Unlike the butch lesbian, the womanly-woman, or the woman who does not defy the conventions of gender is more often to be found within her “normal” environment, that of marriage, and within the family as a contributor to its upkeep by providing domestic, sexual and emotional labour and many times, contributing financially as well. Enmeshed, as it were, within compulsory heterosexuality, within marriage, child-rearing and heteronormative forms of sociality, these women might not have access to forms of lesbian community; often, it might even be that they desire women but have not acted upon these desires. Within literary scholarship, two dominant streams of thought emerge with respect to the woman-loving-woman who is feminine: one stream, a prominent votary of which is Lilian Faderman the American lesbian historian, describes “female friendships” such as these as asexual and lacking in a genital erotic component; especially when these friendships are located in the centuries previous to ours. Faderman’s Surpassing the Love of Men studies “romantic friendships and love” between women in the Western tradition from the Renaissance to the present, while Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers examine different facets of identity creation and the emergence especially of butch and femme identities in the American context from the nineteenth century to the present. Faderman’s position in the first book is that while erotic affinities between women might be primary, these need not ever have had a sexual component, but this view is contested by the other school of thought. With equally detailed analyses of important literary texts within the same Western tradition, scholars like Vanita and Terry Castle among others shows that “friendship” might be a cloak to give deflect homophobic attention from what is a primary erotic and emotional relationship. Female friendships, as Vanita shows in Sappho and the Virgin Mary, might very well be sexual with asexuality or celibacy signalling that these women do not function or do not desire to function sexually within the heterosexual realm even as they aspire to erotic, emotional and sexual fulfilment within same-sex relationships. Martha Vicinus’ term “occasional lovers of women” might therefore be a more accurate description of women within the heterosexual libidinal economy, but looking for a place within an (un)familiar one. As the texts in this chapter show, “female friendship” or female bonding need not function so as to preclude female homoeroticism or female homosexuality. Instead, as we shall see, with one or two exceptions, most of the texts we study here do have women acting upon their erotic or sexual desires within
an (un)familiar libidinal economy even as they desire freedom from heterosexual marital activities.

But as the title of this chapter suggests, if the women are already married women, their place within the familiar orders of heterosexual maritality must also perhaps be inflected by these female friendships? Castle’s *The Apparitional Lesbian* uses the trope of “ghosting,” that is the de-materialisation of desires into non-corporeal forms like ghosts, apparitions and visions, to study how lesbian desire appears within what might otherwise be erroneously taken to be heteronormative sites of action. The lesbian “visitations” that Castle studies suggests that while love between women is a real spiritual and mystical experience for the women involved, its depth and validity might not be endorsed by the world around, leading to its becoming “apparitional.” As we shall see in the texts below, this “ghosting” of female same-sex love within a heterosexual economy, involving marriage and child-rearing within the marriage, literally makes familiares out of women-lovers: the women lovers of women move in and out of the marital home like ghosts because the primacy of their presence is never recognised, and when recognised, might be the occasion for terrible reparational violence, as might be seen in the story “Home” in Ashwini Sukhthankar’s anthology *Facing the Mirror*, where once the (un)familiar love between Kanchana and Amba is suspected by their respective families, a number of violences, including from forced electrocutions to brainwash lesbian love out of Amba’s mind, lead to the destruction of any semblance of marital normalcy. But Kanchana’s earlier escape from her husband leads to the union of the two women almost a decade later, when Amba’s similar escape can be arranged despite her still living in the panopticon of scrutiny by husband, children and community. Amba’s and Kanchana’s (un)familiar love for one another might not be intelligible within the sanctioned “network of desires” permitted to heterosexuality, but they are very much legible when looked at from a non-heteronormative location. While lack of sexual subjectivity might initially seem to be a debilitating place within which to locate any lesbians, transgressive possibilities may also be recovered from an analysis of accounts of women who only occasionally love other women, or who do not act upon (un)familiar desires, that is women who are celibate or asexual because they have not found the right female partners because such accounts are resistant to easy recuperation within heterosexual marriage and conjugality. Offering alternatives to these, female same-sex love in the form of female friendship supplies a different framework for considering love, locating the most desired love-relationships not entirely within sexual prowess and its everyday verification in performance, but within the realms of companionship...
and emotional reciprocity that offer forms of sustenance that might be missing within cross-sexual bonds.

The category of “femme” is a useful one in this analysis as it effectively suggests a femininity that displaces male masculinity as its only or central fulcrum of desire and subjectivity. Instead, femme-ness suggests femininities whose primary desire is for other women, but with one qualifier for the purposes of this thesis: the femme woman insofar as this thesis is concerned is not always a part of the butch–femme couple; rather, the femme woman, or the womanly-lesbian is in much of the lesbian fiction written in India today the consort of other similarly feminine women. With the exception of the few texts we studied in chapter 2, the butch–femme pair is not the norm whereas the femme–femme pair can be seen playing out across a range of texts. This chapter will analyse literary representations of the womanly-woman who loves other women in continuation of the previous one where “femme films” as a tool for representing (un)familiar loves had been studied. Where a teleological movement is implicit or sometimes explicit in the logic of many of the texts in the previous chapter, with the (un)familiar “subject” coming to solidify in the person of the “lesbian” who must leave behind the traditional spaces of the home in order to attain subjectivity, the texts in this chapter operate in zone of slippage between homosexuality and heterosexuality. Our use of the word (un)familiar to convey this slippage, to suggest that female same-sex love is part of a spectrum of sexualities, and dialogic in its relation to heterosexuality, thus, tries to find a way out of what we have called homonormativity – that is, solidified, often non-negotiable uni-directional assumptions about what “modern gay and lesbian identities” should be. That the (un)familiar dialogues with more normative forms of sexuality and kinship arrangements is borne out by the various strategies of struggle, resistance, and sometimes, victory, evidenced in the texts in this chapter. In almost all of them, female same-sex love is in a dialogue, however unequal, with heterosexual structures and requirements; in many instances, the (un)familiar emerges from within rigid structures of heteronormativity, which however are revealed to be not be as invulnerable as might be initially supposed. Thus, even though “femme-ness” might appear to be a less radical subversion of the economies of sex and gender, the texts here show that femininity separated from its coupling to masculinity as complementary other produces a radical reassessment of sexuality itself. While the butch lesbian’s physical presence might indeed queer or destabilise the economy of gender, the femme lesbian’s love for other women produces the less visible subversion of heteronormativity. In remaining invisible, femme-ness need not be treated as the more regressive form of female same-sex love; rather, because it is unintelligible to the seeing eye, femme-lesbianism might well
be more invulnerable to homophobia than its more visible counterparts. On the other hand, however, feminine lesbian women, “passing” at least to the eye of the viewer as straight, might also find it that much harder to establish community or togetherness because the codes of femme-ness, of femininity that desires femininity instead of merely identifying with it, are so fluid. This chapter will study the implications of less communal forms of linkage and relationship than the more public ones that featured in the previous two chapters, both at the level of personal performance and public politics.

Part one of this chapter will study eroticised sister–sister bondings in selected writings from Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Uma Parameswaran and Kamala Das where the confirmed or possible incestuous bonds between sisters heightens the transgressiveness of these “friendships,” as also suggests that the proscription of same-sex love has affinities with the proscription of “incestuous” love for one’s siblings. As this section shows, removal from one’s sister, sometimes one’s likeness or one’s twin, is also a removal from one’s natal home in favour of virilocal residence; the “un-naturalness” of such a move is what is forcefully argued for by a number of texts in this section through their use of often disturbing – because the proscription against incest is so strong – tropes of love, erotic or otherwise, between those who have been marked as forbidden for one another. Part two follows some strands evident in Das’s “The Sandal Trees,” and follows them in texts by Anita Nair, and Mary Anne Mohanraj: in figuring lesbian desire in lower-class or lower-caste settings, these texts take issue with the commonly advanced (feminist) claim that feminism cannot take up the cause of lesbianism or sexual autonomy as long as the problems of caste and class have not been resolved. In plaiting all these three kinds of “problems” together, these texts enable enable a complex critique of how structures of heterosexual and class privilege often function in tandem to eliminate or occlude more marginal or subaltern subjectivities that undercut these assumptions. Part three reads Manju Kapur’s *A Married Woman* as a narrative that writes (un)familiar love between women into the causes of producing an Indian nation that is both secular and feminist. The theme of narrativisation that are implicit in the previous two sections is explicitly focalised in this section, as Kapur’s protagonist’s coming of age as an artist also coincides with her development of a personal theory of her own oppression as a woman by structures of family, marriage, child-rearing and domesticity. Alongside of her lesbianism, Kapur’s protagonist achieves a measure of self-worth through her discovery of the artist in herself, but this process is mediated by a journey in search of community and belonging missing within prescribed, normative heterosexual structures. Kapur’s novel, like all the others we have seen so far in this thesis consciously or unconsciously
makes use of and makes available the counterplotting of the male–male–female triangle of heterosexual fiction by replacing it with a female–female–male triangle where the primary erotic, psychic and even genital connections are made between women. That the complete realisation of an autonomous female subjectivity is made possible by the removal of the male love interest from the triangle is noteworthy—taking off from Luce Irigaray and Gayle Rubin, we might say that the traffic of goods in the “lesbian” novel occurs not between men, but between women; female–female eros subverts and re-defines the conventional erotic geometry of heterosexuality.

A Portrait of the Lesbian as Sister

One very prominent theme in lesbian writing all over the world that contemporary lesbian Indian writing also shares is that of love between sisters. The eroticisation of the mother–daughter bond is not frequently seen, except in a couple of instances, where the protagonists are almost a generation younger than the women they fall in love with. One such instance is that of Anamika in Abha Dawesar’s Babyji falling in love with “India.” Another instance is Roma Bansal’s One Afternoon, where a college student, Ria, falls in love with her English teacher, Radha. Obviously older than the “heroine,” this teacher’s sexiness, articulateness and of course attraction towards her student enables the latter to come away from her relationship both academically and personally enriched. The heroine makes a sacrifice of her own personal happiness to that of her lover’s by reuniting her with the husband from whom she had unhappily separated a few years ago, even as she herself walks into the waiting arms of her male friend Manav, who both knows about her love for her teacher, and is himself in love with her all the same. The teacher–student bond is an eroticisation and amplification of the possibilities inherent in the mother–daughter bond in that the older person cares for and nourishes the younger one much like a mother would. Further, the role of the teacher as a mentor also permits the younger protagonist’s entry into a new, sometimes wonderful, sometimes threatening world. In Bansal’s picture perfect Ahmedabad, though, Ria Rathore only has to strut around like Veronica in Archies’ Comics: nothing seems to be lacking in her world. In fact, the pretext for the book seems to be that Ria’s banal existence must somehow be enlivened, and a lesbian episode seems perfectly in order to add colour to Ria’s supposed “feminism.” Thriving in stereotypes that do not bear much examination, the novel is marketed by its publisher, Rupa, as a light read; immediately upon reading it one understands why it came in a sealed cellophane wrap: dip into it on any page, and the rest of the predictable book scarcely bears reading. Bansal’s consideration of character and psychology is trite, and points of view are only sketchily and inconclusively depicted most times,
with the result that we have only a uni-dimensional picture of what Ria really is about, and we cannot understand why Radha falls in love with Ria except that it might be lust, though the book goes out of its way to assure us instead that Radha is also in the throes of a very high-minded passion. Some tourist flavours are thrown in: Radha Chakravarty, being Bengali is the “other” in India’s western regions, while Ria Rathore as the “proud Rajput” is another popular staple from Bollywood films. While the premise – that of a college girl falling in love with her teacher, and things falling apart as a matter of course when the student goes onward to other educational shores – is indeed an attractive one, Bansal is ill-equipped to do much with it. Indian English writing still awaits a serious representation of the lesbian equivalent of “eros-eromenos,” to borrow Ruth Vanita’s accurate identification in *Sappho and the Virgin Mary* of the intra-female teacher–student pair as also being a continuation of the Greek trope of cross-generational love between men.

The absence of such depictions of love in contemporary Indian English writing about or by lesbians might be put down to the traditional conception of proper relationships as being among peers rather than across generations: most Indians do tend to have friendships within a tightly defined same-age cohort rather than across age groups. But at the same time, since most traditional joint Indian families had people of different ages living under the same roof, children were liable to fix their affections upon a particularly adorable aunt, uncle or grandparent. That this trope is still unexplored shows how much genuine Indian material still remains unexplored due to the limitations in the lived experience of many Indian English writers: without being overly critical, one might say that this class is usually drawn from an English-educated population whose contacts with earlier traditional familial arrangements have broken due to educational or professional preoccupations, and who thus tend to write about matters closer to their own experience. Bansal’s *One Afternoon* is an instance of unpretentious popular fiction signalling for all it is worth at a theme that can be mined by writers of more competence. But till this lack is fulfilled, we must focus on a number of books that deal with the more prominent theme of love between sisters – biological or affectional (adoptive if one translates the Hindi term “moohboli behen” literally, “sister by my word”).

In this section, I will consider three writers’ treatment of a range of sisterly bonds that surprisingly, or perhaps it is not so surprising after all, further a fulfilling, utopic vision of sisterhood, albeit mostly personal, rarely political in application. Chitra Divakaruni Bannerjee’s two books, *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire*, Uma Parameswaran’s “What Was Always
Hers" from her story collection of the same name, and Kamala Das' "The Sandal Trees," again from the eponymously-titled collection of short stories constitute our major texts in this section, to be supplemented by sections from Mary Anne Mohanraj's *Bodies in Motion*. In all these books, the theme of sisterly eros also entangles other familial relationships, especially the relationships that the women have with their husbands. The family in all these books is threatened, redefined and sometimes done away with when intra-female eros, in the form of (un)familiar love between sisters, refuses to yield the space of the home to normative exclusively heterosexual definitions of family.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's fiction has mostly dealt with Indian-origin female central characters in a strange world – the USA – where they come to selfhood largely within a romantic heterosexual narrative. Two exceptions to this heterosexualised diegesis are her novels *Sister of My Heart* and its companion piece and sequel, *The Vine of Desire*, which tell the story of Anju and Sudha. To my mind, these novels are telling a very (un)familiar tale in the nature of their focus on female bonding. Where, normatively, much diasporic fiction has depicted the coming-of-age within the diaspora of the *individual* female protagonist, who develops an interiority and selfhood even as she outgrows many relationships, particularly with significant men – fathers, husbands, boyfriends – these two novels represent what I shall show to be an (un)familiar selving, where Anju and Sudha retain, after travails of course, their sense of sisterhood that dates back to when they were born. Anju's and Sudha's uneasy “male” interims do lead to loss of understanding and love between them, but the revival of their togetherness evaluates sisterhood, friendship and companionate togetherness as more valuable than token heteronormative marital affiliations.

Divakaruni takes recourse to a literal form of the fantastic when she creates a domestic myth that will lead to Anju's and Sudha's being raised exclusively by women. The novels are narrated in first person by different characters, Anju and Sudha exclusively in the first novel, and while in the second, speaking sections are made available to Sunil, Anju's husband, who is provided his own monologues, while dialogues with one of Sudha's admirers in the USA, the letters the families write to one another between India and the USA, and Anju's academic efforts in the course of creative writing paper, which help her deal with many unspoken lacunae in her life find their way into the novel's narration. The first part of the first novel opens in Calcutta, with Sudha's musings on her life serving to locate the Chatterjee household, where she and her mother Nalini had long ago been given shelter by Anju's kind father. Retrospectively, we are able to piece together the family history, located partly within British India a few years before
Independence, though Divakaruni's chronology is often inaccurate, or often skewed unintentionally rather than creatively. Anju's mother Gouri Ma runs the bookshop her husband leaves behind when he goes missing; as the karta of the family, Gouri Ma finds herself hampered by a number of practices she cannot provide alternatives for. Chief among the symbols of these traditions that protect and at the same time wear the user out is the grand mansion in which all these characters live, whose upkeep is expensive, but necessary as it is the women's only link to the Chatterjee lineage that Gouri has married into. Nalini is the wife of the man who enters this household, before the girls are born to their respective mothers, claiming to be a long-lost Chatterjee scion fallen on hard times. Before long, maddened by the dishonour of living off lies, and spurred on by his nagging wife, Gopal comes home with reports of rubies of great price to be found in some secret cave in Bengal's coastal tide-lands; if a secret expedition is financed, Gopal will be able finally to repay Bijoy. Bijoy agrees to go with him, though both their wives are pregnant because, for him, "the only son of the Chatterjees, trapped since birth in the cage of propriety, it was the one chance at a life of adventure. At a life which had seemed to him until now as remote and impossible" (SH 35).

