and I have mine. You say my way is not the world’s way. I say I’ll make the world go my way. You don’t want to go this way? Well then, just go away” (30). Similarly, “Paati’s well-remembered taunt (‘You can’t become a man!’) still arouse[d] in [her] a feeling of uselessness, that I’m an in-between creature good for neither this nor that. And that produce[d] a defiant ‘I’ll show you what I can do, just wait and see!’ kind of reaction” (22), which was hardly helpful. But driven by the perversity of a culture and a people that insisted on judging her only in terms of how she compared with a man, Manohari also comes to the realisation that “I don’t want to become a man” (42). It’s a fact, likewise, that at different points in the novel, Manohari affirms the intractability of social customs. Yet, when pushed to the wall by the perceived weight of those same customs, she also says, “I will change it. Traditions must be broken” (49). Then again, thrilled by the apparent capitulation of Shiva to her demands, Manohari informs,

My self-esteem had risen to a lofty eminence. I felt like an empress reigning over the whole wide earth...Like rajas and ranis in the movies who take off their fake pearl necklaces and grandly bestow them on supplicants, I was in a mood to slip off whatever jewellery I wore on my neck and wrists and present it to the first person who approached me for any help. Such was the inordinate benevolence bubbling up in my breast. Compassion! (55)
However, when a dispirited Akila materialises, at the end of her tether and begging for help, Manohari finds her expansive mood dissipating fast. To quote her,

In a flash, I lost my temper. The compassion that had bubbled up in me a little while ago, was maya. Illusion. It had come out of a feeling of self-satisfaction. Besides, this woman is a caricature, a symbol of sheer defeatism. The way I am now, I don’t wish to acknowledge the slightest trace of failure.... It burned me up that she had utterly ruined my mood. Appa would be waiting for me for lunch. I had planned to speak to him persuasively about Shiva’s letter. I felt furious that this woman had wrecked it all. (58-59)

Learning of Akila’s suicide later, she is forced to acknowledge her own selfishness and culpability in that woman’s death. As she says, “[w]ith uncomfortable aptness, a kural came to mind: ‘Greater than the entire universe is a small act of helpfulness, when given well in time’” (83-84). So, whether it is the endurance and discipline to go it alone, a certain comfort in one’s own skin or empathy for another’s plight, the course of Manohari’s life-struggles reveal in incipient form the emancipative awareness that comes into bloom by the end of the novel.

What remains is to clarify the ideological shape of the intervention that Birthright conceives. As already noted, Manohari starts off with looking to modernity to set right the wrongs of traditional prejudice. By the end of the novel, however, she has learnt better. One reason definitely is that identified by Vasantha Surya, namely, “[t]he modernizing process, far from eliminating patriarchy, has often reinforced it because it has been so uneven. Existing inequalities of class, caste and community have deepened and with the spread of consumerist life-styles they have strengthened ingrained gender biases” (Translator’s Introduction vii). But this is just part of Birthright’s dissatisfaction with modernity, ultimately not even the major part, in fact. According to such reasoning, Birthright is unhappy only with the patchiness of modernisation. By implication, what Birthright then demands is, presumably, an acceleration and extension of the process, simply more and complete modernity, in other words. Yet, this is far from borne out by the text. While highlighting and criticising the unevenness of the modernising process, Birthright is finally also unconvinced about modernity’s potential to
provide any sustainable solution in, and of, itself. In the novel’s viewpoint, modernity with its me-first emphasis, its technocracy, is more or less an experience of ego massage—welcome, no doubt, even necessary, perhaps, up to a point for a female subjectivity battered by traditional sexism. The problem lies in accepting its ministrations, insights and directions in toto. For, in the name of equal rights what modernity does is offer, indeed urge, the second sex to experience and make its own, the hubris of socialised megalomania a.k.a. masculinity. The result can only be a repeat performance, with a more varied troupe of players, of course, but set to enact the same folly. Besides this, and to restate the point, modernity with its emphasis on the material, the quantitative, the rational, and the objective systematically marginalises and estranges aspects of human experience that scramble its grids of intelligibility. Indeed, Manohari admits as much, when she confesses to a change of heart vis-à-vis Mangamma-worship. Where earlier her attitude could be characterised as a mix of distance and derision, “in the last few years,” she admits to an infusion of desire. To quote her, “I feel as if I have changed and become one of them. My life in the city, the acquisition of higher education, a comfortable existence without financial worries—it seems to me that these fragile layers in which I am wrapped are slowly being removed, one by one...” (27).

So what, then? Does Birthright envisage a return to the traditional? Manohari’s confession above seems to point in that direction. Moreover, since the problem is of a wholly traditional provenance, would it not be neat that the solution was also entirely sourced in the traditional? Of course. The novel, however, does not oblige such sensitivities on neatness. If modernity’s politics of assertion, its polemics of rights, attracts the text’s censure as also skepticism, then tradition’s rhetoric of service, its discourse of duty, bhakti and renunciation is not exactly spared either.

On the one hand, it exposes the gynophobia of the traditional dispositif:

Our epics and legends say that a woman who wants to achieve anything at all must renounce not only sexual desire, but every sign of femaleness. And so women poets-saints like the great Auvaiyar, and Karaikkaal Ammaiyar renounced the full glory of their youth, not wishing to be distracted from their spiritual goals. Kannagi plucked out her breast and flung it at the doomed city of Madurai, burning it to
ashes. Andaal threatened to pluck out hers if her divine lover delayed their union.

(49) On the other, Periamma’s dependency-blighted fate as it gets fleshed out in the text is sufficient warning against looking at the traditionally decreed stridharma of pativrata devotion and self-abnegation with schmaltzy eyes. Furthermore, the virtual parade of lives (mostly female but also male) made miserable by conventional injunctions through its pages means Birthright cannot in the final analysis be seen as advocating any sort of simple-minded return to the traditional—even if such a return were possible, that is.

