“Mother, just because I wear trackies and play sport does not make me a lesbian! Me and Jess were fighting because we both fancied our coach, Joe!”

“What, a man, Joe?”

“Yes, as in male – Joe! Joe, our coach! Joe, man, Joe! Anyway, being a lesbian is not that big a deal.”

“Oh no, sweetheart, of course it isn’t. No, I mean, I’ve got nothing against it. I was cheering for Martina Navratilova as much as the next person.”

_Bend It Like Beckham_ (dir. Gurinder Chadha, 2002)

Gurinder Chadha’s fairytale about a successful amateur women’s footballer is well-known enough for us to enter into a critical discussion of it without a survey of the plot first. What is not so well-known, however, is that Chadha had contemplated making her successful girl-footballers, Jess and Jules lesbians. This plot-angle was, of course, removed to make way for the heterosexual attraction between Jess and her Irish coach, Joe. Chadha defended this course “correction” as necessary, given the vagaries of a market where a woman’s sport-film itself is a contradiction invested in terms that threaten to stymie it from the start, to which the addition of “lesbianism” would have been simply too much. Unfortunately, while the removal of female homosexuality arguably permits the director to focus more entirely on issues of racism and female empowerment, the film as it finally came out can be marshalled under the rubric “all the women are straight, all the queers are men.” _Bend It Like Beckham_ clearly displaces the burden of being queer onto Jess’ “mate,” Tony, with whom Jess proposes to make a marriage of convenience though he has revealed to her that he is gay. Jess’ response is a comically aghast “You’re Indian!” While Jess’ response can itself be read as an ironic comment on how Indian-ness and homosexuality may not go together, these ironic possibilities do not entirely preclude the film’s own careful channelling of lesbian desire away from the person of its gender-bending Indian heroine. Jess’ sporting energies are poured into heterosexuality, even though Jess and her (female) football mate and friend Jules seem to share vital energies in a fashion that at least challenges the chemistry that Jess achieves with their young coach, Joe. Both girls have the hots for Joe, but their own togetherness is made of enjoying the same sport, and working hard at it to attain finally the freedom to do fulltime what they love.
The vital energies that footballing releases in the girls makes any heterosexual dalliance pale in comparison, perhaps a reason why this film features high among gay and lesbian audiences’ lists of favourite movies, not only because of its genuinely likeable gay male character, Tony. The film manages carefully its mostly predictable plot of how the diasporic Indian girl “bends” conventional (read Indian) femininity to suit diasporic needs so that slippages into female homoeroticism are restricted to the locker-room, or to the realm of the slip of the eye. But a queer reading of the film permits just such slips as our epigraph refers to to attain a fetishistic queer valence. Jess’ fight to play football, for the queer spectator, approximates the (lucky) homosexual individual’s struggle to secure social validation and support. But as far as the overt narrative of the film goes, the transgression of wanting to bend it like Beckham though you are a girl can only be permitted if the girl in question fulfills the other requirements: find a nice boyfriend and settle down; all of which Jess does, albeit in a deferred fashion. At the end of the film, Jess and Jules leave for the USA, football scholarships having permitted them to postpone for a while the requirements of domesticity, which are presented as natural even while comically satirised. Bend It Like Beckham, viewed in this light, is a film that permits an ostensibly feminist triumph – the heroine does excel at a male game; she is given the means to consolidate her excellence – but meticulously cleaves the feminist project from a possible lesbian one. Mrs Paxton fears that her androgynous daughter Juliet, whose feminine name is used only once and generally referred to by her androgynous nickname, is having an affair with Jess. At her first meeting with Jess, Mrs Paxton had been thrilled to know that the tomboyish Jules had an Indian friend – Indianness in women is accompanied, to Mrs Paxton’s mind, by a certain discipline, decorum and investment in “values.” She is thoroughly flummoxed when Jules announces with quiet triumph that Jess is her football mate. Mrs Paxton’s comic bamboozlement centres around the transgression involved in an Indian girl playing football; this resonates with Jess’ response to Tony’s being gay: being Indian does come with a certain set of associations that in a diasporic location can be investigated and perhaps rendered harmless through cauterization or humour.

However, female sports have always carried the “taint” of lesbianism, with most sportswomen being automatically thought lesbian on account of the redrawing of bodily contours that constant physical training produces. Preferring to “out” the audience’s own doubts through Mrs Paxton’s doubts about her daughter Jules, Chadha reduces what would have been the dangerous spectre of female homosexuality to the merely comic. Once the laughter track is established around homosexual or homoerotic desire and the corresponding seriousness of the heterosexual angle confirmed, the film’s recuperation of heterosexuality is complete. Bend It Like Beckham can send its heroine, safely affianced to a loving and none too masculine Joe – unlike
the eponymous Beckham's own much more virile masculinity – off to her football scholarship in the USA without fears of any disruption to this very contemporary heterosexual coupledom. Where all this will lead, we aren't expected to ask except as a rhetorical question that will only confirm Jess' guts and brilliance. In evading any mention of female homosexuality except in joke, Gurinder Chadha seems to be suggesting that skilled female sportswomen can indeed by feminine in a way that is entirely heterosexual, that is, untainted by lesbianism. This production of the heterosexual but gender-bending female protagonist, however, is achieved through the ridiculing of slippages between female homosociality and female homoeroticism whose possibilities are indeed more than evident in sporting arrangements that permit women long-term contact with other women in the course of training, travel and the like. Thus, *Bend It Like Beckham* is willing to go far in bending one category of gendering in its production of a sporty protagonist. But this "sporty" prototype, bookended by the almost-anorexic, boyish-framed Keira Knightley who plays Jules in the film, and the wholesomely girlish Parminder Nagra who essays Jess, belongs more to the world of fashionably chic girls approved of as desirable in the contemporary world than to the more unfashionable type of female sporting champion signified by, say, Martina Navratilova or even Serena Williams or for a still earlier era, P. T. Usha. Navratilova's butchness, Usha's less than pretty appearance and Williams' masculinity all pose challenges to conventional femininity in a variety of ways; their "difference" means that they interrupt the seamless visual transfer to the gender "female" that Jess and Jules do not because of how conventionally feminine they are in many ways sanctioned by both contemporary Western and Indian tastes. *Bend It Like Beckham*, thus, for all its bending, upon closer analysis reveals itself to be quite straitlaced about how female sports-models should look and be. This role-model, the film suggests, will not rupture familiar expectations of gender in a fashion that is constantly visible and thus an interruption that will be remarked upon. In short, it will not be (un)familiar. That this familiarity is also maintained through the disavowal and containment of the possibilities of female homosexual love and desire is worth remarking.

Bollywood films till the 1990s were able to express homosociality and homoeroticism within the formulae of the mainstream film, as to take just one instance, Sholay's famous buddy-couple of Jai and Veeru proves. This "traditional homosocial formula" as Thomas Waugh describes it, coming down as late as the *Main Khiladi, Tu Anari* couple of Akshay Kumar and Saif Ali Khan, however, was soon replaced by a "growing ambiguity and complexity, playfulness and boldness" within mainstream cinema in response no doubt, to the increasing visibility of a gay and lesbian discourse in the public realm in a big way in the wake of the medicalization of homosexuality following the AIDS-related public health crises of the 1990s. While the male
buddy-buddy film was indeed a constant implicit signifier on the mainstream screen, female bonding and female friendship made for an unfamiliar spectacle, and few films dealt with these themes in as big a way as they dealt with male homosociality and homoeroticism. Shohini Ghosh and Gayatri Gopinath offer incisive accounts of how queer audiences can become “perverse spectators,” to borrow Jackie Staiger’s formulation, and fetishize even momentary appearances of the (un)familiar female desire. Ghosh, for example, points to the “Didi tera dewar deewand” song in *Hum Aap ke Hain Koun* (dir. Sooraj Barjatya, 1994) where a cross-dressing woman dances with the very feminine-looking Madhuri Dixit for a few minutes before the biologically “real” hero, Salman Khan, kicks her off the scene. Gopinath argues that even if this looks like yet another instance where Bollywood films unaccountably depart from the conventions of realism, such moments are instances of how Bollywood’s use of anti-realistic conventions, like the diegetic song and dance narrative – very different from the Hollywood musical – permits the entry of unexpected and “impossible” female desires into public cultures. Ghosh and Gopinath’s accounts focus on queer flashes in what appears to be a heteronormative pan. In this chapter, I shall look at a crop of recent films by film-makers of Indian diasporic origins who have made films that deal full-length with aspects of lesbian female subjectivities. Most of them have unyoked femininity from heterosexuality through their use of “femme” heroines; some have, through the figure of the butch heroine – the lesbian “dyke” to be precise – interrogated familiar ways of being a “woman.” All these films, through their scripting of lesbian desire, however, have made possible an imagination of lesbian love that goes beyond the elisions of anxious ridicule or misogyny. In this chapter, I will consider these films across three sections. Part one will deal with the films *Fire* (dir. Deepa Mehta, 1998) and *Sancharam* (dir. Ligy Pulapally, 2004), both of them coming out stories set in India, which I will read in conversation with earlier mainstream films like the Hindi *Dosti* and the Malayalam *Deshatanakkili Karayarilla* (The Wandering Bird does not Cry, dir. Padmarajan, 1986) to examine the differences between films that function under the sign “lesbian,” and films that do not have avowedly lesbian or gay parts, but that nevertheless do function in a queer fashion. In the second part, I will compare book and the film versions of Shamim Sarif’s *The World Unseen* (2001; dir. Shamim Sarif, 2007), to speculate on the constitution of the fairytale narrative of coming-out as an exit from patriarchy or oppression. I will supplement this with an analysis of the same writer/director’s film *I Can’t Think Straight* (2007), and Pratibha Parmar’s *Nina’s Heavenly Delights* (2006), both of which also function within the genre of the fairy-tale romance when I move into the third part of this chapter. The first two parts, dealing primarily with coming-out narratives, necessarily have continuities and overlaps, which I will then examine against *Chutney Popcorn* (dir. Nisha Ganatra,
2000), a close analysis of which makes the third section of this chapter. *Chutney Popcorn* is the only film here which is not a coming-out narrative. As such, dealing with the life and tribulations of an Indian-American lesbian who is already “out,” the film permits an examination of the possibilities available to film-makers that are often not explored in the rush to make overtly positive images about lesbianism; this text will permit us to consider the facts of lesbian community and “staying there.” Since all the films I consider are already about lesbians, and often by lesbians and for lesbians, this chapter offers me an opportunity to evaluate the nature of the interventions these cinematic texts make to queer our notions of sexuality. These films do pose challenges in various ways to the disavowal of intra-female love and desire in crossover films like *Bend It Like Beckham* which market themselves to the west as the “real” Bollywood, but are often only translations of its conventions. Some of the films I read here are also “translations” of Indian matter for an intended primary audience in the west. In other words, how viable are all these visible lesbians? Does their visibility itself indicate subversiveness and positive transgressions of the normative?

**Queering India**

Because of the outcry it raised, everybody knows the plot, so much so that as Malobika of Sappho for Equality, a Kolkata-based organisation for helping women-oriented-women told me (in a personal interview), over-enthusiastic roadside-Romeos on Kolkata streets were liable to shout “fire, fire” whenever women holding hands walked by. *Fire* has indeed entered the cultural lexicon of Indian film, not least as the first to deal with lesbian sexuality. However, its “invention,” as Madhava Prasad puts it, of lesbian sexuality does not have to be taken at face value. I will look at a mainstream Malayalam film, produced in the 1980s, to see how the woman-oriented-woman who pre-existed *Fire* was constructed. Alongside, we will consider a film produced after *Fire*, *Sancharam: The Journey*, which intervenes in the same debate of visible sexual identities that *Fire* broached.

The “mainstream femme film,” defined by Christine Holmlund as a “hybrid subgenre of the woman’s film and the lesbian drama” (“When is a Lesbian” 145) is a category within which *Deshatanakkili Karayarilla* (DKK) may be placed. In what follows, I treat of *Fire* and *Sancharam* as lesbian dramas, though themselves femme in their casting: all of them feature actresses who are recognisably femme, rather than butch, in that they are conventionally feminine. Yet, the seemingly normative pinioning of this femininity to heterosexuality is challenged by these films in that they focus on the resolution of directly lesbian dilemmas. Through a comparative reading,
I shall examine the achievements of these two different types, looking at their investments and achievements in destabilising or defamiliarising familiar models of femininity to produce the lesbian (un)familiar. What do these genres respectively achieve and where do they stand with respect to an overt LGQBT politics?

*Fire* is a coming-out story which uses its mostly unsubtle tradition-bashing to didactically emphasise the cognition of the female protagonists that they are women-loving-women. This lesbian coming-of-age happens in the heart of the home, a factor that may have lead to the noxious diatribes the film has received especially at the hands of fundamentalist Hindu outfits. In locating lesbianism within “home sweet home” where two sisters-in-law fall in love with one another and leave the joint family home in a gesture that collapses their victimisation as women with their victimisation of lesbians, *Fire* moves beyond other representations of lesbianism as penultimate or as relegated to more suspect female-only spaces like the prison or the girls' hostel. However, in trying to produce a narrative of female homosexual love that transcends familial duty, the film also resorts to manichean dichotomies that reveal Mehta's proclivity for the developmental narrative of coming out into visibility from the hidebound, regressive interiors of the “home sweet home” that patriarchy has constructed as a trap and a prison for all women who love women. The vile and unregenerate male characters who are the lynchpins of the “home sweet home” that *Fire* takes apart have been suitably pilloried, as has their creator Deepa Mehta for making them so vile and unregenerate. The beauty and goodness of the female protagonists has been remarked too, as has been their pluck. The servant's transgressions align him with his masters; one has homosexual fantasies even as his brother goes about gratifying his heterosexual ones. Mundu the servant meanwhile puts the *Ramayana* to what seems to him to be the best possible use it can get; Mehta's construction of Mundu's auto-erotic transgressions has probably made suspect any declaration that the *Ramayana* can be a moving, joyous experience. Similarly, the elder brother's dour, joyless service of his guru, for whom he also keeps aside a huge wad of money from the takings of the family's food business each month, suggests that religious or spiritual experience is necessarily stifling and does no good to the world at large. At the same time, *Fire* does open up a space for recognising many forms of gendered oppressions within the family: the two women and Biji do not have access to a world of homosociality outside the home that Ashok has access to because of his devotions to his guru. Religion perhaps would have given the women a space of their own, but as Mehta's presentation of the audience at the Ram Lila night where there is only one woman – a mother with an infant – in a crowd almost generically male, suggests, women don't seem to be wanted in what turns out to be the virile world of Hindu religious devotion. Through many manoeuvres like this, the six
occupants of Mehta’s “home sweet home” attain a kind of Strindbergian intensity given the symbolic loads they are made to undertake.

One of the biggest anomalies of the film is the language in which it is shot: all the characters, with the exception of a two-minute bit where Mundu speaks to the milkman, speak in English. This English is anomalous because it is strangely uninflected: it is virtually impossible to make out anything about the class-positions or educations of the characters from their English given that Mundu’s version of it is as good as or even better than some of the masters’. Mehta does not provide a gloss for why this is so. Shyam Benegal in Trikaal (1984), for instance gets around a similar problem by making his characters – Goans of Portuguese origin – initially speak Portuguese, which is then translated by the narrator. However, in a meta-narratival intervention, the narrator announces he is tired of translating, and will just convert all the other languages to Hindi for the convenience of the viewer. At the end of the film, this narrator makes a recce of his own position vis-a-vis those he has narrativised, but the chaste Urdu he uses at that point signals a dialogic use of language to communicate a subjectivity that has now come very far from the embattled but endogamously exclusivist Portuguese Goan stock he himself descends from. Mehta’s film offers no signals about why she chooses to use English; in the absence of any authorial comment, we are left to surmise that the entire film is an exercise in translation that makes visible a backward eastern subjectivity and renders it legible within a Euro-American narratival economy. Fire’s take on the east/west relationship as province/metropolis in the emerging politics of gay and lesbian liberation has found many critics. Ligy Pullapally writes a counter-narrative to Fire in her film Sancharam, which she sees as an intervention in the field that Fire has opened up – that of gay and lesbian political work, especially the generation of positive representations. Sancharam is a Malayalam film, but nonetheless a translation, I argue, of “indigenous” sexual subjectivities into a grammar that is primarily Western-imagined in many ways.

Fire has generated a number of debates, from which certain major strands can be culled. One important outcome of the protests against the film screening being disrupted at various places by fundamentalist outfits was that a broad national debate on the subject of censorship could be established. The points of reference for this debate primarily were whether lesbianism or female same-sex love deserved depiction in a country as poor as India where, surely, other more important things should be given attention first, and whether Fire’s critique of Hinduism and modern Indian national icons like Mahatma Gandhi ought to be “allowed.” To my mind, the view that a third-world country should only deal with female homosexual love only after other
feminist agendas have been accomplished is a heterosexist view that masquerades as feminist. If nothing else, and even if unintentionally, Fire did permit a very public interrogation of what it means to be “female” or a “woman,” and what it means to be a “lesbian.” If a lesbian was a woman and if feminism purported to want justice for all women, then surely lesbian women had as much a claim to representation and discourse as straight women. In fact, the woman-loving-woman may indeed be among the most oppressed within a feminism that does not take cognizance of lesbian desire, as a number of narratives by feminist activists – some of them lesbian (see Narrain et al). Fire’s brand of lesbianism, as many have shown, however, seems contingent upon male heterosexist misdemeanours to bring it to birth. At the same time, in placing lesbian desire within the familiar realm of the home, where two women fall in love with one another while they carry out the many labours that sustain this very home, Fire truly queers the realm of the home: perhaps Fire’s greatest contribution. Locating intra-female love in a familiar place thus enables Fire to interrogate the homonormative narrative of home and homosexuality as being in an exilic relationship, as Gayatri Gopinath points out. At the same time, many elements in the construction of this home places the film within a developmental narrative particularly dear to the “developed” West where its director has strong roots. Even as Fire generates lesbian desire within the familiar space of the home, this desire must finally leave the space of the home so that the film can end with the successful “coming out.” Fire ends with the two heroines leaving the execrable home that has tried to break their spirit. In a utopic gesture that suggests alternatives to the Hindu patriarchal home exist, the two women finally “escape” to a presumably more friendly space: that of the Nizam-ud-din Dargah where previously, they had gone on their only outing without the rest of the family tow. Fire is riven by contradictions that in the final reckoning are unsatisfactorily resolved because Mehta does not detail the alternative to the oppressive home-space the two leave behind. A critique of traditions Fire indeed is; but an indictment that does not provide a map for the protagonists’ future together leaves the viewer at a dead end. Either we must imagine a utopic future bliss: one strategy for survival is indeed pointed to by the more daring Sita – the two women will cook to make a living. Of course anyone who has tried to engineer life a single woman of not too many means knows this is not so easy. Where will the capital come from? Perhaps after all Sita did manage to smuggle her wedding jewellry out when she left? Who will rent a space to them? True, they have outed themselves to their own family, unwittingly albeit, but as Eve Sedgwick Kosofsky pointed out, coming out of the closet is an endless process with many “minoritizing” impediments on the way: will they tell their landlords that they are lesbians? Will they live a free and uncloseted life or will a new set of homophobic precedents make them perform like
monkeys, perhaps untrained this time, as they had had to earlier when a “button called tradition,” as Sita puts it, was pressed? _Fire’s_ coming out narrative, while it seems to suggest an “exit from patriarchy,” to borrow from Bonnie Zimmerman’s self-explanatory title for her essay on how coming-out narratives operate, poses far more questions than it can answer, which might be a good thing in that the film does not subside so easily into a thin narrative of improbable victory.