Mortgaging all his properties to fund the expedition, Bijoy sets off with Gopal even though at the very last moment he comes to know that Gopal is not really his cousin; however, his great love for Gopal does not let him dash his beloved friend's hopes of an independence finally, by way of these coveted rubies. The two leave for their unknown destination despite Gouri's misgivings, Nalini having remained silent throughout as she hopes fervidly that this scheme will make good finally on Gopal's tall-tales of wealth that had tempted her to marry this impecunious man in the first place. Gopal and Bijoy never return, and Bijoy's wife runs things thereafter, having promised him to bring up his child "as befits a descendant of the Chatterjees" (SH 37). Never defaulting on the obligations her husband had undertaken though she too suspects the authenticity of Gopal's stories of wealth, Gouri provides for an expensive education for both girls, bringing them both up as befits the "illustrious Chatterjees." In parallel to the girls' stories of their own lives runs Gopal's story: having narrowly escaped death at the hands of the person who takes them on the ill-fated expedition, but proclaimed dead in the newspapers along with Bijoy due to circumstances, Gopal has to return to the household incognito. This he does as Singhji, the driver who is particularly affectionate to Sudha; it is not revealed to her till the end of the first novel that he is her biological father and innocent of the crime of having murdered Bijoy, which his daughter mistakenly suspects her father of having committed. The result is that his anonymous gifts of money, meant to ease her guilt at being an impediment to Anju's
prospects, go to the poor of Calcutta, to whom Sudha gives charity thinking the money to have been tainted by Gopal's murder of Bijoy. The fantastic story of the rubies in the cave, however, is also proven to be true: a ruby is indeed retrieved on the person of one of the dead bodies recovered from the waters where the men are killed. But this is merely the successful completion of a deus ex machina plot which serves two functions: placing the girls in an entirely female household, and two, serving to reify India — specifically Bengal — for an intended primary audience of westerners, as a place of great mystery and exotic adventures that lock one set of women so deep within tradition that they cannot escape it to fashion new lives till they are firmly settled within the same west where Divakaruni writes.

It is also important that the girls' bond with one another is also located within this atmosphere of mystery: while The Vine of Desire is more circumspect, indeed forgetful of the girls' spiritual togetherness because of its own plot's requirements, Sister of My Heart provides enough background for their love. The two girls are born on the same day, a redoubt perhaps to time-worn Bollywood plot formulae for companionship that exceeds human boundaries. Nalini's is a difficult labour that does not end till the newborn Anju is laid on her belly: immediately Sudha responds from inside Nalini's womb, and emerges finally into the world. The girls feel they are twins, because as Sudha says, "she called me out into the world" (SH 18), but all outsiders feel so much attachment between two girls is dangerous. While Divakaruni never does suggest as sexual component, the depth of their bond is made evident by such statements; a component of erotic admiration is also evident from Anju's appreciation of Sudha's near-fantastic beauty. Relieved that Sudha's admirers cannot see her "dressed only in her petticoat, her long hair spilling like black water over her bare breasts," admiring the rain (SH 92), Anju reveals her desire for Sudha in not wanting this beauty for herself. In fact, moving away from heterosexual assumptions about same-sex jealousy, the two girls are at complete peace with their special gifts: Sudha loves Anju's intelligence and wants only the best for her, while Anju is proud of Sudha's beauty more than Sudha herself is. Now, in late adolescence, Anju's and Sudha's attachment to one another is legendary, a source of jealousy to all outsiders: "What people hate is how happy Sudha and I are when we're together... [at] how we don't need anyone else" (SH 13). Divakaruni nowhere indicates that this togetherness at all has a sexual component, but all the same, their attachment is all-consuming: "we found everything we needed in each other. As Pishi says, 'Why go to the lake to fetch water when you have a well in your own house already'" (SH 15). But when Sudha finds out from Pishi the real story of her presence in the Chatterjee household, her faith in this sisterhood is shattered: "I, Sudha, am nothing to Anju. Not twin, not sister, not cousin. Nor
anyone except the daughter of the man who, with his foolish dreams, led her father to his death’ (SH 43). While Sudha’s heart is heavy with this knowledge, her mother, ignorant that her daughter is aware of the truth, plays at being high-handed, accusing Anju of corrupting her daughter when the girls are caught in the theatre watching a movie in secret. Because Sudha, who is extremely beautiful, had also attracted an admirer, Ashok, Nalini decides that in order to keep Sudha chaste, she must be married off immediately though not eighteen yet. Anju, accused by Nalini of corrupting Sudha, consoles the sister of her heart thus: “And no matter what happens, it will happen to both of us together, I promise” (SH 74). The rest of the story, across both novels, follows the girls’ separation by their fathers’ histories, and their final reunion across failed marriages and miscarried babies.

A key homoerotic moment occurs when the girls are discussing Sudha’s secret affair with Ashok: explaining why she is willing to elope with Ashok on such short acquaintance, Sudha explains that Ashok is the first to reveal to her the secret of her beauty. Describing herself as “a princess ... who lived in an underwater palace filled with snakes ... [that] were beautiful – green and yellow and gold – and gentle,” and that sported with her and took care of her, Sudha sees Ashok as the prince who is to carry her out of “that dim green underwater light, those cool palace walls built of coral and sea-stone” (SH 93), into the world of light where she can finally perceive her beauty. Awakening to this “magical universe of men – diamond light on sleek mango leaves, the kokils crying to their mates from the coconut trees,” this princess finds “she would never be satisfied with the wordless songs of her serpent companions again” (SH 94). Grateful to the prince for having “rescued her from sameness, too much safety,” Sudha’s “inward-gazing smile” reveals to Anju that she is now indeed forgotten. Same-sex love and companionship are, as Sudha’s newly-awakened sexual desires see it, too homogenous to satisfy.

But Divakaruni has Sudha long for this very safety through the remainder of the novels: after deciding not to elope with Ashok for fear that her escape will jeopardise Anju’s chances of marrying Sunil, whom Anju has set her heart on, Sudha agrees to marry Ramesh. Just before the weddings, Sudha has “a startling thought. If only Anju and I, like the wives of the heroes in the old tales, could marry the same man, out Arjun, our Krishna, who would love and treasure us both, and keep us both together” (SH 123), a desire that the novel acts on albeit in a convoluted way. Refusing the stereotype that co-wives will always be competitors, this utterance, which Sudha herself disavows moments later as “a ridiculous wish, maybe even immoral,” shapes the structure of the novel. Meanwhile, Anju herself having “traded in Virginia Woolf for Elizabeth
Barrett Browning,' is now "more love-struck than Sudha ever was" (SH 140), Divakaruni's reference to Woolf calling attention to the many homoerotic possibilities the latter's novels offer serving as shorthand for Anju's movement from lesbian love to heterosexual bliss.

Heterosexual desire predictably disrupts the girls' feelings for one another, gradually making their spiritual intimacy unintelligible to one another. At the wedding itself, at the auspicious moment when Anju's eyes "are supposed to meet Sunil's ... instead I crane my neck to look for Sudha" (SH 157), making the women around say, "Here is her husband, right in front of her, and she is dreaming about someone else" (SH 158). These portents are unmistakeable, and Anju's hope that Sunil will sympathise with her feelings for Sudha are ironically realised when she finds out that Sunil too had fallen in love with Sudha when he first saw her. Anju requests Sunil to wait a few moments in the middle of the ceremony so she can watch Sudha's wedding rites being carried out, and unbeknownst to one another, both relish her beauty, enjoying it fully till suddenly Anju sees something amiss: "So deeply in love myself, I recognise exactly what I'm seeing" in Sunil's face as she watches him watching Sudha (SH 159). Jealousy removes Anju from her trust and love of Sudha, and these marriages take one girl to Bardhaman and the other to the USA, keeping them separate for five years, in which Sudha realises her mother-in-law fiendishly wants her to abort all female-children, and Anju realises that she and Sunil "have to reach across [Sudha's] phantom body to touch each other" (SH 200). Anju has a miscarriage as a result of working a job alongside of the postgraduate education she is acquiring in the US, which she proudly refuses to let Sunil fund. Feeling like a ghost separate from her natal family, Anju's despair at her husband's inability to love her and Sudha's despair at her husband's inability to stand up to his dominating mother carefully locate heterosexual marriage as a neverland. Sudha feels demeaned by her mother-in-law's insistence that she roll on temple courtyards to have a child, but nevertheless must go through with it even as Anju feels constrained at not being able to be with her dying mother. Refusing to have an abortion so her well-off in-laws do not face the social degradation of having a first-born female child, Sudha runs away from marital home.

Overcoming her mother's resistance with the help of Gouri and Pishi, Sudha's arrival changes the Chatterjee lifestyle. Finally selling off the old house, the women move to a new flat in the city, where Sudha revives her dreams about having a career designing clothes even as Anju plots and schemes to have Sudha by her side when she expects to give birth to her own baby, not thinking, in her eagerness, of how this will jeopardise her already difficult relationship with Sunil. Sudha in her turn is almost willing to go to America because the anonymity of the land of
plenty will shield her from the shame of a broken marriage, compounded now by her refusal, a second time, of her old admirer Ashok this time because he wanted her to give her child up and marry him. Anju’s miscarriage, however, makes her going imperative: the suicidal Anju is literally brought back to life by Sudha’s voice on the phone after months of depression. The “queen of swords” story that Sudha tells Anju in order to rouse her, literally, from a near comatose depressive bout is the story of a queen who is in grave difficulties and is homeless while pregnant; Anju completes the tale saying the queen had a twin sister who both gives her a home and resolves her troubles. However, Anju’s troubles will begin through this act of helping “the person [she] love[s] the most in the world” at the expense of the one she is supposed to speak of in this fashion. At the end of the novel, she arrives in America with her baby, Dayita. Sunil is edged out of the narrative by the two women forming a couple with Dayita at the centre,

If a passer-by who had the eyes to notice such things looked at us, she would see that we’ve formed a tableau, two women, their arms intertwined like lotus stalks, smiling down at the baby between them. Two women who have travelled the vale of sorrow and the baby who will save them, who has saved them already. Madonnas with child. (SH 340)

Divakaruni uncannily presents us with the Marian model of two mothers with child, where Anju is untroubled even by what she knows to be Sunil’s now fully awakened love for Sudha. In the “hesitant, holy light” of a beclouded evening, the baby, Dayita will not save Sunil’s and Anju’s already wrecked marriage, but rather, following the underlying logic of Sister of My Heart, restore Anju and Sudha to one another though only after Sunil and Sudha have had sex once, a betrayal that permits Sunil and Anju to finally leave one another. The Vine of Desire enables both women to establish a financial independence that years of tradition in India have prevented them from earning: Sudha becomes a sick-nurse to an old Indian man who lives half-heartedly in his wealthy son’s mansion, while Anju gets on the dean’s list in her college despite the meltdown of an excruciating divorce from Sunil.

The Vine of Desire, albeit timidly, challenges a number of stereotypes even as it writes in others. In one instance, Anju, having discovered Sudha’s/Sunil’s infidelity, has a conversation with him about it. Sunil presents a reading of Takeega in response: aligning himself as the man who seeks his love and wants her despite knowing her to be far from pure, Sunil’s romantic recuperation of his own desire for Sudha altogether removes Anju from the narrative of his life, an erasure she refuses to take. Smashing all the breakables in her house, intending to walk on
them, Anju's reprisal of a most famous moment in Bollywood cinema makes the masochism of this scene signify here not as a signifier of true love and willingness to walk over all obstacles including shards of glass, but as a signifier of closure. In order to leave her marriage, Anju must walk on glass, which she does. In an ironic comment on the nature of urban American living, the resident of the flat below Anju's objects to the noise, but once quiet is restored, is absolutely unaware that the woman above him has tried to walk on the shards. Bleeding and about to lose consciousness, Anju's thoughts of suicide are replaced by her desire to live: calling a relative stranger, a woman from her writing-group, on the phone to help her, Anju is indeed able to walk over the threshold of marriage. She re-enters the narrative mended and well, but in her reprise of Pakeezah, Divakaruni turns the libidinal economy of the courtesan story on its head. While Pakeezah's feet bleed for the loss, yet again, of the chance of heterosexual companionship because she is a courtesan, Anju's slow walk on the broken fragments of crockery and glassware is not the pain of true love that it is in Pakeezah, but closer to the birth pangs she does not feel for her dead son, Prem. Being literally reborn thus, Anju earns her freedom, learning, literally, to fly. At an earlier outing Sunil, Sudha, Anju and Dayita went on, the women had seen a hang-glider fly above the bay; Anju is enthralled, and Sudha sharing her enthusiasm, the recalcitrant Sunil helps them seek out the hang-gliders' base. The woman-instructor offers lessons, but Sunil "suspicious of unrequired adventures," officiously hustles the women away, thinking the woman — and her woman lover — as "Americans in the worst possible way," that is, as unspokenly lesbian, a connection that occurs to Sudha only after they have left the scene (VD 44). Returning at the end of the novel to the steep hillside where the fliers take off, Sudha is afraid that Anju is about to kill them both "going off the hillside together" (VD 368), but Anju has instead brought her to show her she can fly. In a meeting that truly wipes out the past, Anju flies over the same lake in her hang-glider, and upon touch-down, runs into Sudha's waiting arms. Without the man and without the child, Anju and Sudha finish the novel as the true pair whose companionableness is resistant to the pervasive unrest that heterosexual coupling has introduced between them. The novel finishes with different homecomings listed on the same page: Anju's to Sudha, Sudha's old patient thinking of going home to Darjeeling with Sudha and her daughter, and Anju's unborn child Prem, whose sonograph Anju releases to the winds, frees his mother to love her own sister again. Though Divakaruni does not place an overt lesbian subjectivity up for our consumption, Anju's and Sudha's uncannily strong love for one another is a viable intra-female analogue for the many Hindi-film hero — hero pairs Indian viewers have been used to seeing. The heroine—heroine pairing, however, is that rarity that Divakaruni writes into a pair of novels that employ a number of mind-numbing clichés about Indians and America.
Nevertheless, in locating the individual women's strength to look for economic and sexual independence within their sister–sister bond, Divakaruni is also making queering the script of diaspora as a place for autonomous femininity. With her trans-national story of _eros_ within the sisterly bond, Divakaruni writes a continuum between female homosociality and female homoeroticism: Anju and Sudha are not lovers, but their relationship is the more valuable to them than marriages they work hard at. In untying femininity from heteronormative marriage and motherhood, Divakaruni produces an (un)familiar picture of selfhood as intersubjectively shared sisterly identity, rather than selfhood as self-contained interiority or isolation.

This sisterhood of common dreams and shared work is given corporeal erotic shape in Uma Parameswaran's "What Was Always Hers," the first story in Uma Parameswaran's collection of five stories that variously define and place diasporic Indians in Canada as claimants of Canadian citizenship in all senses of the world. In a collection of the same name, this story stands apart from the rest of the volume in that it is the only one that does not feature the character of Maru, an Indian woman, now Canadian citizen, in her fifties, trying to be a writer and possessed of great good-humour, lively wit and much understanding. The title story stands as a unit on its own in its exploration of female bonding within, through and in spite of marriage while the other stories are about negotiations and comic tribulations within mostly equable heterosexual marriages. Parameswaran's writing places her characters within the Canadian milieu with a precision that Divakaruni often gives up for cliché exoticism: while Divakaruni's protagonists are also women whose economic autonomy is minimal if not non-existent when they migrate to America, their crises are located within the frame of reference of private heterosexually-generated family troubles. "What Was Always Hers" claims a larger set of affiliations for (un)familiar love between women, placing its protagonist Veenu within a historically-aware narrative of diaspora: the Indian diasporic community in Canada's fruit belt that Veenu's husband organises is a very different one from the socially-isolated, much more assimilationist model signalled by Sunil, Anju's up-and-coming computer scientist husband. In the Divakaruni novels above, Sunil is an American worker who is incidentally also Indian. Similarly, Sudha's and Anju's sarees are always flamboyant for American passers-by, as is Sudha's beauty; the Indian-ness of these characters in America figures self-consciously only when, for example, Anju has to explain or gloss a number of "Indian" texts like Gurinder Chadha's _Bhaji on the Beach_ for her non-Indian classmates. But in depicting just the three of them along with a few other token Indians, Divakaruni clearly does not want Indianness problematised in these two novels, preferring instead to focus entirely on the dissolution in the USA of Anju's marriage,
with the tender (un)familiarity of Anju’s and Sudha’s attachment to one another, with its germ in India, as the catalyst for this breakdown. Anju’s and Sudha’s belonging in America is always described in a peripheral way, though difficulties with food and phone-calls home are mentioned; yet, the reader is not given a sense of the USA any more than about India: these backdrops may just as well have been anywhere else. “What Was Always Hers” on the other hand studies in a beautifully nuanced way its protagonist Veeru’s many roles within Canada and India, as wife, mother and individual within the larger societies that she slowly ends up gaining stakes in. Individual and communal identities, in this long short-story, are carefully contextualised within the cultural geographies we find the characters in so that (un)familiar female desire can explore a network of affiliations that make it all the more threatening than a private affair of the heart as it becomes in the Divakaruni texts considered above, notwithstanding that Divakaruni’s protagonists are also enabled to re-enter the diaspora as free labour on their own, without a paternal, masculine hand to steady them: in fact, maleness is presented, with few exceptions, as corrosive, violent and deceitful, as evidenced in the cases of Sunil, his father; others like Ashok appear empowering but are not, while still others like Lalit might be appealing as human beings, but are still not quite the right companions for protagonists insistent on singleness.