The swaraj that Birthright envisions then as the resolution of the tricky dialectic of self, other and desire is neither exclusively modern nor traditional in inspiration. And that provides a vital clue to its make-up. For the principal dynamic exhibited towards the end of the novel is integration and integrity, integration with integrity, of that which has been variously sundered by tradition and modernity, i.e., the rational and the emotional, the material and the moral, the personal and the political, the empirical and the experiential, the socialised masculine and the socialised feminine. This makes it different, for instance, from the Gandhian rendering of the idea cited earlier. Gandhi’s swaraj, its radicalism notwithstanding, still places a disproportionate emphasis in practice on what has been and so supposedly is as opposed to what may be (even if it has not been so far). 567 Willy-nilly, it is fixated on purity. The result, methodologically, is repression and sublimation as demanded by a pre-determined telos rather than openness, acceptance, integration and transformation. Swaraj, for Birthright, in contrast, I am arguing, signifies the latter set of experiences. It is a condition that

567 This is especially so vis-à-vis gender. Gandhi’s valorisation of the feminine as the inspiration and stuff of his politics, paradoxically, cages women in their traditional passivity. However useful Gandhian “effeminacy” may have been in countering colonial hyper-masculinity, its bisexuality was male. My point is that in the absence of any other legitimate alternative and given their institutionalised dependency on a variety of counts, femininity for women was more likely to be a necessary convention than an experience of satya or satyagraha, swaraj or sacrifice. For a useful introduction to Gandhian swaraj, refer to Anthony J. Pare! ed., Gandhi, Freedom and Self-Rule. For an account of Gandhi’s bi/sexual politics, read Ashis Nandy, The Intimate Enemy. For an account of the implications for women of Gandhi’s bi/sexual politics, read Sujata Patel, “Construction and Reconstruction of Women in Gandhi” and Karuna Chanana, “Gandhi, Women’s Roles and the Freedom Movement.” Best of all, read the man himself.
is self-enabling, not self-denying. It is also self-authorising, yet not, by that token, solipsistic and alienating. This is because it does not understand the self–other equation in terms of an absolute and antagonistic binary. Rather, from its standpoint, the act of recognising one's self and that self's rights, is inseparable from realising one's responsibility to the other. Apart from Manohari's actions at the end, which I will come to in a moment, there is another episode in the novel that encourages me to advance this interpretation. Seemingly extraneous and unnecessary, in retrospect, the description of the Bommallattam puppet show, assumes significance because it contains an insight that is key to Birthright's delineation of swaraj. To quote Manohari,

The Bommallattam performances took place during the summer holidays.... They would place a special chair for Amma in front of the puppet box, but she would always refuse and would sit on the... mat with everyone else. The peasants' wives would sit a little way off, but somehow the distance between them would disappear a few minutes after the show began, as Nalla Thangaal's sorrow and Draupadi's agony took hold of everybody. "Bommallattam is not meant to be watched sitting on a chair," Amma said once. "Why?" I asked her. "Look at it from here," she said, pulling me down beside her. With my head on her lap I looked at the stage. The men who stood behind and animated the puppets came into view. From that day on I stopped looking at the puppets and began to watch the men behind the scenes. Transformed into Nalla Thangaal and Draupadi, the puppeteers lived their humiliation and their grief. I found it astonishing that they shed real tears. The miracle of the puppeteer becoming one with his puppet would throw me into a kind of daze. (47-48)

Embedded in that miracle of the puppet and the puppeteer becoming one, in the shrinking distance between peasant women and feudal lady is no doubt the rasanubhava of traditional aesthetics but also, I submit, the secret of the self–other puzzle which Amma perceived but could not build on, and which Manohari must comprehend, to heal herself.568

And so to Manohari's final act in the novel. It consists in refusing to perform female foeticide any longer. What's more, citing Mangamma as the rationale for her refusal. "Last full moon" Manohari tells her patient, "during the pujai

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568 Manohari recounts a similar incident of melting barriers when she takes Kamalini to the village women to record their songs (14). While rasanubhava is said to belong to the discursive register of classical aesthetics but also, I submit, the secret of the self–other puzzle which Amma perceived but could not build on, and which Manohari must comprehend, to heal herself. For a handy exposition of rasa theory, refer to N. Balasubrahmanya, trans., Indian Poetics, among others.
Mangamma’s spirit came and said that from now onwards all the girl children who are born in this clinic are going to bring great prosperity to their parents’ homes” (146). I would say this is a masterstroke in conclusion for two reasons. The first concerns the Mangamma-myth. On the one hand, invoking Mangamma to help bring about a change in consciousness recognises the legitimacy and power of myths as constellations and purveyors of affective, imaginative, intuitive and subliminal apprehensions of a people and as modular archetypes. On the other, giving a radical twist to the Mangamma-myth points the way forward. Firstly, it underlines how myths about women as these currently exist in popular view are unsatisfactory because one-sided, giving expressive scope only to a kind of Nietzschean ressentiment. Secondly, through the sudden birth and crystallisation of the Mangamma legend, it demonstrates that myths are far from static and closed to invention or innovation. Ergo, high time and cause enough, Birthright suggests, for women to realise their authority, to become self-authored and self-authorising, to transform cultural scripts steeped in negativity, fear and pain into narratives that reflect, support and inspire positive agency, self-belief and hope. The second relates to Manohari and the overall thrust of the novel: if Manohari’s refusal and attempt to engage and persuade reveals the active responsibility towards the other, mentioned above, then her decision to intervene and positively accent the Mangamma-myth stresses her newly gained authority, as she is confident enough to be autonomously creative and transformative. Both aspects ultimately confirm her changed consciousness and they do so in terms of the idea of swaraj, which, I believe, the novel deems critical to personal and social health.