Just before Radha and Sita are about to leave the house, Biji, their invalid old mother-in-law spits on Radha, who all these years has been a faithful and compassionate care-giver, ministering to her every need. Biji’s gesture can be taken to mean that not only patriarchy as was expected, but also the solidarity of women who are not lesbian, but who are women nevertheless, has failed Radha and Sita. Biji earlier also spits on Mundu’s face for Mundu had been – perhaps for years – masturbating in front of Biji while watching porn-films in the time he was supposed to be watching the Ramayana with Biji. Biji’s equation of Mundu’s transgression with Radha’s and Sita’s equates Mundu’s abuse of trust with their desire for one another. Mehta’s narrative thus highlights the debates within feminism, both Western feminism in the 1970s and Indian feminism even till the present moment, on the role of lesbianism in feminism. One of _Fire’s_ greatest contributions, to my mind, has been its disturbance of the so-called separation between the feminist and the lesbian agendas. Adrienne Rich’s concept of the “lesbian-continuum” is a very useful point to embark on our analysis. In placing female homosociality and female homoeroticism within a continuum rather than as irreconcilable opposites, Rich claims an important place for lesbian desire in the fight against gendered oppressions. Rich’s formulation is indeed open to critique for this very strength: her focus on gender oppression often occludes any consideration of the peculiarly sexual nature of oppression of lesbian women, or rather, of “the” lesbian woman, as Rich does not in her early work take cognizance of the heterogeneity of positions the terms “woman” or “lesbian” may compass. Nevertheless, Rich’s attack on compulsory heterosexuality is a watershed in linking feminism with lesbianism, and equally importantly, for its recognition of heterosexuality as a common combat frontier, albeit in different ways for different groups of “women” and “lesbians.” However, Rich’s formulation is almost strait-laced in her construction of lesbian sexual desire: the lesbian continuum is a range of experiences that for Rich unites women across history and across individual women’s lives irrespective of whether they have had or desired genital sex with another woman. Rich’s lesbian continuum has for this effacement of lesbian sexuality gained considerable notoriety amongst lesbian feminists for one. However, as a concept, it is extremely useful in our consideration of Deepa Mehta’s film _Fire_, for this film clearly and at the same time problematically combines
political solidarity between the two oppressed women with desire for women to produce its effects. In showing Biji, herself oppressed by Mundu, as also against Radha's and Sita's love, *Fire* points to the gap between feminist idealistic aspiration to treat the lesbian as a subset of woman, and feminism's own often unaddressed homophobia.

Mainstream Hindi cinema has often given space to memorable female protagonists. Earlier decades within the history of Hindi cinema yield at least one “canonical” cinematic text where the diegetic focus was the woman: *Bandini* (dir. Bimal Roy, 1963), *Mother India* (dir. Mehboob Khan, 1957), *Pakeezah* (dir. Kamal Amrohi, 1972), *Umrao Jaan* (dir. Muzaffar Ali, 1981), or *Rudaali* (dir. Kalpana Lajmi, 1993) and within the contemporary era, a case may be made for films like *Page 3*, *Chandni Bar* (dir. Madhur Bhandarkar, 2001), *Astitva* (dir. Mahesh Manjrekar, 2001), *Fashion* et al, though it is too early to tell if they might be treated as exemplars of their times. However, the focus in most of these films is the heterosexualisation of the heroine: educating the young woman on her place in the normative order, these films most often privilege heterosexual marriage, companionship, motherhood and related family roles. Where the first crop of films is firmly located within normative heterosexualities for both genders, films like *Page 3* and *Fashion* displace the burden of being homosexual onto male characters who are also members of the fashion fraternity, and thus presumably always-already predisposed to the effeminacy which is Bollywood's most visible trope for male homosexuality. The contribution of films like *Fire*, *Sancharam* and *Deshhatanakkilli Karayarilla* lies in the sensitivity and seriousness with which they approach *sakhya* between women; *Fire* and *Sancharam* present explicitly the continuum between female homosociality and female homoeroticism functioning as a “cinema of attractions” (Gunning 56) for the spectator who can have the pleasure of watching a certified spectacle, while with DKK, it is the spectator who has to become a “perverse spectator,” in Janet Staiger’s phrase, to mine its depictions of female friendship and homosociality for queer valences (Staiger 2).

*Sancharam* tells the story of two girls in their final year of school, whose lives are disrupted by their desire for one another. Kiran and Delilah are neighbours in a small Kerala village; schoolmates who do everything together, they end up falling in love. Their intimacy is discovered by a teacher and a fellow-student; the latter tells on them while the former communicates the template of impending social disapproval in her reaction to what she has discovered. Once their families come to know about their love, efforts to separate Kiran and Delilah are put in motion, prime amongst which is the quick arrangement of Delilah’s marriage to Sebastian, a doctor who is shortly to settle in the USA. Delilah’s marriage to such a man will
of course put her physically out of Kiran's reach; Kiran's despair pushes her to think of suicide. The film begins with her standing on the brink of a waterfall, poised to jump, even as Delilah's wedding is underway in the village church. Delilah has what seems to be a nervous breakdown just before she is supposed to say "I do," and the energies of her dithering communicate ethereally to Kiran, who finally decides not to jump, but to go on with what at least for the present is an attenuated life. A direct political intervention in that Pullappally set out to make it after receiving an email about yet another "lesbian suicide" from Kerala, Sancharam makes a powerful case for representing lesbians and lesbianism positively. Pullappally's avowed intent was to make a film about Indian lesbians where lesbianism would not have to flow from heterosexual angst, disturbance or deprivation thus setting it apart from Fire, where heterosexuality as many critics have noted, seems to be the motor of lesbian desire. However, the extent of Sancharam's ability to produce a positive effect is severely limited by factors relating to its distribution. Sancharam, out on Wolfe Video, a relatively mainstream US gay-and-lesbian distribution node, is one that is more easily available for a dollar price on Amazon.com than it is in any Indian outlet. Slotted as a "lesbian" film, this coming-of-age story has been very favourably reviewed by peers in the gay and lesbian circuit and has won a number of awards at film festivals, but is yet to have a non-festival large-screen release in Kerala, though promotional material such as trailers and music videos have aired on various Malayalam cable channels. Given its international film-festival record and its touring chart which covers more western metropolises than Indian ones, Sancharam's reception history is very different from Fire's. Sancharam is a well-made film indeed. Fitting under the rubric of the "exit from patriarchy" that Bonnie Zimmerman posited was the basis of lesbian desire, however, does not extricate Sancharam from producing a construction of lesbianism that is itself exclusivist in a number of constricting ways, as we shall see below.

Unlike Sancharam, the third film we consider in this section was a mainstream production from the 1980s that still airs on and off on Malayalam cable channels. Not a "lesbian" film, and not a "feminist" film, and not a "women's film" either, Malayali director Padmarajan's film Deshatanakkili Karayarilla (DKK) is nevertheless important as one of the very few Indian films that treat of female friendship and bonding as equal in weight if not more important than heterosexual relationships. Padmarajan's film depicted the story of two high-school girl students about the same age as protagonists of Sancharam. The rebellious and mischievous Sally and the tremulous but quietly passionate Nimmi are boon-companions sharing a close, warm and psychically intimate relationship in the residential school where the two have more or less been left to their own devices by their families, who couldn't care less about them. The film's narrative does not suggest they have been lovers, but regardless, their intimacy is recognisably deep, even
primary to them: the less-troublesome Nimmi is even thought of as Sally's “tail” by the school authorities. Sally, and by association, Nimmi, get into trouble in school with a new teacher Devika, whose various public attempts to discipline the duo spark off a powerful antagonism in Sally. Sally decides to get her own back, hatching a grand plot to spite the hated teacher. The two run away from a school picnic, knowing full well that Devika would in turn be disciplined by the school management and deprived of her job. While they are living incognito — under assumed identities — in a nearby city, Cochin, doing odd jobs and lodging with a kindly old man who runs a guest house largely for western tourists, Nimmi falls in love with Harikrishnan. Initially, he is even encouraging of her attempts to woo him, despite the gulf in their ages: he is in his late twenties, while she is still an adolescent. However, her love does not fructify because he discovers Devika’s photograph in Nimmi’s collection; Devika, it turns out, had cost him his bank job awhile earlier. Mysteries are unravelled, Harikrishnan falls in love with his peer Devika, and it is in the best interests, they think, of all parties concerned, to try to return the two runaway girls to school so Devika can get her job back. Nimmi, heartbroken and bereft at the discovery that Harikrishnan does not care for her at all, agrees, but the film ends not with this muted triumph of discipline, but with a tragedy the viewer is most unprepared for, but nevertheless, one that does not ring false.

The director engages sympathy for all concerned: Harikrishnan’s gumption and intrepidity is as endearing as is Devika’s effort to do the right things in order to secure her very shaky finances; Nimmi and Sally have already won our hearts with their own brave attempts at building a new life of their own. The night before they are to be met by the team of negotiators consisting of, among others, the hated Devika and the equally unloved principal of the school, to return to school, a move that will get the two runaways their tenth-standard school certificates and Devika her job, Sally decides not to capitulate, preferring instead to start yet again, incognito, in yet another faraway place. She does indeed pack her bags and go as far as the gate of their lodging-house when suddenly, to the audience’s surprise, she turns around and runs back to Nimmi, who takes a long time opening the door. Prepared now for at least a suicide attempt, Sally and the viewer both have their hearts in their mouths, as Sally tries to beat the door down, watched by increasing numbers of white couples who emerge from their rooms because of the noise. Nimmi opens the door finally; relieved that she is alive, albeit exhausted, we leave her and Sally together, with Sally asking Nimmi: “Did you think I had abandoned you?” and “Haven’t you understood me yet?” when Nimmi replies to the first question in the affirmative. The next scene, coming as it does after this reconciliation, does indeed take us by surprise as much as this one where the film does not spell out what Sally and Nimmi mean to one another; the next
morning, we find their dead bodies on the bed, joined in an embrace. Nimmi and Sally are together in dead, gone to “a place very far away” as the legend on the screen informs us. This final journey the girls make, coming as it does on their many intended and forced journeys through the film, does not, to my mind, destroy the powerful representational archive of (un)familiar female love and bonding the rest of the film articulates. While Sally and Nimmi are indeed found dead by Harikrishnan, Devika and the teachers of the school who have come to take them back, the entire film hinges on the girls’ love which forms the backdrop even of Nimmi’s love for Hari. Sally’s and Nimmi’s story, told thus, places them in a tradition of same-sex friendship that even when not explicitly sexual, has powerful erotic valences. Their joint death can be taken as metaphoric — the cruel world will mutilate the two of them, and their death is a painful experience for the viewer because the film’s presentation of their potential for life is so touchingly beautiful and at the same time real enough to generate associations amongst most viewers, irrespective of gender. A film like DKK then, is able to generate (un)familiarity without having to produce an exhaustive description of what (un)familiar love looks like. That their friendship is a “dangerous” interruption of consensus realities is evident from the many punishments — explicit and implicit — that the girls must undergo for their various “pranks.”

_Deshatanakkilli Karayarilla’s_ cast includes bonafide mainstream Malayalam stars like Mohanlal, Urvashi and Karthika; further, its music has attained near-classic status and is part of the cultural memories even of Malayalis born well after the 1980s. Belonging thus to the genre of the mainstream film, DKK’s reception has not been confined to a very narrow segment of Malayalis as _Sanchari’s_ has been; nor was it a “critical success” that suddenly achieved success due to notoreity like _Fire_. Padmarajan as a director belonged to Malayalam “middle cinema,” whose makers wanted to unite the probing depth of the Malayalam art film, whose most iconic name is perhaps Adoor Gopalakrishnan, with the commercial viability of films made by directors like Priyadarshan. Padmarajan’s oeuvre is considerable and offers a range of complex, highly pleasurable treatments of often disturbing material. The 1980s are seen as the “golden age” of Malayalam cinema, and Padmarajan’s has since become recognisably canonical. Aired still on cable channels off and on, these films are part of the cultural grammar of the Malayali spectator.

Friendships between men are frequent, in fact the norm for Malayalam cinema’s circuits of desire, as T. Muraleedharan argues very persuasively. Yet, friendships between women are not; femininity is marked by not only its subordination to masculine preoccupations, femininity is also marked by its isolation from its own gender, especially in the last two decades of Malayalam cinema, which has seen a gradual diminishment in the roles given to female protagonists, a
diminishment that may be said to have begun in the 1970s, with the advent of Jayan, arguably the first Malayali non-romantic superstar. Jayan's films valorised a hyper-masculinity that films in the 1980s continued, though the accent now was upon the comedic, with the female protagonists increasingly coming to serve as figures of fun, shrews to be tamed or guinea pigs to be worked upon. Through the 1990s, the trend persisted though the genres that contained women were now once again mega-vehicles for major stars like Mohanlal and Mammootty, whose own stardom, though now beyond question, was also no longer amenable to playing light comic roles as they were to thinly-disguised hagiographies. Alongside these ageing stars' new movies were released a number of films by younger stars more cut out to play renditions of young college-going romances; these films once again made a space for female characters of length, and sometimes distinction. But in all, through the last three decades in particular, Malayalam cinema has proved to be stringently conservative in its representations of femininity, belying its reputation for radicalism among regional cinemas. In a majority of the films still, female leads are expected to play along in their taming and fashioning by male characters into receptacles fit for domesticity. Padmarajan’s film, in the middle of the decade of the 1980s when the hypermasculinity with which Mohanlal is instantaneously identifiable was at its dominant anti-feminist best, is one of the few oases in mainstream Malayalam cinema wherein female subjectivity is considered at any length. Ligy Pullappally’s _Sancharam_, which belongs to the genre of independent, even “art” cinema with a good festival-touring record, with its very compelling representation of female same-sex love is also a representation that breaks this mould. Female subjectivity untrammelled by male requirements is an unfamiliar type in Malayalam cinema. Such a subjectivity that also has within it an active sexual component is almost unthinkable, explosive even. In what follows, we will consider Ligy Pullapally's film in the light of Padmarajan's film, as the latter offers Malayali viewers the most viable and easily accessible public cinematic memory of intra-female love, though their ambitions and scope are radically different. Pullapally’s film is an avowedly political and conscious intervention in the field of available representations of intra-female love, while Padmarajan’s film does not have such an agenda. It is possible to say it is a richer film for that – indeed it is the greater film for the range of talents director Padmarajan brought to film-making; however, an affirmation of female–female desire that does not end in suicide was long overdue, and Pullapally's text must be studied as a campaign document at the very least.

If both Dawesar’s _Babyji_ and De’s _Minx_ appear fantastically unfamiliar, whether for good or for evil, _Sancharam_ offers a pair of compellingly realistic filmic protagonists in Kiran and Delilah. Neither of them stands out as any different from any other girls of their age, unlike both
Minx and Anamika. Delilah and Kiran, are further, characters with names and local habitations; they are amply established as characters in their own light by the film-maker such that their stories take on an independent reality that audiences can partake of; their relatively “ungroomed” cinematic appearances further strengthen the impression of verisimilitude, of connection to the immediate realities of the real world in which such girls “pass” as straight and then tragically commit suicide. Pullapally, like Deepa Mehta, is a diasporic Indian; a trial-lawyer in Chicago before she embarked on making this film in response to an email about yet another tragic lesbian suicide from her home state of Kerala, Pullapally’s film was partly funded with the prize-money she won for legal work in gender issues. Pullapally, we can safely say, is sufficiently self-aware about her location within the projects of queer studies and sexuality studies, and perhaps this prevents her from making disingenuous defences of her film: Mehta at one point had said that Fire was not about lesbianism at all, and was instead about “choices.” Pullapally on the other hand examines the emergence of lesbian desire as desire rather than as political tool for feminist liberation. As such, her film is free of many of the burdens Fire wittingly or unwittingly labours under, such as a shoddy and perhaps unnecessary critique of Hinduism, and depictions of masculinity so unredeemable that the protagonists “Radha” and “Sita” can be seen as emblematic sufferers of tradition itself. Sancharam, while it does not blunder into such jungles, makes almost the opposite mistake in its own “translation” of lesbianism into and onto India. Sancharam locates lesbianism entirely within the realm of the interpersonal, even as Fire locates same-sex love as one of many possible responses to a stifling patriarchally-scripted religious culture. While Sancharam’s main characters and their dilemmas are believable, Pullapally flounders just as Mehta does into re-orientalising the east: “in a land steeped in tradition,” the DVD blurb says, two girls fall in love with one another. Sancharam presents same-sex love as necessarily making a break with tradition; however, as we shall see below, (un)familiar love need not necessarily do this, and all breaks with tradition need not be subversive either.

Sancharam locates love between women within the familiar realm of the home, not in the more public space of the same-sex school like Deshatanakkili. In DKK, the heroines are all “unhoused” – unwanted by their respective families, they have been housed in the school’s boarding, where they are a constant source of devilish pranks that are a refreshing refusal to be incorporated into mainstream discourses of docile femininity. While Fire’s and Sancharam’s radical potentials lie in taking (un)familiar love home, DKK’s mainstream auspices perhaps necessitated that the Malayali home not be the locus of disruptive female homoerotic desire; the home in DKK is the space occupied by the correct Devika – she cares for aged and troubled relatives, and for a while lives unhoused in the home of another old female relative who suggests the
means by which Devika gain the capital that will fetch her a job. Unwittingly, however, Devika’s carrying out of this plan robs Hari of his job; these multiple transgressions are cancelled out in the end, and the ideal home restored with Hari and Devika coming to occupy it as partners in an idealized heterosexual unit. The emotional and tangible costs of this housing of the heterosexual unit, however, are paid by Nimmi and Sally. It is this un-housing that Fire and Santharam resist in their various ways; while the home in Fire is abandoned by the (un)familiar lovers, the home is also the site of recognition of desire. Their leaving this home takes out of it many things that keep it home: they remove their labour which produced the food that Ashok’s takeout sold to the public; their removal of themselves nullifies two marriages; further, Biji loses her caregivers. The home, it turns out in retrospect, was sustained by the labours that would have successfully repressed (un)familiar desire in order to keep it running. Santharam ends with Kiran’s stepping back from the precipice we find her at in the beginning of the film; chopping off her long hair, which she never did like, Kiran divests herself of a symbol of her femininity. Delilah’s name suggests associations with Samson Agonistes, but where Samson was betrayed by evil, anarchic femininity, Kiran’s cutting off her hair suggests not a betrayal by femininity and a consequent disavowal of it, but a deeper commitment to the same feminine. For Kiran’s hair trimming suggests also the taking of religious vows, especially since it comes after Kiran’s having decided to wear white clothes, which she buys after pawning the minimal jewellery she wears. It is true that Pullapally does not shave off Kiran’s head, but nevertheless, the plot up to that point suggests that Kiran will head in the non-marital direction, opposite to the one Delilah has taken. The Nair home, which Kiran does not unequivocally renounce, may still be changed when it is headed by a Kiran who refuses to marry and continue the illustrious lineage. What looks like Kiran’s asceticism might also be interpreted as Kiran’s possible adoption of a butch identity, as Kishore Kumar suggests (see interview with Pullapally); but her truncation of her own femininity is in either instance so as to undertake erotic responsibility for her (un)familiar love while at the same time not giving up claims to home.

By locating this home space within a traditional space, that of the village where figures often seen even in contemporary Malayalam cinema, like the wandering soothsayer – female here – are still part of everyday life, Pullapally is attempting to contest the claims that lesbianism is neither “traditional” nor “Indian.” However, in this small film where the number of characters is limited and their interactions minimal, characters like the wandering female soothsayer and the chorus-like figure of the “village gossip” stand out as performing certain allegorical functions. Where the latter represents the force of consensus reality that proscribes (un)familiar desire, the former symbolises the unchanging nature of the world that “lesbian” love penetrates and
necessarily shatters. This soothsayer informs the girls, now both in their late-teens, that one of them will get married very young and that they will both know love of a magnitude and harmony as Shiva’s for Parvati. The soothsayer is also predictably disturbed by something she sees in Kiran’s hand, and making the Delphic oracle’s pronouncement, “know thyself” in Malayalam, she wanders off muttering in puzzlement and anxiety. Kiran and Delilah are not much perturbed, but the dramatic arc the story will make is already laid before the viewers. The soothsayer’s prediction might be read two ways: one the one hand, traditional epistemologies or means of knowledge are able to cognise (un)familiar loves like Kiran’s for Delilah’s while at the same time not articulating them explicitly. This we might say, opens up a space for their expression in the first place, but within the logic of Sancharam, the second explanation is more accurate: the soothsayer’s response, while not judgemental, is intended to be a prelude to what society will mete out to the two girls: what she foretells is not merely their fortunes, but the way this society works. Sancharam works through a tight symbolism wherein (un)familiar love is always going to show up in predictable ways with predictable results: therefore, in a “land steeped in tradition,” lesbian love turns out to be something that destroys the idyll and thus remains outside the structures and modes of the everyday. (Un)familiar desire itself is, in a sense, presented as unusual even as the film tries to show that unusual does not mean abnormal. All the same, casting homosexual love as a clearly labelled “difference” separate from the meanings and intentions of the society it develops within, Sancharam is in a sense a step backwards from Fire where the homosociality of the joint family is itself seen as a point of origin for (un)familiar desires. The space of the home, of the family, of the nation are all thus, in Fire, always already marked by this desire: there were no pure spaces to begin with, and (un)familiar love can come anywhere, it appears. Within Sancharam, the opposite is established when the beauty and static idyllic pastoral of Kerala landscapes are first established, and then reiterated to prove repeatedly that the girls’ desire is radical. However, as we shall see, making Kiran’s (un)familiar love radical comes at the expense of exoticising both this love itself, while in Fire, the very quondam domesticity of the household has the opposite, and to my mind, more radical effects – (un)familiar love could be anywhere in Fire.