Parameswaran’s short story opens with Veeru’s waiting in bed for her husband to speak to her. Within the first paragraph, Veeru’s disinclination “for any intimacy” with her husband becomes evident, and within the first page, the reason for it: Niranjan’s insistence on Veeru’s having an abortion instead of a third child has complicated what has been the otherwise uneventfully happy marital bond, at least for Veeru, who however now suddenly finds her sense of the past changed for good. Veeru has been a dutiful Indian daughter-in-law and wife, having come to Canada, yet a village-girl at heart, eight years ago to join her husband, student-agitator and labour-organiser Niranjan years after he himself has settled into this new, very fertile and very large country where he had first come to do his PhD. She is the mother of two boys, but having always desired a girl child, she is dismayed to find that her excitement about this unexpected third pregnancy was not shared by Niranjan. The reason slowly emerges, retrospectively: Niranjan has been having an affair all through their almost two-decades-old marriage with Jitin, his fellow labour-organiser and second-in-command of the organisation he establishes in Canada. The rest of the story follows Veeru’s emergence from the marriage into an independent and self-reliant woman, the sting in the tail coming at the end, overturning that commonplace about wives and girlfriends being competitors for a man’s attention.
Jitin, the so-called contender for Niranjan’s affections, is for Veeru “Jitin Deedi” because “Deedi, you are so much wiser than I am” (WAH 19), even though, as Jitin tells her when they first meet and Veeru instantaneously recruits the reluctant Jitin as her mentor, “in this country everyone calls everyone else by just their first name” (WAH 19). Veeru, then fresh off the boat, feels grateful: “Deedi, I am so glad you are here to teach me everything,” even though among the first things that Jitin ironically coaches Veeru in is how a painless suicide can be engineered by carelessness with the gas oven. It later emerges that Jitin and Niranjan have already been drawn to one another when they first meet in Canada; Niranjan, already married, was now also the father of three-year old Vikram, and his arranging for Veeru to spend a month with him in Canada was only, he later reveals, a failed effort to prise himself away from Jitin:

That is why I had you come over that summer, to break the endless cycle of frustration, of trying to break off and not being able to, and not being able to talk about it though each knew there could be no other. (No other? No other? What was I then? Sleeping with you every night for four months) And then after you left ...” he paused. (Oh my god, that was seven years ago, for seven years ...)(WAH 24)

Veeru’s thoughts, in the parentheses with no closing punctuations, inserted in Niranjan’s self-righteous and insensitive presentation of his case for “freedom” from his marriage of eight years with Veeru, refuse to cognise Niranjan’s bracketing of her as the “other” who is less than nothing in what he sees as his primary relationship with Jitin. Niranjan asks for “freedom” also because “it isn’t fair to her (to her, she thought, to her, what am I?)... she has a right to her child, and to all that has been always hers...” (WAH 24). Niranjan’s desire to give Jitin a child when Niranjan had decided only six months ago to terminate what would have been Veeru’s third child with him is rightly identified by Veeru as an instance of hypocrisy and double-standards: “Murderer, murderer” is the appellation that comes to her mind along with “a vicious anger [that] tore at her vitals” (WAH 24) at the person who was responsible for the “abortion of my beautiful baby at your hands” (WAH 25), Veeru’s response to Jitin when she next sees her after having found out about the affair is striking in its lack of anger: “Veeru left quietly, unable to bear the sight of the woman who seemed to have grown lovelier than ever before, and so far away, so far away” (WAH 28). Jitin, who has been working alongside Niranjan in the labour-movement all along is of course a fixture at every Party-organised event, is someone Veeru herself had worked with all these years when her only desire had been to “make herself his real helpmeet, his equal so that he could achieve his fullest potential, for she knew that he was made
for greatness" (WAH 11). From a peasant village girl a decade ago, Veerbala had become “set about educating herself,” pouring heart and soul into becoming an indispensable part of the movement Niranjan spearheaded, into finally making “’Veeru Deedi’ ... a household word in many an Indian cabin and home in the fruit belt” (WAH 22). A decade ago, when Niranjan first meets Veeru to see if he can marry her, she likens his work as an organiser of farm labourers in the lumber mills and fruit orchards of British Columbia to that of Acharya Vinoba Bhave in India. Niranjan is taken aback by the young Veeru’s awareness of Bhave three decades after Indian Independence, and decides that she is the wife he must marry, in preference to all the “Girls who spoke English with a good Convent accent, girls who knew how to cook and sew, studying as they were towards a Home Science degree, recently named Home Economics” (WAH 12) whom his family had thought he would want to marry, given his own wish to pursue higher education abroad. Veeru, Niranjan decides when she welcomes his “vow of service to the community” was “a gem too precious to ignore,” and he marries her (WAH 14). Learning English and Punjabi at his home in New Delhi after they marry so she can be of use to him in this work, Veeru’s desires are “to grow so she could walk hand in hand with this giant mind who was her husband” (WAH 11). But the giant mind is revealed to be that of a petty murderer, after all, when Veeru sees him unfeelingly plan her abortion, go about his routine, and finally demand a divorce so that he can be “fair” to Jitin who wants to marry him. Veeru’s “wild strangled stream of hatred that she alone could hear” (WAH 25) is not directed towards Jitin even in the painful weeks when she mulls on the matter; instead, Veeru’s desire is to confide in the same Jitin, wanting to embrace her when she sees how “tired, lonely, utterly beautiful” Jitin herself looks through this period (WAH 29).

Even as Veeru tries to come to terms with Niranjan’s surprising, life-changing act of betrayal, her real perplexity is about how to deal with the loss of Jitin she has suffered through Niranjan’s infidelity:

Deedi, deedi. They were sisters. Could they not share one more thing? And be friends, sisters? No. Because they had shared it already, unbeknownst to Veeru. That was why they could not be friends. The hypocrisy of it all. But what could Jitin have done? Propose a ménage a trois? And how would Veeru have responded? How else could she respond now other than the way she was? Had she been the village girl she was when she first landed here, would things have been different? (WAH 30)
As this meditation reveals, Veeru's real sense of betrayal comes in the loss of Jitin's friendship: sharing a husband seems a welcome relief, indeed, to the idea of losing Jitin's love. Wanting "just rest her head against Jitin's bosom and make time stand still" (WAH 31), Veeru's musings reveal that she values friendship over marital reciprocity, her female friend and also her husband's lover over her (male) husband. The image of Jitin is desirable and inviting in a desexualised maternal and sisterly form until this point, with Veeru's earlier memories of life long before her coming to Canada confirming the story's suggestions that in spirit, Veeru and Jitin have been united a long way before they ever met one another:

Jitin was gone, vanished like the rainbow that arced across the horizon of her childhood. Always pining for lost worlds, pining in those early years for her aunts' arms, for the placid dewlaps of Amrita, Devika, Latika ... cows she had named and fed and milked in those days which had vanished like the rainbows that arced across childhood horizons. (WAH 30)

Veeru's memories of being nurtured and of nurturing animals in her turn suggest her kinship with Jitin also goes deeper than theirs with Niranjan, which suddenly, after the abortion he masterminds, seems directed more to the fulfilment of his need to lead than of any other higher-minded objective. Jitin's being gone like Veeru's childhood and its memories of colour and caring suggests that her love for Jitin is, at this point in Veeru's life, something that she imagines is already past, to be duly enshrined in nostalgia: "Rage, jealousy and hatred washed over her again. But they could not wash away the ache of separation. Deedi, deedi" (WAH 31) Veeru goes on thinking as she establishes a new set of rituals for life.

Two years after the divorce Niranjan dies suddenly in a car crash; by now, Veeru has successfully reinvented herself as a real estate businesswoman, a far cry from the Party-worker and labour-rights organiser she was when she was married to Niranjan. The Party, to which she had devoted all her time since arriving in Canada, does not remember her personally nor does her humble everyday work leave any legacy to be remembered, in contrast to the hagiographic attention bestowed on Niranjan in his lifetime and upon his death. Veeru's information about this event comes from her loving in-laws, all the way from India over phone lines crackling with static; sad that no one from the Party informed her till half a day later, Veeru can only think: "She had never been part of their world then? Was that it? Like a stone ingested by some willy-nilly act of misplaced idealism, housed for a time, cast out along with other products the body did not need, the party did not need" (WAH 40). Her sense of being unwanted, abjected to the
level of excreta, Veeru's sole thought is that "her sons, not his any more" will speak for her value, her worth in the world in a way in which her work, devoted to her erstwhile husband could not. Her son Vikram, now fifteen, is full of hatred for his father and Jitin for having broken up his mother's marriage, even though the divorce had been amicable, with ample visiting rights for the father. The power of familial love through Veeru's period of mourning for her sons' loss of their father, not hers for her ex-husband, is symbolised not by conjugal ties, but through the mutual love between her in-laws and herself: "She blocked away everything except their voices, bappaji, mataji, bappaji, mataji" (WAH 35), remembering gratefully their kindness and love to her even after the breakdown of her marriage to Niranjan. Her marital family - excluding Niranjan - stand by her even as heterosexual marriage reveals itself to have been a hollow sham built on almost a decade of deception, signalling once again Parameswaran's re-worlding of our assessments of normative kinship ties, especially "now, she had grown, grown out of her childhood view of life, her village views," in the modern world where only "shock, revulsion and hate" can serve as adequate responses for her betrayal by Niranjan (WAH 30).

Veeru's desire to be affectionate to her Deedi in her hour of need is similar to her need to be with her two years ago when the marriage breaks down, but where Veeru did not know what "she had to do," now, after Niranjan's death, survived by Jitin and a baby girl, both unprovided for, Veeru finally does know (WAH 52). In the interim between Veeru's finding out about Niranjan's death and the funeral, Veeru wants to comfort Jitin: "Jitin, Jitin, she thought longingly, remembering the comfort of her arms which she could not now return" (WAH 45) when Jitin needed ministering to. Where her son Vikram wants to hate Jitin, Veeru is able to convince him that blaming women comes naturally to many, especially the older generation, when it is often not the fault of the women; reminding Vikram never to hate a woman, Veeru is even able to sanction his temporary hatred of "daddy" perhaps knowing that Vikram would claim his inheritance from his father as a man himself, which he does. Her own inheritance, "what was always hers," was to be Jitin herself, as Veeru decides one afternoon, going to meet Jitin in the one-room apartment where Niranjan and Veeru themselves had first started life in Canada.

Now comes the turn the story has been setting up awhile, though disguised in the form of an asexual affection, which, however, now reveals itself to be also sexual, also bodily, besides being a desire to finally be together. For Veeru the years of marriage with Niranjan had been erased the day he sets up her abortion. Her separation from Jitin also starts from this point, as in
the depression thereafter, Veeru had lived in isolation from everyone: it turns out Jitin never did know that Niranjan had had Veeru abort a baby, revealing yet another crack in Niranjan's commitment to "service." Veeru's assessment of Niranjan as "murderer" reveals itself to be just one after all, given Niranjan's callous attitude to Veeru's reproductive and emotional rights, especially since these are Niranjan's sacrifice presumably on behalf of Jitin. Jitin's sorrow upon learning of the abortion is genuine, but Veeru is yet unable to talk about it, but on all other matters, the two women are united:

Then they clung to each other in a frenzy of need, hands, faces, mouths reaching out, the thirst of years seeking to be slaked. Jitin, Jitin, she moaned, and heard, love, love, my sweet love, and she did not know whether the voice she heard was real or in her head, his voice for surely the words were his or hers, but it didn't matter, at last at last they were together. (WAH 59)

Their love for one another revealed to be mutual and suffused with desire for one another's bodies as much as with desire for togetherness, Veeru and Jitin enter a conversation in short sentences that occupies the rest of the story: a good tenth of the story consists of dialogue in which it is impossible, after three or four exchanges of sentences, to be sure who the speaker is. Veeru and Jitin speak as one, it appears, in a story where such mutuality has been absent between them individually with Niranjan: Niranjan's interaction with Veeru through the story is in the form of memories of the past, or of negotiations for divorce in the present, while his life with Jitin happens off-stage, the author's third-person point-of-view focussing on Veeru's subjectivity all along. In contrast to the clipped nature of the exchanges with Niranjan all of which there are subtle or unsubtle inequalities of power between the man who fights for the rights of the subalterns – immigrant Indians in Canada – and the wife he subalternises in turn by enjoining upon her, in various ways to become his helpmeet, the conversation Jitin and Veeru has traces the arcs of development the two of them have shared beginning with childhoods in which neither knew the other existed. Veeru's and Jitin's memories of games played, dreams dreamt and plans made are different from the bundles of "plans, of which he had many and all very neatly tied and labelled" (WAH 13-14) that their love for Niranjan makes them carry out. In this epiphanic conversation that suggests a pouring of soul into soul, of making one out of two bodies and beings we find a coupling absent throughout the story despite Niranjan's relationships with them: the women's coitus with one another is both literal and metaphoric. Their coming together is the only act of sexual coupling in a long short-story that begins with
Niranjan's demands that Veeru abort the child they have conceived together; in contrast to that beginning is the end where the two women playfully nibble at one another's bodies as they lie together in the same couch that Niranjan bought the first time Veeru came to Canada. A full circle is attained when Niranjan is left out of this exchange: Veeru promises to help Jitin revive the Party, now become centrist in the hands of leaders with aspirations far from the Leftist political leanings that Niranjan, and Jitin, so firmly followed. Veeru and Jitin have doubts about whether they can be together, but realise they can, in this land of plenty. Jitin herself wants recognition as an individual with a sexual existence, though the puritanical Party “pretended I was a virgin” even when she and Niranjan openly start living together (WAH 63). Relinquishing her “goddess” status for her place in Veeru’s comforting arms, Jitin reveals her own desire all these years to have been “holding [Veeru] just so when I’ve felt the ground was sinking under me” (WAH 58). In the absence of Niranjan, removed so they can be together finally, Veeru and Jitin can raise the two boys and Jitin’s daughter Niranjana together in a country where Niranjan’s masculinity seems extraneous for carrying out life’s tasks. Veeru goes from being younger sister to lover and beloved even as Jitin is finally able to come to be recognised as an individual apart from Niranjan and the Party, which have so far masqueraded, unwittingly sometimes, as her entire, exhaustive identity this far.

“What Was Always Hers” locates same-sex love as love for one’s sister, one’s beloved likeness in whom one can delight and even share a husband with in contravention of the requirements of respectable heterosexual conjugality, a theme strikingly similar to Sudha’s fleetingly desired resolution to the problem of separation from Anju in the Divakaruni novels discussed above. Parameswaran’s long short-story also sees the economic coming of age of a woman protagonist whose sheltered existence did not require such autonomy earlier, though Parameswaran is able to avoid treating India – Veeru’s carefully detailed natal home – as a space of regressive tradition, focussing instead on the enabling aspects of these traditions that empower Veeru into becoming what Niranjan and Canada require of her. In unfamiliar lands, though, Veeru’s self-sustaining identity is not the husband she married in the familiar realms of home, but another kind of familiar, another woman whose protection, companionship and ability to provide and receive emotional nurture are to her a more compelling form of self-definition than is the presence of a husband she very much loves, even worships. In not having to worship Jitin – whose refusal of the “goddess” status conferred on her by the hordes Niranjan organised shows her unwillingness to be placed again on a pedestal by the admiring Veeru – Veeru is able to finally achieve a mutuality that was always missing in her relationship with her
dead spouse. Veeru's and Jitin's union at the end of the story suggests a template for diaspora different from the patriarchal model Niranjan's and his Leftist workers wittingly or unwittingly generate. In their intense lyricism and mutual contemplation of one another's beauty at the end of the story, Jitin and Veeru suggest aestheticism as not an alternative but as a necessary component of the utilitarian political organisation that Niranjan worked hard to build: unrefined by this mutually sustaining ethic, Niranjan's legacy has come to nought. Suggestively, it is the women who must create anew what he fails to create; their biological productivity — their children — is not the defining attribute that Parameswaran ends the story with, but their identification of their history as lying within one another, in "what was always hers," in what was familiar. Reproductive rights, marital, spousal rights and labour-rights within the diaspora — often masked in introspections of individual subjectivities by diasporic Indian authors — are all quests that may be affiliated with Veeru's and Jitin's quest for what was always theirs, as their joint participation in struggles for the resolution of various kinds of parity through the organised movement shows. Unlike Divakaruni, then, Parameswaran is able to establish female same-sex love as a potent tool in re-worlding the world, enabling a critique of heteronormativity and political rhetoric in her protagonists' search for "what was always hers," and therefore, only needed to be claimed.

But while Veeru and Jatin are able to develop voices with which to claim what they know they seek, albeit by way of the deus ex machina of Niranjan's death, Kamala Das' "The Sandal Trees" shows how the legacy of the (un)familiar may go unclaimed till too late if the environment is hostile. "The Sandal Trees" carries the transgressive and incestuous possibilities of sister-sister bonds further, explicitly sexualising the attachment two half-sisters have to one another in the first half of their lives together as sisters rather than at the tail end of their marital careers. Set partly in an ancestral Nair household in Kerala and partly in the modern city of Cochin a few decades after, "The Sandal Trees" provides one of the few, and therefore invaluable accounts of the lesbian as an older woman.

Kamala Das has been a remarkable fictional presence in the Malayalam short story, to say the very least. "The Sandal Trees" is the first, and one could argue, the most compelling story in the collection The Sandal Trees and Other Stories (the English version of Chandanamarangal, translated by V. C. Harris and C. K. Mohamed Ummer). The other stories of the collection engage once again with Das's most primary fictional material — the forest of the more normative man-woman relationships, their power relationships and filiations, negotiations and trade-offs.
“Sandal Trees” studies the wood that gives this forest its character, its distinctive shade and smell. Das in “The Sandal Trees” filters through the prism of her protagonist’s consciousness a set of disturbing realisations about the nature of love itself, complicated by class equations that are generated by the feudal ecology that the protagonist and the amour she tries to disclaim emerge from.