Reviewers, as shown earlier, have arraigned Birthright for passing off mere pablum as narrative resolution. In conclusion, let me reiterate that this is unfair criticism. The novel does not end with the struggle against traditional and modern prejudice having been won. We don’t know for sure that Ranjitham, the patient

569 Indeed, it is in this sense that I had meant, that Mangamma, despite starting off as a reactive “cultural prop” and “shock absorber,” had the potential to also become original and genuinely therapeutic.
who comes to Manohari in the last scene is convinced to keep her baby girl. What we do know is that Manohari’s intervention presents her with the possibility of an alternative way. It may well be that she finds another clinic to drop her bundle. The novel does not rule out that possibility. Neither does its tinkering with the Mangamma-myth mean that all one needs to do is tell a different story, and hey presto, problem solved. Birthright is just as aware as the next feminist text that “reform to property rights and practices, to employment and its gender proscriptions, to education and health—and their relations of access—and to kinship relations” (Harriss-White, “Gender-cleansing” 149) are all necessary before we can successfully see the back of institutionalised misogyny. 570 What it does show at the end is a heroine who has worked through her socially inscribed personal hell to emerge determined a) not to be complicit in her own damnation any more, and b) to try everything in her capacity to help the cause for change.

The conceptual metaphor of swaraj through which I have argued this resolution is reached, means, of course, that Birthright considers each person responsible if not for desiring their emasculation, then definitely for suffering it. This is not about blaming the victim so as to be done with it but about recognising, each without exception, our agency, our part, in the tangle and the tango of life and living. 571 In any case, the way swaraj is conceived in Birthright no justice, no liberation can be secured for the self through and in the denial of the other. All things considered what the novel does, then, is call the bluff of male freedom as much as etch the pain of female un-freedom and make a case for concerted efforts to realise a world where swaraj would indeed be our recognised birthright, that which we are born to, that which is our due by birth.

570 For more on the debates around female foeticide, among others, refer to Nivedita Menon, “Rights, Bodies and the Law”; Madhu Kishwar, “When Daughters Are Unwanted”; and more recently, Gita Aravamudan, Disappearing Daughters.

571 Not acknowledging this is a form of, what Ashis Nandy, after Rollo May, calls, “pseudo innocence”—an “innocence [that] leads one to participate in a structurally violent system because of the unawareness of one’s power to intervene in the real world and because of the indirect psychological benefits of being a victim” (At the Edge of Psychology 43)—with the qualification that the “benefits of being a victim” are in the long run extremely dubious.
Conclusion

"Tell me what your desire is and I’ll tell you who you are" (Foucault as qtd. in Glover and Kaplan xvi)—in some ways, both the promise of desire as well as its premise, especially within the discursive protocols of modernity and late modernity. My thesis was urged by the link apprehended between the telling of desire, which is also its identification/identity, and the processes of subject-constitution and object-formation. It was urged, furthermore, by the conviction that this telling has been, to date, a largely androcentric affair. The burden of my venture has been to demonstrate both the fact of this sexist articulation as also the contingency of it. I have limited my labours to the relations of desire variously circuiting and circulating the novel genre.

The thesis so far has focussed upon relations of desire pre-existing the novel form, upon relations of desire for the novel form and upon relations of desire in the novel form. Conspicuous in its absence has been any attention to the relations of desire engendered by the novel form. I cannot undertake to explore this dimension in any detail here. But if the genre is ineluctably authored, authoring and authorising different types of desire, as I believe it is, then such an omission clearly demands some, even if only cursory, addressal. What follows, therefore, is a brief engagement with the said angle on the subject. As it happens, in so doing, I am also presented with the opportunity to offer a clarification that has been long overdue—about why I zero in upon the novel form as my field of study.

It is no secret, of course, that with the establishment of print culture and technomodernity, the novel genre emerged as one of the important sites of cultural production in India in the last century and a half.\textsuperscript{572} Given the particularities of its nascence, the form, in any case, is implicated in the “crosstalks” of tradition and modernity as this obtains in different places. In India, that engagement has been

\textsuperscript{572} Indeed, among the literary forms and formats, it currently occupies pride of place for its influence, its opinion-forming capacity. More broadly speaking too, its hold on the cultural imaginary, at least of the middle classes, is exceeded only by the cinematic text among the modern creative arts and the “entertainment” on offer via the electronic media.
complicated, as mentioned before, by the script of colonialism with which the novel’s development is intimately twined. What has resulted, by and large, is an almost compulsive but conflicted and richly variegated imag(in)ing of the discursive exchange between the old and the new. Needless to say, reworked through its “relations,” whether directly or otherwise, have been the ideas of “India” and “Indian-ness” for concurrent and retrospective consumption. Contra Jameson, however, these have not always been as allegories of the “nation”—sometimes it is the desh and its dasha that has stood revisioned, at others, darshana not reducible to, or even hostile, to the desh as bounded political reality, but nonetheless interpretively associable with the notional charge of “India/ness,” in some form or the other. 573

Actually to say this is not quite enough. It can be misleading even. It allows the novel to appear as a sort of neutral interface between divergent temporalities and sensibilities, when, in truth, the form is partisan, always-already a product of modernity. As a meta-language, the novel functions not so much as a facilitator of “dialogue” between two parties to a parley, but as an agent of modernity, weeding out, blending and reformulating traditional mores to render them coherent with/in