Sancharam, like Fire, places lesbian love in and around the home, though the choice of adolescent protagonists permits us to dwell on some important questions. Where Fire’s protagonists are married, and equipped with experience, presumably know their minds, Sancharam’s depiction of (un)familiar love requires a tabula rasa in order to achieve its impact. In the first place, the girls’ love for one another is uncluttered by any other encumbrance: no husbands, children, and the like. This construction of the ideal love as romantic and
monogamous is different from *Fire's* more involved negotiation with the dilemmas of sexual identity versus sexual behaviour. After Radha is kissed by Sita for the first time, Radha's behaviour towards Sita is so as to reassure her that it was only a temporary lapse, and the film's construction of their growing love figures their confusion about what to do with the desires they feel. In *Sancharam*, on the other hand, while diegetically these confusions between the girls are part of the plot, the underwritten assumption is that there is a core lesbian identity that must out. In placing the growth of their love in the home space and following it from childhood to late adolescence, Pullapally implicitly sees lesbian love as identity, as elemental to the self. Delilah and Kiran, neighbours in a village in some part of Kerala, are friends from the time they meet when children, leaving no doubt that lesbian desire is indeed constitutive of their selves. Their friendship slowly grows into love that un-houses them in various ways. *Sancharam* acknowledges the very porous borders that keep female homosociality and female homosexual desire apart. Through a number of episodes and stories that resonate with a number of foundational lesbian “moments” in mainstream Western lesbian texts, the consequences of this osmosis are presented. *Sancharam* locates lesbianism itself within the range of the home, among one's most primary experiences. The realm of the home is to be contaminated, as it were, by the “taint” of homosexual desire, when Delilah's and Kiran's “unnatural” love is revealed to Delilah's mother by Delilah's spurned male lover. Where the same-sex spaces of the women's hostel or educational institution are also important, it is often possible to isolate these as finite experiences separate from what is to come after. Lesbian desire can often be cleanly relegated to spaces that one outgrows; by extension, leaving these spaces behind also means leaving the desire behind. Placing these within the home, however, performs the function of placing intra-female desire at the roots of the self, within identity as it were, among the things that constitute the self. Yet, at the same time, in presenting this very lesbian love as something that disrupts “a land steeped in tradition,” *Sancharam* has the effect of cleanly separating lesbian love from the familiar spaces wherein it first erupts, a removal that is problematic in its surrender of the home as a possible space for (un)familiar love.

The story opens with Kiran's parents deciding to settle in Kiran's mother's ancestral house in a Kerala village. Kiran's mother has inherited the ancestral house after the estate has been divided among its claimants. However, matrilocal residence does not guarantee an emancipatory approach to desire. Kiran's mother belongs to the matrilineal Nair clan-group and her ancestors include important local chieftains and warriors. Contrary to lay perceptions on the subject, matrilineal arrangements such as the ones the Nairs followed were not necessarily empowering to women either as propertied or as sexual subjects. Effective control of the
homestead and its properties usually lay in the hands of the karatavar, one's mother's brother. Matrilineal descent does guarantee that women do not get sent away from home upon marriage; in fact, the Nair household for any woman inhabitant was one that gravitated around one's natal family, with a fringe of spouses immediately surrounding it. All arrangements to meet life's necessities, except the provision of sexual needs, were already available within this homestead. Sexual needs would be met by means of visiting male spouses: this may have guaranteed a modicum of freedom to the female partner, but at the same time, one must note that the procreative function is still central to the Nair household. The woman must have children to carry on the line; matriliney is invested in carrying out certain heteronormative functions just the same as patriliney. In this sense, then, matriliney is still a heterosexual arrangement, as Kiran later realises. Kiran's mother, thus, despite being the inheritor of a female lineage, is as heavily invested in heteronormativity as are Delilah's people, who are Christians, and who should be more fearful of the "sin" of lesbianism if anything.

Delilah and Kiran are drawn to one another from the time they first meet; they unite in childhood against the common enemy, their male playmate Rajan; Kiran even in childhood is the more decisive and the more rash partner – she elbows Rajan in the stomach to get a ribbon back for Delilah only to have Delilah tell her that it wasn't necessary to have struck him after all. Children grow into adolescence before long, and their first scene as young women is one where Delilah – addressed as Lilah throughout once the two become friends – runs into Kiran's house with a bunch of grapes. Pullapally's voice-over on the DVD acknowledges this to be a Biblical moment – Kiran is being given the fruit of knowledge by her best friend Delilah. Following that lead, we are enabled to make a number of conclusions. Unlike Milton's epic, which is also about a woman eating a piece of fruit, here the fruit is offered by a friend, a familiar, kindred spirit, not a dissembling serpent familiar. Delilah – we will consider the implications of her name in its due place later – in giving Kiran some food, something to eat, something for the body, is also inviting considerations about the nature of their relationship itself as nutritive and nourishing for them in body and spirit. Love for a kindred spirit, a likeness, is thus represented as enabling not disabling, soul-fulfilling rather than threatening or emptying. Delilah offers food just as she offers friendship; however, along with the grapes she brings a thorn – to pierce Kiran's ears. Kiran's bare ears invite complaints from her mother that Kiran is oblivious to but upon Delilah's impetuous insistence, Kiran is only too eager to submit. Her ears are pierced but the act is painful; Delilah admits she was foolhardy, but runs on to the rest of her day's activities, leaving Kiran with a bloody wound. The piercing of any part of the body, especially the finger, is a common trope in fairy tales for the impregnation of a woman, usually the princess, by the prince.
The princess pierces her finger with the spindle while she is weaving yarn, and is usually very ill after that; her literal confinement to the room, to her bed suggests the confinement of the woman to bed after pregnancy and parturition; in childbed, the princess is no better than an ill person in having been incapacitated for activities other than child-rearing even if only for a short time. However, in most medieval fairy tales, this story takes on dark overtones; childbed was a dangerous place for women – many died. Here, however, this act of penetration signals not the death of a person, but the advent of sexuality. The penetration of the ear is suggestive of penetrative intercourse, which itself may mark a rite of passage from childhood to womanhood; of course, as the story reveals, penetrative intercourse – or its prelude in marriage – will only follow the separation of these two girls. It is thus possible to read Delilah’s painful piercing of Kiran’s ear as a marker of the separation of two lovers that will result when one of them takes to the metonym for childbed – marriage. Following immediately upon Delilah’s offer of food, this bloody rite of penetration – meant to have been successfully painless – suggests the impossibility of their love; while love for one’s own kind is nourishing, it might be proven unequal to the other imperatives that structure life. However, Kiran’s willingness to bear pain also marks her as the “hero,” whom we are to follow and identify with.

Female homosociality that is physically demonstrative is not suspicious or marked as sexual in most traditional Indian conceptions of desire that cannot be allowed – indeed that place is occupied most often by heterosexual love, often deemed impermissible because of incommensurability in caste standing or intentions, as some of the protagonists’ classmates find out. Kiran is the one who is identified with the life of the mind, and Delilah with the sensuous. Kiran, the “teacher’s pet,” is also carefully placed as quintessentially Malayali in seeking to contribute creatively to the language – she aspires to be a writer in, and indeed a poem of hers titled, with emotional portent, “The Awakening” – suggesting Kate Chopin’s novel about sexual coming of age at the same time – is published in an important Malayalam literary journal. It is while Kiran is writing and scratching out lines in her house that Delilah materialises with her bunch of grapes, signalling that the life of the mind that Kiran is invested in is also tied in many productive and vital ways with the sensuous, energising power of Delilah’s presence, for which the fruit is only one metaphor. There is a moment of self-recognition, after Delilah has left Kiran with a pain in her ear and a black tongue – Kiran happily wags her tongue at herself in the mirror when she finds it coloured black, joyous in the wake of Delilah’s intervention. This “mirror moment” contrasts strongly with moments later, when Kiran finds herself forswn by Delilah, after their intimacy has been recognised by both.
Kiran understands her desire for Delilah when they study together all night for exams that Delilah is bound to fail in without Kiran’s help, as Delilah’s mother gratefully acknowledges. Kiran is immersed in her books while Delilah is immersed in the sounds of the night, the rain and her shadow-puppets. The sexual charge between them first finds its way out through ventriloquism. Tired of studying, Delilah brings her puppets out; tellingly, she wields the female puppet, and the shadow of this girl-puppet speaks to Kiran’s shadow on the wall, complaining of confinement in the quotidian. Kiran responds by picking up the boy-puppet and speaking as a low-level male feudal tenant or vassal to Delilah’s princess – though Kiran herself has the more illustrious lineage – saying “he” is only a poor man and cannot guarantee variety at all times, but can indeed give eternal love. Delilah’s princess responds, surprisingly, saying she also loves “him,” a surprise because their conversation so far has not presented any such prior intent in the girl-puppet’s character; swiftly, however, she moves on to say that love alone is not enough, she is bound to be tired within the poor mud hut the “boy” can offer her, and then, goes on to “kick” him in the head. Kiran’s puppet expresses heartbreak but still promises eternal devotion and they return to their books. This shadow conversation, with the shadows of the girls framing the more clearly defined shadows of their puppets, offers an opportunity to reflect on both women’s dreams and responses to one another, as well as an opportunity to reflect on marriage itself. Delilah wants to fly high, travel far and to be free; yet, as the rest of her story will show, she is the one who is also the more liable to be shackled because she is, paradoxically, the more practical of the two. Kiran offers eternal adoration, but despite the romantic impracticality one associates with such an utterance, Kiran’s puppet is also prepared to love fully and deeply, to offer a promise, a commitment that is the product of both self-understanding and awareness of limitation. This intimate ventriloquised exchange is also our first signal of certain susceptibilities within both of them; Kiran is the one eager to love while Delilah is the one eager to fly, to be pursued, even while loving. Their narrative of love till now appears properly heteronormative; yet the circumstances of this impromptu puppet-play by two girls all alone by themselves forces a new location of desire as between women rather than as solely between a man and a woman. The film subversively replaces the male poet who sings in the romantic lyric mode with the female poet – Kiran – whose writing and reading inscribes this (un)familiar love with a poetry that would normatively be the preserve of heterosexuality. In fact, Kiran’s later reading, in the classroom, of “Krishna you seem to have abandoned me” by famous Malayali woman poet, Sugatha Kumari, unshackles devotional love and the mystic experience of union with god/beloved this love can bring about from the traditional conception of the lover/beloved pair.
as cross-sexual. For Kiran’s critical appreciation of the poem’s depiction of the experiences of love and longing is derived from her own still unconscious love and longing for Delilah.

Pullapally further locates (un)familiar love as an equal to heterosexual love within the film’s plot, where Kiran and Delilah are surrounded by many successful and unhappy narratives of heterosexual fulfillment or its thwarting. Kiran’s great-grandmother had abandoned her great family for the love of a poor soldier; his first gift to her was a glass bangle which was Kiran’s mother’s most prized inheritance amongst all the ancestral goods she inherits. Delilah’s grandmother has loving memories of her dead husband, with whom she awaits reunion in death, though still joyful in life through her relationship with her beloved grand-daughter. Kiran and Delilah are thus surrounded by loves that enable their possessors to cherish their lives and feel fulfilled in existence. However, a sense of how love is normatively valued and constructed also emerges through a set of other stories: two classmates of different faiths – one Hindu and one Muslim – elope from school only to be apprehended amid great scandal and public castigation. Heterosexual love is also revealed to have more tragic consequences for women than it does for men in the story of another female classmate who had been impregnated by a man she believed had loved her; however, he betrays her and she is forced to have an abortion. For Kiran and Delilah, however, the impediment of heterosexual love is merely comedic, arriving in the persona of their classmate Rajan, who develops an immense crush on the beautiful Delilah.

But Kiran gets there first. Studying together with Delilah, Kiran discovers she can preserve her senses in the onslaught of Delilah’s easy charm and beauty. In a reprisal of a solo dance scene in a saree that reminds one at the same time of both the Shiv-tandav and the sight of innumerable Bollywood heroines in big blockbusters – Sridevi in Chandni (dir. Yash Chopra, 1989), Madhuri Dixit in Beta (dir. Indra Kumar, 1992), Juhi Chawla in Darr, Urmila Matondkar in Rangeela (dir. Ram Gopal Verma, 1995) to name only some of the most iconic. Sancharam permits the visual referencing of such renditions of hyperbolic femininity by having Delilah perform such a dance in a bright red saree in a dark smoky room with no other contours; that such a hyperbolic femininity can be appraised by a female gaze as much as it can be by the expected male gaze is revelatory. Kiran is the homospectatorial audience then, whose desire for the leading lady is unmistakable and can be equated with the desires expressed by the male hero for the person of the heroine. Unlike the male hero, however, our protagonist cannot insinuate herself into such a dance scene by imagining it to be her due; she is tormented by nightmares in which Delilah dances like Shiv on the burial ground. Pullapally’s use of a respectably heterosexual convention to convey the sexual power of a desiring female gaze, loving a female body is in
keeping with such introjections of queer desire into familiar heterosexual locations and conventions by other directors like Pratibha Parmar in *Khush* and *Nina's Heavenly Delights*, or more intrepidly by Deepa Mehta's use of old Hindi film songs as the stimulus for an impromptu fancy-dress dancy at home in *Fire*. In all these cases, an open form, usually interpreted as heterosexual, can be appropriated by viewers of any persuasion to produce sites of immense pleasure.

However, Delilah's sensuous power is not lost upon the male who presumably should have had exclusive entitlement to it. In fact, both of them find themselves spying voyeuristically on Delilah as she plays with little chicks in her backyard. While Kiran runs away feeling that she has been apprehended in the act of admiring something that she is not entitled to, Rajan misreads the situation with what can only be described as pure heterosexual presumption. Rajan, astutely he feels, thinks Delilah's best friend is his best, god-given helpmeet in finding a way to Delilah's heart. Predictably, authored by Kiran's poetic talent and knowledge of Delilah, “his” letters are a big hit with Delilah, who does not know what to make of this new sensibility in Rajan. His fourth letter, however, is his own; with his ventriloquist no longer speaking through him, Rajan reveals himself to be a silly puppet after all, revealing his soul to be a cat that longs to drink out of the saucers of Delilah's eyes in suitable doggerel verse that is more comic than romantic. However, when Delilah tries to read the letters out to Kiran, the truth comes out. Kiran though thinks that she has fallen in her best friend's eyes and lives in agony at having lost her friendship. At the same time, a party of bride-seekers comes to Delilah's house, and are predictably swept over by her beauty. Delilah's mother tells them no, though, because the “child” is too young for the immediate marriage that the suitable “boy,” Sebastian the qualified medical professional about to depart to America, wants. Rajan manages to convince Kiran in the meanwhile that Delilah is about to marry and Kiran's anxiety reaches a peak. She manages to confront Delilah in the bathing pool, that prized location for clandestine erotic encounters – mostly heterosexual, or at best male homosocial – in Malayalam literature and cinema. They become intimate, though their intimacy is represented much more discreetly than Deepa Mehta manages to with a body double for the frontal nudity she packs in. The space of the bathing pool with its few lotuses, the step with an alligator carved on it, the tree-reflecting green water, all convey a primal interiority that suggests Rajan and Sebastian have either been left far behind, or haven't yet been thought of, though the plot clearly suggests otherwise. Pullapally leaves the audience in no doubt about what happened; however, the audience is forced to speculate for themselves what they might actually have done amongst themselves – the question of how women have sex, which is answered so transparently and voyeuristically for Ashok's character in
Fire is here left to the audience’s imagination. At the same time, in placing lesbian love out in the bathing pool, and later, in the yard, rather than within the house has a familiar effect: female homosexual desire is a liminal thing, in this film’s construction of it, after all, unable to enter the home though it is within sight of it. Further, Kiran initiates love-making with Delilah out of desperation, afraid that the latter will marry; the urgency of their sex does not thus completely leave behind heterosexuality as Kiran’s “coming out” is precipitated by Delilah’s impending marriage. Thus, while Fire places male eyes at the keyhole, studying (un)familiar female loves violate their patriarchal privilege, Sancharam places heterosexuality at the centre of the frame as the chief threat to happiness, thus moving away from the model provided by the lesbian continuum. In seeing oppression against lesbians as deriving from a sexuality-based system rather than a gender-based one, Sancharam moves away from Fire’s depiction of male privilege, evidenced in its depiction of Ashok’s anger at Radha’s lack of arousal when he tries to get intimate with her after Sita has left the house. Sancharam foregrounds heterosexuality’s workings as a normative system that stays in place within matrilineal as well as women-headed households where Fire addressed more overtly “feminist” concerns about the lack of autonomy for women within male-dominated systems of familiality and domesticity.

The space devoted to feminine development and growth is rare for screen time allocation in Malayalam cinema as the hero’s development gets the bulk of the time; often, the heroine’s growth might be in context of overt negotiations of the feminine’s place in Malayali modernity, as for instance in Pavithram (Purity/The Pure, dir. T. K. Rajeev, 1994) where Unni, played again by Mohanlal, is brother and surrogate parent to his sister, born almost three decades after him, and whom he raises after his mother’s death after a very late pregnancy. The “purity” of the femininity suggested and secured by such films as adherence to precedent and tradition – often patriarchal – is what Pullapally’s and Padmarajan’s films, however, question when they place femininity at the centre of the frame in a conscious fashion. The diegetic placing of Malayali heroines is always within a frame that marks desire as heterosexual; heroines are also constantly being shaped for a heterosexual future existence. Sancharam’s representation of its protagonists’ relatively cloistered home-lives frees the screen of the hypermasculinity it is constantly in danger of descending into. Due to the dis-location of the male/masculinity from the viewing range, independent feminine characters and affiliations are allowed to develop. In Deshatanakkalli Karayarilla on the other hand, despite the lovingly detailed intimacy that Sally and Nimmi share, once Harikrishnan enters Nimmi’s life, the screen-time given to the female–female couple shrinks in proportion to the increased time given to the two prominent heterosexual combinations of Harikrishnan and Nimmi, and Harikrishnan and Devika.
Sancharam goes beyond – some like Navaneetha Mokkil argue it regresses – in its imagination of intra-female eros; where Deshatanakkilli Kangarilla does not offer any reliable clues, indeed sidesteps consideration of any sexual intimacies between the female protagonists, Sancharam like Fire makes no bones about sexual desire between women. DKK also locates intra-female eros within two male–female–female triangles of varying import; in one, two women aid one another in assessing one man; in the second, two women compete with one another, unwittingly, for the same man. The latter triangle proves the more powerful. Sancharam places love between the women at the centre of the story, not as one of two equal subplots, a move that makes evident its politics – that of claiming an autonomy for female homosexual subjectivity that is not dependent on male–female erotic structures.

Ligy Pullapally stated in one of her interviews that her achievement in making an “authentic” lesbian narrative lies in having made Sancharam in an Indian language when she could have made it in English (Kumar 2007). Pointing to Fire’s use of English as the “home-tongue,” Pullapally argues that her use of Malayalam, while it may have precluded her making a contemporary western lesbian “classic,” has also precluded the follies of translation. Nevertheless, Sancharam is, I argue, as much of a translation as is Fire. This lesbian love-story, as the DVD blurb notes, is set in a “land steeped in tradition.” This static representation of Kerala as an unchanging domain brings with it a variety of problems, as we shall see. One of the effects of setting such a story in a “land steeped in tradition” is to reify lesbian love. Love for a lesbian familiar when itself set in an unchanging realm congeals the meaning of lesbianism in much the same way as Judith Butler points out continuous acts of performance makes gender congeal around particular bodies. Here, the effect is to valorise a particular romantic version of lesbian love, untainted by the contaminations of compromises such as marriage or poly-amory. This lesbian love, located in the person of a protagonist who is also the locus of feudal, class and caste privilege makes lesbianism all the more problematic. Must the lesbian needs be someone like the much martyred Stephen of Radclyffe Hall’s classic Well of Loneliness, born to wealth and culture but having to traverse through lower psychological castes for want of a mate in her own territory? Sancharam encodes its lesbian love story in ways that would not be immediately obvious to the non-Malayali viewer as casteist or even class-ist. This non-Malayali viewer – the film has been released on DVD in the USA by a major “mainstream” distributor of gay and lesbian movies, Wolfe, and is yet to have a television or theatre release in Kerala where the story is set – is, on the other hand, more likely to take for granted through one of the elisions of translation, the various setpieces of Kerala that the film captures as part and parcel of what “god’s own country” makes available to all its inhabitants.
As anyone who has followed the story of Sree Nandu and Sheela, a lesbian couple who went public with their relationship a few years back in this state, would know, the public resources for the sustenance of a non-normative relationship in Kerala are very slender (See V. N. Deepa in Narrain et al). Sancharam presents itself as an exemplum – a moral story for how life should have been for these two girls, but how it turned out to be – but despite its garb of near universality, or perhaps because of its need to appear universal, the film does not take into account the specific difficulties of sustaining a lesbian relationship in Kerala. As V. N. Deepa of Sahayatrika notes in her powerful piece in Because I Have a Voice, men and women have different perceptions of their entitlement to the resources available to the individual for personal emotional sustenance. Men were the more frequent callers to the state's first designated lesbian helpline; women callers, on the other hand, few and far between as they were, were more hesitant to make claim to a space designated specifically as theirs. Their caution and their sense of being undeserving of such autonomy which acted, as Deepa notes, as a barrier to many women initially in using the helpline, are particularly characteristic of how femininity has come to be shaped and perceived in this state. Pullapally's film loses a golden opportunity to place her lesbian love-story within this realm of feminine self-deprecation and self-rejection in Kerala that Padmarajan's film addresses so beautifully. Pullapally's film is concerned about making itself intelligible under the sign "lesbian," and the result is that the film is indeed intelligible to any one who watches it as a love story pure and simple, of two girls separated in love. But the amorphous or ectopic quality of this love, located entirely within the personal, leaves the film without the anchorage of personal detail that makes for great literature. A narrative that is unencumbered by location, indeed, may be pleasing at many levels, but may be too pat to disturb the viewers into producing a programme of change. Filtered clear of any potential to relate the personal to the social, to the complex mess of relationships that relate our loves to the larger webs of relationships social, economic and indeed, sexual, that structure society, this film relies on the narrative of decontextualised lyricism.