Sheela, who lives up to the decorum and piety that her name suggests, is the legitimate daughter of the Nair clan where Sheela’s and Kalyani’s story begins. Sheela’s monologic meditations yield the story of the present and the past, both hidden and in the open. “The Sandal Trees” at least initially casts Kalyani as the evil familiar in a literal sense, “an enemy who intensely hates me and all my relatives, dead and living” (TST 1), whose arrival from distant Australia on a vacation of a few weeks has wrecked many innocent lives, feels Sheela. Sheela’s husband offers a taxonomy dividing women into two categories: harmless, asexual mothers and furies who “can’t help destroying everything” (TST 25). Placing Kalyani in the latter category, Sheela’s husband tries to cheer up Sheela seeing how distraught she is at Kalyani’s departure but as awhile earlier, driving to the airport to see Kalyani off, Sheela cannot see the “Kalyanikutty who had turned into an avenging angel,” instead seeing through teary eyes “the old Kalyanikutty, my bosom friend who embraced me and dropped hot tears on my neck and shoulders ... A girl whose skin had the colour of sandalwood” (TST 1-2).

The thought of Kalyani takes Sheela into the past where she is literally the fortunate one, and Kalyani the miserable charity-child supported by Sheela’s family’s largesse: “the one who wore my old skirts and blouses and always accompanied me,” and whose poverty meant the family kept her at arm’s length literally, not giving her “the right to enter my bedroom or dining room” (TST 2). Kalyani’s socially prescribed role is “to follow you as your shadow, as a maid to look after you,” a familiar in more than one way, employed both as a menial and viewed as a false likeness, whose harsh tongue makes Sheela often accuse her of being an enemy rather than the beloved friend for whom Sheela fights with her family. The smell of sandalwood, intimately associated with Kalyani, is also the symbol for the silence that Sheela “cultivated” between herself and her husband over the years of their loveless marriage, a tree “giving ... much happiness” to her (TST 13) who finds her wifely duties as exhilarating as “eating leftovers, of eating leftovers over and over again” (TST 16). Silence permits her to “awaken” from the spiritual death she experiences everyday in the company of her husband – who in fact is for her a template for all men – but despite the beautiful silence the image of the sandal tree provides her,
“no relief was possible. I wandered in search of myself. At last, with drooping shoulders, I turned back and walked towards others” (TST 16) locked in the pain of never belonging to the woman who loves her and whom she loves too, unmistakably, in a fashion that is so primary as to remove all other considerations when the safety of this woman is endangered, as it is at one point during a botched abortion.

“The Sandal Trees,” like most of Das’s works, searches with chilling sangfroid “a marriage that lasts for years, greying and rotting” (12), a situation the protagonist Sheela notes, is, “for civilised people, ... certainly impossible to bear” (12). The husband, as usual, is much older than his wife – a twenty-one year gap between the spouses in this story – with his age serving to place them in different stages in the lifecycle prescribed by the Hindu shastras, which, despite not being explicitly mentioned, serve as spiritual and psychic signposts with which to create a workable cartography for life. But in “The Sandal Trees,” the husband’s repulsiveness stands in contrast not to the clean virility of a younger male, but to the elegance of a woman of the same age as Sheela, Sheela’s childhood friend and old lover, Kalyani. Attention to only the superficial devices of the plot would suggest that Kalyani is ironically named – Kalyani is a most inauspicious character indeed, managing in the space of a twenty-two-day vacation in Cochin to push the current wife of her ex-husband into attempting suicide upon finding that Kalyani had not only reunited sexually and emotionally with her husband of three decades ago, but was also planning to take the latter’s daughter to Australia with her. The daughter emerges into open rebellion against her diabetic, always-ill mother, with the mother also claiming that there was something unnatural in the interest Kalyani took in the young girl. Kalyani’s presence also succeeds in arousing Sheela’s old husband into the wanting to commit adultery with her in his turn, though she spurns him – or so she tells Sheela.

The paradox, however, is that Kalyani’s inauspiciousness is itself a function of Sheela herself being an embodiment of good conduct, as her name suggests. Sheela, “born an aristocrat” (TST 11), cannot break away from the ostensibly natural-born ability of the aristocratic woman “to live with such control” (TST 11) even as their fathers beget children like Kalyani on their poorer feudal dependents. Sheela’s mother continues, perhaps in ignorance, perhaps in knowledge, Sheela’s father’s “good works,” sponsoring the education of Kalyani besides keeping an eye on the general welfare of her family. Kalyani is the more sharp-eyed and even when they are children together wonders why it is that she resembles Sheela though her
genitor, at least socially, is Shekharan Master and not Sheela’s father. Sheela, however, does not notice anything more than a well-brought-up girl should.

Kamala Das’s figuring of lesbian desire in this context of miscegenation can be usefully read in the light of the notion of the familiar that defamiliarises and makes strange — within the ecology of this story, with its bathing places where seductions happen, Kalyanikutty is a water sprite whose disappearance condemns Sheela to a barren existence with a husband who is very much like T. S. Eliot’s “Gerontion.” Kalyani’s body radiates a glorious aroma as a result of her “having swum and bathed in the pond for hours together, smelt and tasted of weeds and mosses, water lilies and medicinal herbs” (TST 26), striking in its healing connotations when observed against the malevolence radiated by the male body, with its genitalia described with surreal precision as “hang[ing] loose and look[ing] unsewn,” “the figure of a rotten bitter-gourd” incapable of nothing other than mechanical oscillations (TST 15). Where the barren old man of “Gerontion” is unstirred into fecundity even by mirrors infinitely replicating sexual fulfillment, Sheela’s husband refuses to give Sheela children on ideological grounds — in a world soon to be decimated by nuclear stockpiles, what price children? Kalyanikutty, on the other hand, wants Sheela’s children, impossible as that is, and almost dies of a botched abortion to keep her womb free of any (male) other’s children. Kalyanikutty is the perverse slippage in a feudal economy of desire where the female spouses only planted trees, while the males had the privilege of sowing wild oats in addition, but the fire in her belly is deliberately denied fuel by Sheela’s almost moribund adaptations to her environment. Sheela almost strategically empties her life of the element of water, with its life-sustaining fluid connotations marking itself as different from the rigidities Sheela is forced to adopt everyday in order to keep up the farce of marriage, taking herself farther and farther away from Kalyanikutty, only to find herself, at the end of the story, in “the darkness that slowly spread in the car” (TST 26), old and empty, her ears sharp to the sound of Kalyanikutty’s girlish laughter that seemed to rise from the dark waters of one of Cochin’s numerous canals.

In “The Old Playhouse,” Das defines the wife thus: “You called me wife,/ I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and/ To offer at the right moment the vitamins. Cowering/ Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and/ Became a dwarf.” At the end of “The Sandal Trees,” the opposite transformation takes place when Sheela finally realises the value of the familiar that is Kalyani: “Was it I, that woman with the glowing cheeks, hair clearly displaying its silver strands and the yet-to-be-effaced vermillion spot on the forehead? Never” (TST 26),
finding herself transformed into a young girl, in the reverse of the process that seems to be transforming her still ageing “very very old man” of a husband into a clown (TST 17). Trapped within heterosexual conjugality Sheela never did have a taste for, despite her best efforts to convince herself and Kalyani that it was what she sought, Sheela has become old enough to pass for Kalyani’s mother even as Kalyani, free now of two marriages, looks so young no one can believe she is fifty-two, the same age as Sheela. Age and heterosexuality seem inter-linked in a causal relationship: even Kalyani when married to Sudhakaran is subject to the vicissitudes of ageing, appearing “lean and haggard” in comparison to the “healthy and handsome” Sudhakaran. Kalyani’s haggard appearance has to do with an unwanted pregnancy, unwanted because it is Sheela’s children she wishes to have, not the children of “an ordinary man” like Sudhakaran (TST 7, emphasis added): it is Sudhakaran’s biology that makes him ordinary, not any personal attributes. Desiring only to love Sheela, to be with her and to give her pleasure, Kalyani’s commitment is courageous just as Sheela’s restraint is born of cowardice:

Still you chose for yourself the traditional path. The path to decadence ... And now you have no one to call your own. No one cares for you. Of course certain people need you — to amputate suppurated diabetic limbs or to do a caesarean and pull out a baby. (TST 21)

Kalyani’s characterisation of Sheela’s life as only instrumental to those in pain, and of no value or worth to the healthy and the living, least of all to herself is later ratified by Sheela when she finds Sudhakaran’s daughter’s questions about the naturalness or otherwise of Kalyani’s love for her “had fallen into my mind like a fishing hook in a lake” (TST 25). Unobtrusively reappearing at the end of the novel, this image of the self as a fish swimming in water, but flailing in air is completed when the smell of dried fish surfaces along the road Sheela and her husband are driving on homewards. The wind bears the smell of fish, but this is the smell finally of dead, dying fish, captured for sale and consumption; from the waters, Kalyani’s girlish voice rises yet again, a reminder of that Sheela has sacrificed herself in refusing to give and receive love from her sister, her likeness, her familiar, Kalyani. In between, Sheela’s husband compares Kalyani and himself, saying, “I was a mere drizzle arriving hesitantly, timidly, after a full storm” (TST 26): it is (un)familiar love that is presented throughout this story as the bread and the wine of life, while heterosexual love, for Sheela, is merely a transient drizzle, incapable of quenching her thirst and thus leaving her diseased, incapacitated and in the pain of being unloved when love could have been had for the asking.
"I haven't betrayed you, and you haven't betrayed me. We have not slept apart for a single night" (TST 17) says Sheela when her husband asks her if they could possibly enter a contest for "ideal couple." While these parameters might suffice at least superficially to characterise ideal conjugality, Sheela's overwhelming everyday nausea at the sight of a companion who has become "shameless" with old age, in contrast to the "increasing sense of shame" women past a certain age feel at when the "inelegances of their body start multiplying" (TST 14) makes very evident the nature of Sheela's preferences. Ascribing to all women a hatred of "such ugly scenes" as can be witnessed when husbands take off their underwear and pace about naked, Sheela's description of their room as "my room" calls attention to her husband's violation of her sense of space and self by the mere nature of his gender and its underlying exhibitionistic tendencies that mark it as different from the more dignified female body. In contrast to the gentle, refreshing odour of fresh linen, rain or sandalwood that marks Sheela's memories of Kalyani's body are Sheela's visions of heterosexual conjugality: 

To lie close to each other in the same bed and exchange the foul smell of sweat; to witness the excrement of your spouse who has forgotten to flush the toilet after use at sunrise; to feign sleep while slyly watching him masturbate, with his pretty fingers that seem to have been made for blessing others ... I don't want this much-praised _grihasthshram_. (TST 12–13)

In contrast to male selfishness in retaining pleasure for the male body is Kalyani's eagerness to give pleasure: "I could not forget the way she had caressed me, pressed her fingers hard into me and satisfied me with her lips, all with the intention of giving me pleasure" (TST 5), smelling fresh and like nature itself in contrast to the stale, man-made odours of decay and dissipation that emerge from her husband's mouth. Twenty-six years later, when Kalyanikutty returns from Australia to see Sheela, each memory of the past is revived, carefully revisited and once again restored to their respective static places in the mind by Sheela who is unwilling to disturb "that all too-familiar world of mine that comprised my house, the lovely objects on display there, my aged husbands, my patients" even though all she longs for is a positive answer to her heartbreaking question to herself: "there is no other place for me to live ... and no one else to love me, is there?" as she returns home after dropping Kalyani at the airport. In "The Sandal Trees," (un)familiar love plays out the dimensions of the lesbian lover as a mischievous familiar and at the level of same-sex love as a defamiliarising medium through which to see the distortions heteronormativity produces on its craven adherents.
Notes from the Underground

While Kalyani comes from an impoverished background, the avenues for higher education opened for her, paradoxically, by her illegitimate status place her in the same domain as Sheela, even though it is a matter of constant regret to Kalyani that the other privileges of high social status, such as good-breeding and refinement, were never hers by default. While Kalyani's sorrow at belonging, in her eyes to a lesser psychological caste in comparison to Sheela is real, Kalyani emerges as the woman who earns her autonomy, financial and emotional, while Sheela stifles herself under the burden of habit and precedent. Sheela's privilege is thus matched by Kalyani's industrious acquisition of similar, if not greater, privileges, re-emerging unscathed by age or suffering into Sheela's life in middle-age after twenty-six years in Australia. All the texts we have dealt with so far have been located in what can be safely called the privileged classes: middle-or upper-class representations of (un)familiar love do depict relative lack of autonomy their women members face in economic and physical terms, but at the same time, these texts also work to normalise, at least to some extent, the privileges that accrue from belonging to relatively affluent classes in society. While directly not having access to resources themselves, their membership in classes that sometimes have a monopoly on resources of various kinds means that the women inhabiting these texts may still be beneficiaries of their social group's relatively high class standing. In this section, the texts we consider locate (un)familiar desire within humble places, writing lesbian desire upon humble bodies. One narrative out of six in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* and selected stories Mary Anne Mohanraj's *Bodies in Motion* constitute the slender archive upon which we must depend for representations of (un)familiar loves located in socially and economically less-privileged classes.

Using the metaphor of a train journey in the “Ladies coupe” to anchor narratives of feminist emancipation through small acts and big, Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* presents a version of (un)familiar desire that locates female same-sex love within the heart of not only the family, but also within what appear to be rigidly heteronormative feudal structures. The larger narrative of this novel focuses on the life of Akhila whose youth, energy and money have been invested in the nurture of her family after her father's death. Having taken up his place as the “head” of the household, Akhila finds that her sexual autonomy and her selfhood are completely disregarded due to puritanical and pecuniary vested interests within her family, which plainly, in Nair's scheme of things, stands for the patriarchal family anywhere in India. Nair explicitly shows patriarchy as functioning with the active cooperation and cooptation of women into the policing
of other women: thus, some of the women in the story are undercut by other women, as Akhila is by her mother and her younger sister at many points in the narrative, and disciplined into remaining “chaste” and inviolate. Expressions of self-will on Akhila’s part are unacceptable interruptions within the functioning of the family she supports, so small things like eating an egg – Akhila belongs to a very strict Brahmin family – become acts of rebellion and subversiveness. Akhila decides all of a sudden to take a train journey for the sheer pleasure of it, to go to Kanyakumari, a symbolic journey all the more because she is herself a virgin though in her forties already; unlike the deity at Kanyakumari, though, Akhila’s virginity is disempowering. Never treated as an adult because she is single, even though she is the sole breadwinner, Akhila’s selfhood finds expression in this pilgrimage of the self she goes on where her interlocutors are the women passengers in the ladies’ compartment of the long distance train she has booked her seat on. Akhila’s co-passengers are all middle-class or affluent, English-speaking women with a place in the world except for one woman who wasn’t one of them. She didn’t look like one of them. It wasn’t that she was dressed poorly or that there was about her the stink of poverty. It was simply the expression on her face. As if she had seen it all, human fickleness and fallibility, and there was very little that could happen that would take her by surprise. In contrast, their faces, though much older than hers, were unmarked by experience or suffering.

Besides, they were sure she didn’t speak English as they all did. That was enough to put a distance between them and her. (LC 18)

All night they talk in turns to Akhila, sometimes sharing their stories in groups, sometimes singly, but not till the next day, when the others have already got off the train and Akhila and this last women are alone is an inclusive conversation possible. This woman who “wasn’t one of them” tells Akhila the story of her life the violence and the pain of which puts the others’ privileged lives in relief, setting their victories up as the victories of those who are already successful. This woman, Marikolanthu, “Sister to the Real Thing” tells of her life spent in Kancheepuram, where she was born and raised to work in the “kottai” or fortress-like bungalow of the local Chettair, successful businessmen engaged in the booming silken fabric trade, making the world-famous zari-laden sarees of Kancheepuram. Marikolanthu’s father is a poor subsistence-farmer whose many efforts at tilling the arid piece of land he has inherited do not amount to much and when he dies, Marikolanthu’s mother begs for work at the Chettiar Kottai and is made cook in the Chettiar household where dozens of people eat at each meal. Marikolanthu’s father, a devoted
farmer and extremely connected to all creatures transfers to his daughter his insight that the silk-industry a brutal one because it strips “the poor, naked worms” of even their natural covering of silk. Calling the Chettiar a “slave king,” Shanmugham tells his wife that he does not want to become the Chettiar’s minion, but after his death, Shanmugham’s children grow up on the fringes of this household, taking employment either in the household itself, or in the silk-factories the family owns. In this economy, the labour of people like Marikolanthu’s parents did not have any avenues other than the monopoly industry of the Chettiars; Anita Nair connects economic bondage and servitude with sexual bondage through Marikolanthu’s fascination with, and later relationship with the woman caring for whose child becomes Marikolanthu’s first job when she finishes primary school, and cannot be sent to high school. School is far away, and sending the girl alone would mean putting her chastity, as valuable a possession in the rural Tamil country as it is in Akhila’s urban Brahmin community, at “too much risk” (LC 214). So Marikolanthu’s education is truncated while her two brothers, not being marked “chaste” as they are male, get to go off to this distant school even as Marikolanthu becomes Prabhu-pappa’s (Baby Prabhu) nanny, though she herself is only about ten at the time. Marikolanthu is attracted to Sujatha-akka (akka is elder sister in Tamil), the newest daughter-in-law and wife of one of the Chettiar’s sons, and Prabhu-pappa’s mother, because to her naive village-girl’s eyes, Sujata Akka is a veritable film-star, like Savitri, B. Saroja Devi, Vijayakumari or Jayalalitha, the reigning goddesses of the Tamil screen till the 1970s. The hyperbolic femininity of these stars will, retrospectively, once Marikolanthu’s (un)familiar road to self-acceptance is traced, reveal possibilities for fetishization for queer readers/viewers; the femininity of these screen-icons, for viewers like Marikolanthu, enables a repertoire of identifications that, at second remove, suggest psychological explanations for why Marikolanthu is drawn to Sujata in the first place. Marikolanthu’s (un)familiar role in the “ladies coupe” that Akhila is travelling in is to reveal to Akhila world where learning to swim, wear western clothes or say goodbye to one’s virginity or to a dead grandparent are not the most important crises: hunger, rape and abuse are part of the troubles Marikolanthu must surmount in order to produce a subjectivity that goes beyond the masochism suggested by these long-suffering film-heroines’ movie characters.