573 By way of example, consider how the universalistic spirit in Tagore’s fiction, for all its opposition to the narrow creed of territorial nationalism, is nonetheless undeniably Indian in its sensibility as well as inspiration. For a brief glimpse of his views, refer to the essay “Striving for Swaraj” (84-93). For an exposition of the same, refer to Ashis Nandy, *The Illegitimacy of Nationalism* and P. K. Datta edited, *Rabindranath Tagore’s The Home and the World*, among others. At the opposite pole of the spectrum, there is the modern brigade of novelists in English whom, on the one hand, Tabish Khair cautions against taking at face value when they depict a “‘protean and multifaceted’ India … that while ‘resisting any unifying impulses’ from a nationalist perspective staple together an India from a cultural/class/ideological perspective that is in some ways just as privileged and homogenizing” (*Babu Fictions* 338). And, on the other, Bishnupriya Ghosh lauds for the “linguistic localism that shores up the irreducible supplementarity of the postcolonial English literary text [in their works]; vernacularity; self-reflexivity in staging communicability and self-conscious notations of IWE circulation; a political commitment to subalternity, engendering an ethical spectrology; and finally, the acts of cultural translation that attempt to mediate the globalization of knowledge” (10) that constitutes a “cosmopolitical intervention into stable national-global cultural dialectics through privileging provisional and contingent local contexts” even as it is a “canny play to emergent global and local markets for world literatures by the effective production of linguistic localism” (8). Then again, Alok Mukherjee suggests how Jameson’s view is inadequate to understanding different types of Indian fictional writings. Dalit literature, according to him, complicates matters “by exposing how a subjugated society such as that of pre-independence India could, simultaneously, be a subjugating society and how, in postcolonial India, that subjugation could continue” (*Limbale* 17).
modern idioms of thought.\textsuperscript{574} It is heavily invested, that is to say, in imaginatively
in/stating modern “reality”—where at stake is not only a resolution of the present
but also versions and visions of the past and the future.

The entire dynamic, in fact, can be broadly grasped as a playing out of three
postulates. That:

- Modernity is the overall matrix and trigger of novelistic creativity
- The novel is a means of ideological and affective re-presentation, and
- Translation (some manner of it, cultural and/or linguistic) is
  indispensable to the craft of fiction

To this triune, can be added a fourth angle, which is of particular interest to the
present undertaking, namely

- The centrality of gender relations in the genre’s enterprise

Paul Ricoeur’s threefold theory of mimesis can be a useful aid for elucidating the
mechanisms of literary production and consumption that make narratives socially
significant.

According to Ricoeur, the circuitry of narrative meaning is made up of three
types of mimesis.\textsuperscript{575} “Mimesis\textsubscript{1}” is what gets called “prefiguration.” It refers to “some
preliminary competence” of the dynamics of human action. For the reader this is
necessary so as to be able make sense of a plot; for the author it is important so as
to be able devise a plot.\textsuperscript{576} Mimesis\textsubscript{2} is understood as “configuration”: the

\textsuperscript{574} This is the case even when the novel evinces an obviously conservative stance or does not
ostensibly “treat” the modern in its narrative. For instance, in a text like \textit{Samskara}, the tradition-
modernity dialectic that is written into genetic code of the genre gets played out as an intra-
traditional conflict underlining the need for qualitative changes in the way of life of a people if
they are to survive.

\textsuperscript{575} The gloss attempted is based on Karl Simms introduction to Ricoeur’s thoughts, especially the
chapter devoted to “Narrative” (79-99). All quotations are from here.

\textsuperscript{576} To quote Karl Simms,
Ricoeur identifies three ways in which we have a \textit{preunderstanding} that we bring to
narrative in interpreting it, or that a writer must have in order to compose it: they are
\textit{semantic} understanding (how one understands, for example, that “X did A to B
because of Y”), \textit{symbolic} understanding (how one understands, for example, that the
hero should be interpreted as a \textit{good} character—“good” is the symbolic value of
organising thread that holds the different elements of a narrative together and
gives it the appearance of "an intelligible whole." Finally, there is Mimesis, or
"refiguration," which concerns "the intersection of the world of the text and the
world of the hearer or reader." In the words of Karl Simms, paraphrasing Ricoeur:

... narrative time has the same threefold composition as time experienced by
humans, phenomenological time, except that it is its mirror image. In narrative,
prefiguring is configured into refiguring, while in real life, the present is an
anticipation of the future mediated by the memory of the past. It is because narrative
time and real time mirror one another that the "healthy cycle" between narrative and
real life exists: we can understand narrative because we understand life, and our
understanding of life is increased by our understanding of narrative. (86-87)

Ricoeur's observations, of course, are meant to be about narratives in general. My
point is that in modern times, nowhere, among the available literary formats, is
the semblance, the verisimilitude, the homology between present "reality" and the
fictional world, and therefore, the "hermeneutic circle," more emphatically
established than with the novel genre.

Novel after novel bears witness to this back and forth between text and context, a
sort of r/evolving spiral of metaphors and meaning that confirms the mirror act in
performing it. For example, consider the case of a couple of texts studied here in
some detail. Bankim's "refiguration" of a deified Motherland in Anandamath
becomes operative as a "prefiguration" of sorts in the cultural memory of the
people such that even today "the specters of Mother India" continue to presence
its collective psyche. The Bharat Mata temple in Benaras, inaugurated by
Gandhi, is one example, as mentioned before, of the independent life and form
that the idea took on in the social imaginary. As it happens, the later translation-
adaptation of the novel by Roy has a Mother India inspired more directly by this
avatar than the original Bankim figuration. Altogether, that is to say, a handy
demonstration of the cross-pollinating cycle of meaning at work between text and
society through the mediation of the novelist.