Kerala's justly-famed natural beauty comes handy in providing a suitably mesmerising background for this lyrical exegesis, but picturesque locales of seemingly unperturbed beauty indeed hide a series of normalisations that in turn caution us to the fact that all narratives of unconventional sexuality need not necessarily themselves be unconventional. The film for instance, marshalls Kiran's Nair ancestry, humanised with the help of the love-story of an ancestress who left it all behind for the love of a foot-soldier and journeyman, to give a certain heft to her endurance under pressure. Faced by the crises generated by discovery of her love affair with her familiar, Delilah, Kiran tells her mother she will resist staunchly everyone's effort
to quell her since she has martial blood running in her veins. Why must caste be marshalled to help bail out a lesbian love affair of all things? To the outsider, perhaps, such an identity must be necessarily exotic, fascinating and even endearing – perhaps it confers regal qualities upon the character. But within the Kerala context, this invocation is more than problematic. As V. N. Deepa notes in her essay, women from the lower castes and classes seem to be more prominently represented among those who have committed suicide because they have been prevented from being with those they love. Deepa adds as corollary that higher castes, with greater access to social and financial privilege, are also more equipped to keep such data about their womenfolk from entering the records. However, given that this film is itself, as Pullapally claims, her artistic response to an email she received about two Malayali girls who had committed suicide because they were not allowed to be together, Pullapally's invocation of the Nair sub-caste's claims to martial and psychological superiority is problematic, to say the least. Overall, Sancharam's heroines are both in positions of relative privilege, though Kiran clearly has more. But in providing her Nair ancestry as guarantee for Kiran's seriousness of intent restricts the scope of the presumably empowering gesture that Kiran's character is making for other such embattled lesbian women. Historically, the Nairs' access to social, economic and cultural privilege gave them ascendancy in Malayali life that arguably, has only been slightly mitigated even today. As such, Kiran's invocation can only go so far in providing a point of reference to others in similar positions, but lacking this caste's privilege and ascendancy at least as they are depicted in the film.

Further, the picturesque locations in which the story has been filmed themselves also invoke privileges connected to caste: the traditional thiruvathirakkali dance, the sarpa-kaavu or serpent grove, and the kulippura or bathing pond, to name but a few. The bathing pond where the two girls consummate their love is a space that is an instance of a space that is grounded in caste-arrangements but presented in a decontextualised way within the plot. Such a private bathing enclosure, contrary to what outsiders might believe, is not available to all Malayalis. Instead, it forms one of those special enclosures of the tharawad or upper-caste ancestral house that in contemporary Kerala is more the exception for use as everyday bathing enclosure rather than the norm. The film though is set somewhere in the post-globalisation phase, as one frame each of a film magazine and a scene in the street with telephone booths indicate. In the last two decades at least, the use of such a location for one's daily bath is an unlikely fact; its presence in one's life's pattern suggests the continuance of older feudal property arrangements that benefitted the uppermost castes in particular. But even as this is a space clearly of caste-privilege, Pullapally's use of the bathing enclosure in a film about lesbian love must also be placed in
another, more favourable context. As a space for erotic encounter, the bathing pond is a staple in most Malayali films till the 1990s; hero and heroine invariably met for a secret liaison at the bathing pond, which being gender segregated, was a space that the opposite gender must necessarily literally penetrate in order to get an audience with their beloveds. In this film however, the depiction of love for one's likeness rather than for one's other means the filmmaker has an opportunity to queer one of Malayalam cinema's most resolutely heterosexual and male homosocial spaces. This she does in a fashion that leaves nothing to the imagination even as it stops short of the explicitness that Deepa Mehta engineered in her depiction of what goes on in the joint family's master-bedroom when the master is away. However, in disrupting the seamless availability of the lesbian love-making couple to the viewer's gaze, whether “automatically” heterosexist and homophobic like Kulbhushan Kharbanda's in Fire, or somewhere in between, Pullapally makes available to the characters and the viewer alike an alternative to the lesbian film's tendency to “over-sex” its protagonists, as might be argued is the case with Fire: Radha's and Sita's first kiss happens in the middle of what to its participants is a very moving conversation about Sita's longing to go home. The pathos of this moment is suddenly interrupted by what appears to be Mehta's signifier for raw lust on Sita's part – suddenly kissing Radha, Sita forgets all about loneliness. While this might be taken to mean a reclamation of the lost plenitude of her mother's love in Radha's presence, the suddenness of this manoeuvre does not seem to be justified by the plot's development: impetuous as Sita is, it would have been more in keeping with her persona for Mehta to have postponed the kiss to at least a point after some more conversation. However, Fire is, at that point, in a hurry to get on with establishing its protagonists' erotic interest in one another. Sancharam is more staid, allowing Kiran and Delilah's relationship all the development of a childhood and youth spent together before consummation; further, the scene in which the girls are discovered by Delilah's jealous suitor in a grove near their house is itself not accompanied by a voyeuristic tour of what women do to one another where the viewer and the person who makes the discovery are given an opportunity to play voyeur. Instead, the hermeneutic of touch, necessitating that we imagine what happens offscreen comes into play. Across all three texts, however, the emotional range of the intra-female relationship is most challengingly explored by Padmarajan in Deshatanakkilli Karayarilla. Sally and Nimmi though “typically” rebellious in wanting to run away from school to spite a teacher are nevertheless emotionally mature to allow one another room for genuine self-expression. Sally is the domineering initiative-taker; halfway through the film, her look changes and she acquires what modern Indian viewers will identify as a butch look with short hair and trousers replacing shoulder-length hair and knee-length skirts. Nimmi is in her way identifiably
femme, with her large bindi, range of clothes that are primarily Indian, including the occasional sari, and her more “feminine” demeanour and mein. Sally is suspicious initially of Nimmi’s clandestine encounters with Harikrishnan, but her probings may be reconciled with those that would not be objectionable even in a heterosexual *sakhi* – Sally is aware both of Nimmi’s need for love, especially affirmative relationships with a male, as also of Nimmi’s great innocence about the world. Nimmi’s vulnerability is identifiably “feminine” while Sally's worldly-wisdom is at the same time “masculine” even if in a tomboyish way. A conventional reading might want to place Sally and Nimmi as binaries occupying recognisably heterosexually-coded male/female positions within a relationship without providing an explicit frame of homosexual autonomy within which to place these deviations from normative assumptions about femininity. But in explicitly presenting the same also as strategies, whether consciously assumed or unconsciously, that help the girls negotiate the world – when Hari first meets the girls, he had assumed they were a heterosexual couple because of Sally’s short hair – DKK is able to place their assumption of “roles” as making meaning within social contexts rather than exclusively personal contexts. *Fire* and *Sancharam*, in contrast, while unyoking femininity from heterosexual desire or desire for a masculine object, do not necessarily examine the significations of gendering as a process that is particularised, with different meanings and implications in different milieus.

Pullapally also places lesbian depressiveness within the space of the education the protagonists forfeit – Delilah’s studies are indeed truncated; Kiran will weather the storm apparently, but the tenuous resources at their disposal are made evident as are the consequences of this lack when Delilah asks Kiran what jobs they are likely to get without even a school certificate. In this, the film differs from Padmarajan’s; there, the female protagonists are able to run away from the school system to take up petty jobs in the big city of Cochin. However, how difficult such a sustenance, eked out by pawning the jewellery they have, is highlighted time and again by the many difficulties the girls must surmount together and alone in Kerala’s fiercely normatively gendered public spaces. One wishes Pullapally had gone beyond the high tragic strum und drang of her morally implacable heroine Kiran to explore what happens thereafter to her when Kiran tries to make her career as poet and lesbian lover after school. At the end of the film, Kiran does not jump off the edge of the waterfall on which she is poised, but instead, chops off her very long hair and throws the shorn locks into the waters that earlier looked threatening, now only powerful. Just as Kiran’s cutting her hair still leaves her relatively long-haired, the film only goes this far in establishing a lesbian trajectory. Once familiar trials have been reprised and diatribes mouthed, *Sancharam* refuses, ironically, to undertake the journey it purportedly chronicles. Thus, while it is a rare, invaluable instance of characterisations of
autonomous femininity in Malayalam cinema which is so lacking in such depictions, the film’s adherence to a theory of lesbian representation that is prior to the narrative, we argue, impedes its artistic development. *Sancharam* cries out for the complex intransingences that make up life’s disturbing moments. Their lack in this narrative means we must be content with a static, reified rendition of the lesbian as familiar to Western theory and practise, of the lesbian as an unfamiliar denizen of a lyrical non-Western location made deliciously, easily consumable to an audience located far from the spaces it purports to describe.

At the same time, the depiction of intra-female desire as autonomous and outside the realm of male fantasy is indeed a very necessary piece of initiative, even a plucky one. The serious lack of such depictions in Malayalam cinema indeed foster a conservatism that may have dangerous implications for any politics for radical or moderate change these films may purportedly espouse if their depiction of female protagonists does not go beyond current rubrics where they are presented as mere figures of fun when young, or self-sacrificing adjuncts when older. Indeed, the independent feminine is even feared, if the suspicions that are brought to bear on the bored housewife and her virginal sister-in-law in *Manichitratazhu* (The Quaint Lock, dir. Fazil, 1993) and the fiery young virgin in *Aaram Thambiran* (The Sixth Lord, dir. Shaji Kailas, 1997) are anything to go by (see Muraleedharan in Vanita) In not collapsing female initiative into male demands for heterosexual unit formation, *Sancharam* is indeed charting a new path. Kiran advances the proposition that they run away, and become the *deshadanakkillis* (migratory birds) of Padmarajan’s film. Yet, as Delilah pragmatically points out, what will running away without money and with only an incomplete education achieve? *Sancharam* takes the middle path. *Deshatanakkilli*s young heroines take up a path identifiable to most Malayali audiences as the path of no good in a society that is not only highly literate, but also highly aspirational, setting up expectations of a dramatic return to the fold or of dramatic punishment in the end. While this path may have the moral force of subverting the authority of the blatantly violative school system and to the invasive schoolmistress Devika, the two girls themselves are unable to, literally, oulive the consequences of their escape. Thus, even as *Sancharam* takes the problematic path of underwriting Kiran’s rebellion with her blue-blooded fortitude, *Sancharam* envisages alternate courses of action for young women, courses of action that are significantly lacking in mainstream Malayalam film where female docility is taken to be the given. The explosively rebellious protagonists of *Deshatanakkilli* are unable to find a way back to the world they have refused; their rebellion thus effectively sidelines and marginalises them such that their value as people seems totally redundant in terms of the plot even though the symbolic power of their love percolates all our other judgements. Within the conventions of popular film their death together signals their
refusal to accept, even unto the death, the ways of an unjust world; however, in the unjust world of Malayalam cinema, the metaphorical power of their joint suicide does not equal the disempowerment lack of positive images can produce. Given the number of Malayalam films with dead, dying or “cured” heroines outweighs the number of heroines who retain their dignity and autonomy by a figure so large, the ideal that shapes a film like Sancharam is laudable, indeed necessary. Sancharam is able to provide the female viewer more than one route that female existence may take. Yet, Sancharam slight the compromises many women who love other women must make in marrying: Kiran is outraged by Delilah’s pragmatic offer of a secret relationship on the fringes of her marriage to Sebastian. The film-maker is clearly with Kiran’s high romantic refusal of such a ploy; heteronormativity itself may offer spaces for the enactment of female same-sex love and desire, as the case of Fire proves. An “emancipatory” lesbianism in comparison to a pragmatic lesbianism, if such we may call the idealistic Kiran’s and the practical Delilah’s approaches to the question, would rather outlaw heterosexuality itself even as the latter suggests making the best of a bad case. Pullapally follows Kiran’s feeling of betrayal at the treatment Delilah suggests; intuitively Kiran’s reaction is indeed true. Yet, as a responsible film-maker it behooves those who wish to propound positive political images for lesbian love to also consider the subversive potentials of strategies that may at first appear compromised or diluted, so that the emancipatory or empowering potentials of their own narratives not be circumscribed by unitary notions of how lesbians in a third world land “steeped in tradition” must live. Sancharam, in fact, is misleadingly subtitled “the journey” – the physical journey that Sally and Nimmi undertake in Deshatanakkilli Karayarilla is not even begun in this film. Kiran does indeed mentally travel from teacher’s pet to tainted lesbian schoolgirl, but Padmarajan’s film, despite its many politically incorrect or fantastic positionings, is able to suggest strategies for survival that are anchored in the everyday world we travel through. The girls are able to find a hostel – albeit with a kindly old gentleman who exemplifies the fantastic I mentioned above, almost an instance of deus ex machina, willing to take in two under-age girls without a background check – take on assumed names and make a go of it. Pullapally arguably achieves what she sets out to when Kiran does not jump off the cliff. Pullapally’s voiceover on the DVD acknowledges that this was not the climax that she originally intended though – Kiran was to have died as per the original plan. However, in “saving” Kiran, Pullapally is indeed making a very strong case for survival at all costs, continuity and endurance rather than naive idealism. Where there are hardly any positive representations of lesbians, each film that does not kill its lesbians off counts a great deal: we must thus credit Pullapally for what she does achieve in producing credible protagonists, making a powerful interruption in the politics of visibility by creating very visible and very
dignified protagonists who are treated with compassion by their maker. The many homophobic castigations Pullapally received at various film screenings in Kerala, as also the various stratagems employed during filming, such as not telling people that this was to be a lesbian film, all illustrate amply the personal courage required to make these interventions (DVD features). But unlike DKK, Pullapally's film stops just short of pushing Kiran into this real world in which we so desire to take her measure; in denying us this opportunity to see her amongst other men and women, Pullapally places her film within what I shall call an ectopic lesbian narrative. Islanding Kiran and Delilah in a paradise on earth is in keeping with narratival strategies undertaken by a number of writers but at the same time, this islanding itself isolates Kiran from context, making her an emblem rather than a particular character, and making Sancharam an exemplum whose tale still needs telling.

Lost in Translation

In the year 1893, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was thrown out of a train from Durban to Pretoria where he was going in the capacity of legal counsel to his Muslim employer in Durban. Being thrown out of this train was to be a shaping force in transforming Gandhi from “an Indian nonentity” to one of the most powerful leaders of people of all time (Autobiography 111–12). Shivering at the Pietermaritzberg station where he had been offloaded from the train for refusing to travel in the van compartment when he had a ticket entitling him to travel in the first class, Gandhi says, “I began to think of my duty.” Was it to remain and “root out the disease of colour prejudice” in South Africa or was it to be insulted and to return to India? He decided “to take the next available train to Pretoria,” and his further activities in South Africa are as well known as this incident: rooting out the “superficial” symptoms of colour prejudice, Gandhi was convinced, was necessary to attest the fundamental equality of all human beings. Gandhi’s struggles in South Africa were on conducted on a variety of fronts, and one of the most important effects of these was to draw international attention to the system of indenture in the various British colonies, besides raising critical questions about the ethics of racial discrimination.

In the year 1892, two years before Gandhi, Begum, the grandmother of one of the central characters in Shamim Sarif’s The World Unseen makes a journey in the reverse direction from Gandhi’s. Where Gandhi is able to stand up and decide to fight colour prejudice in South Africa, Begum is being returned to India in disgrace for having been raped by a black man. The logic of colour prejudice here also operates in the opposite direction from which it does in Gandhi’s case, emanating as it does here from non-whites, directed against the Blacks. Begum is
on the train from Pretoria to Durban, from where she must board a ship back to Bombay, to her own natal family. Once the child conceived by this rape is born and its non-Indian genes make themselves evident, Begum's in-laws beat her badly, disabling her for life as her punishment for having “allowed” herself to be defiled. They decide that neither she nor her children can stay in their community any more. It does not matter to this small community of Indians in Pretoria in the 1890s that Begum was raped by a black man and is thus herself a victim, and deserving of love and ministration. The diaspora's patriarchal logic of lineage from father to son is made further obvious in the latter half of this episode, when Begum's marital family refuses to let her son — also the firstborn — go with her. Begum however, refuses to leave without both the children and the threat of her presence continuing to defile them is enough to make the family agree. It turns out this is for appearance's sake only; as the train is pulling out, her husband requests her to hold their son out of the train's window so he can say a final goodbye. Begum agrees, thinking “he has feelings after all,” despite his willingness to part with his wife. Her husband however, simply seizes the child from his wife's frailer grasp as the train picks up speed, leaving Begum screaming and empty-handed as the train quickens out of the station. Having abducted his child thus, her husband and his family “did not linger for very long in the station, but moved hurriedly to return home, because they, and everyone else who remained in the station could hear the screams of the woman on board the train even after it was long out of sight” (TWU 144). Deprived thus of her first-born, Begum, then only nineteen years old, is banished to India where she brings up her half-breed daughter, Amina's mother. Begum insists to this daughter, her son-in-law and her granddaughter Amina that they never return to South Africa, the land that humiliated and deprived her so entirely, but upon Begum's death, her family does migrate once again back to this country.

Life in the multi-racial British and Afrikaner colonies of southern Africa was organised along a carefully monitored system of privilege and deprivation guaranteed by race. This racial ranking system, which David Horowitz calls “positional psychology,” arranges blacks, coloureds and whites on an ascending cline (Leonard 620). Traditional blacks were at the bottom of the pile, Westernized blacks a mite above, coloureds further above, followed by Indians, followed by whites, themselves sorted out into various degrees of privilege. In addition to Indian indentured labour in South Africa, there was also a relatively better-off class of immigrants called the “Free Passenger Indians,” because they had paid their own passages to provide trading services in South Africa, unlike the indentured labourers whose passages were paid by those who imported this labour to work in the mines and plantations. The majority of the Passenger Indians were Muslims, and generally of a higher social class than the indentured Indian labourers in South
Africa. They were also given citizenship rights, and were not subject to the same level of humiliation and deprivations the poorer, mostly Hindu indentured labourers who had been arriving in South Africa from the 1860s on were exposed to. By about 1911, about 30,000 of them were settled in most cities and towns over South Africa (Thiara 129). Indian indentured had labour primarily settled in the Cape province and KwaZulu–Natal where the Indian population by the turn of the century exceed the white settler population, arousing much anxiety amongst the British, who then sought to contain the enterprise and mobility of this Indian population through discriminatory methods that sought to clearly place the Indian as a “coolie,” a “scab” whose existence was defined only by his ability to provide labour. Repressive and humiliating systems of taxation, repatriation and confinement were introduced. For one, the British administration of these provinces sought to restrict Indians to specific areas within these provinces, and any kind of travel outside them was possible only through the acquisition of passes that were hard to obtain. Indentured labour was outlawed altogether by the 1920s to altogether stop Indian immigration as the Indian population by that time exceeded the British population in Natal, which was where Gandhi started the campaign that successfully fought against many of these discriminatory provisions.