But for poor Marikolanthu, the Chettiar-kottai is a cornucopia of wonders as much as the femininity of these film-stars is; full of things like refrigerators and televisions that she in her own world has no access to, the Chettiar-kottai suggests innumerable possibilities that Marikolanthu must train herself to never desire. Even the humble glass bangle is an object of great wonder for the poor girl while for rich Sujata Akka they are a matter of no importance and
to be broken easily. The aesthetic satisfactions provided by Sujata Akka’s presence do not simply include glass-bangles galore:

The first time I saw Sujata Akka, I lost my heart to her. Sujata Akka was fairer than anyone I had ever seen. She had long black hair and she wore an orange and green sari. Her blouse had sleeves that ended halfway down her upper arms. A diamond nose-stud sparkled and on her wrists were gold and green glass bangles. There were flowers in her hair and talcum powder on her face. And she wore spectacles. She looked like a film star and all I wanted to do was worship her. (LC 219–20)

While Sujata’s spectacle-wearing might not immediately identify her with a cine-star, the rest of her appearance, bejewelled and powdered till it is fit for a life of constant leisure as a prized trophy wife in a huge household, is very similar to the majority of the female parts available to Tamil movie heroines for a long time, perhaps even today. Sujata is, in the terms of this thesis, the beloved whose femininity is itself a magnet for the (un)familiar lover, though Marikolanthu is as yet unaware of the portents. It is only a matter of time before “Sujata Akka made me her slave with her cast-off glass bangles” (LC 217), just as the Chettiar, according to Marikolanthu’s father made slaves of his workers; the star-struck Marikolanthu has, in her way, fallen in love not only with the grace that accompanies the trappings of great living, but also with Sujata Akka’s femininity which is different from the spare, dark visages of her own people. Living in the Chettiar-kottai, Marikolanthu is constantly in contact with the ways of Sujata’s world, with its largesse to its members and scant regard for her class; Sujata is kind to her, and indeed performs the role of interested elder sister or fairy godmother, preparing clothes for after Marikolanthu comes of age, teaching her to sew and the like. But the things she gives Marikolanthu are intimate cast-offs – used but clean undergarments, jewellery that has lost its fineness, old clothes – all portents, perhaps, of how Marikolanthu’s emotions will, in the time to come, be treated as “sister to the real thing” and never the thing itself.

Marikolanthu goes to Vellore when puberty makes of her a fine young damsel and trouble in the Chettiar-kottai is forestalled by sending her away. Where Sujata had earlier been a comfort to Marikolanthu in the tough days following puberty when she is chafed by restrictions and proscriptions, when the men of the Chettiar household stop to look at the blooming Marikolanthu, Sujata, in a “voice thick with tears” decides to deal with the “difficult situation” that Marikolanthu’s womanhood has made of her, by sending her to the household of two white women doctors, Missy K and Missy V. Marikolanthu there becomes Mari; Mari here for the first
time acquires plans for the future, deciding with the doctors’ help to finish her school education and to train as a nurse. Mari also becomes wiser about the ways of the world, seeing among other things that the women secretly sleep together at night. Where “the sensible thing to do would be for them to share a bed,” Missy K visits Missy V secretly at night and “in the early hours, she crept back to her bed” (LC 323). Mari wonders “why this secrecy,” understanding only years later what Missy K’s “caressing Missy V’s face with her eyes” means (LC 233). But Mari is soon taken back to the Chettiar-kottai from this all-female world when her mother breaks a leg and wants Marikolanthu to stand in for her as the Chettiar’s cook so she can hold on to her job in that household. Marikolanthu is no longer enthusiastic about Sujata’s presents: dreaming now of “independence and dignity,” Marikolanthu sees the Chettiar’s household as rapacious and alienating in comparison to the sparse but free home in Vellore where Mari is not a feudal semislave, but a person whose individuality is acknowledged. Mari in Vellore is a “widow even before you are married” according to her mother because of her carelessness about her appearance ever since she had moved to Vellore. In the village, where femininity in the traditional sense is not cleanliness and youth as it is with Kate and Violet in the city, Marikolanthu is expected to look a sight: “Girls of your age should be seen with flowers in their hair, collyrium rimming their eyes, bangles on their wrists, and the tinkle of anklets should echo every step that they take” (LC 236), but this femininity shortly reveals itself to be a terrible liability. On Pongal night, a few days before Marikolanthu was to have returned to Vellore, she is raped by one of the Chettiar young men who had spotted her in her persona as “Sujata Akka’s handmaiden” (LC 237). Sujata’s brother-in-law, Murugesan rapes Marikolanthu even as the Pongal bonfires are being lit and the auspicious end of winter rituals are being performed all over the village; thinking himself entitled to the “pickings” of the Chettiars as a relative, even though a poor one, Murugesan finds it behoves him to “remind” Marikolanthu of her proper place in the scheme of things, as a slave, not an individual with any rights, independence or dignity (LC 240). Murugesan finds it abominable that a Chettiar servant girl should wear a watch, or “drawers and a bra” like a “town girl” when his own sister had been sent back by the Chettiar as too ignorant to be married to his son (LC 240). In the scheme of things that Murugesan sees himself as part of, the Chettiar and Murugesan both are possessed of power to make the lives of individual women miserable; Murugesan claims his power in the form of rape while the Chettiar is supposed to have maddened his wife by having taken a mistress. Reminding Mari-kolanthu of her menial position through this molestation, Murugesan laughs away her threats that of exposure. After the act, Marikolanthu goes home and scrubs herself clean just as she had done at the end of the day’s work all these weeks when she had been cooking for the Chettiars. But this of
course is the wrong move in a society where victimologies are the only narratives that women can undertake:

What should I have done? What would you have done? Now I know ... I should have rushed to the Chettiar's courtyard the way I was, with torn clothes, mussed up hair, his fluids and mine trickling down my legs, and terror in my eyes. I should have threatened suicide and demanded justice. I should have wept and stormed and let the world and the Chettiar see me as a victim. (LC 241)

A combination of naivetie and wounded dignity makes Mari think, in common with most rape victims who cannot bring themselves to recollect the trauma yet again, that wiping the terrible event out of memory was the best approach. No one believes her when the truth comes out in the form of a pregnancy: Marikolanthu's mother suspects her story, but Mari is now wise and understands that "not even the village elders would dare point a finger at Murugesan and that was the truth Amma was reluctant to accept" (LC 244). When Sujata suggests to Mari that had she told her on the night of the rape, she would have "brought it up with the Chettiar and insisted that Murugesan marry" Mari, Marikolanthu rejects the idea as preposterous and insulting, to the surprise of Sujata and to the outrage of her mother (LC 244). Repeating the dialogues of film-heroines in similar spots, Marikolanthu enjoys a moment or two of attention when her intention of killing herself to avert the disgrace that so troubles her mother is voiced. While Murugesan's guilt is self-evident to Sujata, the combination of patriarchal and socio-economic power in the Chettiar household ensures that the only "solution" to the problem is a secret abortion paid for by Sujata; Marikolanthu is sent to a distant aunt to convalesce and get rid of the baby.

The Chettiar-kottai is also home to the Chettiar's mad wife, maddened by childbirth: after the birth of her last child, the Chettiar's wife had refused to feed it, and had on occasion even tried to kill it, leading to her solitary confinement with a nurse in a part of the house set aside for her. Marikolanthu's response to the trauma of rape is to descend into herself just as the Chettiar-wife's resistance to childbirth and childrearing is manifested in madness; Marikolanthu leaves the child to her mother's care and goes back once again to Vellore. Here, Violet is no longer happy with either Kate or with India, and wishes to leave both; Mari's trauma is manifested in nightmares of such violence that Violet gives her strong narcotic sedatives despite Kate's objections to artificial means for dealing with suffering. Mari does not pay much attention to the disintegration of Kate's and Violet's relationship, but in the end, the Vellore household is
disbanded, and she goes back once again to the Chettiar-kottai where she is now entrusted the

 task of being Sujata's "eye," as also the old Chettiar-amma's caretaker. Like Grace Poole in Jane

 Eyre, Marikolanthu looks quietly after the Chettiar-amma who "in her madness ... escaped from

 the long iron chain that manacled her to this world" of reproduction and wifehood (LC 256). Marikolanthu, similarly, escapes, through sedated sleep, "from the child that grew in my mother's

 house" (LC 256); not wishing to go near the offspring of her rape, Marikolanthu stays always in

 the Chettiar-kottai, patrols the house, helping Sujata retain control over it through her loyal and

 trustworthy espionage as her "proxy."

 But soon came "the day when she let me read her eyes and I was reminded of the Missies in Vellore" (LC 258): Marikolanthu's drugged stupors slowly recede to show a Sujata who is

 reluctant to perform her conjugal duties, and eager to constantly talk about "the Missies again,"

 wanting to be told all the time about life in that Vellore house. "Tell me what you saw" she asks

 Marikolanthu every afternoon as they retire for rest (LC 259). Soon, Marikolanthu realises Sujata

 is, like Missy K repulsed by men and desirous of being only with women. Mari finds that she

 "loved her with my heart for so long, it seemed natural that I love her now with my

 body" (LC 261). This (un)familiar love however is marked by lack of reciprocity right from the beginning;

 while Mari is able to love and wishes to receive love, like the cautious servant she has been

 trained to be, she must understand that Sujata would never make love to her body: "Her fingers

 slid through my palm. That was all she would do for me. It was I who had sought to give her

 pleasure and in her pleasure lay my reward" (LC 261). Her own loving of Sujata is far more

 generous and giving, transforming Sujata into a happy creature through their union every

 afternoon, described with heartbreaking beauty by Nair. Things fall apart with great speed

 hereafter; happy finally with being "sister to the real thing" now, Mari does Sujata the ultimate

 favour in performing sexual favours for Sridhar so that he leaves his wife alone. Having done

 this to secure her beloved's happiness, Mari is completely surprised when she comes back after a

 short visit home to bury her dead mother to find that Sujata wants her to leave the Chettiar-

 kottai forever. Having found out about Sridhar and Marikolanthu, Sujata exercises her class and

 heterosexual privilege in accusing Mari of infidelity and disloyalty. Mari is shattered at the

 thought of leaving the only person she is able to leave but she does leave, proceeding to sell the

 son born of the rape to Murugesan himself by a gruesome stroke of utilitarian calculation, for

 two years of bond-labour in Murugesan's own looms. The poor boy, Muthu, is loving and

 trusting, but knows he has been betrayed by his mother when he realises the promised "school"
is actually a place of back-breaking labour but nothing will deter Mari just yet from her path of vengeance.

Wandering serving as a maid in one household after another, Mari's life after this point is devoted to never staying long enough for any household to take over her affections. But the gravity of her own brutality to Muthu, her son, comes home to her when she sees him dancing at his own father's funeral pyre; following it to the burial ground, she sees the poor boy has also been made a "chandala" when he is asked to stay back to feed the fires so that the dead body, stubbornly resistant to fire, is properly burnt.

Hidden by the night, I stood there and watched the boy gather wood to light the pyre again. I saw him walking through the grounds foraging for leftover kindling from other pyres, twigs, branches, dried grass ... anything that would break into flame. The boy's face was clenched in sorrow; or was it pity? (LC 267)

Moved finally by the injustice of a ten-year-old having to assist a "half-charred, half-intact corpse" that adults could not bear to look at, Mari reflects on her behaviour, wondering how she was any different from all the others who had used her so ill. "There was so much work to be done before I could claim him for my own" (LC 268), Mari tells Akhila; in order to literally buy back the son she had sold to the mills, she goes back to Missy K who helps. The bond between mother and child, denied so long, is finally ratified by the "quickenings in my phantom womb" (LC 268); ten years after he was born, Mari is finally able to accept her son as hers, becoming the "real thing," a real mother to her child after all these years of being a surrogate, a "sister to the real thing" (LC 268).

Mari's narrative places within a dense background a number of very interesting observations about (un)familiar love. In Mari's world, only the relationships between parents and children seem unclouded by the rancour and remorse that heterosexual relationships produce, but only when motherhood is a self-chosen and lovingly-cherished role. In the event of the opposite, when motherhood is thrust upon women, as in the case of the Chettiar-amma and Mari herself, after their "rapes" literal or metaphorical, at the hands of the world, these women are incapacitated in their performance of everyday normative roles as "good" women, wives or children. Where the Chettiar-amma's madness seems to stem from maternity itself, catalysed, as Sujata's personal anxieties suggest, perhaps from her dislike of sexual contact with her husband, Mari's unloving and cruel motherhood stems directly from explicit physical and psychic abuse
and molestation. Mari seeks to avenge her violent rape by Murugesan by paying him back in the same coin, but the sight of her defenceless child doing the work of a “chandala” in the crematory awakens her compassion finally, after about a decade of its masochistic suppression in the interests of serving her masters, the various Chettiar. Acknowledging the brutality of her desecration of her child, and seeing it finally as similar to the depredations and brutality occasioned by her “kind” Chettiar employers, Mari’s desire to be different from these masters enables her to make a place for herself within a different economy. Once again to be part of a woman-centric household along with Missy K and Muthu, Mari will have opportunity to realise herself as she did the last time she was in Missy K’s home in Vellore. Nair’s novel seems to suggest that within the space of the feudal Chettiar home, women like Mari and children like Muthu will never be given a space of their own because class-privilege will make objects of them. At the same time, within these households, it is women like Sujata who are active vehicles for the exercise of heterosexual privilege as evident in her disbelief at Mari’s explanation for sleeping with Sridhar: Mari’s desire to protect Sujata had led her to do this, but for Sujata, Mari is a menial woman who is “unnatural” because she turns away from her own child and prefers a “mad woman’s company” to that of her mother (LC 263). Mari’s departure from normative feminine performances of duty, whether towards children or parents, is in Sujata’s eyes an expression of sexual abnormality consisting in her making love to Sujata, which the latter puts down to “black magic to make me your slave ... make me do things no woman would” (LC 263–64). Mari’s (un)familiar love for Sujata is ascribed to wickedness and control over the powers of evil, making of Mari a familiar in the literal sense of the term. Mari’s position as a lowly subject of the Chettiar’s will, however, makes her also less than human in another more corporeal sense: Mari’s love for Sujata is not regarded as an emotion worth any recompense at all; Mari’s emotional labour towards making Sujata happy is completely disregarded and unrequited. For the time Mari’s attitude to Muthu mirrors that of her masters, Mari was willing to be “sister to the real thing,” but when Mari decides to claim her son’s individuality as equal to Murugesan’s at least, Mari looks to the representative of another paradigm. Missy K, as lover of women and good counsellor, is the opposite of Sujata or any of the “benevolent” Chettiar; willing to make slaves of none, Missy K’s power to love is similar to Mari’s. At the close of the novel, one wonders more about Mari’s life rather than about the central protagonist, Akhila’s.

A superficial critique of the novel might see Nair’s location of a viable alternative upon the white body of Missy K as disempowering. Through a queer lens, however, it is possible to read this location as enabling: Missy K’s confirmed lesbianism places her in a position of “family
outlaw” similar to Mari’s. But free of many of heteronormativity’s constrictions, Missy K is able to function with less violence to those around her just as Mari’s father Shanmugham long ago had been able to. In their minimisation of violence, Missy K and Shanmugham, at the end and beginning of Mari’s narrative respectively, suggest ways forward for the production of critical subjectivities. While Missy K suggests a critique of both patriarchal and feminist characterisations of the independent woman and the lesbian, Shanmugham presents the narrative’s strongest and most memorable critique of indigenous capitalist violence towards creatures big and small, animal and human. Missy K as family outlaw is able to help Mari realise the family that more entrenched participants in the life of the same family, but uncritical of its normalised assumptions – such as her mother, brothers or Sujata Akka – had been unable to do, even as Shanmugham’s characterisation of the silk-trade as the needless traumatisation and murder of silk-worms must be read in conjunction with Mari’s own sale and later repurchase of her son Muthu. Shanmugham’s treatment of the little worms as also entitled to dignity, love and freedom from needless pain stands in contrast to the mechanised, reifying worldviews that the various Chettiers have and which come to colour Mari when she has worked too long with them. Mari’s freedom from her alienation then comes in the form of her recognition that the (un)familiar love she gives Sujata is also tainted by the same ugliness as the Chettri-scion’s attitude to her as a mere toy for sex-education. Once Mari makes the connection between her (un)familiar love for Sujata and what this love might mean for a more worthy object, Mari can free herself, which she does by reclaiming her son. The same-sex narratives within Ladies Coupe need not be seen as extraneous to the narrative: coming as Mari’s story does just before the train finally reaches its destination, Mari’s account of her existence’s lovelessness contributes to Akhila’s own decision to find bodily and spiritual love. Mari’s (un)familiar narrative makes Akhila’s own struggle less difficult in comparison; Mari’s otherness, her (un)familiarity also makes it possible for the reader to place female same-sex love within a less privileged economic class.