"hero"), and temporal understanding (how one understands, for example, that a
character is expected to do something as a result of such-and-such an event having
occurred to her). Mimesis, then, is preunderstanding of narrative. (84)

577 The reference, of course, is to the title of Mrinalini Sinha's exploration of the complex political
inscriptions on the national as well as imperial register determining the publication and reception
of Katherine Mayo's controversial Mother India.
If Bankim’s novel offers a nineteenth century instantiation of the phenomenon, then Vaasanthi’s *Birthright* offers proof of its operation more than a century later. That a declining sex ratio and the resultant deficit of women due to the widespread incidence of female foeticide is an issue of national consternation is not news (or rather, it has been news for the past decade or so). Vaasanthi’s journalistic research has involved documentation of the occurrences in the Salem and Dharmapuri districts of Tamil Nadu infamous for being among the “killing fields” of female babies and foetuses in the country. Her novel though is not just a propaganda piece for the campaign against the practice.\(^{578}\) It is more centrally an exploration of the psyche of female gynaecologists conniving in this sordid saga. Manohari, the novel’s heroine, is a take off on an actual practitioner, Dr. R. N. V. Manonmani, who runs her own medical establishment in Rasipuram. The interesting part is the difference between the historical and the fictional figures. The flesh-and-blood personage has been quoted defending the medically assisted weeding out of female life:

> I support the policy of female infanticide and refuse to admit that it is a sin... These mothers have suffered so much that they don’t want the pattern repeating in their daughter’s lives. They are not committing murder... (Iyengar, “Girls in Salem Are Born to Die” as ctd. in Nabar 54)

The narrative version starts out echoing Manonmani but ends with resolving to have no more part in this self- and other- dehumanising practice. As Vaasanthi

\(^{578}\) Precisely the reduction executed, in a review of the novel, by Mohan Rao. Rao calls it a “simple novel,” one, which he hopes will “add to the campaign being carried out by women’s groups and health groups against SSA” (“The Unwanted Goddess” 41). This review is also interesting for the ways in which an overzealous deference to Western determinants can result in fundamental misreadings and almost comical demands for political correctness. Rao concludes his review with a criticism, “I have one quarrel: the translator Vasantha Surya’s use of the word ‘foeticide’ in her introduction.” According to him, “Foeticide is the word used by the right-wing pro-lifers—who have no qualms killing doctors who perform abortions—and the Vatican. Feminists, who recognize a woman’s right to abortion, and indeed still have to fight for it in Bushman times, therefore use the phrase Sex Selective Abortion (SSA), or Pre-Birth Elimination of Females” (41). Quite apart from the fact that this is a completely artificial mapping of the terms of debate obtaining in one region onto that operating in another, it is not very logical either. The objection to “foeticide” in the American context is because pro-lifers, with the church’s backing, characterise abortion as murder by pointing to the personhood of the foetus. Using Rao’s rationale, if employing the term “foeticide,” plays into the hands of the anti-abortionists, then, surely, the “females” in PBEF is more ammunition for the pro-lifers. Unless the jury be still out, that is, on the personhood of females!
says, "The real Manonmani is not as strong as my heroine. I made the heroine as I wished Manonmani to be," underlining, in the process, the flows and counterflows of influence between the fictional and the social.

In any case, the point is "gender relations" was often the focus of much of this catoptric re-/con-figuration executed with/in the novel frame. Moreover, women played a crucial role in that representative venture, and not just as the object of narrative resolutions or its targeted readership. In substantial numbers, if not equal measure with the men, they were also the novelists engaged in the narrative fabulations of the genre. It would be inaccurate, of course, to characterise this as wholly unprecedented: Bhakti saints and sampradaya, for instance, both had fairly noticeable female presence and articulation and gender relations was often an implicit, if not manifest, thematic prop for their songs. These, however, were spread across centuries and regions; they were discontinuos, that is, in their occurrences as well as the genres favoured and/or patented by the bhaktas for devotional expression. Likewise, it can be said that in the early years of the novel's taking root in India, there were more women writing poetry than attempting fiction, among the literary art forms. Altogether, what can perhaps be termed unique about the novel form, then, is that it is the single most popular literary format which, over the years, has witnessed a more or less democratic participation of both the sexes in its making. When combined with the fact that it has also been in the forefront, among literary forms, for imaginatively inscribing modern "reality," the novel emerges as an attractive body of work for exploring the contemporary politics of gender relations through its clinch with the discourse of desire; thus explaining my generic choice. In what follows, I very briefly address how the "facts" and facets of gender relations stand refashioned through

579 As admitted to this writer in a private correspondence. According to Vaasanthi, Manonmani is not a role model. She calls herself a feminist but aborts female foetuses without batting an eyelid, explaining that she is helping the poor women out. Then I found a psychological reason. She had her own feeling of insecurity being born the only child to her parents. The cultural pressures were too much for her to bear. What the novel says about the heroine's shock about her father's plans to get a second wife or adopt a son to light the funeral pyre are from her experiences. (e-mail correspondence; I have edited the contents for minor typographical errors)
the "fictions" of the novel form—a limited foray, that is, into the shape and substance of desires cut out and inked in by the stencil and stylus of novel narrations.

The colonial enterprise, overall, flourished on the feint of "civilisation," understood as a verb. The racial-anthropological profiling, the socio-cultural engineering involved, picked the figure of the native woman as both the index of barbarity or degeneracy and especial benefactee of colonial protection and uplift. With the power dynamic at play, not surprisingly, this set off chain reactions of different sorts in the colony, each, in turn, accenting the figure of the woman, her nature, position and role in society, according to its own ideological persuasion. All in all, what this did was confer on gender and gender relations a hitherto unknown visibility outside the domain of domesticity—it made the personal intensely political. The public sphere, in fact, was witness to a range of interests and activities that more often than not took the "resolution" of gender roles and identities as central to their projects and polemics. Two points need emphasis here, which are of direct relevance to the line of thinking being pushed.