Sari’s location of her story in the 1950s, with much of the back-story occupying the previous decade, is significant because in this decade, many of these very provisions became South African law. 1946, when Amina and Miriam come separately to what to them was a land of opportunity, was the year the Asiatic Land Tenure Bill, also called the Ghetto Act, which altogether prevented the sale of land to Indians, was passed. The Group Areas Act of 1950 was a further such instance of racial positioning, literally demarcating areas where different populations might live. Initially confining the Indian populations to particular areas and designed to confine them to servicing just their own ethnic group, this policy served as the groundwork for Apartheid:

Expropriation, forced removals, and disempowerment were just some of the historical hurdles that the South African Indian community faced under Apartheid as racist stereotyping designated Indians as unscrupulous business people, who posed a threat to white-owned commerce. This stereotype motivated government response and reinforced the divisions between groups. (Fainman-Frenkel 60)

The Group Areas Act of 1950 banished Indians to “Asiatic Bazaars” where facilities were poor, though often better than in Black areas; on the one hand, it forced Indians and Blacks together
in that they were both very much below any kind of white in the “positionality” charts the Whites devised, but at the same time, the Indians nevertheless believed they were far above the Blacks and in many ways did have it better than them. and only in 1961 when South Africa became a republic did the view that the Indian population was an integral part of the South African republic and not a group of lowly “scabs” to be wrung dry and repatriated gain currency (Rastogi 10). Further, two years later, Apartheid was introduced in 1948 causing immense upheavals within South African society.

Fighting to alleviate the racial oppression Indians in South Africa were subjected to by the whites, Gandhi’s campaigns primarily drew participation from middle-class Indian men. In 1913, however, when the South African government passed a law that nullified all marriages except those registered as Christian one, Gandhi called for women to participate in large numbers as the case directly affected them and this mass mobilisation contributed directly to the concessions the Indians were able to secure from the South African colonial government of the time. The rights of Indian women in the South African diaspora to personal autonomy outside of the family, however, were secured much later by the visible participation of a number of women like Amina – one of the two female protagonists – much later in the joint struggle by Indians and Blacks both against white racism. The personal histories of the women characters, primarily Amina and Miriam, with the figure of Begum serving as both a gloss and a herald, placed against these larger historical events in their country of adoption allows a comprehension of their larger, political significance to the story of the Indian diaspora. Admitting a queer feminine subjectivity to the account of diaspora enables the book to transform the often patriarchal, heteronormative, Oedipal and biological logic of diaspora, as we shall see below.

Shamim Sarif’s novel tracks across three generations the fictional lives of the Muslim trading community settled within the Afrikaner region of Transvaal. Starting in the 1870s the Free Passenger Indians, mostly Gujarati in origin, had established successful trading units in the Transvaal, particularly Pretoria and Johannesburg, to which a tiny Indian “coolie” population of less than a thousand had migrated before laws prevented such relocations within the colony. Soon, stringent policing of these communities in various ways became the norm, especially once their trading hegemony became evident; one such regulation was the 1885 Transvaal law to segregate Indians. Sarif’s titling her work “the world unseen” is quite resonant because the history of this small diasporic group is not very prominently narrativised: one of the few texts that exists is Imraan Coovadia’s The Wedding, where the story of the Passenger Indian’s arrival in South Africa in the 1870s is fictionalised. Sarif’s fictionalisation of this history, however, follows
not the traders, but their womenfolk: her fictional foci are the lives of Amina and Miriam, both born in India, but whose families have brought them to South Africa. Unlike *The Wedding*, set almost entirely in India and dealing with the how and why of Muslim merchant migration from the west coast of India to South Africa, *The World Unseen* is set in the as yet unexplored South Africa for these descendents of the Passenger Indians.

Amina Harjan’s father runs a gas station in the town of Springs, near Pretoria, while she herself runs a café in Pretoria, an unusual occupational choice for a young woman of her ethnicity when most other Indian women were housebound as a rule. Miriam helps her husband Omar run his all-purpose store Delhof, out in the boondocks of the huge veldt. Amina’s life-story reveals the difference in the social worlds the passenger “Indians” inhabited, in comparison to those of the indentured Indian: the former had both the freedom and the wherewithal to return to their homelands whether to stay or to find spouses, unlike the latter. Miriam herself is one such chosen spouse, chosen by Omar on a visit to family in Bombay, where he is “feted,” a celebratory homecoming that resembles that of later such diasporic homecoming heroes like Shah Rukh Khan’s characters in *Pardes* (dir. Subhash Ghai, 1997) and *Swades* (dir. Ashutosh Gowarikar, 2004), to name only two such characters. The notion of exploration that a title like “the world unseen” communicates, however, is very different from the relatively more stable dialectical coordinates offered by “swades” and “pardes.” This sense of movement – familial and individual – helps interrogate familiar notions of place and self and produce a narrative different from the often patriarchal logics that films like the above-mentioned ones, along with other Shah Rukh Khan vehicles like *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* and *Kabhi Khushi, Kabhi Gham* (Sometimes Happiness, Sometimes Sorrow, dir. Karan Johar, 2001). *The World Unseen* allows an older diaspora, now forgotten in the clamour of newer, first-world diasporas, to provide a position of interrogation of the Oedipal logic of normative diaspora: (un)familiar desire interrupts the placement of women as as static placeholders and load-bearers for tradition. Through its articulation of (un)familiar desire between Amina and Miriam, *The World Unseen* allows a different cartography of diaspora, as we shall see.

Amina is very much her own woman while Miriam is the lowly and subservient household drudge to her husband’s family: her sister-in-law, Farah, with whom it soon turns out her husband Omar is having an affair with, plays the role of surrogate mother-in-law to the hilt, making Miriam work so hard in their household in Springs that Miriam is more than glad to leave for Delhof. Delhof’s isolation is analogous to Miriam’s own isolation; cut off from the more urbanised towns of Pretoria and Springs due to lack of her own conveyance, Miriam’s
mobility or its lack plays an important part in the novel. Learning to drive the car, which would bridge the gap between rural seclusion and urban autonomy is something she very much wants to but which Omar feels threatened by. In the final parts of the book, when Amina has offered Miriam a job as part-time cook at her cafe, Miriam's driving lessons place her in a position where she makes a choice not only between remaining forgotten in Delhof, but also forgotten by Omar, and attaining a selfhood where she has mobility, independence, and resources of her own: a choice between being herself or becoming more like Amina, it would seem.

The home that Miriam marries into is emblematic of many of the complications the novel produces of the idea of the nation and the diaspora. Omar and Sadru are South Africans: born and brought up there, they see South Africa as home. However, what is home for the two male children is not quite home for their sisters Jehan and Rehmat. Hegemonic articulations of both nation and diaspora rely on the symbol of the uncorrupted, pure woman. Sarif's story reveals the heavy investment in the figure of the sexually and emotionally chaste woman for the diaspora, and the violent, often noxious energies that are required for its impossible preservation. Jehan is mentally retarded and syphilitic. Farah, in a moment of rare revelation, tells Miriam that “Omar and Sadru only prefer to think that Jehan had been raped,” when in fact the origin of her syphillis was a consensual sexual relationship with her boyfriend (TWU 41). Jehan's consequent madness following the onset of syphillis functions as a sign of both resistance to being “set to order” by her brothers and fathers and “the men in the family who ... almost beat the life” out of her boyfriend, finally driving him away from her (TWU 41). Now isolated totally by madness, Jehan with her cackling laughter and endless flow of nonsensical utterances is a cipher to Miriam at first; thinking syphillis to be a strange African disease, Miriam prays she may not contract it. Miriam's sexual innocence is ruptured soon enough, when she goes through days on end without a smile watching and learning from the conversations family members and their friends have, which perforce do not include her. Unlike the laughing but insane Jehan, the silent and efficient Miriam finds herself marked by servitude to hetersexual patriarchy. Jehan's sister Rehmat however, runs away from this home when she falls in love with a white South African and lives in Paris. A law that prohibited mixed marriages came into force from 1948, making Rehmat and her husband James vulnerable to police persecution when they come home in 1952 for a short visit to see James' dying father. Rehmat is betrayed to the police by her sister-in-law Farah in a characteristic fit of jealousy at Rehmat's sophistication and success. Rehmat's life is intended by Sarif to be a signal critique of much of what was wrong with South African Indians as much as with Apartheid. One of the most potent stories in a novel choc-a-bloc with stories is the story of Rehmat's flight from home one cold April morning eight years ago, “with heavy bruises leaching
out across her arms and legs, bruises that her father had given her ... for he had finally heard the
rumours about James and herself’ (TWU 98). Remaining at home after these beatings, which
resonate with the story told later about Begum sixty years earlier, would have meant Rehmat's
being palmed off on some cousin or stranger. Flight, however, would also mean pursuit:

They had needed to get out of reach of the group of thugs, all of them her relatives, that
had spread out at once across Pretoria, trying to locate her by means of rumours,
sightings and whispers. James's at the university had been broken into and searched by
men carrying knives and sticks. If she had been found within a day, she would have been
dragged home alive but beaten. After two or three days, they might have simply brought
her home dead, for by then it would have been too late to pretend that she had never
left; the damage to her reputation would already have been done. On the boat out of
Cape Town she had had plenty of time to consider this, and to wonder whether her own
brothers and father had been amongst those searching for her. (TWU 99)

Rehmat's flight takes her to Europe, where she is able to live a life of dignity and autonomy with
James, without recriminations about how she had corrupted her race dodging her at every step.
Begum's life-story and Rehmat's are curiously similar, though separated by about sixty years: the
diaspora appears to be fixed within a narrative of non-progress, of feudal subjugation of women
with no quarter given to their rights as individuals. But South Africa's white government further
complicates the story of honour killings and vendetta within the diaspora with Apartheid
regulations that themselves are a product of white fears of being assimilated within a burgeoning
black/brown matrix. In equating the settler colonialists' policies designed to avoid racial
contamination with the Indian diaspora's own desire to avoid such mixing, Sarif's novel makes it
very difficult, if not impossible to valorise the diaspora itself as a counterculture of modernity, a
phrase Paul Gilroy uses for black-derived diasporas on both sides of the Atlantic. Gilroy sees
these diasporas as constituting a genuine form of resistance to the movements of capital that
structure (the repressions of) the modern nation-state, a formulation that others have extended
to include all diasporas. Sarif's novel problematises such a de-materialised conception of diaspora
through its focus on the movements in which all these women – Begum, Amina, Miriam,
Rehmat – are involved in. Moving back and forth along the Indian ocean, the South African
Indian diaspora constitutes, it appears, not a counterculture to modernity, but an underbelly
shaped by the very movements of capital Gilroy's formulation claims black diasporas resist
(Gilroy 16). This diaspora's preoccupation with maintaining an always-already fictional purity has
violent consequences for its women, who invariably become the symbolic receptacles wherein
this purity is placed and sought to be maintained. Rather than a counterculture — and thus a
critique and an alternative to modernity — this Indian diaspora is vehemently pre-modern in its
cultural attitudes to women even as it is Anglophilic in matters that suit its economic interests:
dress and language are obvious examples of the Passenger Indian community's willingness to
abandon the ways of the old world for pragmatically achieving success in the world unseen.

*The World Unseen* complicates the normative account of the diaspora as characterised by a
longing for the land of origin with the backward and forward movements of its characters both
between the “home” of India, and South Africa, and within the South African host itself. Both
nations are both homes and prisons to various characters at various times, with the result that
the nostalgia for home is queered in significant ways. These homes reveal themselves to be
places of violence, dishonesty and fear for their various women inhabitants; at the same time,
some of these homes provide spaces of opportunity within which autonomy can be sought, and
new desires fashioned and fulfilled. Amina herself, described as “fucking queer” by an infuriated
policeman, finds in South Africa new life, and the energy to fight what she does not like. Starting
a business in South Africa is easier for her than it would be to do so in India, placing the
diaspora thus a place where the female subject also has room for manoeuvre, to become modern
in ways not permitted in the home country. Amina's queerness itself, displaying itself the way it
does, in trousers, manual labour and car-driving, would perhaps have never found expression in
the home nation, while South Africa's dramatic racial heterogeneities offer Amina a number of
traditions to model herself on. (Un)familiar female desire thus signified by Amina offers an
alternative model to the conformist patriarchal model adopted by the male members of this same
diaspora where she finds herself free: Amina’s life is organised not around undercutting black
people or treating them as invisible and non-existent — as Omar does when they come to his
shop — but around making common cause with the “other” races. Amina’s liminal position as a
quarter-part black herself makes her stand at a tangent, literally, to the narratives of racial purity
and sexual probity that both the Indian subaltern diasporas in South Africa, and the white,
dominant settler diasporas wanted to believe in.

The novel starts in April 1952, the year in which passes have been made compulsory for
all Coloureds including women, in South Africa. A major prong in the Apartheid arrangements
ensuring separateness in all social transactions between whites and non-whites, these passes
involved the classification of one’s race first through extremely complex and extremely arbitrary
methods. In fact, members of the same family could find themselves classified under different
heads depending on which petty official did the testing. Whites and non-whites were supposed
to live in demarcated, separate areas and all told, the whites had access to the best facilities, while everyone else was given what was left over. Indians, confined to the Asiatic Bazaars of South African townships, had a better deal than the coloureds and blacks, whose livelihoods were jeopardised almost totally by the Pass system. Passes for work would be issued only to those with government approved work, which directly plunged the unorganised sector, which depended on non-structured avenues and opportunities for employment, deeper into poverty, affecting the quality of life of the majority of South Africa's non-white population. Further, the Pass laws separated families too – black men working in the mines would not be able to live with their families as they were not mine employees themselves. The Pass system enforced from the 1950s sought to carefully monitor women's access to urbanisation and employment; black women at the heads of households found themselves under a new system of colonisation whereby they would not be permitted to seek employment as their presence in urban areas as a free labour force, in contrast to the contractual male labourers in the mines and other primary sector industries, would defeat the structures of separateness the Apartheid policy sought to enforce. Though women's groups in the previous years had resisted strongly the introduction of this system, by the end of the 1950s, it was as Winnie Mandela put it, impossible even to die without a pass. With this context in place, Sarif's beginning her story in 1952 enables a link between the presence of autonomous female labour and resistance to racial hegemonies that underwrite both nation and diaspora, white South Africa and “passenger” India. Amina reveals herself at an unusual location – lying on the roof, repairing the tiles – for a woman in the 1950s surely, and the reader's assessment of this positioning is revealed to be accurate when we realise that she is also the owner of the business whose roof she is fixing. This business is a cafe, which she runs with a coloured man, Jacob; in the South Africa of the day, owning a business with someone of another race was itself punishable by law. Amina is a site of transgressions that leap out immediately at the reader.

The film version though, moderates these very transgressions. While the book clearly places Amina as “lying on the roof,” the film begins with Amina delicately hammering at the nameplate of her cafe; though dressed in trousers – unusual again for Indian women in the 1950s, this Amina is a great deal more feminine than the book leads us to expect. Where the novel says Amina is tall, straight-limbed with “long curls,” the Amina of the film is a very petite femme with rather long hair that may at best be described as simply uncombed. Amina's hair is a source of much fuss in both texts – being one-fourth part black as a result of her grandmother's rape sixty years ago, Amina is identified as not quite Indian by the other Indians of the Pretoria
community. Amina’s mother’s curly hair had at birth led to the suspicions of miscegenation that finally led to her mother Begum’s abuse and banishment from South Africa in the first instance.

The film’s styling of its lead actress dilutes the potential her appearance has to communicate both racial and gendered/sexed appearance. Amina in the book clearly gives people pause – they wonder to what sex she belongs, to borrow from the title of Martha Vicinus’ essay, discussed in the previous chapter. Vicinus argues that the butch lesbian’s appearance signals a disruption of gendered expectations. The butch lesbian’s sartorial choices and mein is an interruption, Vicinus argues, to her being placed as a “she.” Vicinus’ essay uses examples from history, starting with the seventeenth century, of many women who had successfully passed as men, sometimes even marrying other women. She joins to this history the appearance of lesbian trendsetters of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century like Rosa Bonheur the French painter and Radclyffe Hall the writer, among others, to establish the importance of the persona that we today call “butch,” to the construction of a visible lesbian identity. Sarif’s coding of Amina – with trousers, hat and suspenders – seems to be clearly butch as far as the points of reference in the novel go; in the film, however, Amina’s femme-ness seems to be a gendered crossing necessary for Sarif’s film to garner as wide an audience as possible. The femme film, where two women whose appearances confirm to normative expectations of femininity are at the centre of the narrative, is a text that itself can “pass” amongst heterosexual audiences as a film not specifically lesbian or homoerotic. Femme films, as Christine Holmlund has pointed out, can suggest a friendship between the women to heterosexual audiences who do not wish to see any deeper than this even as queer-friendly audiences are able to read aspects of this very friendship as coding a more than friendly relationship. Femme films, Holmlund further argues, function on the basis of an economy of looks and looking: the audience is disposed to look at the femmes a certain way even as the femmes are looking at one another in different ways. These exchanges of various looks between the women may or may not be suggestive to particular viewers, but because of the range of interpretations these looks allow, the film-maker is able to appeal to the mainstream rather than to just niche audiences. The cinematic text of The World Unseen is precisely such a discreet femme text, where the track of (un)familiar passions offers a selection that heterosexual and non-heterosexual spectators may track into.

The book is able to marshall critique of diasporic normativities at many points – the stories of Jehan, Rehmat and Begum pile on one another to produce a dissatisfaction early on with the promise of modernity that the move to South Africa suggests. The film on the other hand completely removes Jehan, thus occluding one of the strongest stories of racialised and
sexualised feminine oppression and resistance that the novel tells. Rehmat's own story is indeed briefly told, but without the back-story that the characters' own meditations revealed by the third person narrator of the novel, the cinematic version of Rehmat remains just a very chic Indo-African-Parisienne who appears and then disappears in the blink of an eye. In fact, in the film, Rehmat, once betrayed by Farah, comes running to Amina's cafe where a motley crowd of Indians in full fancy dress – the regalia of the saree and the kurta-pyjama that they have abandoned for everyday use – is dancing away to “Pyar hua ikraar hua” (from Raj Kapoor's film Shree 420). The irony of Rehmat's second flight is that despite love despite a successful and happy culmination is still a thorny path. “Kehta hai dil rasta mushkil, maloom nahin hai kahaan manzil,” as the second line of the song goes, holds very true for Rehmat, as her motherland itself becomes the world that must remain unseen if she is to have love. However, in the book, Amina not only conceals Rehmat in a cupboard in her room in the back annexe of her cafe, but also drives her to safety with great intrepidity the next morning under the watchful eyes of the insidious white policemen out to enforce Apartheid with glee. Amina's enviable mobility, in a beat-up pickup truck that travels long distances over flat endless plains points to her as indeed an unusual person for her times: more affluent than the average black woman, Amina has a car of her own to drive. But unlike the wives of the white men whose tenants Omar and Miriam are, this car does not convey a sense of racialised luxury and privilege: where these women have a driver to chauffeur them to afternoon tea with Miriam, a drive that takes hours but whose diversion they can afford, Amina's driving gives her financial independence. Replacing all this with images of cardboard-faced extras dancing to a catchy old Hindi song – a sequence not in the book – has the effect of nullifying completely the resonances the novel allows between sexualised oppression and gendered oppressions and their connection in turn to patriarchal notions of lineage, descent and inheritance.

Amina, unlike most other Indian women in the small Indian community in Pretoria, is both financially independent and self-confident almost to the point of being cocky. The odd jobs that she takes to support herself are distinctly uncharacteristic ones for the approved feminine roles the Indian community offers its women: she ferries passengers in cabs between the far-spaced towns of the South African veldt, one time going the distance of almost 1,500 km between Pretoria and Cape Town; she also tills land to establish gardens for anyone interested in market-gardening. Amina's job portfolio places her in a truly liminal role: her mobility and the labours she undertakes for pay are not labours that Indians – men or women – performed yet in South Africa. Though her family is not affluent, as an Indian, her social and fiscal position place her at a level probably better off than the average Black or Indian woman; Amina's social
relationships with the Blacks are considerable in comparison to the other Indians, and a great deal of her autonomy and free-spiritedness seems to come from her association with Black people, women in particular, whose lifestyles do not seem as constricting as those adopted and tenaciously adhered to by the Indians of this diaspora. While for her fellow-Indians her racial background is a scandal, for Amina and for those who like her, Amina's acceptance of her ancestry enables her to embrace a far less insular life than the ones the Indian diaspora of Pretoria permits its own. The film version, though, is careful not to overemphasise Amina's unfeminine job roles; arguably dressed “like a man,” Amina in the film is more like a businesslike contemporary woman in Khaki casuals rather than a woman whose “queerness” is visibly recognisable to all who see her in the case of the book. Amina is seen dancing in her cafe in the film, a girlish manoeuvre that again puts her at a remove from the stately dignity that Amina in the novel possesses, despite her youth. Amina's self is predicated on her vehicle thus effectively marking her as different from Miriam in her mobility and autonomy. In showing Amina's truck only occasionally, rather than as a necessity to Amina's many “jobs” delivering goods, making up land for market-gardening, as a cab she drives between Pretoria and Cape Town, the film version of The World Unseen renders intelligible many aspects of Amina's identity that would on the one hand highlight her non-femininity as per the conventions of her day, and on the other hand, point to the very constructedness of femininity itself. Keeping Amina static places Amina outside what the audience would identify immediately as (un)familiar, as Amina's pick-up truck is the equivalent of a woman today driving a ten-ton truck: she simply would not be the girl next door if she did.