In Mary Anne Mohanraj’s Bodies in Motion, three narratives out of almost two dozen centre around female same-sex love and desire. Placed at two ends of this novel which is strung around a series of extended family snapshots of a Tamil and a Sinhala family apiece in Sri Lanka and in the global nations of the West, the (un)familiar narrative I shall consider here is remarkable in its production of an aged lesbian subject. Set late-1940s, the first of Mangai’s narratives is a tale in first person of her sudden sexual coming of age when she meets the beautiful Sushila, her brother Sunthar’s newly-wed wife. Mangai is deemed too unattractive for the marriage-market, being “too-short, too plump” with “coarse hair and flat chest” and is thus,
at the age of seventeen, already deemed an old maid (BM 24). In the week before the newly-weds leave for another home far away, Mangai and Sushila consummate their relationship; Mangai knows she has fallen in love, but Sushila is unwilling to “lose caste, lose family, lose the future” in order to spend her lifetime with Mangai in deprivation, “washing someone else’s filthy clothes” as that seems to be the only possible avenue for earning a living that these two uneducated women will have apart from their families (BM 33). Sushila leaves after she and Mangai engage in the fitful secret space each night of the week in intricate love-making rituals that mark their bodies as one another’s; the last line of the story, however, reads: “the scar faded into nothing within a year” (BM 38). Mangai’s sister-in-law can announce to Mangai before leaving that “It’s for the best, Mangai. You’ll be married soon – try to be happy” (BM 33) but Mangai knows then that she “would never marry” nor love anyone else the same way. At the end of the narrative returns in 2002 to the same Jaffna village where in 1948 Sushila and Mangai had parted; Sushila is now safely in the Tamil diaspora in Canada with Mangai’s brother, Sunthar, who has become, among other things, also a donor to the Tamil Tiger cause. Mangai, resistant to her brother’s importuning her to live in safe America with them, has lived “with her servant, Daya, for decades in a house with only one bed” (BM 273), confirming her feelings about marriage from half a century ago.

Mangai has evolved into an (un)familiar in more than one sense of the word in this time: she enters this narrative as a wiry old woman in white who “went out alone to the sea, every day, in her battered fishing boat” (BM 273). Fishing in order to support herself and her lover, Mangai’s strangeness exceeds the merely sexual; the villagers “let her fish” because they are also attuned to her “madness,” which is grown so old no one remarks on it any longer. But for the reader of the novel, who has now travelled through the many diasporic locations the other characters of the novel people, Mangai, in the home they all left behind, is the most wondrous thing our travels have yet shown us. Mangai’s sexual identity would evidently require the word “lesbian,” given her life-long devotion to Daya, after whose death she takes to wearing widow’s weeds. But the word “lesbian” also, problematically, suggests a number of teleological narratives such as the ones suggested by Fire and Sancharam, where the nation as “home sweet home” is viewed as the space of tradition that the queer female subject must escape from in order to attain a visible and intelligible identity. But as Bodies in Motion suggests, the space of the home as the (Sri Lankan) nation, in a forgotten Tamil village torn by the civil war between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government, is far from closed, despite its impoverishment and its instability to the reach of (un)familiar desire. Far from being closed, this home contrasts affirmatively with the third
lesbian section in the book: here, Leilani, the second-generation daughter of Sri Lankan Tamil immigrants in the USA, becomes a poet in defiance of the wishes of her mathematically-ambitious family; she is also already lesbian, but unlike Mangai, the narrative leaves Leilani uncoupled after having informed us that in the course of her life, she will also have become bridesmaid to her lover. In this instance, Mangai's and Leilani's lives share a great deal despite their spatial and generational distance from one another. While Mangai never does have a "lesbian" identity, having been branded "strange" by the community she lives in, Leilani is visibly "lesbian" though her family does not know this. Nevertheless, Leilani's lesbianism is camouflaged as celibacy and abstinence despite her being located in a presumably emancipated First World location. However, within the diaspora as we have already seen, the premium upon female chastity is high enough for Leilani's mother to "throw a pot of boiling crab curry at my head," which, while it misses the target, symbolically scars both mother and daughter (BM 103). Leilani and her mother are both bound within the conservative Tamil diaspora's expectations of its women while Mangai, within her Jaffna village, escapes from her own mother who never liked Mangai because Mangai was "too clumsy, too fat" besides "too dark" (BM 269). Setting up a home of her own, but within her own people, Mangai's (un)familiarity percolates the space of the nation in a way that Leilani's lesbianism cannot enter the space of the diaspora, while on the other hand, Leilani's non-Tamil peers know of her real emotional orientation. Mangai's (un)familiarity, thus, in contrast to Leilani's "identity" can enter dialogue with her neighbours in which Mangai can stake her claim to live the way she wants and yet be part of the community, though "one reason why Mangai can live in peace in his village [is that] she brings her neighbours as more pleasure as present scandal than she ever could as past expulsion" (BM 272). The scandal of Mangai's living with a woman all her life is told and retold, both "what they know and what they guess" (BM 272). But as Mangai and Daya have always kept their own counsel, what the villagers "guess" is more than what they "know." This epistemology of not knowing fully what a lesbian is, evidently, a great contrast to the dynamics of visibility, clarity and consequent expulsion from the space of the home that films like Fire and Sancharam generate and wish to make paradigmatic. Mangai's story, on the other hand, in providing both a critique of the narrative of escape to the diaspora – from where Sushila sends her Teflon pans and other prize consumer goods – and a critique of the narrative of identity. In not making herself explicitly intelligible, Mangai's safety is assured, but years of uneasy coexistence precedes her current geriatric existence as a protected specimen on the fringes of life in the village.
Yet, the novel ends with Mangai cooking in plain view of all the village-belies intent on getting good husbands: Mangai’s fame as a cook is so great that part of the unspoken bargain for her being left unmolested involves her letting generations of these village girls watch from outside her house as she cooks. Mangai’s cooking is not an exhibition of skill, however, that will recuperate Mangai back into the economy of normative domesticity. Mohanraj on the other hand subverts the hearth by showing Mangai strip her withered septuagenarian body even as the food cooks. The novel ends with Mangai, now completely naked, leaning against the crumbling mud walls of her hut eating her splendid cooking after drinking from the same tin-cups she and Sushila drank water out of in their love-making fifty years ago: “shuddering with pleasure, she eats” (BM 275). As the last words of this novel, these words make us reflect on the nature of sexual subjectivity: Mangai’s love for Sushila, rekindled time and again in the marvellous spells of cooking that come upon her, attains a tangible presence even though we know Sushila herself has lived a chaste life with Sunthar all these years though Sunthar now knows without being told that it is women she likes. Mangai’s desire for rich food, cooked beautifully, is a metonym for her relationship with Sushila from long ago. While the psychic and social costs of choosing (un)familiar ways of living results in Mangai’s having no opportunity for public affirmation of her grief for Daya, for instance, the aroma of Mangai’s cooking does bring a circlet of village-girls around her to learn from her. Even these girls know that Mangai is what “they will become in time” (BM 272): with the withering of the body in old age, the trappings of femininity will have worn away; the asexuality of Mangai’s old age offers an analogue for her sexual unavailability to male masculinity through her youth. However, Mangai’s desire in old age for rich “food” suggests a full-blown critique of female imperviousness to desire: Mangai’s asexuality is a critique of not of femininity, but of heteronormativity. In fashioning a world for herself beyond heterosexual marriage, Mangai defies the normative. On a closing note, the word “mangai” in Tamil means the ideal girl; it is a paradox that the girls of Mangai’s village learn how to be a woman from a woman who has already stepped beyond the performance of femininity for the sake of masculine endorsement.

A Portrait of the Lesbian as Artist

Leilani in *Bodies in Motion* finds her vocation as poet only after she discovers she loves women, not men. A similar conjunction happens in Manju Kapur’s *A Married Woman* where Kapur’s protagonist’s withdrawal from heteronormativity sees her wielding the brush just as Leilani and Mangai wield the pen and the cooking knife respectively as artists of great renown in their
separate disciplines. But while Mohanraj is able to produce spaces of individual autonomy albeit different in nuance both for young Leilani and the very aged Mangai, Manju Kapur's novel ends as Kamala Das' short story does, with a woman returning from the airport after having seen her lesbian lover off to a country she cannot follow. While Das's Sheela could have run away with Kalyani to Australia, her self-conditioning and years of habitation have made a living "corpse" of her, such that she cannot move or act to satisfy herself any longer. Kapur's Married Woman is in similarly, like the proverbial fly in the ointment, trapped within a life she finds unliveable, but unable to make change, she returns to the trap despite having known it for what it is.

Manju Kapur's novel runs in parallel the narratives of Astha's self-discovery and the nation's post-al moment of destruction - that of the Babri Masjid. Astha means "faith," and Kapur's strategy of deploying such a name for her protagonist sets at rest any doubts one may have about the allegorical function of her narrative in contemporary India's attempt to resolve the role of religious belief in a secular state, though this state is underwritten by a peculiarly Indian re-casting of the secular signifier. In its counterpointing of personal history with social unravelment, this novel shares a great deal with Raj Rao's The Boyfriend and much of Shyam Selvadurai's work, where the gay male protagonists' articulations of gayness happens against a background of many non-sexual conflicts - with communal riots in Bombay and ethnic cleansing in Sri Lanka respectively. Homosexuality, then, in all these books, is not a universalised emotion that happens in a distinctly apolitical or unworldly space: the erotic is not a universalised, apolitical, other-worldly emotion, but one that is part of the re-worlding of the psychic and material spaces that the protagonists inhabit. Interestingly, A Married Woman also resonates with another lesbian novel from another time - Sylvia Townsend Warner's Summer Will Shine, where the wife and paramour of one (unfortunate?) man get together and become lovers, elliptically in the earlier book, graphically in Kapur's novel, like in Uma Parameswaran's story above. Summer Will Shine has at its centre the French Revolution while A Married Woman returns time and again to the conflicted imaginings of "Indianness" in the communalised public imaginary of India after the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1991. Both novels share a common trajectory of female self-realisation through same-sex erotic companionship, ironically made possible by heterosexual attractions that recede to the periphery. The "powerfully physical relationship with a much younger woman" the blurb advertises materialises only when two-thirds of the book are already done, a placement that is remarkable if only in its difference from most other lesbian "interludes," all of which invariably run their course in the first one-third of the narratives they appear in since lesbianism in most narratives is cast as penultimate to the "real thing."
most reviewers of the novel disapprovingly noted that Kapur's "use" of a lesbian plot, if such it is, happens late in the day and seems adventitious to a novel titled "a married woman," our reading below suggests that Kapur's delineation of "a" married woman has the effect of suggesting that we reconsider "marriage" itself. Kapur's novel at the very least contributes in providing a shift from the focus on marriage as largely heterosexual form of coupling at least in Indian society. At the same time, Astha's lesbian infidelity is not the only trouble her marriage has to go through. Kapur's novel, located in the orthodox, conservative world of the New Delhi government elite and its underclasses, very accurately captures the changing yet static mindsets of this orthodoxy. This, I argue, only serves to routinise the lesbian within the humdrum throb of a patriarchy updating itself in accordance with the modernities of India in the 1990s - liberalisation, globalisation and privatisation. Locating itself in the centre of India's "structural transformation" of its economy, A Married Woman queers domesticity, conjugality and contemporary historiography with its routinisation of the lesbian in the realm of the familiar workings of everyday life. I argue that this patchwork quilt of social history and musings on one's own personal history may be read as an attempt to queer, to de-straighten the otherwise near-total heteronormativity of national and marital imaginings.

Kapur's Married Woman, Astha inhabits a number of significant lesbian-fictional tropes: she is an "only child," to begin with, an echo back to the days in the early twentieth-century lesbian novel in English when such "only daughters" would always have been raised to serve in the stead of the "son her parents never had." However, Manju Kapur's novel, like the others we have studied so far, is under no compulsions to produce the (in)famous "mythic mannish lesbian" that Esther Newton describes as the characteristic lesbian character in this early fiction. Astha has not been raised to dress, walk and talk like a boy as was, most famously, Radclyffe Hall's Steven Gordon in The Well of Loneliness, though in substantive terms Astha has also been given an education designed her to equip her for the world, because, as her father tells her, "with a good job comes independence" (MW 4). The gains of feminism have permeated very Indian mindsets, it would seem, and here are fathers, otherwise supposed to be constraining patriarchs, egging their daughters on to do well in the world. A Married Woman does not employ the trope of inversion as Hall, or Shobha De closer home, has done. On the contrary, "Asth a was brought up properly, as befits a woman, with large supplements of fear" in a house where her mother was always putting into "a steel almirah another spoon, sheet, sari, piece of jewellery towards the girl's future" (MW 1). This piecemeal accumulation of a dowry would culminate, it was hoped, in
the acquisition of a suitable partner whom Astha envisions as holding her in his “strong manly embrace.”

Manly embraces however, come from the very heterosexual world of the Mills and Boons and Barbara Cartland romances, where the heroine, whether a beauteous wallflower or a power-dressing tycoon, would ultimately find her home in the cocoon of the suitably well-endowed and well-heeled (male) hero’s arms. A Married Woman is, in its totality, a carefully-observed deflation of just such a heteronormative romantic fantasy. In her late teens, Astha also acquires a secret boyfriend after the fashion of most young Indian women. Theirs is a suitably raunchy affair in the Indian-middle-class style, conducted mostly in the backseat of the boyfriend’s car in suitably shady and deserted lanes cars. Astha keeps a journal of this affair, a romantic landmark because Roshan is tactile and non-penetrative as a lover, thus avoiding the pregnancy scares and the rough sex that the Hindi movies of the 1980s revelled in depicting. These depictions serve multiple purposes. On the one hand, they glorify male power, and partly as a way of bolstering the male ego by way of making sex so unattractive to women that they automatically hated it, thus opening themselves to the accusation of “frigidity,” and giving the men in question the further excuse of “straying.” Astha’s expectations of romance are typical of the romance-reading (heterosexual) girl. On the one hand, as important commentators have noted, romances give female readers both an opportunity to dream and an education in what is expected of them. On the other hand, in masking the real-life impossibility of perfect conjugal harmony, they also produce in their readers anxieties when expectations aren’t met in reality. Similarly, Roshan is only an interlude, and Astha is dumped at an appropriate point in the academic calendar in time for him to go abroad for graduate studies. Bereft of the manful embrace, Astha knuckles down to doing well in her chosen discipline – English literature – the discipline affected by a remarkably huge percentage of the “independent young women” and incipient feminists of Indian English literature today. But once she has acquired a masters’ degree, three years after Rohan, the only alternative in front of her is to “drift into teaching” (MW 31), the only question being whether she would teach school children, or college students.

But the marks of “confirmed adulthood” (MW 32) are a husband and children. So Astha marries Hemant Vadera, who narrows down upon our erstwhile romantic heroine by traditional means. Their wedding ceremony is a grand one performed with the suitable gods and family members in attendance. During the honeymoon, she is “too high to see the sludge that had gathered around the houseboat, too high to notice the slight smell that came from the stagnant
edge" (MW 42). But gradually, once she settles into the aimless waiting that constitutes her prescribed dose of marital bliss in the home of her in-laws, the “future seemed very pedestrian” (MW 47), with her husband revealing that he was more interested in making money than in making love to Astha.

On the one hand, because she has married into a family that has its pulse on the nation’s growth in a way in which her own father, a less successful bureaucrat, did not, she is materially among the richest and most privileged top five percentile of Indians at that point in the eighties. On the other hand, because of this very prosperity, she finds that she serves best when she is a receptacle for children, preferably male children, and an adornment at parties. The in-laws are suitably emancipated in their desire that she work outside the home, but at a job that would not interfere with her wifely duties. Teaching it turned out, was “good time-pass” that everyone approved of; it seemed as if “all women were destined to be teachers or nothing,” and Astha does indeed choose to teach rather than be a nothing. Astha becomes a traveller of sorts, between her affluent home and the (slightly) less privileged school she teaches at.

This is the moment of Astha’s coming out. In sharp contrast to a homonormativity that presumes that the proclamation of one’s (homo)sexual identity is the defining moment of one’s coming of age, the evidence of most lesbian Indian texts reveals that one’s voluntary revelation of one’s sexual orientation is usually not the life-affirming moment for women in Indic characters. The moment of “coming out” that permits characters like Astha to discover that “the central thing in her life” (51) does not have to be sex with their husbands. Astha does not outgrow her sexual dependence on her husband immediately upon “coming out” of the home, though. In a convincing manoeuvre, it takes a while before the narrative permits Astha to realise that she would rather engage with “minds” rather than “needs” all the time. Then follows another journey, one of looking into, around and at herself, in ways in which she had never been able to, or had mulishly refused at other times. The Astha who refuses to introspect — “I don’t want to look inside myself” (55), she tells her mother — becomes the Astha who is able to turn an unflinching gaze on herself and the world around her, to turn her experiences of it into art. Astha’s movement from a very domesticated, romantic-brained girl is paralleled by the momentous restructuring of the Indian economy, first by delicensing, and then, through liberalisation and globalisation. While Kapur’s novel does not explicitly make these parallels, the critical reader can see that Astha’s emergence from the home, and her emergence into art are
connected in at least some ways with the nation’s emergence once again into the global economy.