580 Refer, for instance to Geraldine H. Forbes' "In Search of the 'Pure Heathen'" which shows how among the "missionaries, the secluded woman gained the reputation of acting as a 'protector and zealous adherent of traditional heathenism'" (68) so that there was an active drive to "recruit single women as missionaries and send them out to bring 'light' to their eastern sisters" (71) through the project of Zenana education (68-90). Then again, Vasudha Damia, researching Parliamentary Papers on Widow Immolation, 1821-30, shows how women get written into the discourse as "innocent victim," and how with the "self-appointed task of protecting the 'innocent victim,' the British further took over the function not only of potent legislation, but also of manly protection" ("Sati in the Mirror of Post-Enlightenment Discourse," Orienting India 70).

581 So, for instance, there were sections of the native population, defending often the indefensible in orthodox customs in the name of cultural autonomy, pride and solidarity (Radhakanta Deb, Tilak). Then there were others who embraced the project of reform (Raja Rammohan Roy, Mahadev Govind Ranade). There was a re-examination of the caste-system. Different religious communities carried out their own reviews. And, of course, there was, what Partha Chatterjee somewhat erroneously describes as the nineteenth-century nationalist resolution of the women's question. Women had a visible presence in most of these debates, movements, etc. For a handy introduction to the intellectual and social consciousness of nineteenth-century colonial India, refer to K. N. Panikkar's Culture, Ideology, and Hegemony. For an informative account of some of the debates surrounding Hindu conjugality and its implication in the discourse of nationalism, specifically, refer to Tanika Sarkar's, "Hindu Conjugality and Nationalism." For a gender-sensitive overview of nineteenth-century debates, refer to Uma Chakravarti's Rewriting History; Tanika Sarkar's Words to Win; and Rosalind O'Hanlon's introduction to Tarabai Shinde's Stri-Purush Tulna, among others.
Firstly, the public sphere as this existed in nineteenth-century India found definition through the chisel of colonial modernity. In its horizons and boundaries, in the broad set of protocols it worked by, the “space” was, *inter alia*, testimony to the spreading clout of print culture, testimony, that is, to an epochal shift in the happening. The novel as the pre-eminent literary production of this techno-ideological conjuncture, spoke to the same “moment.” It was part, parcel and participant in the public sphere, in the contests and debates that constituted meanings and moralities for an emerging bourgeois temporality. Secondly, women were not merely the “grounds” of debate but actively engaged the debates, which shaped public opinion. It can be said, of course, that this engagement was limited to gender and gender relations, that it debated issues pertaining to the private sphere and so was hardly radical. Since there was a traditional mandate that deemed these issues the concern of womenfolk; indeed demanded it be so and demeaned it for being so. Such an argument, however, turns a blind eye to the newfound premium attaching to gender and gender relations in the constitution of cultural legitimacy and different kinds of group identities. In bringing, through their person, speech and text, the *ghar* into the precincts of the *bahir*, then, women willy-nilly contested and impacted models of social relations and modalities of social formations. Their modes of expression and/or intervention were diverse: some chose the fictional route to engagement; others preferred the autobiographical form of self-substantiation, while still others engaged in different social reform initiatives and public awareness campaigns. What’s significant is nearly all of this “negotiation” occurred by way and as part of the expanding hegemony of literacy in the re-forming public sphere.

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582 Lata Mani puts forth this argument vis-à-vis the *sati* debates in her groundbreaking essay “Contentious Traditions.” The error is in sloppily extending this perspective to read every nineteenth-century Indian debate concerning gender and gender relations.
In Bengal, the invention of the *bhadramahila*, for instance, can be credited to the composite ingenuity of the literate imaginary.\(^583\) She first found form in printed circulation, with her subsequent appearance as a historical subject being an effect of complexly mediated desires. Elsewhere in the land too, the “new woman” was an object of furious debate and detailed fashioning. While the part played by didactic literature, polemical writings, journalistic pieces, autobiographies, speeches, etc., in rendering this phantom real cannot be discounted, it was in the novel genre that this notion came into animated life in a special way. Not only was it fleshed out, given a character, individuality, affect, morality and mindset all its own, it was also rendered in its repeated fictional representation, “attractive”\(^584\) and “pleasing,”\(^585\) and, given the generic artifice of verisimilitude, gradually, normal or culturally acceptable.\(^586\)

Hand in hand with this imaginative reconstruction of femininity, the novel was also significantly invested in another piece of social engineering—this one touching more directly upon the structural aspect of gender relations. I am referring, of course, to the genre’s role in making the unit of the husband and wife as “romantic couple” a pervasive social ideal to match with capitalist push towards a standardisation and nuclearisation of the family. Briefly, the old feudal model of devotional love and service owed by the wife to her husband in a relationship scripted by social requirement and/or religious duty is retained and even reinforced in the revisioning, while the absolute non-reciprocity of it is scaled down. The wife is still very much under the political and moral jurisdiction of her husband, subject to his direction. Only, it is the idea of companionate

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\(^583\) For further details on the dynamics underwriting this figuration, refer to Himani Banerjee’s *Inventing Subjects* and Tanika Sarkar’s “Nationalist Iconography,” among others.

\(^584\) She was many times the heroine of the novel.

\(^585\) Pleasing not just because of her beauty, grace, intelligence, her “feminine modesty,” but also because of the subliminal pleasures derived from novel reading and its displaced association with this narrative figure.