The reader's perception of Amina's difference from her ethnic group is more nuanced than the viewers: the film unaccountably elides ethnic specificity to make Amina a rebel without context, making it harder to place Miriam's own later rebellion in a frame that is any more than individual. Amina's family lives apart from the Indian Muslims in Pretoria; as a result they are able to give their daughter free rein. Efforts are made by Amina's father's mother, on a short visit from Bombay, to reintegrate Amina to the brotherhood of Indian Muslims in the town, but with tragicomic effects: Amina's many queernesses — of dress, occupation and mobility — come home to the grandmother giving her, literally, a heart attack, which she dies of. The novel is able to assess the tragic and the comic impacts of this shock while the movie plays comic music all through Amina's “bride-viewing,” and its later implications, by the conservative Ali family. Persuaded by the grandmother into thinking that Amina was reformed and made afresh in the mould of the conservative Muslim Indian woman, the Alis come to a meal where Amina is exhibited to her prospective suitor, much to both parties' shock. Amina, unregenerate as ever, is
A modernity that the Alis refuse to have anything to do with. Amina is also not in possession of a suitable virginity: rumours abound of her involvement with women, many of them Black. Further, Amina lives by herself in the cafe unsupervised by any “elders,” and goes off by herself to do what she chooses. For the Alis, as for most South African Indian Muslim families, the sceptre of a woman like Amina destabilises every tenet they hold dear about accepted Islamic and Indian values. In telling off Amina’s grandmother, the Alis ratify Amina’s otherness. But in killing off Amina’s grandmother – herself an Indian from the old land – the film makes Amina’s queerness a comic failure of the old lady’s, when the novel unequivocally presents these episodes as benchmarks wherein Amina is recognised as the figure of the (un)familiar in society at large, and that Amina is a signifier of something shocking not only to the old lady, but to every Indian in their community. Cutting away the social milieu the novel painstakingly writes in, the film version makes of Amina herself a consumable when in the novel Amina displays a staunch resistance to being consumed and allocated to the labours of diasporic patriarchy.

Miriam’s predicament, in her turn, is one that still echoes with that of many brides to diasporic locations. With uncertain means to remain connected to her natal family, Miriam is literally all alone in a new world, making her journey from loneliness to confident exploration virtually unassisted except by Amina. Raised by her widowed and very poor mother in Bombay, Miriam’s marriage to Omar is a godsend for her family, who consent to Omar’s impulsive proposal without asking her. Sent, half in banishment to this unfamiliar country, Miriam’s resources are within herself. Meeting Amina for the first time in September 1951, at Amina’s cafe, Miriam is most unwanted and lonely within Sadru’s and Omar’s noisy household where she is effectively dominated by the raging Farah. Amina is the first person to smile at Miriam in over ten days, the book’s very first chapter makes clear, placing Amina’s and Miriam’s attraction to one another within a relationship of complementarity with warmth given and taken. The film, however, fails to build Miriam’s isolation as resulting from virilocal residence and individual coldness within a stratified diasporic society both. Miriam as a young Indian bride is the last person to be fed, and sometimes goes hungry because the food runs out; Miriam is the one who does all the hard housework, the one who takes care of mad Jehan, the one who is left out of all the good things in life, including meaningful contact with her husband. In avoiding these contextualising factors, the film version is unable to produce as powerfully as the novel does the meanings Miriam’s journey towards independence have for both Miriam as a person and as a woman far away from the familiar, reassuring presence of India as both natal home and nation. Removing “India” from the backdrop, Sarif’s film with its cosmetic references to history and place, is very much a text of new diaspora, while her book, written only six years before the film,
enables an investigation of the hegemonic and stratifying powers of diasporas that the film takes as normative.

In employing a uni-tonal English as the only language within the film, *The World Unseen*'s many dialogic movements between Gujarati-speaking Bombay Indian Muslims, and the different Englishes employed by the whites, coloureds and blacks within South Africa are glossed over. For instance, Afrikaans in this region is very clearly marked as a white language, which English-speaking Omar is not allowed access to, even though he knows enough of the language to converse in it, while English is the tongue the whites use on everybody, including their black servants. Newness does not enter the film while the novel is able to make heterogeneity and racial difference palpable on virtually every page, where Miriam does not know how to speak with the Blacks because her husband has told her they are only animals for labour, not people, and where the visits of her landlords, the Kaplans are “redolent of a world which Miriam could hardly fathom” (TWU 44), reminding the reader yet again of the low place these Indians occupy in South Africa. The blacks who come to shop at Omar's are very poor wage-labourers who look to Miriam for help with purchases, while Omar talks exclusively to their Afrikaans boss. The everyday impoverishment of these people is evident when a penny or two less to the price of a dress makes all the difference between what a day-labourer can afford for his daughter, and what he can't, is not part of the film, just as the luxurious life of the Kaplan's, with driver and long-play records in their car, are not. In not depicting these episodes with blacks and whites – Afrikaaners and English settlers – the film short-changes the viewer about the real nature of the world unseen. Miriam's gesture of helping a black man run over by a neighbouring Boer farmer is particularly important in underlining her sense of justice. However, in the novel, she cannot even see the black man in the intense dark that descends upon the veldt in the winter, let alone help him, though she tries her best and leaves water and blanket, while in the film, she is depicted as helping him out of a ditch even though he tries to fight her off. Miriam's being unable to see the injured man as he lies in the bush road serves as a trope for the years of negligence and separateness from the blacks that Indians in South Africa invested in, suggesting that this cannot be bridged through a few moments of an individual seeking to help; the film's treatment of this scene serves to highlight Miriam's personal courage and defiance of Omar's unspoken attitude to the Blacks more than anything else. Miriam in the book does not manage to make contact with the Black man literally, though word gets around later, to Amina, of how she had helped; in the film, Miriam is able to, signally marking a direct visual rupture in at least a few barriers that separate the races. The film has the paradoxical effect of suggesting Miriam is able to help the black man despite his wishes, while the book in the same scene shows Miriam as
shamed by the man’s pride in refusing help: her Indianness is for the black man no different from the alienness and unconcern of the Boer farmer who ran him over and worried more about his broken car lights. While both texts suggest individual acts of courage have suggestive power and value, the film wants to play on the symbolic significance of this act of Miriam’s: this is the only time a black and an Indian body are touching one another so much in the film, in contrast to other efforts to get closer to a racial other, such as Madeline’s and Jacob’s efforts.

The novel is hung on the individual lives of Amina and Miriam primarily, and as it draws to a close, the focus is on their desire to make a shared life possible. The film however, gives equal billing to the budding relationship between Jacob and Madeline Smith, the postmaster who is also white. In Apartheid Africa, relationships between the races were prohibited by the law. In the book, the character of Madeline Smith makes a relatively late appearance, and leaves to our imagination the shy development of Jacob’s and Miss Smith’s relationship through the former’s weekly visits to the post office she runs. The film chooses instead to introduce her in the very first scene: she is eating at a table in the cafe when the police arrive, wanting to check passes and more generally, make a nuisance of themselves. The Mixed Marriages Act of 1949 prohibited marriage between whites and other races, while the Immorality Act prevented any “indecent behaviour” between these races. Further, the various regimes of economic segregation prevented non-whites from establishing businesses in white areas or employing white people; economic relationships between the other races were also restricted in similar ways. One of the chief mechanisms of enforcing “petty apartheid” was through prevention of any sharing of facilities among races; whites-only restaurants meant coloureds, blacks or Indians would not be allowed to enter. Sarif’s film, in placing Madeline at the restaurant, strengthens the resistance to Apartheid that Madeline in the novel displays. Yet, in placing a heterosexual love-narrative of equal length parallel to Amina’s and Miriam’s growing attachment, the film version reveals its diffidence about being a lesbian film all the way. In fact, the casting of the Madeline-Jacob pair is better both in acting skill and attention to detail than the Miriam-Amina pair, which lends a greater authenticity to the former, while the latter pairing requires some imaginative suspension of disbelief at their accents, appearance and the like. Madeline and Jacob are affected by Apartheid, the novel and the film agree, while Miriam and Amina are affected, by metaphorical extension, by rules as silly as Apartheid: why should two women be kept apart if they love one another, asks Sarif, any more than two people of opposite gender should be kept apart by race? The general public marks Madeline’s pleasant treatment of a coloured man and set about humiliating him: a boy a third his age calls Jacob “boy,” ordering him to bring a glass of water; a policeman notices how smartly dressed both Madeline and Jacob are on the evening he was to
take her out to dinner and to escape his censure, Madeline has to pretend Jacob is her driver, not her date. They do not have dinner together through the length of the text. While the film is able to depict the social existence of Apartheid through the public difficulties Madeline and Jacob face even before they are able to head out for a planned date in a strikingly evocative manner, the dilemma of Amina's and Miriam's (un)familiar love is progressively depicted as an increasingly privatised matter.

Amina's and Miriam's love affair is conducted in secret similarly, through the language of sign and suggestion just like Jacob's and Madeline's was. Miriam's and Amina's affair, however, despite obvious links with the Apartheid-separated couple, does not manage to explicitly attain the dimensions of a social problem in quite the same way as the former does in the film; the novel on the other hand, enables the reader to linger on the significance of the dates that Sarif marks different segments of the story with. This structuring of the novel as a diary of sorts, collated from the individual unwritten diaries of many of its characters, however, is hardly evident in the film, where the font that displays the month and the year vanishes almost the instant it appears into the yellow and brown tones Sarif uses to capture the vastness and flatness of the African prairie. However, even this cartography suggesting space and possibilities of mobility and thus freedom from constriction, are not available in the film as they are in the novel, where alternating claustrophobia and spatial liberty suggests connections between personal development and literal availability of space or territory. Not mistress of any territory of her own, Miriam's sense of self is meagre to begin with, and only gradually, after a couple of driving lessons, does Miriam decide to make use of the immense spaces of possibility, of the world unseen South Africa offers her. Meanwhile, upset at not being able to make headway with Miriam, Amina thinks of leaving Pretoria altogether for any other town; again, the liberty of space is hers to take, but the over-furnished bedroom assigned to Amina in the film, in contrast to the very spare room the Amina of the book sleeps in, scarcely suggests an undomesticated individual given to travelling at will. Amina's critique of constricting domesticity — which involves violence in the case of Miriam's with Omar — is embodied in her living arrangements, but again, the film version passes off a glossier, picture-book like South Africa for the spare lives of the passenger Indians in the decade immediately after the Second World War, when petty apartheid, with its various segregation laws had indeed wrecked the hard-earned capital of many Indians, especially the ex-indentured labourers.

Amina's father walks in then, on a rare visit to his daughter's cafe, and tells her that all the local gossip is indeed linking Miriam to her, whereupon Amina tells him that Miriam's
husband hits her. Her father's response is unequivocal: "then go and fetch her" (TWU 331). In deflecting the conversation from the viability of lesbianism to domestic abuse, Sarif's text places us in the same unenviable quandary Deepa Mehta's did: is marital unhappiness the only genesis of lesbian love? Sarif's structuring of the conversation may also be read as a recognition of the true nature of marital bonds for those in love with an (un)familiar: heteronormative marriage bonds may well be abusive and violent for those in love with one of their own sex. However, Amina's emotional pain at her beloved's being battered by her husband is sufficient to persuade her decent father to, in turn, persuade his daughter to "liberate" Miriam: the logic of lesbianism might be unpalatable for this honourable man, apparently, but not the logic of human dignity. The specificity of lesbian love and the specific nature of the social recognition it requires as also an erotic bond between two women is here occluded by lesbianism becoming a particular kind of problem within heterosexual marriage. Thus, while public resistance to the Madeline-Jacob affair is explicitly staged in both the film and the novel, showing the unreasonableness of Apartheid South Africa and at the same time making evident the social nature of couple-formation, the Amina-Miriam one, conducted largely in Miriam's household, is relegated thus to a "private" set of acts: their affair does not convey in equal measure the social construction of heterosexual coupledom which it would have stood in contrast to.

Miriam and Amina get to know one another and recognise an emotional kinship when Amina is getting Miriam's husband's garden ready; the familiar space of the patriarchal home — though it is a nuclear diasporic one this time — provides them the vital site for exchange and sustenance. Amina eats Miriam's cooking and is struck, later, by the idea of starting an Indian menu at her cafe with Miriam as cook, pointing thus to a mutually contributory autonomous economy the two women can participate in, in contrast to the unpaid labour that Miriam must do for Omar. Miriam's road to financial autonomy is also, interestingly, the road to emotional reciprocity: the mutuality that Omar denies her, through a combination of coldness and being otherwise occupied by his affair with his sister-in-law Farah, had placed Miriam from the first in the space of an observer in her own life. Amina's offer of engagement is not only financial; it is also spiritually engaging for Miriam finally, to find that appreciation for the things that she can do is to be had. Miriam however does not want to take Amina up on her suggestion that they take the three children Miriam has with Omar and leave for Cape Town where Amina promises Miriam she can look after her. Miriam's refusal to flee shows her resistance — and the novelist's resistance — to placing this lesbian exit in the realm of the escapist. Miriam instead wants to make her own way. In focussing only on her wanting to cook two or three times a week instead of working every day unpaid as Omar's labour, Sarif calls attention to the poignant nature of her
struggle: large gestures are not for the likes of Miriam. Miriam's road to liberation will only come three steps at a time. In the book, Miriam writes a letter of acceptance to Amina's offer of a place and plans to take a bus the next morning to work in Pretoria; in the film, Miriam somehow drives to Pretoria despite her unfinished driving lessons. Miriam's fantastic driving thus places the film's rendition of Miriam's victory also in the realm of what is at least partly magical while the book's resolution carefully places Miriam's victory as another mundane victory, all the more (un)familiar because real. In the film, Miriam and Amina meet in the last scene: Amina is proud that her beloved has managed to make it to the end of the journey, which, if it is not in her arms, is at least in her kitchen. The book avoids this utopic resolution: instead of seeing Amina and Miriam together in the final frame, we are left to think of how Miriam's morning will be. Will Omar try another time to beat her into submission? How will she dispose of the morning's housework? Will she get on the bus after all? The film's desire to end on a positive rather than an ambivalent, though still open note, is perhaps understandable given the lack of affirmative representations of lesbianism.

However, in translating Amina's persona into completely femme, and editing out several other stories and characters, Sarif's film privileges a certain kind of lesbianism as possible and blocks out others. The figure of the working-class dyke, which is what I suspect Amina would have looked like all other things being equal, would have placed more effectively the social and the racialised nature of the transgressions that Amina's body literally embodies. In rendering visible a woman of some Black ancestry, with a great fondness for women and a love of many masculine activities, Sarif's film would have broadened the range of lesbian types beyond the "femme," even though it would then have been open to the accusation that it was pandering to the culture of heterosexuality in producing a binary butch/femme couple. If it had retained the strong Indian coordinates of the various characters at home, the film's critique of Indianness – in both its "authentic" mainland version and its ghostly diasporic other – would have resonated differently, communicating Sarif's ambivalence about both, and opening up both thus to re-evaluation. At the same time, this would have perhaps made the film an (un)familiar text for much of its intended Western audience. In its current version, the film features strikingly good-looking women of South Asian origin in the lead parts; their good looks, along with their accents float decontextualised in a world of similarly good-looking women with, say, dark hair and dark eyes. However, the greatest loss sustained via this translation is in the biting interrogation of diaspora the book makes possible: where Sarif's novel enables a critique of normative diasporic values of patriarchy, Oedipal lineal succession and female subjection, the film displaces this interrogation with its privileging of the Amina–Miriam love-story as a romantic triumph over
adversity. Where Amina and Miriam in the novel struggle to establish sites for (un)familiar love within the home and the workplace, the film reifies their love for one another as yet another timeless story that happens to be set in South Africa. Jacob's and Madeline's story in Sarif's film functions through the better known black/white dichotomy within Apartheid, as a result of which it does not necessarily lose when treated primarily as a tale of thwarted love because the reader/viewer is more attuned to the socio-cultural implications of forcing a dichotomous perspective on race relations. The cinematic version of Amina's and Miriam's love story, set as it is within the history of the little-documented diaspora of passenger Indians in South Africa, when decontextualised into an eternal story of lesbian triumph over heterosexual marital impediments, loses much of its impact as also an (un)familiar critique of the consensus realities of home, nation, diaspora and colonialism.

**Homecoming Queens and Daydream Believers**

The nineteenth century diasporas of indenture and trade consequent to the presence of large Indian populations in settler countries like South Africa have been replaced in the twentieth century by the diasporas of the post-industrial age where individual migration, regulated largely on the basis of intellectual capital was the norm as opposed to the unskilled-labour-intensive earlier migrations. However, sometimes, as Makarand Paranjape notes, the older diasporas are heard only when they are mediated through the new ones (*InDiaspora* 10). Often, these older diasporas are wiped out altogether by often uncritical celebrations of the postindustrial diaspora as a critique of the nation (see Braziel and Mannuc) when these very diasporas have themselves been formed by transnational flows of capital necessitated by modern capitalism. *Nina’s Heavenly Delights* takes up the ubiquitous persona of the Indian restaurateur in the UK, gives it female shape and makes it lesbian, a premise that one would think had considerable promise. But Pratibha Parmar removes all the material that would make such a transformation interesting, choosing instead to focus on the predictable romance the eponymous Nina has with Lisa in the process of coming back as a prodigal daughter to claim her dead father’s inheritance.

I take the title for this sub-section from a song sung after a particularly heavy meal by Nina’s Indian-origin family settled in Glasgow, Scotland, in Parmar’s *Nina’s Heavenly Delights*. “Welcome to Scotland” says a poster at the airport where a very ebullient but relatively underdone queen goes to receive his homecoming friend, the prodigal Nina of the title, to take her to her father’s funeral. Nina Shah is the daughter of Mohan Shah, the owner of the New Taj in Glasgow. Nina ran away from her own wedding three years ago because she did not want to
marry Sanjay, her father’s friend’s son and heir to competitor and neighbouring restaurant “The Jewel in the Crown,” and become one half of a “power cooking-couple” with him. Nina is shocked to find her father had planned to sell the restaurant: cooking was his passion and she thinks it impossible that he should go against his heart. She convinces Lisa, now owner of the half-share Nina’s father sold, to not sell the restaurant till the “Best of the West Curry Competition” goes through: Nina’s and her dad had already won it twice and are on a hat-trick chance. Winning it, Nina thinks, will restore her to her father’s faith and reunite her to the family she ran away from. In the process, she falls in love with Lisa, and surprisingly, her family greets Nina’s lesbianism with nary an objection, though Nina had remains closeted for the greater part of the film because she is unable to imagine such a reaction.

_Nina’s Heavenly Delights_ suffers from the fairytale, tourist picture-postcard treatment its director affords the Indian presence in Glasgow. Avowedly, Parmar did not want to make a “gritty, realist drama,” but given the paucity of lesbian representations that have Indian material, the viewer and the critic cannot but sigh at the lost opportunity. Indians form one of the largest ethnic communities in Scotland, with histories dating from the post-World-War labour shortages and the expulsions of Indians from various parts of Africa from the 1960s, a history that resonates with the larger history of Indian presence in Britain. _Nina’s Heavenly Delights_ completely decontextualises these histories of origin to produce a romance that supposedly speaks universally to all lovers, or at least to all lesbian lovers. While it might seem unfair to castigate one film for stripping its love affairs of context, these missing contexts might have saved the film from lapsing into exoticising the diasporic Indian family and its female subjects, presenting them for mindless consumption in the manner of the food that Nina cooks, consumes or throws away through the film. Where Miriam’s and Amina’s labours in South Africa’s Indian diaspora make meaning through their negotiations, interrogations and subjections to colonialism and the movement of imperial capital, _Nina’s Heavenly Delights_ facilely buys into the teleology of diaspora as a place where lesbian and feminist agendas might be achieved without demur from society.