Asthā’s journey from one location to another in the capital city of Delhi marks the passage of these changes. Asthā’s girlhood is spent, in the quiet, solitary lanes of Pandara Lane, a respectable though humble government housing colony then, when Trans-Yamuna and south of South Extension are still dacoit-infested cabbage fields. Asthā spends her honeymoon in pre-turmoil Kashmir, and the initial years of her married life in her in-laws’ government flat, when Hemant is still an officer with a suitably fiscally conservative bank, mired in the red tape of 1970s bureaucratic “rationalisation.” However, there is one deeply troubling lacuna in Kapur’s history of modern India. Kapur’s characters do not even register two of the most momentous events in modern Indian history – the Emergency of 1975–77 or the 1984 riots – both of which played themselves out on the stage of Delhi. This to my mind, signals the author’s inadequate handling of what might otherwise have been a suitable objective-correlative for her protagonist’s life. One can place a more charitable construction upon the lapse by examining, instead, the evidence that suggests that Kapur wants the reader to focus on India’s opening up to the world rather than to other events in its immediate history. Nevertheless, at the end of the novel, one does get the feeling that Asthā’s “coming out” is also being validated in the same terms as the country’s opening up: “gayness” and “lesbianism” after all did enter the Indian public sphere as part of post-globalisation discourses on AIDS, public health and whether government spending on public health was necessary in a market economy.

Asthā’s husband seizes change by the forelocks in deciding to join the communications bandwagon just before it becomes big. Dissatisfied with his placid bank job, Hemant sets up a colour-TV manufacturing unit. Innocuous as they look, these colour televisions are heralds of a new order of things. The Asian Games of 1982, for the telecast of which the Indian government first sanctioned public broadcasting in colour, marks the turning of the tide, though in keeping with Asthā’s upbringing and her interests as established so far Asthā herself hardly registers the significance of any of this. Asthā’s preoccupations are different: the birth of a son relieves Asthā of some of her familial burdens at least, though not before tense moments in which she is brought face to face with the naked truth of her absolute vulnerability to ugly social censure if she should prove unable to deliver the goods. But at the same time, Hemant’s commitments to his new business also make a single mother of her: Kapur locates within conjugality itself a
phenomenon that would otherwise be interpreted as a wayward woman’s doing, a result possibly of corruption by exposure to the ways of the west.

But we must not lose sight of the relative privilege of Astha’s location within the city of Delhi. The topography of the novel also undergoes an important change alongside the gradual opening up of its characters in various ways. Where it was earlier confined to the “safe” heart of the densely urbanised older Delhi, the narrative gradually ventures out, with Astha’s father-in-law’s retirement, to their house in what was then South-West Delhi, into Vasant Vihar. The family move into the house that Astha’s father-in-law had built on his lucky ticket in a cooperative housing society construction scheme, a pathetically sharp contrast to her own father’s more unlucky draw of a 280-ft plot in a Trans-Yamuna jungle-plot. Vasant Vihar is both unmarked by the precedents that clutter Delhi’s older conurbations, and affluent enough to be constricting in its own way for a woman who lived well in her husband’s home, but had no idea of what the family’s resources were. The novel also registers meanders South-East, with Hemant’s business venture, into the now sufficiently urbanised “NOIDA” sector, which at that time was “Electronics City” only in governmental ambition. The Vasant Vihar that the senior Vadera draws is today the enclave of the very rich, those who have now come to be accepted as “classily” so, while NOIDA remains the sector of Delhi that is motored by the dreams of a newly-liberalising India, as opposed to the cluttered, older industrial areas of North Delhi. Hemant’s business also takes him further afield, and farther away from the home-bound Astha:

Four times a year Hemant travelled. The glamour of international references entered the house, as he flew to South Korea and Japan looking for the best deals. He always went alone, which he claimed he needed in order to establish personal contacts. He invariably came back in great good humour, with generous presents for everyone: perfume, chocolate, sweaters, jeans, toys, Japanese dolls, games for the children, underwear for Astha, toiletries, soaps, creams, shampoo [sic], kitchen and electronic equipment. Gradually their house acquired the gloss of a house with money. (MW 71)

This catalogue of acquisitions is an excellent illustration of the aspirations of pre-liberalisation India. The austere self-sufficiency that the Nehruvian modernity aimed at through the 1950s and 1960s was gradually giving room now, in the 1980s, for desires for consumerist gratification. The capital, intellectual, creative and financial, locked up by previous investments was crying to be spent somewhere else, and Kapur’s little miscellany here shows how it will be spent in the next two decades – in foreign travel and consumer goods. That Hemant should get Astha underwear
is also telling in several ways. Indian-made undergarments, in contrast to what appeared to be the decadent fineries of the Western fashion industry, were as unimaginative and unflattering as could possibly be; at the same time, Hemant’s reading of Astha’s needs are also restricted to a limiting view of her as a sexual object, a niche she has long outgrown. Astha had “changed from being a woman who only wanted love, to a woman who valued independence” (MW 72), though Hemant seems not to notice. The time, it would seem then, was ripe for Astha to look abroad.

The communications revolution that in many ways was the precursor of the 1990s globalisation of Indian media, especially with the entry of cable television, has had consequences for sexual relationships as much as they have had for other personal interactions. I would even argue that the communications revolution has offered outlets similar to what in an earlier phase had been made possible by urban spaces. Freed of the supervisionary intimacy of the close-knit community, and with the mobility offered by public transport and places that can be rented, individuals have of course been able to explore all manner of expression, the sexual being one very major component therein. Manju Kapur’s novel does not venture into the world of cyber-sex, cyber-feminism, or indeed, cyber-life (as a number of other writers have done; see the collection 21 through 40), but does hint at the quiescent presence of new life within the old. Technological changes in communication methodologies in Kapur’s novel are still in the analog phase, but change is certainly perceptible. The advent of cable television via satellite antennas was making it possible for sufficiently well-heeled Indians to watch in India programmes that would earlier be smuggled in on grainy VHS tapes. Astha is conventionally feminine in her resistance to change – that television was taking over culture is a fact that Hemant, not Astha, registers first in Kapur’s novel. Astha is also resistant to Hemant’s desire to keep abreast of these changes for the sake of the children, for it turns out she has less standing than them in her husband’s house. She is not “allowed” to buy what she wants, in this case a beautiful silver box that costs five thousand rupees even as Hemant thinks nothing of spending ten times as much on a dish-antenna because the children wanted to watch cable TV and Hemant also ostensibly had to keep up with international television programming for the sake of his TV-making business. Many such episodes through the novel chronicle the small but nevertheless revealing belittlements that the married woman undergoes in the course of her married career.

This systematic counter-narrative to the romance novel brings us via Astha’s growing disillusionment, pain and ennui, typified by her aggressive headaches, to yet another summer vacation. A theatre workshop at the school she teaches in brings her in contact with the left-
leaning Aijaz Akhtar Khan, an agit-prop theatre ideologue who is also good looking and intelligent. Lest the guise fool us, Aijaz is not the sweet romantic hero making a rather late entry: Aijaz is sexually inviting, a far cry from the sexually disciplined ideal man of the romance genre, and appears to also not be above deception. But either way, the novel has Aijaz transform Astha not by resorting to the cliché of an extra-marital affair, but by drawing out her creativity, last manifested during her honeymoon, another period of intense sexual awareness. Astha's second coming, however, takes her on a journey that is at best firmly tangential to the journeys good married women must make, such as journeys to places of pilgrimage, like Astha's widowed mother does. Aijaz is the thinly disguised fictional alter-ego of Safdar Hashmi, whose death marks a watershed in Kapur's chronology of modern Indian history. Aijaz, “the voice of the underprivileged” (MW 102) speaks for those people and things the new media, the new consumer opportunities and the new culture of Liberalisation, Globalisation and Privatisation try to leave behind. Where Hemant can say with conviction “we are not deprived Indians any longer” (MW 102) with justice about his upper-middle-class cohort, Astha is not sure it applies to her, or to women of the same upper-middle-class ilk, because despite an obvious affluence that sees to it that the husbands spend enough on the wives' “clothing and jewellery that she always looked well turned out” (MW 72) these wives hardly had cash to dispose of as they desired. Astha's relative deprivation within patriarchal affluence gives her a point of entry into Aijaz's proclaimed aims: “to create empathy, generate social awareness by having workshops that involve workers and students, bridge the class divide” (MW 103). Aijaz's entry permits Astha to evolve a conscious theory of protest against her gradual interpellation into subservience so insidious that her it made her victimhood itself look dubious.

While Hemant is quick to spot a business opportunity in the television business, it is Astha who sees the transformations television-viewing wrought. The dangerous homogenisation of representations is one of the novel's immediate concerns: the serialisation of the Ramayan is an epochal moment in the history of the media in India, an event whose significance is not lost even upon children who grew up in the 1980s. Watching the Ramayan on Sunday mornings became a sacrosanct ritual, pan-Indian in the observance it elicited. Astha's house is no different:

Every Sunday morning, the family gathered upstairs before a ClearVision TV, twenty-inch screen, manufactured by the son of the house, and watched the story of the Ramayan. Week after week they agreed, this was the golden age of India, this is our noble heritage, now thoroughly debased, when justice flourished, when Hindus had pride,
when a king showed responsibility towards his people, when a king showed responsibility towards his people, when duty, honour, devotion, truth and loyalty had a place in Ram Rajya. And today the birthplace of this king, our Lord, is occupied by a mosque, the shame of it, dismissing as nonsense the protest that it was not possible to really place the exact spot of a man’s birthplace so many thousands of years ago. (MW 105)

Television mega-serials produce a script that in the novel Manju Kapur challenges with Astha’s own script for the play that Aijaz’s workshop will produce. Kitschy as it looks to the viewer revisiting it today, the characteristic feature of the Doordarshan production of the Ramayan was its un-self-conscious mimesis, its untroubled confidence about representing a myth of such emotive and religious significance. In contradistinction to this almost smug self-confidence is Astha’s script-writing, anxious but thorough in its search for the truth. Religious conflict can be made to come to the boil better if participants are assured of the seeming timelessness of the conflict. Removing all elements of context from particular frictions, reducing them to what is seemingly their kernel of “Hindus and Muslims have never, will never get along” is the formulation Kapur’s exploration of Astha’s creative process seeks to challenge. The creation of communal violence, Kapur implies, is as much an “art” as is the creation of works of art, given the artifice employed in producing, marshalling and propagating ideas that in the long run produce conflagrations that burn the house down.

Aijaz himself, the inspiration for Astha’s art, is as seductive a (male) muse as “Bharat Mata” is to the imaginers of the fundamentalist Indian nation. Astha’s creativity has a distinctly erotic if not directly sexual edge; she devours every inch of his body with the ardour of a devotee though allowing herself only “frequent covert glances” (MW 112), drinking in eyes, limbs, muscle- and skin-tone, gait, frame, energy and pearly white teeth: a male muse objectified to perfection, one may think. And “the thought of not having anything to show Aijaz drove her on” (MW 108) to write, and then paint him. Sexually drawn to him, but unable to betray emotion or gesture under the eagle eyes of her children, Astha sublimates sexual desire into art, though not before Hemant second-guesses her desires and resents their independence of him, their erstwhile sole receptacle. The play is successfully performed, but within days, Aijaz is burned to death in a gruesome act of politically motivated and sponsored arson along with the rest of his theatre group in one of the wilder parts of western Uttar Pradesh. Aijaz’s death draws Astha out of her house for the first time ever to do something other than the dignified “time-pass” that her teaching career has been. She walks with the massive crowd protesting against the manner of
Aijaz's death. The communalism that Astha recognises as having its home in the retrospective homogeneous imaginings of an uncontaminated Ram Rajya in India free of Muslims has claimed the life of a theatre-artist because, as Hemant says with scarcely masked schadenfreude, "he was a Muslim, he should have kept to the issues within his own religion" (MW 139).

Asthā's act of mourning completes the coming out that her humble teaching career commenced. That her act of mourning is not for her husband, but was, instead for Aijaz marks a moment of coming-of-age: Astha's creativity has been unlocked not by Hemant, but by Aijaz, and so Aijaz is the true mate, for whom she dons a white sari. Aijaz's passing brings Astha in touch with the Sampradayakta Mukti Manch, set up, again in violation of expected conjugal claims, not by Aijaz's wife, but by a woman called Reshana Singh who claims to have been very close to Aijaz. This appropriation of memory by the Manch, and its later activites of "preaching to the converted" (MW 216) are problematised by Kapur even as this forum offers Astha her only opportunities so far for self-realisation. Astha starts painting again, resuming a girlhood hobby long forgotten now; her canvases make the Manch tidy sums of money that are used, presumably, to further Aijaz's memory.

The trauma of Aijaz's death re-inscribes Astha's erotic landscape. Sex with Hemant never enters Astha's subconscious; in retrospect then it was not as important as the unconsummated potential enfolded by Aijaz's appeal to Astha. Astha however dreams of Aijaz: the dream begins with Astha and Aijaz seated in an auto-rickshaw, kissing. More important than the kiss, however, is the fact that they are in the auto-rickshaw, the form of public transport Astha takes to get around Delhi; the auto-rickshaw gives Astha at least partial mobility, if not the absolute freedom conferred by that bulwark of individual liberty, the motor car. The auto-rickshaw is an unobtrusive signifier throughout the novel of Astha's status — as a woman of means, but no independence — and her efforts at broadening her curtailed strides. Aijaz himself is a vehicle, a humble one like the auto-rickshaw, for these dreams, but having been suppressed for so long, they must return only in dreams, prefaced by headaches so severe as to be pre-emptive punishments for the marital infidelity Astha is about to embark on. However, the moment of consummation within her dream is a moment of what in lesbian writing is a characteristic doubling of erotic possibilities. Aijaz suddenly metamorphoses into Reshana Singh, who in the interim has been acting as a sort of agent for Astha, exhibiting her work to best advantage and procuring good prices for it for the Manch's work. Where Aijaz was the muse, Reshana as the manager proxies in the role of sustainer that Astha plays vis-à-vis her family. Reshana does for
AsthA what only Astha's father had done so long ago – encourage her, however slightly, into entering herself as it were. Reshana's ends are not entirely altruistic, of course, and she makes a hasty exit once Aijaz's widow Peepeelika enters Astha's life, but regardless, Reshana enters and successfully displaces Aijaz in what would otherwise have been Astha's only act of (emotional) infidelity with a man. Reshana's entry into the incipient Astha–Hemant–Aijaz triangle marks the moment of rupture of the male–male–female triangle by the more reactive female–female–male one. Astha is disturbed enough by Reshana's intrusion to immediately have sex with Hemant, but the physical act is not potent enough to push away the newly arrived (un)familiar homoerotic desire.

AsthA's uncanny dream provides her with the material for another painting, the one that confirms the first was no fluke and encourages in Astha thoughts of taking up art as a professional.

The disturbance lingered with Astha all next day, the vividness and strong emotions of her dream demanding some kind of recognition. Hesitantly she started making sketches. Two women faced each other in a scooter, their noses covered because of the pollution, only the eyes visible. The scooter-wallah was a dark Sardarji with a striking read turban. Perched next to him was a young man, taking a ride. Around the edges of the canvas, traffic, buildings, road, but at the centre the scooter with its passengers bent towards each other, the devouring eyes, the Sardarji and the young man. (MW 155, emphasis added)

The desired but repressed genital contact with the familiar – the woman, Reshana – is here displaced to the realm of the visual: Astha makes a painting in which women's eyes devour other women. Sex with Hemant, and anticipated sex with Aijaz, then, were both red herrings; the real thing is here, with devour suggesting very accurately the performance of a lesbian sexual consummation that is markedly different from the pleasures of a penetrative heterosexual encounter. Painting becomes both means and end: a means to creative and sexual autonomy, and an end in that devouring gives Astha pleasure that is valuable for its sake, food for the body transformed into food for the soul.

"Women Travelling" presages Astha's first real journey away from family. She takes a train, another important signifier of a modernity that permits subversion of patriarchy and, sometimes, heteronormativity – as is the case in Kamala Das's My Story – to address a public meeting at Ayodhya on Reshana's insistence. In the months leading up to the destruction of the
Babri Masjid, kar sevak - marshalled from the common folk, not only from the card-carrying RSS/Hindu Mahasabha/BJP fold - had been gathering at Ayodhya for Ram darshan. Astha goes with the Sampradayakta Mukti Manch as one of the voices against this potentially mischievous mobilisation of religious workers. It is here she meets Peepeelika Khan, Aijaz's widow, who has scrupulously kept away from Reshana Singh's activities so far because of her objections to the latter's commercialisation and elitisation of what she thinks are Aijaz's true legacies - his ability to appeal to the mass by the strategic use of a Brechtian rhetoric. Safdar Hashmi had, over the course of his theatre career, spoken of the need to re-fashion the structures of the traditional drama to create a medium capable of transmitting current realities. Hashmi, like his alter-ego Aijaz here, is aware of the interpellative power of artistic forms that artists have not made their own. Reshana Singh, working within the received wisdom of petitions, scholarly lectures and art exhibitions, takes Aijaz's legacy away from the subaltern classes he worked amongst, though he himself was an academic. Though Peepeelika is aware of this estrangement, it is Astha who fashions an artistic medium supple enough to both resist the snobbery of a verifiably "high" culture, and the crassness of propaganda. Astha gives a successful speech - she is able to touch chords with the raw Indian mass in front of her, but unlike Peepeelika who works amongst Delhi's slum women, Astha does not relate to this mass as much as she does to the attractive young woman who is among her listeners, and whose name she does not know. A suitably miffed Reshana informs Astha about the identity of her interlocutor, and Astha is immediately intrigued as Aijaz's widow has occupied her thoughts ever since she heard of his death.