\(^586\) *Indulekha*, mentioned earlier, would be a perfect example of the way in which the novel soft sells the “new woman.”
pleasures that the husband and wife find in nurturing each other on the path of matrimonial "virtue," which becomes the means of upholding a sexist domestic arrangement evolved to tune with the demands of a colonial moral and material economy, rather than outright domination. A large part of the sway this contrivance of native modernity went on to achieve can be attributed to two factors, among others. First, both male and female novelists contributed to its fabrication: there was a broad consensus available in their fictions, the odd goings-on in a Sultana’s dream, notwithstanding, on the overall paradigm of conjugal relations, even if there were differences marking individual elaborations of domestic life. Second, the ruse of gender complementarity that informed the ideal of romantic coupledom was a modern rewriting of traditional notions. As such it did not appear as a radical break with conventional domesticity, just, an optimisation of those arrangements, if reformist-minded, or even a reversion to type, if revivalist-minded.

Anyhow, the point is both these, in some part, novelistic inventions, achieved a social reality and presence because of the hunger they generated for replication, for emulation. The above, of course, is an extremely summary engagement with

587 On why such a position on the part of women can signify intelligent "choice" as opposed to a form of false consciousness, refer to Judith E. Walsh’s *How to Be the Goddess of Your Home and Domesticity in Colonial India*. According to her, in the latter work, the choice available to young women in nineteenth-century India was “between their husbands and their mothers-in-law” (158). In the circumstances, she suggests, we read the hyperbole of Indian women’s self-described devotion not as evidence of false consciousness or as an aesthetic survival from the past, or as femininity, but rather as evidence of a choice. There were, after all, two patriarchal alternatives available to women in late nineteenth-century India: an older orthodoxy inscribed in Sanskrit texts, which found its lived expression through the customs and hierarchies of extended family life; and a new patriarchy, inscribed in the (proto-)nationalist discourse of (among others) advice manuals, which was presented to women most frequently through the teachings and person of a husband. Devotion to one’s husband as a god then, and the discursive forms such devotion took, marked women’s efforts to use the concepts and practices of the new patriarchy in ways that would allow them to gain greater freedom from an old patriarchy that had an equally powerful hold on their lives. (144)

588 For instance, the Introduction to Pavan K. Varma’s and Sandhya Mulchandani’s anthology of erotic literature from ancient and medieval India, notes how “All the major gods in Hindu mythology have been given consorts” (10). As it is put there, “Gods and goddesses represent a conscious duality, complementing each other” (11).
the desires produced by the novel form even when just considering the impact on
gender and gender relations. Not only does it explore the issues identified in a
cursory manner, it also sheds no light on the shape of gendered desires stoked by
later novels. To do justice to the subject would require at least an entire chapter, if
not a full-length thesis in its own right. Apart from spotlighting one area in which
this thesis could further develop, here my purpose was only to briefly a)
acknowledge the productive function of novels vis-à-vis social desires, and b)
accent the implication of the genre in the business of gender relations.

Even so, there is another aspect to desires produced by the genre that can do with
some attention, especially given its centrality to my theoretical and
methodological approach. Thus far, in discussing the matter, I have focussed on
textual content, on metaphor, trope and figuration, as triggering the urge for
imitation. The reader and reading have implicitly been taken as passive—simply
absorbing the fictional output so as to reproduce the same when impressed, as it
were. After Bakhtin, of course, it has become a bit of a critical truism that the
"novel is multiform in style and variform in speech and voice" (261). The
mistake consists in confusing the genre’s heteroglossia and dialogicality with an
absolute lack of formal constraints, of any kind of an ideological matrix. As
Lennard J. Davis reminds, the novel often functions as a pacifying, alienating and
conformist influence (ref. for details to his Resisting Novels). However, and this is
what is significant, it can also afford an opportunity to “refigure” narrative
meanings through an active, if not activist engagement. Obviously, sensitivity to
the politics of the genre is crucial for “resisting” its hegemonic appeal. Ironically,
this is also important if novels are to cease being, modifying Benjamin somewhat,
merely “mechanical reproduction[s]” and transform into something, more
resembling, “machinic production,” say.

589 Bakhtin defines the novel “as a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of
languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized” (262).
Throughout the thesis my endeavour has been to broach the intersection of desire and the novel form in a way that clarifies the ideological emphases at work while recognising the potential for subversion and/or deconstruction, if not transformation, in the competing interests and energies operative. This is reflected in the structuration where different facets of the problematic are explored with a view to assemble a broad scale through which to gauge the specificity of the relations of desire articulated in the form. Part II, in fact, attempts a demonstration of how novels can be read against the grain to proffer meanings more in sync with the insights of a transformative gender politics as that obtains at present.

And what shape eventually do I see those insights presenting? In the words of Hélène Cixous:

Phallocentrism is. History has never produced, recorded anything but that. Which does not mean that this form is inevitable or natural. Phallocentrism is the enemy. Of everyone. Men stand to lose by, differently but as seriously as women. And it is time to transform. To invent the other history. ("Sorties" 96)

Elsewhere she goes on to say, “A will: desire, authority, you examine that, and you are led right back—to the father. You can even fail to notice that there’s no place at all for women in the operation!” (“Sorties” 92). While tying in almost perfectly with certain aspects of my thesis, such a perspective would nonetheless represent a distortion in other ways. For, in India, culturally, symbolisation, figuration, has not been denied the feminine pole, as in the modern western context. Yet, socially, authority and the legitimate exercise of power, has overwhelmingly been vested with the male and in the masculine. The aim therefore should be a redistribution of authority, a de-siring of it, so that subjects coded as “women” in social discourse are not resigned to living out patriarchal scripts of impotence and ressentiment in order to be “good.” So that they can exercise authority under their own assignation as a matter of course without guilt, calumny and/or infamy. So that they can be sires of their own desires, and that, no contradiction.