Dealing exclusively with Nina’s emotional dilemma about coming out, _Nina’s Heavenly Delights_ may well have been about people of any ethnicity or accent: Parmar apparently chose to set it in Glasgow upon a whim because she found the Indian-Scots accent delightful. The film’s most memorable role, however, is that of the “homecoming queen,” not Nina, but her male cross-dressing friend Bobbi, who runs the other ubiquitous Indian business – the video store that provides the cultural material that links the diasporic Indian to the land s/he has left behind, in the manner described by Ziauddin Sardar in “Dilip Kumar Made Me Do It.” While Bobby
might also be seen as that predictable character now, Bobby has a vitality the lead characters lack. "With my dress sense, deceit is not an option," says Bobby, when Nina remarks on his openly gay lifestyle and wishes she were like him too. Nina's love affair with Lisa culminates, under Bobby's insightful presence, in their running the restaurant jointly: at the end of the film the two, all smiles and with arms around one another, are shown gleefully entering their full restaurant, apparently blissfully together. Nina has not, by the end of the film, become as interesting as Bobby, whose cameo does indeed carry the film away, but nevertheless remains the boring lesbian subject we must study as best as we can before we decide to do without her altogether.

Despite its many shortcomings, Nina's Heavenly Delights carries the trademarks that made Parmar's Khush such an interesting text. Cutting familiar Bollywood songs such that the viewing position was occupied by a woman where in the original text it was an implied or an explicit male position, Khush offers a revisioning of the politics and the erotics of the gaze. Instead of a normative heterosexual male gazing, Khush presented the possibility that the gaze could be the vehicle of erotic not only aesthetic pleasure to the female viewer as well. The hyperbolic femininity of the Hindi film heroine, for instance, can be enjoyed as much by a woman watching any Hindi film-song, as it can be by a man. In making the gaze thus homoerotic and endowing it with lesbian potentialities, Parmar had broken new theoretical and creative ground with Khush.

Nina's Heavenly Delights is premised on this female gaze all round, but in a stoically straight way that deprives the viewer of the pleasures of unpredictability or curiosity. The queer gaze, however, returns in the shape of Bobby's many adventures with fashioning himself: as the lead dancer and choreographer of a motley crew of non-professional dancers who want to break into Bollywood films, Bobby's cinematic desires are often more inspiring and at any rate more energetic than Nina's. Bobby's dancing, his cross-dressing and his affair with the hunky white plumber place, along with his video shop where he performs to a pre-adolescent audience of boys and girls who marvel at his many transformations of himself, inhabit a realm of reality that defamiliarises the meanings of normative sexualities in a way Nina's love-story does not.

I Can't Think Straight complicates this celebration through the love-affair between a Christian Palestinian Arab woman and a second generation British-Indian Muslim woman. The former, Tala, has already had dumped four fiances at the eleventh hour, finding that she does not love them as much as she should. The latter, Leyla, is an aspiring writer and daughter of an insurance salesman who has made it good and will leave his girls a successful business. The two women come together after they are introduced by the man Leyla is seeing at that point. Later, after a short-lived idyll with Tala where Leyla finally understands she cannot click with Ali because she likes women not men, Leyla dumps this man, tells her parents that she is "gay,"
moves out, has another girlfriend, and publishes the book she has been writing all along. Tala meanwhile finally tells Hani he is not the man for her either, and later still, after a meeting with Leyla set up by Leyla's sister and Ali — on the verge of becoming a couple themselves — decides to break the news to her parents. This coming out done, Leyla feels she can now be with Tala, and the movie ends with them on a park bench, admiring children and planning their own. While many of the things the characters do necessitates social and economic privilege of a high degree — Tala plays polo, for instance, and her mother can come to England from Jordan within hours of hearing that her daughter might be much too interested in another woman — or luck — Leyla is able to write and publish her novel with a speed that might not be possible in real life on the strength, apparently, of great talent — the film nevertheless manages to establish a new paradigm for the family that surrounds those who come out. Both women have supportive fathers, while the mothers are depicted as more deeply conditioned by society: Leyla's mother comes around before long though Tala's mother is left fuming at the end. However, in all, both these films signal an acceptance by the family of the central lesbian relationship, a paradigm that one would think was impossible given the previous films we have considered. One must remark on how the accepting families are portrayed though: Nina's and Leyla’s families have now been in the UK for two generations; the UK is home even as they are still vestigially Indian in food habits and occasional family “values.”

Tala's family, still located in Jordan — in the East — is more recalcitrant, given their position in a society where the word “lesbian” triggers off a joke reminiscent of a similar scene in Bend It Like Beckham: at the end of the movie, when word of Tala’s lesbianism has got abroad, two women sit at one of Tala's parents’ parties talking. One tells the other: “Lebanese? She’s become Lebanese? But some of my best friends are Lebanese!” Mistaking “lesbian” for the aurally somewhat similar “Lebanese,” this uninformed Jordanian signifies those peoples of the east who are still far from knowing about visible gay and lesbian identities. The speaker is wife to Ramzi, an old “uncle” of the family who makes very evident eyes at all the good-looking men whenever he is on screen, but Ramzi’s happy marriage to his much younger showpiece wife provides Ramzi with cover that is not available to Tala. As Tala’s father puts it, “Men have options, especially in the Middle East; but a daughter needs a helping hand,” when consoling his daughter after she has finally broken her fourth engagement. Tala’s options in Jordan are to be mistaken for being “Lebanese,” and or living like Ramzi but probably finding out in the process that it is much harder for her than for him to sustain a marriage of convenience. Tala’s dilemmas resonate with the viewer; after a night with Leyla, Tala overwhelmed by changes she will have to engineer in her life if she is to steer clear of deceiving her family and friends as Leyla says she
should, says of the possible freedom that may come to her from the honest approach, “No one lives like this! Not where I come from.” Tala’s puzzlement about how to achieve sexual autonomy even within a loving family that unfortunately does not see anything other than normative heterosexuality as a real design for loving, rings bells in a way that Leyla’s easy existence does not. A few tears and recriminations later, Leyla’s mother comes around to Leyla’s lesbianism quite easily, while are more than tolerant to begin with. Tala’s dilemmas communicate better because Sarif supplies a social context within which to read them; yet, the relative wealth and the relative personal success of individual characters makes any real struggle mostly unnecessary in these lesbian fairy-tales of acceptance and cultural mutuality.

The only film of the crop of six that is not about coming out, Chutney Popcorn’s most valuable contribution is that like Deshatanakkilli Kargotakilla, it provides a life-script for those who want to stay “out,” though, unlike DKK, Chutney Popcorn makes no bones about being a lesbian film, exploring even the comic everyday failures of a (lesbian) sex-life. Chutney Popcorn also provides a richly-nuanced realistic representation of lesbian life-worlds that are also Indian, but does not disintegrate into an ethnography, detailing the way of life of a strange people inhabiting a strange place. Dealing with the life of a second-generation Indian-American, Chutney Popcorn’s depiction of desire does not have to follow the facile polarisation of home versus society, nation versus the diaspora models we have seen in action earlier, nor does it have to lapse into the fairy-tale populated with extremely fetching actresses in order to make points about Indian diasporas as also being welcoming to daydream believers and homecoming queens. In realistically representing both the challenges and the possibilities of lesbian community and family, Chutney Popcorn is also able to make (un)familiar the meaning of “family,” unhousing and making unhomely many familiar familial patterns to generate a structure within which to imagine an “outlaw family,” to twist Cheshire Calhoun’s phrase (“Gender Closet” 30). Nisha Ganatra’s first film is consciously an effort to write a script for Indian-Americans of the second generation, who are now no longer Indian, but who are not American in the same way as Americans of other ethnicities. Placing ethnic difference parallel to sexual difference, Ganatra interrogates whether these heterogenieties can yield viable subject positions. It seems the answer is yes.

The film opens with Reena and Lisa on a bike, with Reena driving in a sari worn over a t-shirt and a biking helmet. This incongruity, with a gift-wrapped parcel in the back, is headed to Reena’s sister Sarita’s wedding. Sarita is marrying Mitch, who is white like Lisa. These two biracial relationships frame the film’s engagement with the relationships the sisters and their mother share and are irked by, the discomforts becoming obvious within minutes. Sarita’s
wedding is conducted with Hindu Punjabi rituals, with Mitch's guests also turning up in Indian-style clothing. Reena arrives late, a predictable time of arrival for her, we discover, missing the entire ceremony, but also foregrounding the many difficulties in the way of her full participation in such a ceremony. Though living with her girlfriend Lisa, who has just moved in with her, Reena cannot be seen by the Indian community as lesbian, or so her mother thinks, being literally given pause when having to introduce Lisa to the other guests: “This is Lisa, Reena's old room-mate from ... college.” Prevaricating about the exact, erotic nature of her daughter's relationship with Lisa is for Meenu the only way out of the everyday discomforts generated by Reena’s lesbianism, which she has accepted in principle though occasionally making efforts to take the lesbian out of her daughter. Standing to one side camera in hand, watching everyone dance Reena announces to Lisa “I feel like I'm in drag!” Reena's being in drag is not simply a function of her butch-persona's discomfort with being in a sari, however well tied, but also a reflection on how clothing marks the self. For Reena, Indian clothing is far from her set of everyday sartorial choices: the sombre jeans and t-shirt, with the boots that mean business, that she is in all day long, and that identify her as “dyke” are indeed a far cry from the loud almost lurid colours of the clothing everyone affects in the wedding scene. Weddings are a site of difference for Indians and other ethnic groups, from the communities they are within. At the same time, Reena’s personal choice of clothing also sets her as sexually apart from the others on the scene, as a butch lesbian “dyke,” the clothes her mother would wear most days is part of the performance of a heterosexual femininity Reena does not affect.

Lisa, for her part dressed in a salwar-kameez too, is very understanding about Reena's mother's need to “closet” Lisa; Reena and Lisa are more than willing to accommodate one another, a great relief in any bi-racial film which is usually about just such lack of accommodations. As Lisa leaves, the Punjabi wedding music “dupatta tera sat rang kaas soniye” changes to a western one, marking Reena’s position as a conflicted other between two sets of accommodations literally with a musical correlate that is itself hybridised, just as Reena herself is, now, as a second-generation Indian-American in New York. The realm that Chutney Popcorn fashions is the (un)familiar one: that of an Indian dyke living with friends but visiting her mother every weekend to set the lawn sprinklers right, trying to cook to earn approval, and fending off “protective” gestures from horny Indian men who want to sleep with her dishy, all-American Italian girlfriend, and finally, becomes a surrogate mother so her infertile sister can raise the family she so desires. The sting in the film's tale, placing it in a league of its own, is that the lesbian does not end up the “rent-a-womb” her friends are afraid she will become; as the film's DVD blurb says, an Indian family
reinvents itself as a result of a lesbian daughter becoming surrogate mother for a baby her sister wants now, but will soon change her mind about.

The film's opening credits roll to the images of Reena putting mehendi on the bodies of women at the beauty-salon she works in. Conventional beauty services like waxing and eyebrow definition are of course also provided there, to clientele who appear mostly to be lesbians, suggesting connections between female homoeroticism and the labours of producing a femininity that is usually associated with heterosexuality. Reena takes pictures of the women whose bodies she has decorated with the green dye; these adorn the entire salon, making it look, her boss tells her, like a museum. Reena's camera should be read as her effort to organise an archive of cultural artefacts that literally queer given notions of femininity. Reena's use of mehendi marks her designs with an ethnicity that tattooing ink onto the body does not have within Western culture. Instead of the permanence of the tattoo, mehendi offers the comfort of painless body-art that does not have to last forever or need expensive removal techniques. The use of mehendi in India at least invokes strong tropes of female homosociality: women putting henna in one another's hair is a quotidian hair-conditioning and maintenance activity for many women. Decorating one's palms and feet with mehendi on the other hand, evokes the spectacle of the Indian wedding in North India, and in a more mundane way, is an act imbued with aesthetic pleasure when performed outside the ambit of preparations for a wedding. Chutney Popcorn harnesses the tactile pleasures of mehendi application to convey a female homoeroticism that is far removed from the spectacles of heterosexuality that the Indian wedding conveys. The film's title credits roll alongside of Reena's adorning Lisa's body with mehendi designs; various parts of the body – cleavage, the back, arms, the belly-button, the thighs – are the recipients of Reena's artwork, but the pleasure is not merely aesthetic: Lisa's reason for not getting a permanent tattoo is that this way, she has "an excuse for getting close to you all the time," signally a forthright rendition of everyday sexual chemistry between long-term lovers. Reena's professional use of the dye also takes her away from the conventional parts of the body henna adorns in India – by not confining herself exclusively to the arms, hands and feet, but instead making a canvas of the whole female body, Reena's body art literally lays the entire female body out bare before decorating it with fine filigree. The potentials for homoerotic pleasure this supplies can well be imagined. Separating the female body thus from the heteronormative mechanism of wedding party, Chutney Popcorn explores many opportunities for making love to the female body. The body art of real artists is displayed in the film as Reena's shows mehendi designs on a number of women's bodies, some naked, some partly clad, but all adorned in ways that remove the humble mehendi far away from its demure traditional home on the modest extremities of female limbs.
Reena's photographs of these bodies signal a female aesthetics that manages to sidestep the masculinist fragmentation of the female body into "money shots" that focus on supposedly erotic places on this body. Instead, in photographing women such that their nakedness is not foregrounded, but the erotic potential of this design placed on them is, Reena's persona as a specifically lesbian artist calls for a re-evaluation of phallocentric art and provides an alternative to it. Her customers are not always sensible to this critique: for them, often, mehendi is an exotic dye, just as Reena is an exotic Oriental. "Is this how it's done in India," asks a woman who has just got her hands dyed with her friend. The tiny gap between the question and Reena's answer, coupled with a barely visible shrug reveals the "oriental's" inability to combat being pigeonholed by the well-intentioned. Reena's artistry has been to remove mehendi from its old "oriental" home to produce an art that starkly emphasises the sexual potencies of the female body alongside of conveying erotic pleasure in this body, both on the part of the woman whose body it is, and of the viewer. Ganatra is able to frame this complex interchange of looks between artist, artist's model and art, even as she comments on the identifiably "ethnic" provenance of this art. But what is art for Reena is "nonsense" for her mother, who says, when told that her daughter's art might make the cover of a magazine: "You don't even appear in these pictures. How will anyone know they are yours?" Showing Reena looking at the two women looking at her asking her if this was indeed part of the authentic Indian ritual of applying mehendi to take a photograph at the end of it, the narrative of Chutney Popcorn looks at exchanges between being visible in one's artistic endeavours as an ethnic artist, being visible as one's own art, and being visible as a lesbian through one's art in a way that complicates many homonormative views about "seeing" and being visible. In an excellent trope for the film's own self-reflexivity about its definitions of "lesbian," "woman," "Indian," and "tradition," a mirror behind them, meanwhile, reflects Reena looking at the two of them: Reena's art is framed on the one side by western expectations of "Indianness," and on the other by the mundane nature of this Indian-ness. Her own presence outside both these definitions of her is signalled by her perception of herself in the mirror: neither entirely Indian nor non-Indian, Reena's lesbianism is a border territory wherein cultural identity and personal identity negotiate.

Reena lives a visibly lesbian lifestyle sharing her apartment with her girlfriend Lisa and their friend Becky, the "baby dyke" who has an often ruinous tendency to fall in love with bisexual women. Lisa's girlhood friend Janis, who is still attracted to Lisa, walks in and out functioning as the apartment's visiting cynic. Together, Janis and Lisa signal a history of lesbianism not available to Reena: the free-love decades of the 1980s, before the advent of the AIDS-crisis when non-monogamous love of all kinds, including lesbian love, became dangerous.
"alternatives" in comparison to their earlier valuation as necessary liberations from heterosexual monogamous couplings that were taken by the lesbian community as normative. Further, Janis and Lisa also suggest the existence of lesbian community, in the form of physical systems of support, living spaces and professional mentoring for lesbian women within the white community. Janis and Becky can also claim dykes for mothers: both their mothers were "dykes" all along; when Reena tries to tailgate into saying her mother is also one so as to be part of this fellowship, her friends shout her down as it is obvious to all of them that Meenu is no dyke. Becky, still young in the ways of lesbianism according to Janis and so a "baby dyke," is typically butch, with short hair, a body carefully cultivated to look sporty rather than curvy, and no make-up, while her (girl)friend Tiffany is conventionally feminine-looking, with long hair, makeup and skirts that accentuate her chic New York woman look. Between the pair of them, Becky and Tiffany are Ganatra's take on what it means to be butch and thus identifiably lesbian, and not-butch, which enables Tiffany to "pass," and to date Todd in the evenings after having furtive sex with Becky when Lisa and Reena are not in the apartment. Tiffany, it would seem, literally has Reena for lunch, and when any of the flatmates walks in, Tiffany's reaction is to rush into the closet. Tiffany's literally closeted sexual habits belong on a cline the "out" lesbians. Here, it is the white and very emancipated-looking, tough-talking lesbian feminist Janis who is not yet out to her family, as a result of which Lisa's mother can threaten to out her to her father when she finds Janis throwing a spanner into the works of the Lisa-Reena relationship that Lisa's mother more than approves of. At the other end of the cline, Reena, Becky, and Lisa have uncloseted lesbian lifestyles, but these again are inflected with difference: Reena's lesbianism, though not castigated, does not easily find a place within her family's arrangements, while Lisa's mother is extremely supportive of both Lisa and her lover, Reena. In contrast to the happily exploratory Becky, Tiffany is the "other" to the lesbianism of these women, just as another of Becky's girlfriends, a bisexual woman this time, is. Tiffany and Becky's bisexual girlfriend only have on/off relationships with Becky; Becky, on the other hand, is more than willing to commit to them and is always eager to get to spend more time with them. The traffic between the heterosexual world and the lesbian one is via these liminal figures: bisexuality or closeted biseuality places these women in uncomfortable places. At the same time, paradoxically, avowed lesbian desire enables Becky, Janis, Lisa and Reena to make less dishonest lives for themselves.

_Chatney Popcorn_ is probably the only film with Indians in it that refers to casual lesbian dating, non-monogamous relationships or possible promiscuity among lesbians. In breaking from the mould of eternal lesbian love, _Chatney Popcorn_ breaks new ground in not representing lesbianism as heterosexuality's better man. The lesbian is as vulnerable as the heterosexual to
dating games, mind games and manipulation; where all the other films we have studied so far make a ponderous virtue of monogamous, infinite and eternal fidelity in lesbian relationships, hinting besides that this fidelity is a special characteristic of lesbianism, Chutney Popcorn boldly breaks away from this already homonormative depiction of a lesbianism. Ganatra's film studies lesbianism as it is, rather than as it should be in showing that many lesbianisms make up the terrain of the non-heterosexual woman's existence. In depicting the attitude of confirmed lesbians like Reena and her friends to the bisexual, Ganatra avows the frissons between the bisexual and the lesbian. Bisexuality, for lesbian theory and literature, has always been a no-man's land, a cop-out. Becky's girlfriends are confused in the eyes of these lesbians, but the viewer is afforded an inside perspective on the damage the "bisexual lesbian"—whose ability to pass or to sleep with men makes her more mobile than the butch lesbian—has on the lesbian desirous of a life free of at least some dishonesties.