The seed for homoerotic desire has long lain buried within mourning for Aijaz, but with Peepeelika's long awaited arrival on the scene, the object of desire reveals itself to be not Aijaz, but Peepeelika herself. Desire is recognised in incongruous moments: Peepeelika's arm tightens around Astha's in driving a monkey off Astha's back in Ayodhya; Astha feels cared for and worthy of love after a very long time. Our heroine finally has a series of dates with someone, albeit a woman, dates that do not involve the in camera performance of pioneering heterosexual caresses in the back-seat of a car. Instead, Peepeelika takes Astha here and there across Delhi on her motor scooter, which, much like the public transport that Astha has been taking all along, becomes another of modernity's liberating instruments. And unlike that early affair with Roshan, Astha is not afraid to be seen with Peepeelika. There is disapproval, but since Peepeelika is a woman, it does not look like the hymenal barrier of conjugal fidelity can be breached here: "Since Pipee was a woman, this disapproval was tinged with contempt, and the assurance of no threat" (MW 218). The glorious irony is also that Astha herself feels liberated from the
proscriptions of patriarchal organisation of the female spouse's desires: "indeed had Pipee been a
man, Astha would have found it impossible to stray so far down the road of intimacy, or be so
comfortable with it" (MW 218). Since female homoeroticism is so completely disregarded by
heteronormativity to the point of absolute dis-recognition of any threat-potential, Astha is finally
able to step out of an unrewarding monogamy. The "mirror moment" of much homosexual
writing is staged in Kapur's novel too.

"Are we going to do mirror, mirror on the wall / Who is the fairest one of all?" laughed
Asth a nervously....

"A modern version of it," said Pipee putting on the light and pushing Astha's head gently
forwards. "Look."

Asth a tried to turn away, "I don't like looking at my face, especially so close."

Then she felt Pipee's hands in her hair, her clip undone, her hands framing the oval of
her face. Lightly from behind she traced her eyebrows with her fingers, her nose, cheeks
and mouth.

The two women said nothing looking at their reflections in the small water-stained
mirror. "See?" whispered Pipee.

Asth a saw nothing, and abruptly left the bathroom. (MW 221)

Asth a recognises what is familiar, herself, but refuses to acknowledge it, to claim it and thus
validate it. Astha's self-hood, fed only by the very rare acknowledgements of her family, is
attenuated to the point of spectrality itself - "Asth a saw nothing" when Pipedilika sees
something. Astha herself has become a ghost, a spectre of herself, in following
heteronormativity's rules so closely. To become visible in the mirror, to partake of the flesh,
Asth a has to be with someone who sees her, and not a wife. The infidelity that punctures most
marriages, even successful ones, is literalised in the person of Pipedilika who kisses Astha's hands
with the attention to detail that only Roshan had given Astha a couple of decades ago. The
gender of the desired lover, however, is markedly different from the expectations raised by most
romance or indeed, ordinary fiction. A woman helps Astha return to the world of embodied
agency, self-hood and self-recognition, bringing her to be able to re-affirm her own existence
instead of negating it. Thus, in A Married Woman, (un)familiar love enables Astha to find her
way back to herself while heterosexual conjugality had merely displaced her from herself: queering the function of “marriage” thus, Kapur is able to make Astha demand a more equal negotiation with heteronormativity.

The disavowal of her selfhood is a cumulative corrosive procedure stretching over years of trying to maintain marital peace. Astha’s avowal of selfhood, however, is a short flowering, short even in the space it occupies within the novel. Manju Kapur, writing in the twenty-first century, does not have to resort to the tropes of either silence or ellipsis is describing the coupling. Kapur also stages Pipeelika’s first exploration of Astha on the marital bed for good measure, so that Hemant is paid back in kind: “Women,” said the husband emphatically after a somewhat long phone conversation the wife had had with her friend, “always mind-fucking” (MW 218). The joke is very much on Hemant when Astha realises that “mind-fucking,” far from “lacking the excitement of the real thing … [because] the organ penetrated the ears, the weapon of penetration, words,” was also liberating in the permission it offered for public performance of desire. “Words, that left no mark but in the mind” permitted “listening upon listening, fucking upon fucking. In full view” (MW 219), a fucking that Astha carries to its full physicality in a hurried afternoon meeting with Pipeelika after a meeting with her children’s censorious schoolteachers. All these snatched moments permit a thorough cuckolding of Hemant that goes beyond the physical; the mind and the body both gratified alike, Astha realises that she has found not only sex, but friendship: “making love to a woman took getting used to … And it also felt strange, making love to a friend instead of an adversary” (MW 231). The strangeness of this physicality however also mean that for “an affair with a woman was not an easy thing for a husband to suspect” either (MW 232). All bases covered, Astha becomes capable of guile and strength. She competently tells lies to be able to meet Pipeelika; she persuades Hemant to get her a car, and learns to drive it, furthering her mobility and thus, the range of her time with Pipeelika.

But where Hemant returns happy and fulfilled from his presumably non-monogamous jaunts on his many “business” trips, Astha is burdened by the operations of sexual guilt. The guilt of constant lying is also a burden separate from any Hemant has to bear as it is assumed that a man needs free time, while the woman must always hold fort at home. But the guilt of not being emotionally available for Pipeelika is the biggest burden, and this, perhaps inevitably prises the two apart. Astha is unable to relate to the coming-out on-screen, of “the men and women … speaking broad American about the discrimination they faced as gays” (MW 237). They all live in the “open, none of them living a life of lies,” but the pure truth is another problematic category,
its uncontamination itself meaning that Astha must give up those things in her life she values at least as much as she does her lesbian love — her children and the home. Pipeelika, on the other hand, very much wants a life out in the open, but then, Pipeelika has definite assets, positive and negative — a home bought with among other things, the money due from her dead husband's life insurance, a supportive mother, unlike Astha’s, no burdens in the form of children for the sake of whom fictions of happiness must be maintained, relative mobility in her life as a single woman free of in-laws, and so on. Astha’s investment in the epistemology of partial disclosure is evident, but Pipeelika’s desire for complete disclosure and presumed liberation is also presented as legitimate.

Kapur’s caution in endorsing the homonormativity that Pipeelika’s desires embody in their quest for absolute “openness” is noteworthy. To my mind, this represents an important counter-narrative to mostly Euro-American prescriptions of a “healthy” (sexual) existence. In the colonial period, the “healthy” colonial functionary would be free of the contaminations of both “tropical diseases,” and of sexual or erotic desire for the “natives” that was only a prelude to the shame of miscegenation. A new queer imperialism, not unremarked by non-western critics, is slowly falling into place even in the non-west, with “out”-ness being identified with modernity, and closetedness with a tradition always retrograde in its shaming of non-heteronormative sexual desire. Manju Kapur’s novel understands that the interstitial spaces provided by patriarchy — but unsuspected of performing any such function — are capable of nourishing the roots of very strong and very fulfilling homoerotic desires, but at the same time, she does not valorise these possibilities. In a modernising India, the spaces of the home are not uncontaminated by modernity — if indeed this ever was possible — nor are the protagonists themselves “authentically” traditional by any stretch of the imagination. In a changing India, female homosexual desire itself is produced and marked by several modernities, orthodox and unorthodox. Astha does not walk in the path of western materialist feminism to reject the family altogether; it is important enough to her to fashion a resistance that does not involve her leaving the space of the family altogether, which given her desire for it, would have been a capitulation, not a utopian celebration of autonomy. Astha cannot generalise on the nature of her desire either, for lack of sexual experience: so she does not know if she is a “radical lesbian” who loves another woman for political reasons, or for personal ones. Indeed these are not the questions the novel poses. A Married Woman recognises an overwhelmingly Indian reality — that the majority of women-loving-women in India are already married, a fact noted by almost all grassroots organisations.
There has been much significant scholarship on the masculinisation of Hinduism in contemporary India, though antecedents have been traced as far back as Swami Vivekananda, who called for virile young men to come forward and work hard to lift India out of the morass of crippling traditionalisms. The antidote to the masculinity in *A Married Woman* is the queer female subject, whom Astha embodies at several levels — that of the female artist, the woman troubled by (heterosexual) monogamy and conjugality, and finally, the woman who desires woman. This female subject, however, grows out of precisely the realm of the familiar — the strong Hindu family replete with “family values” — to challenge it not by her obvious departure from this space, but by her re-spatialisation of this apparatus. Astha as resisting subject grows out of a very passive femininity, forced to account for every rupee or minute of the day it spends, a category of existence that heterosexual patriarchy finds useful to keep at home, ostensibly so the children are reared better to make good national subjects. Astha makes excuses to go away on a three-week trip with Pipeelika, with the two of them as part of a group of observers following a major national leader’s Rath Yatra, the Ekta Yatra, from Kanyakumari back to Delhi part of the way. At Kanyakumari, the Vivekananda Rock, where Swami Vivekananda is supposed to have pledged to uplift the Indian masses only awakens Astha’s guilt at being away from her family, away from the work she had been doing all these years, the labour that she seems to have been ordained for: the “home work” of child-rearing. This national journey, however, conducted as it is in the teeth of resistance from everyone including Astha’s widowed mother who herself spends months in the company of her guru at his ashram in the hills, represents Astha’s equivalent of the celibacy that Vivekananda exhorts, though Astha’s celibacy has to be defined as her resistance to functioning any longer within the patriarchal panopticon of her husband’s home. Where Astha’s mother’s widowhood gives her the sanction to renounce sexuality, Astha realises that as a “married woman,” or a woman in the peak of her sexual and emotional career, religion does not offer her avenues other than blissful devotion to conjugal duties for the realisation of autonomy. Astha’s personal circumscription within the family as wife, mother and daughter are thus challenged by Astha’s assumption of the role of unencumbered traveller — at least in theory — on this trip. Travel emerges as an alternative to the life of the family that Astha wants to partake of, but finds inadequate because it de-recognises her selfhood. At the same time, in such a Rath Yatra, Astha’s and Pipeelika’s lesbian relationship is itself a challenge to the heteropatriarchal nature of most religious fundamentalisms, many of whom have characterised lesbian love as an inducement to race suicide. Astha does not get to spend as much of her time on this journey loving Pipeelika as she would have wanted, for the latter is now beginning to think of life ahead, of research and higher education, both of which
she can plan for rather than dream of, being unencumbered. Despite the distance, for Astha, the Rath Yatra, though a fundamentalist initiative to foment communal violence through religious mobilisations, becomes her only vacation from family and home ever: freed of everyday duties, Astha is able to think.

The (un)familiar homoerotic desire that catalyses the crystallisation of Astha’s now quiescent subjectivity haunts her home, the marital home, in various ways. There is a spectrality to both this desire and to the resistance to it: her husband, children and in-laws all disapprove in various ways of her increasing autonomy. But what are they to disapprove of? That their daughter-in-law/wife/mother was doing very well at both motherhood and attaining social regard for her non-maternal labour as an artist? These dual responsibilities have an effect on Astha of course: her headaches function throughout as an externalised register of Astha’s unconscious perception of her “sick” role. The sick person has to be validated by society in many ways; medical practitioners must first certify the sick person is indeed sick, and this diagnosis must be confirmed at periodic intervals so that a non-sick person does not get away with deceiving society with non-performance of his/her social responsibilities. However, headaches function in a peculiar way in the sickness firmament: headaches do not have physiologically indubitable symptoms like say, a fever would have; thus, headaches in a sense function as sicknesses that leave room for performances that cannot necessarily be corroborated by physical evidence. Headaches, in that sense, are spectral diseases almost – non-sufferers think the sick person is slumming, while the sick person feels victimised that others around her do not find her disease important enough to care for her.

Asta’s headaches, which first arrive somewhere after her successful production of a male son and heir, mark Astha’s repressed desires for rebellion and her unacknowledged pain at being “re-cast” to fit the moulds that patriarchy and heteronormativity demand of her. It is important to note that during the course of her affair with Peepeelika, Astha is “cured” of her headaches altogether, a feat that surgery and other medical interventions had not been able to accomplish. The headaches disappear with Astha’s repressed desires find expression, only to reappear when Peepeelika leaves India for the US and a PhD. The medicine for Astha’s sickness then, was homosexual desire and its fulfilment; Astha’s emergence from “sickness” into health is mediated by her lesbian relationship with Peepeelika, who takes Astha’s freedom from sickness as her due. But upon her return home, the law of the Father takes over. Astha is racked by jaundice, and the nation too falls “ill,” descending into the relative anarchy of the early 1990s
marked by communal violence and political assassinations accompanied by economic turmoil. The paterfamilias, literally personified by figures like the leaders of the Rath Yatras and the leaders who spearheaded the destruction of the Babri Masjid will have their due, it seems. The nation and Astha both find their mirror images immediately after descent into sickness repulsive; their convalescence is troubled. The nation has to let go of its old socialist principles in asking for World Bank assistance, provided upon condition of economic transformation. The woman has to accompany her husband — pushed to the brink by factory troubles — on a family holiday to the USA so he has time away from the multiple factors that threaten him with heart disease.

The virile heterosexual masculinity demanded of the kar sevaks who would build a Ram temple at Ayodhya finds its radical other in the almost ineffable homosexual desire Astha feels for Peepeelika. But in the end, when Astha returns from the family holiday abroad, Pipeelika is ready to leave, her desire to step out of a relationship in which she cannot be primary having removed all the vacillations she had felt so long. Astha is abandoned, it would seem, to the strained fabric of heteronormative conjugality just as the nation is to the hyperbolic masculinity of a Hindutva that attains its culmination at the end of the novel with the tearing down of the Babri Masjid. Does fundamentalist patriarchal reinscription of religion, defined into homogeneity that denies difference, win at the end of the day?

Asthana feels "like a woman of straw, her inner life dead, with a man who noticed nothing, with whom for that very reason it was soothing to be with. Her body was his, when they made love, it was Pipee's face Astha saw, her hands she felt. She accepted the misery of this dislocation as her due for being a faithless wife. (MW 287)

Asthana's spiritual death is akin to the decomposition of the body politic. But Astha is still able to hold an art exhibition in Pipeelika's honour, before she leaves. Among other canvases of Pipeelika and herself masked as Everywoman, is "Women Travelling." The plot comes full cycle here — Astha no longer travels in auto-rickshaws; she has just returned from two major journeys — one spanning the length of India, and another to and from the USA; she is also a seasoned traveller between "flimsy possibilities," and their "mangled and inert" comfortless real life manifestations (MW 287). Astha has become a pilgrim troubled by her own progress; her quest does not lead her to a guru at whose feet she can prostrate herself as her mother surrendered herself to her guru in far away Rishikesh. Astha realises that "life was made up of these things" (MW 285), namely disaffection, emptiness and perpetual seeking, but unlike her mother, Astha is unable to see the virtue of detachment, wanting instead to be able to fight like Pipeelika or Aijaz.
Instead, all she, Astha, whose name means Faith, has is “Faith in herself,” (MW 299). Faith will be Astha’s panacea, though she is “stretched thin, thin across the globe” (MW 307), almost to breaking, by Pipeelika’s departure.

Though Astha’s faith in herself is a latter-day development, it is a faith wrought out of an earnest attempt at self-realisation, a sincerity at building the self that Swami Vivekananda would have approved of. Astha’s lack of self-confidence, the corollary of her almost total orphanhood within her married existence, is also reminiscent of the morbid self-negation of colonised India that Vivekananda sought to remedy. That Astha’s self-confidence should spring from homosexual fulfilment is the important departure Kapur’s imagining of the nation makes. The tenuousness of this relation to the self, however, is evident when, in the last pages of the novel, Astha is threatened with traffic violations when she tries to stop the car to say goodbye to Pipeelika at the very crowded Delhi International Airport. This denial of a dignified goodbye, the narrative’s refusal to provide a stately closure need not be interpreted as a disempowering disarticulation. On the other hand, in leaving Astha “stretched thin, thin across the globe” (MW 307), *A Married Woman* suggests a homosexual subject that cannot be pinned down, and thus disciplined. Astha, like faith, is a free floating subjectivity whose needs cannot be met by the home that she nominally inhabits as familiar—a willing pair of hands for difficult and easy tasks, sexual gratifications and care-giving—and who may, thus, by virtue of her seeming omnipresence, also travel without anyone’s noticing.

*A Married Woman*, like the other texts in this chapter, thus, offers a counterplot of female homosexual desire that strategically harnesses the very disarticulations imposed upon the incipient and tentative female subject by heteronormativity and patriarchy to make possible a selving. The sheer (un)familiarity of the queer female subject does place her beyond the scope of life-giving affirmations within patriarchy, but at the same time, its (un)familiarity also allows it to appropriate the disarticulation of invisibility to subvert it into becoming a means of articulating a desire that is not normative. But just as Astha finds herself corpse-like without her familiar beloved, so does Sheela in “The Sandal Trees,” Marikolanthu in *Ladies Coupe* and Anju and Sudha in Divakaruni’s novels. While strategies of disarticulation ensures relative freedom from homophobic interrogations, the invisibility and unintelligibility of (un)familiar desires that is codes itself in the feminine gender means that community and common cause cannot be made easily, with the result that individual pain and suffering remain just that: individual pain and suffering. Thus, unlike butch dissidence or lesbians who emerge into the modern same-sex
communities, the portrait that emerges in this chapter has a more sobering flavour. As desiring subjects, these (un)familiar subjects may be in a dialogue with heteronormativity, but even as their subversion of conventional expectations of femininity are radical, the pain of isolation is also the greater here. In the next chapter, Ismat Chughtai paints a more ambitious canvas where even the notion of sexual identity is shattered in Chughtai's exploration of what it means to be a desiring subject.