While I have referred to the goddess traditions, off and on, it should be clear that the idea is not simply to dislodge the Father and install in his place, the Mother.
Gynocentricism as a counter to androcentrism is, of course, all very well, if the alternative is naught. But insofar as it continues the hierarchies of patriarchal systems and only reverses the evaluations, it cannot escape actuating like exclusions. A feminist endeavour in the present would be to consistently deconstruct the brief for structural binarism and institutionalised stratification wherever this may be found—on the axis of sex, caste, class, race, religion, ethnicity, community, language, nationality or any other.

Similarly, I have often “read” my subject against and through the instrumentality of identifiably “Hindu” religious, mythical, aesthetic and philosophical filters. Cultural chauvinism has very little to defend it in any intellectual enterprise. In employing older, non-western frames, models, etc., where it appeared productive, my intent was not to set them up as some sort of unassailable reference point, as apologias for antiquity. Turning the past into a fetish and conferring on convention the power to legitimise can have no attraction for any feminist even remotely familiar with the sordid track of sexism through history. No custom however longstanding, no scriptural edict, no book, no principle, then, is above the test of truth, compassion and justice from time to time. And just because something has not been in the past is no reason why it may not be in the present or come to be in the future.

590 This is not about making only “strategic” play, to respond to the charge brought by Rajeswari Sunder Rajan against feminists using goddess traditions for affirmative interventions in patriarchal paradigms. For that, as she rightly observes, is “literally, bad faith” (“Real and Imagined Goddess” 282). While there is little to quarrel with the dangers she signposts in such feminist endeavours, the lessons she wishes drawn from them remain disappointingly tethered to precisely the “religious ‘tradition,’” “secular ‘modernity’” binary that she herself admits has long passed its used-by date in any for intelligent deployment (281): “In a ‘modernizing’ post-colonial nation, the authority of majoritarian religious discourse and practice can only be countered, it seems to me, by a clear-cut and visible secular alternative (281-82; emphasis added). To ask if the Goddess is feminist and then to expatiate on that, it seems to me, is to start from a mistaken premise when undertaken literally; it is to commit a category error. However, without demanding that the Goddess be “feminist” and without believing literally in the figuration, it is still possible, in “good faith” (and not “bad politics” either), to value the dignity such an intimation of immortality affords women, the apprehension it registers of women as intrinsically sharing in the sacrality of life, the divinity of being; to productively build upon this to further contemporary agendas of distributive justice amongst peoples and polities, yes, but perhaps also, amongst the wider variety of life-forms that are with us, coparceners of this eco-system.
Having said that, there is also very little to be said for continuing to function within the tired opposition of “tradition” and “modernity” where both “tradition” and “modernity” are what Svati Joshi calls, “polemical cultural categories” (Rethinking English 18) traceable back, for their discursive roots, to the political and ideological ferment of nineteenth-century colonial India. There is very little to be said, that is, for academic sloth of the reverse variety that recoils in habituated horror at the prospect of encountering anything “traditional” without the sheath of modern prejudice in which it remains cocooned.

My dipping into the cultural pool for hermeneutic aids has been an attempt to move beyond the terms of this sterile bind. It has been an attempt to put together a broader frame within which to study the intersection of desire and the novel form so as to a) discern more clearly the specificity of the relations of desire that the form constitutes and vice-versa, and b) better turn narrative mirrors into windows. It is in the nature of windows, of course, that they open onto an outside and so offer a vision, a point of “contact” with it. The point is they also “frame” the view afforded. The novel is one window in the architectural edifice of modernity. Its “scope” is the parameters of translation. The linguistically translated novel, in fact, is a rendering explicit of the ideological translation generating the scapes of the form. And just as knowing the source language from which a novel has been translated, better still, having access to the “original” novel, can only add to the overall experience of reading it, so also, an awareness, if not, degree of competence, in the source and target grammars of ideological translation can only enrich the ways in which narrative relations of desire and gender signify.

The entire exercise here has been geared to articulating scenes where, among other things, the roles we play in life do not stand subject to the tyranny of an ultimately falsifying binarism instituted by the valorisation of biological

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591 This is a play on the title of an essay by A. K. Ramanujan, called, “Where Mirrors Are Windows.”
difference over all else. This is not merely negative politics—swearing off identity and responsibility for the gambols of postmodern play. It is making peace with the relativity that is at the core of our being, indeed, that is the very possibility of our being in co-dependent origination.\(^{592}\) Obviously, “responsibility” in such a scenario would carry a very different charge, as, in fact, would “politics.” For with the paradigm shift entailed, integrity would lie in the work of integration, than otherwise. As a conceptual and methodological rule, this work has throughout tried to correlate the imperatives of politics with epistemology, the prerequisites of transformation with truth. It has encountered carrots and sticks, that is, and tried to ascertain whether serpent or rope. There is no wish to claim infallibility for the approach, however. In the final analysis, this thesis is only a provisional, exploratory move, one which I hope can be deemed successful, both if it is found persuasive in its account/ing or if it offers some incentive for serious debate and further research.

\(^{592}\) The Buddha is said to have articulated \textit{pratityasamutpada} as: “That being, this comes to be, from the arising of that, this arises. That being absent, this is not; from the cessation of that, this ceases.” (as ctd. in Mitchell, \textit{Buddhism} 39). For more details on the concept, including the “twelve links (\textit{nidana}) of conditionality” involved in the arising and cessation of \textit{duhkha}, refer to the text, especially pp. 39-42. My deployment of the term above is fairly broad.