One of the best moments in the film is when Becky and Reena make the street—the realm of the public—their own by "scoping the street for dykes." Reena and Becky are relaxing and talking shop, trying to identify the dykes from the straight women. At one point, Reena tells Becky, "it's the socks! No self-respecting dyke would wear those socks," when Becky wants to know why one woman can be lesbian while the other is so patently not. This lesbian radar is a direct reversal of gaze: sitting on the street occupying a traditionally male place the two women virtually see lesbians everywhere. Ganatra is able thus to suffuse the entire New York street with homoeroticism: all these women are made available to the queer gaze. A woman comes out from inside the salon, and hearing the "dyke" word and says, "that's great why don't you just appropriate the culture of our oppressors." The other women however label confirm she is a dyke too, whether she likes it or no. Ganatra seems to be saying that whether or no the label is acceptable to the people being labelled, labels confer tremendous power on those who are in control of the taxonomic exercise. Becky, Reena and Janis who joins them, see lesbians everywhere, all for the taking, and for them "dyke" is a term they have already appropriated to signify a positive meaning when they use it with respect to their own lives. Further, like Kari which shows the title character travel the city's drains by night and its streets by day, even featuring her walking through the extremely crowded sea of humanity that is the Ganesh Festival, this film makes the realm of the public sphere its own in showing its characters inhabiting different spaces—the bar, the street itself, parks—where the world is around them; yet, their relatively "leisured" positioning in many of these spaces also indicates that they stand at a tangent to capitalist America.
Contentious as these different streams of opinion on appropriate nomenclature for lesbian difference are, the moment that threatens to make Reena – bravo dyke that she is – an outsider to this very community of lesbians is when Reena gets pregnant to help her sister. Seeking approval, Reena knows the bread of financial autonomy and an apartment of one’s own are not enough to stave off longings for deeper connections with one’s natal family. Reena’s difference from her Indian household is underscored time and again when “traditions” enter the otherwise culturally unmarked second-generation Indian-American experience. Reena is almost left out of the improvised *harlan* Meenu is conducting in order to bless Sarita’s new house. Not having anything to cover her head, Reena has to run for her cap by which time Meenu and Sarita get half way into the ceremony without waiting for Reena. Unlike the “perfect daughter” Sarita who fits into Indian rituals despite being quite American, Reena’s presence demands a new script. Before this ceremony begins, Sarita tells Reena that she and Mitch are trying to have a baby. Reena remarks “that’s so predictable!” but Sarita comes back with “We’ve never done it before!” indicative of how each life is new, for those who live it at any rate. When Sarita and Mitch are unable to conceive, Reena in a moment of great bravado which is also a gesture seeking approval from her natal family, seeking participation in rites that leave her out because she is lesbian and thus unsuitable for the traditionally scripted ritual, offers to carry the baby for her. Reena’s offer puts everyone in a tizzy, pointing out that what might be “predictable” for the heterosexual daughter is not predictable for the lesbian one, who earlier has to defend herself saying “Ma, I’m lesbian, not sterile” when her mother blames her lesbianism for her denying her mother the pleasure of grandchildren. In contrast to Meenu’s diffidence about Reena’s “lifestyle choice” is Lisa’s mother’s acceptance of her daughter. Lisa’s mother is also very fond of Reena, even bringing Reena food from home as a sign of particular caring. While initially it might seem that the film is setting up a binary between the modern white mother and the traditional and thus regressive Asian mother, as the film progresses, we realise that Meenu does indeed reinvent rituals for her unregenerate daughter. *Chutney Popcorn* is able to study the reworlding of tradition that an encounter with the unfamiliar might induce.

After a particularly excoriating encounter with the entire family, Mitch in tow, over lunch at Sarita’s new house, Reena returns to obsessively try to cook, in order to make up for her many deficiencies, one of which is her inability to cook without turning on the smoke-alarms, a story which has now become part of her family’s legends about Reena’s ineptitude. Further, Reena does not have either a stable job or a nice boyfriend, even though her creativity is beginning to get recognised, with a possible magazine cover with her photos on the way. Reena is the aspiring artist, the contradiction of Mitch’s and Mother’s aspirations to suburban permanence and
stolidity. Combined with her lesbianism, she is indeed a poor variation on the theme of perfect femininity Sarita has mastered so well. Reduced to nothing, Reena finally yields to the comfort of pizza with her friends, where she recounts how the celebration of “their trying to get pregnant” is itself a judgement on her. Janis ever vigilant about male forays into what she deems is exclusively female territory, refuses to see how getting pregnant needs the pronoun “they,” even as all of them endorse the lesbian’s freedom from the duties of motherhood, self-chosen or otherwise imposed. Further, marriage is also the end of the sexual intimacy that marriage promises; Lisa says “that’s the end of their sex life. From now on, it’s all about procreate.” Of course Mitch and Sarita are unable to do just that, leading to many changes in their road-map for life together. When Reena offers to become the surrogate mother, everyone’s response is a surprised guffaw – Reena has never been the one for motherhood. Her consolation to Sarita on her tragedy is that there are other more important things than having children, but while Reena has her art, whether her family finds it artistic or no, Sarita does not seem to have anything to keep her on her feet.

Chutney Popcorn makes use of Sarita’s inability to produce a family as a trope for Reena’s own partial loss of family because of her lesbianism. Being lesbian, Reena is an (un)familiar, an outsider to a number of rituals that till the end of the film implicitly require heteronormative partnerships. Disrupting the consensus reality of the Indian-American diasporic life their mother is used to, Reena’s lesbian life is something brushed aside in order to make the most of the heteronormative daughter. However, in the spirit of comedy, what begins as Reena’s altruistic though approval-seeking motherhood culminates in the successful fashioning of a new kind of family where, in yet another of her mother’s many pujas depicted in the film, her brother-in-law is the father while Lisa is, finally, acknowledged though as “like the husband.” Sarita the elder sister is made to do duty as her sister’s brother, in the absence of one, and has to hold an umbrella unfurled to “protect your sister.” The camera frames this motley crew of Reena, Lisa, Mitch and Sarita standing where Meenu places them, to form a queer family photograph of sorts: two couples, one sitting, the other standing, make up Meenu’s family finally, in the eighth month of Reena’s pregnancy. Paul Gilroy’s concept of black diaspora as “the changing same” is useful here: while Meenu’s rituals do not change, the instruments that perform them and the things that are made sacred or purified by them are in a constant process of self-definition or change. Earlier in the film, trying to bless Sarita’s new house, Meenu is as puzzled as her two daughters are by the requirements of the ritual, where Reena’s head is covered by a cap she runs to get since she does not have a scarf. Meenu’s psychedelic idols and frail imitations of the “real” thing, however, seem to do the job of sanctifying their lives quite well even as the aura of the ritual process is
different with only three women performing them. While blessing Sarita's house and while setting afloat offerings in the river praying for a baby for Sarita, the three women belong quite clearly to a “continuum” of women who look out for one another without the lack of male presence signifying in a negative way. Meenu is herself unconventional in the sense that she has long been divorced from her husband; Sarita’s husband Mitch is a male feminist who is as aghast as Sarita is at how “magazines objectify women,” and is thus not to be marked as conventionally male as the character of Raju, who cockily strolls into Reena’s mother’s yard to propose, secretly, to Reena that: “I will get everybody off your back and pretend to go out with you if you hook me up with your fine-ass roommate, Lisa.” Reena can only tell the surprised sleazeball off with “she likes Indian chicks,” not Indian boys like him. Taken aback, he next suggests a threesome, relieved on the side that he wasn’t being rejected for being brown, and leaves after his mandatory genuflexions of devotion to “auntie” Meenu. The Raju–Reena exchange comes after a sombre moment between Reena and Meenu where Reena pensively tells her mother that she never did have positive male role models, whereupon her mother suprisingly tells her with emphatic aplomb, “you know, neither I did. \110 cares?” Coming as it does after this moment of rejection of male masculinity as necessary to proper female development or happiness, Raju’s comedic intervention only serves to highlight the autonomy of the women, lesbian or no, placing this autonomy both as a necessary survival strategy and as an alternative that already exists to patriarchal, objectifying males.

While some aspects of life remain the same, others are negotiated within diaspora such that constant change is the norm. In Chutney Popcorn, Reena and Sarita are at a crossroads: Reena redefines her lesbianism with motherhood such that it takes her closer back to her family, producing the much longed for grandchild whose arrival will mitigate the anger produced by bad “marriage” – in her case, to lesbianism – while in sarita’s case, the birth of the child takes her into a place here she can discover more of herself apart from famly. In fact, in the course of carrying the baby, Reena discovers that there is no place for her in her lesbian community – other than Janis and Becky, everyone, including, for a short time Lisa, abandons Reena to her own devices assuming she has become a renegade. Even the attractive black hipster woman at the street corner who hands out flyers makes as much an untouchable of the hugely pregnant Reena as she does of an old, evidently straight looking man who wants one of her flyers too. Bundled together with the rejected straight man, Reena’s lesbian identity is severely compromised in the eyes of her often militantly “dyke” community. Isolated for not confirming to the dominant paradigms of her lesbian world, Reena can see there are homonormativities that are as difficult to resist as heteronormativities. Even as the existence of these normativities is recognised, they are
challenged by the film, which, like a good comedy penetrates the surface layers to reveal sociocultural fissures that challenge and threaten just such normatives. From beginning with the wedding, which serves as a marker of ethnic difference for the diasporic community, to the birth of the baby which reconciles her once again to this diasporic community where certain aspects of her selfhood are never addressed, Reena's journey is one that is (un)familiar.

Late into her pregnancy, Reena and Meenu share a joke sitting in the park in order to eat lunch on a day the mother and daughter spend together in genuine bonhomie. Reena speculates about what life would be like if she had been in India: “they'd kill you in India for being lesbian.” But at the same time, talking about Meenu's family, Reena asks Meenu, “Have you ever thought your own mother, my grandmother could have been lesbian?” Meenu is greatly amused, saying: “I never thought I'd see the day when I'd hear your grandmother was a lesbian!” Their laughter and pleasure at their whimsical exchanges about the history of their own family's sexuality, occuring out in the open, is an act similar to Reena's scoping out dykes on the street with her friends. Opening up the space for the existence of lesbians even in places where they might be “killed” as Reena facetiously puts it, the scene invests South Asia with as much possibility for lesbian existence as it does about the USA. The Indian paan-walla, from whom the women order paans even as they talk about their various reproductive troubles at various times, is privy to every detail of Sarita's failed attempts at conception, and Reena's successful one. This gentle satire on the Indian attitude to including one's reproductive health as part of the general bill of fare also helps complicate the vision of South Asia as a closed place. Pregnancy is clearly an incitement to publicly discursiveising private dys/functions; at the same time, the South Asian viewer is alert to the fact that these conversations cannot happen in India in quite the same way because Reena's lesbianism would not be a “comic” factor here, but a relatively more difficult, monstrous one. In these scenes, which happen mostly after visits to the obstetrician, the background music is the rich voice of Asha Bhonsle singing to a remixed background of club; nevertheless, the contexts of paan-eating and the friendly neighbourhood petty-bunk-owner who knows all the gossip place the film's location as unmistakably within “India” even if it is the “little Indias” of Jackson Heights, New York, where these scenes were shot. The “changing same” of Indian diasporic experience in the USA makes space for both the buying of Indian clothes, spices and mehendi here, while at the same time enabling Reena's lesbianism scope for public recognition and validation: the paan-walla is probably the first person in the “Indian” community to be subjected to the vicissitudes of having a lesbian daughter or sister who is also willing to carry her sister's baby for her. This public recognition of Reena's sexuality, however, is the first step...
towards the incorporation of this (un)familiar sexuality within the scheme of things Meenu well-intentionedly orders for her children.

Reena's pregnancy, itself born of her desire to seek approval from this family of "Indians" represented in chief by Meenu, finally permits an interface between Reena's life with her more militant dyke friends and weekend visits to her mother's suburban home. Here, Reena seems most happy on the fringes – the yard where she does her mother's nails while they talk about male role models, or the basement where she fixes the sprinkler settings which her mother seems unable to not disrupt in the course of each week. Once inside the house, Reena is subject to censure: Mitch and Meenu make fun of Reena's cooking skills at dinner much to both Sarita's and Reena's mortification, while outside Reena is more able to pitch into Mitch by making fun of his inability to get his wife pregnant, though that is not really his "fault" as it turns out. Once inside the house, however, Reena is unable to hold out against the expectations of suburban and middle-class stability, order and continuity that Sarita and Mitch, supported by Meenu, embody. Living in the city, not in the suburbs, Reena's lifestyle seems to the others to be hedonistic and unproductive even as Reena's photographs begin to appear on magazine covers. Between inside and outside, however, the liminal space of the yard, where Ganatra set most of her movie's outdoor scenes more due to budget constraints, offers Reena a Moebius-strip's worth of space within which to plant herself and retain her roots. Ganatra's construction of Reena's lesbianism thus as liminal might not have been intentional – her DVD track lists shooting in yards as one of the stratagems of getting a low-budget film made – but the film's development has consistency enough to merit the view that Reena, who would be stifled indoors by the requirements of "convention," can retain her own family when in the meeting place between home and world. Her own family becomes more expansive once outdoors – Sarita and Meenu are both more patient and confiding, and Mitch is less oppressive when separated from the security blanket of American material prosperity. When Reena offers to carry Sarita's baby for her, this offer is made in the flowerbeds where Sarita, in an effort to battle depression, is planting; later, Sarita relays this offer to Mitch when they are both outdoors, once again. While a small budget would have made indoor shots with the necessary lighting and camera work a nightmare, the film makes it possible to see the liminal space of the "outdoors" as not necessarily marginal. The great American middle-class values of having a suburban home with an immaculate lawn are employed by these Indians so as to make the lawn, the yard, signify as the place where home is, even as the house – perhaps of America itself – is still not large enough to hold the many shapes of multicultural difference that come to it. The house at the same time is also the stronghold of "Indian" traditionalism, which unites here with similar American values: Reena's city apartment
forms a subcultural space that this mainstream “home” will not recognise easily, at least as far as the Indian diaspora is involved. In contrast is Lisa’s Italian-American mother’s response to her daughter’s lesbianism: Lisa’s mother drops by of an afternoon with love and food for Reena included among the things she brings. Later, she insists that Lisa go back to Reena instead of saying “It’s not my baby!” which, her mother points out, is what “they all” say. “They all” within heterosexual fatherhood would be men who refuse to take responsibility for their women’s pregnancies; in placing Lisa within this “macho,” emotionally recalcitrant group of men, Lisa’s mother is challenging Lisa to show she’s different, as a lesbian and a dyke, from the men who impregnate women without taking responsibility. Lisa’s mother and Reena’s meet at the end of the movie: in hospital, together hoping and praying for a good “delivery;” the two are anxious through the labour and exhilarated to see a healthy child at the end. Reena’s mother’s diffidence about her daughter’s lesbianism, is however, not to be read as dialectically opposite to Lisa’s mother’s more open acceptance. While Meenu is able to accept Lisa as a lesbian, she is still unable to give Reena due recognition for her orientation and emotional experiences in the course of an everyday life structured around relatively more heteronormative community structures. Lisa’s mother, on the other hand, is represented as an individual whose Italian-American difference has long since assimilated into a larger “American” culture. Never represented amongst other members of her own once-diasporic community, Lisa’s mother is a more “western” individual herself, dapper in denims and short hair, unlike Meenu with her strange pyjama-like outdoor trousers and her need to keep up her “Indian-ness.” However, these differences or assimilations are not evaluated as negative by the text: presenting both as designs for living, Ganatra is able to inflect Meenu’s traditionalism itself with an accommodatory power. Meenu is able to retain her non-Western roots and pass them onto her children, and later, possibly, her grandchild. These very roots are what Reena seeks, in the film’s acknowledgement of her racial difference from the white Lisa’s more comfortable blending into the surroundings of the largely white world the women move in. Chutney Popcorn’s lesbian pregnancy thus enables two worlds to meet along their margins such that osmotic exchanges are possible even as the core is not suddenly marred by change that no one is yet ready for.

Chutney Popcorn’s failing, though that seems a word too hard to use for such an intelligently loving film, is that it does not pay enough attention to Reena’s and Lisa’s anxieties or joys about having to keep the baby that Sarita no longer wants. Some way into the pregnancy, Reena abandons her bike in order to make sure the baby stays safe; Sarita wants to drive it on the streets though Mitch is amazed and amused by the idea of his feminine wife driving her sister’s rather virile bike. This becomes Sarita’s secret “project” – learning to free herself from the
normative expectations that define her as a certain kind of feminine woman, Sarita begins to reconcile with her inability to make her own family, though her process of healing is barely begun when she comes to see Reena’s baby. Sarita’s distress through the process is depicted with great sensitivity and understanding by the film; however, Lisa’s lesbian in comprehensibility about what to do with a baby she did not plan on having with her altruistic girlfriend, and Reena’s own muddle of emotions about losing her girlfriend even as she carries a baby she cannot afford to have, are not dealt with in the detail afforded to Sarita. However, the film is able to show what Sarita as a married straight woman has and what Reena as a single lesbian woman cannot have: public support to Reena is withdrawn as it is assumed she has betrayed the lesbian “cause.”

Meenu is very supportive of Sarita, among other things telling her to “get up” not lie down as “it is easier to feel depressed when you’re lying down,” in a scene that artfully combines the comedy of this statement with Sarita’s anguish and desire for proximity. Meenu’s response to the news that Reena will have Sarita’s baby for her is “tell her to stop this nonsense immediately!” But her feeling of disgust at this “not natural” process is somewhat mitigated by her sense that this will help Reena get over her “you know, her lesbianism,” even as Sarita tells her lesbianism is not a medical condition to be got over with. Meenu’s incomprehensions, however, are abandoned in the eighth month, when she arrives at Reena’s house for the first time in the film to perform the mandatory Indian rites for pregnant Hindu women.

This “first coming” is a relief to everyone somewhere or the other: Reena’s lifestyle is subtly validated even though the film does not show Meenu talking to any of Reena’s housemates except Lisa. However, Meenu’s very presence in her daughter’s house is a sign of reciprocity and mutuality that so far was lacking: every earlier visit was made by Reena to the homes of her sister or her mother, and their sociality had earlier only extended to the New York street, never to Reena’s home. The impending arrival of the baby, however, changes all that: eight months seems sufficient for Meenu to reconcile herself to both to one daughter’s inability to produce a baby and to her daughter’s lesbianism — now muted by the visible signs of pregnancy. Further, Reena herself is no longer either a bike-rider, having given that up in order to help the baby stay in her womb, and neither is she identifiable anymore as “dyke,” looking instead like any irritable pregnant woman. However, these immediately missing signs of the lesbian are more than made up for by the presence of the ever-loving Lisa by her side. For Meenu, the impending arrival of a grandchild once again makes Reena family in a fuller way than she has known since perhaps, Reena’s coming out, which does not figure in the film either in references to the past, or as a preoccupation in the present. Reena’s (un)familiar identity is very much necessary for the text to produce its critique of the family, dismantling the
heteronormativity characteristic of the diasporic version of the American dream. Further, Reena is neither the economic nor the social prototype for success this “dream” mandates: instead, she is a failure on most counts. Without the “stable” job that someone like Mitch has, and without the suburban job, Reena is a resistant participant in the capitalistic life of the global city of New York. With her dyke-ness, her girlfriend, her lesbian pregnancy and her art, she is a very queer “other” role model. Chutney Popcorn’s end might be read as an attempt at escaping the difficulties of a lesbian existence in which one partner wants to have a baby while the other one does not, with very little financial resources at hand. But the film’s diegetic trajectory, as also its choice of the mode of comedy leavened with much irony and cultural reflection, forbids such a facile reading. Chutney Popcorn must instead be read meditation on the meanings of the word “lesbian” – as a dedicated lover of women who would also be a mother to her baby and daughter to her first-generation Indian mother, Reena symbolises (un)familiar alternatives to heteronormativity that are not often visible within the Oedipalised logic of diaspora as depending on descent from the “seed” of an implicitly male ancestor and in modern times, as the inauthentic other of the “nation.” Chutney Popcorn’s repertory includes a refreshing range of normal-looking women characters of various ages and persuasions who make life in a new country more than liveable. Meenu and Reena both re-world their new worlds: Meenu melds Indian with American even as Reena’s version of the mixing reveals to her yet another possibility for mixing, this time of “lesbian” with “family.” Chutney Popcorn’s sexualisation of the narrative of cultural contact, conflict, acculturation and assimilation is an (un)familiar critique of otherwise normative narratives of heterosexual fulfilment attained by diasporic protagonists within a desexualised, racialised diasporic environment where only marginal attention is paid to the normalisation of heterosexual privilege in various forms.

The films we have studied in detail in this chapter perform this function in various ways, but the most dialogic of these narrativisations has been that of Chutney Popcorn. While Fire, Sancharam and The World Unseen explicitly produce various forms of “coming out,” challenging and reinforcing homonormativities about what it means to be visible or invisible as a sexualised being, Chutney Popcorn provides a critique both of homonormativity in its many ironic and comic discussions of what it means to be not just lesbian, but also straight. In doing this, Chutney Popcorn queers the space of heterosexuality as much as it renders (un)familiar the perceptions of female – female love and desire that the other three films might have produced. Moving away from the monogamous devotions the other three films solemnly, even piously create and sustain, Chutney Popcorn presents intra-female love as not a rare egg, but a most familiar object, present everywhere, suffusing the everyday. While narratives of coming out have their value, their
dependence on the viewer's implicit identification with the protagonists and the diegesis of their stories often allows reactionary views on subjects like tradition and religion – as in *Fire* – or in caste as in *Sancharam* – to seep into narratives that overtly wish to produce empowering depictions of sexual subjectivity. But as *Chutney Popcorn* shows, the “minoritising” view that an (un)familiar sexuality is the problem of only a special few need not be the only way to plead for lesbianism: a much more favourable plea can be made by works of art whose power to disturb and amuse is not compromised in favour of their power to convince.